

**Wednesday
3 September 2025**

**Volume 772
No. 180**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 3 September 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Domestic Abuse Aggravated Offences

1. **Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the potential merits of creating new domestic abuse aggravated offences. [905462]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): The Government are absolutely committed to tackling the scourge of domestic abuse and halving violence against women and girls in a decade. We are implementing a domestic abuse identifier at sentencing to ensure consistent recognition of domestic abuse offenders across the whole justice system. That will strengthen victim protection and offender management, delivering on a recommendation made by the independent sentencing review.

Calum Miller: I am sickened by the frequency with which I hear from victims and survivors of domestic abuse about the ways in which the criminal justice system has aggravated their trauma. One constituent recently told me that she was living in fear after her abuser was released early and the Probation Service failed to enforce probation conditions. Another has seen the charges against her ex-partner scheduled for criminal trial in two years' time, and in the meantime he continues to exert control through the family courts. Will the Minister meet me to review what has gone wrong in those two cases and what lessons can be learned about how to use identifiers of aggravation to give victims and survivors more protection?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and for all his work to amplify the voices of victims and survivors. Like him, I am sickened by the treatment of the majority of women and girls who go through this in our criminal justice system. He will know that we inherited a criminal justice system in absolute crisis. That is why we conducted a once-in-a-generation review of our courts process—the Leveson review—which the Government will respond to shortly, and a once-in-a-generation sentencing review, to consider exactly the issues that he is talking about. I will happily meet him to discuss this further.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My constituent, who had been the victim of historical domestic abuse by both her partner and her children, recently raised with me the need for a clearer understanding and definition of child-to-parent abuse. At the time of her abuse, she did not know that what her children were doing could be classified as domestic abuse, and both the police and social services failed to understand that she was the victim, not her children. Will the Minister provide an update on the work to reach a legal definition of child-to-parent abuse.

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that vital point. She will, like me, be horrified by the results of the Femicide Census report this week, which show a rise in mothers being killed by their sons. We must tackle that as a society. She will be pleased to know that what she is talking about will be in the upcoming violence against women and girls strategy.

Support for Trans People

2. **Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): What steps she is taking to support trans people in the context of the Supreme Court judgment in the case of *For Women Scotland v. Scottish Ministers* of 16 April 2025. [905463]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): Trans people deserve dignity and respect. The Government are upholding the legal protections that Labour's Equality Act 2010 put in place, ensuring that trans people can live free from discrimination and harassment. Work is already under way to fulfil our manifesto commitments, including the delivery of a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, the equalisation of all strands of hate crime, and a review of health services to ensure that trans people receive appropriate and high-quality care.

Ian Sollom: The Minister will be aware that many trans people with gender recognition certificates followed all the legal processes in good faith, often over many years, and made legally binding commitments to live in their acquired gender for life. Yet now that they find themselves legally bound to live in one gender, they are at the same time being denied access to services and facilities aligned with that gender. How does the Minister plan to resolve those contradictory legal obligations, and what will she do to provide immediate support to the trans community?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the importance of gender recognition certificates. Let me be absolutely clear to this House, as I have been on many occasions: no one, including trans people, should suffer indignity or a lack of respect. They must of course have access to safe provisions and appropriate services. However, the Supreme Court ruling was clear that biological sex is the means by which single-sex provision will be delivered.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I am really pleased that the Government are committed to delivering a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion therapy. When will that legislation be introduced to bring that abusive practice to an end?

Bridget Phillipson: We are committed to bringing forward a draft Bill to ensure that we deliver on our manifesto commitment to a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, which are abhorrent and have no place in our society.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): The Equality and Human Rights Commission has confirmed that at least 19 public bodies, including organisations across the policing, education and health sectors, are misrepresenting the law on single-sex spaces. That is a breach of the Equality Act 2010, as confirmed by the recent Supreme Court ruling. Has the Minister been told which bodies they are, and how can women and girls have any confidence in them if they are knowingly and deliberately breaking the law?

Bridget Phillipson: The results of the previous Government's call for input showed that, although the law was being followed in the majority of cases, a small number of examples were identified that seemed to have misinterpreted how the single-sex exemptions of the Equality Act operate. As the hon. Lady will appreciate, it is for the independent regulator, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, to follow up on these issues through the appropriate processes. It is doing so in more detail and will work with organisations to put that right.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituent Charlie is from Offerton. He has a gender recognition certificate that states that he is male; he has a birth certificate that states that he is male; and he has a resplendent ginger beard. The interim EHRC guidance, however, states that he should use the ladies' loo. That is clearly crackers, and Charlie tells me that he has had stick in the past when using the ladies.

It is in the interest of the whole of society for trans people to be able to leave the house and for there to be a loo that they can use in peace when they do so, while they contribute fully to our society. Does the Secretary of State agree that when the final guidance is published, which we expect soon, parliamentary scrutiny would be a good thing to ensure that the guidance is as good as it can possibly be, so that trans people can live their lives to the full with the clarity and security that they need?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that trans people and women deserve appropriate access to safe spaces and the right level of accommodation and that we must ensure that provision is there, so that no one feels that their safety is at risk. To be clear to the House, the Government did not receive advance sight or notice of the interim update from the EHRC. The EHRC has now consulted on its proposed changes to the draft updated code following the ruling. I have yet to receive that code from the EHRC. Once that happens, we will ensure that, as a Government, we consider it fully, as the House would expect.

Violence against Women and Girls

3. Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls in the home. [905464]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): We are committed to halving violence against women and girls within the next decade. We are working tirelessly to deliver that ambitious plan to tackle these heinous acts through our violence against women and girls strategy. Ministers across Government meet regularly to drive progress through the violence against women and girls ministerial group.

Mr Forster: The murder of 10-year-old Sara Sharif in my constituency was a harrowing example of violence against women and girls in the home. Social services play a vital role in protecting vulnerable girls, yet we often hear that they are overwhelmed and under-resourced. Will the Minister please confirm what steps this Government are taking to ensure that local authority social services are able to protect vulnerable children and stop tragedies such as Sara's ever happening again?

Jess Phillips: I am sure that the whole House has sympathy for the case that the hon. Gentleman has outlined. I understand that the inquest is ongoing, but to answer the substantive point of his question, children's and adult social care have historically not always been what victims felt they could rely on, with many cases to demonstrate that over the years. Without doubt—as I sit next to the Secretary of State for Education—the work with my office, with the Ministry of Justice and with her office to ensure that that is handled in the violence against women and girls strategy, and more broadly, is at the top of the agenda for all of us.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend use this opportunity to remind the House how many women and girls are vulnerable to people they know, as distinct from people they do not know? Will she also use this opportunity to condemn elected politicians who peddle misinformation about who is most at risk and where the targets really are?

Jess Phillips: I do not have in front of me the exact data that my hon. Friend has requested—I am not entirely sure that exact data exists—but what I can say, based on decades of experience, is that women and girls in our country are far more at risk from people who know our names, and whose names we know, and who we work among and live alongside. The idea of “stranger danger” is one that most women do not recognise; the people they fear are people they know.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The Parole Board is extremely concerned about the impact on domestic abuse victims of the Sentencing Bill that is now before the House. I urge her to keep in close discussion with members of the Parole Board and with the Justice Secretary as the Bill progresses.

Jess Phillips: I absolutely make that commitment here today. Throughout the progress of any such sentencing changes, the Home Office, the Minister with responsibility

for victims and I have been heavily involved, and we will continue to ensure that, despite the difficult situation that we were left, every possible safeguard is in place.

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): The Minister will know that the rise of platforms such as OnlyFans has led to the mainstream commercialisation of women's bodies. Does she agree that if we are to tackle violence against women and girls, we must look at pornography prostitution? Will she commit to working with colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to ensure that that is included in the violence against women and girls strategy?

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; a strategy on violence against women and girls that did not include the online elements that she highlights, as well as others, would not be worth its salt. I commit to continue to work with DSIT colleagues on those issues.

Maternity Care

4. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help improve the quality of maternity care for women. [905465]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is unacceptable that women are experiencing poor maternity care. An investigation has been launched to understand the underlying systemic issues and develop national recommendations so that women receive the care that they deserve. We are also taking immediate action to improve accountability and better identify safety concerns. That includes rolling out a programme to tackle discrimination and racism.

Mohammad Yasin: Sadly, Bedford hospital's maternity services were downgraded to "inadequate" last year, and its gold standard home birth service has recently been reduced. Will the Minister ensure that the review examines why choices for birthing services are still being cut? Will he guarantee improved outcomes in maternity and perinatal care, so that all women can access safe, personalised, high-quality care?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner on this issue for his constituents. The Care Quality Commission has committed to monitoring maternity services at Bedford hospitals closely, including through further inspections, to ensure that people receive safe care while improvements are implemented. The investigation will seek to understand the systemic issues behind why so many women, babies and families experience unacceptable care. The chair is working with families to finalise the terms of reference for the investigations and those will be published shortly.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Does the Minister agree that listening to the voices of bereaved families who have lost their babies is of essential importance? If he does, will he listen to the calls of Sussex families to appoint Donna Ockenden to lead their review?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree that it is vital to listen to those voices; it will not be possible to get to the bottom of why care is not of an acceptable standard without hearing those voices. I have heard what the hon. Lady has said about Donna Ockenden and I will certainly take that away to discuss with ministerial colleagues.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Trauma during childbirth can have lifelong and debilitating impacts. Failing maternity services are felt by all, but especially by families from low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds. In my constituency, where too many already experience health inequalities, Luton and Dunstable hospital's maternity unit has recently been downgraded to "inadequate" by the Care Quality Commission. Does the Minister agree with me that mothers and babies deserve better? What cross-departmental work is taking place to ensure that NHS trusts across the country improve maternity care?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is campaigning strongly for her constituents on this issue. We are establishing the maternity and neonatal national taskforce, which will develop a national plan to drive improvements across maternity and neonatal care. It will be chaired by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and made up of a panel of experts, and family, charity and staff representatives. I was pleased to learn that my hon. Friend met Baroness Merron in June to discuss maternity care in Luton North.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Post maternity, many women suffer female pelvic prolapse, but I am unable to get any answers on the matter of surgical mesh implants. Will the Minister please work with his counterparts at the Department of Health and Social Care to get a realistic update on exactly what has happened as a result of the Hughes report, and give me the information about meetings between the Department and the Patient Safety Commissioner about progress on those recommendations?

Stephen Kinnock: I will absolutely raise the issue with colleagues in the Department and we will write to the hon. Lady urgently with the answers she is looking for.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Once again, this Labour Government have failed women and girls through their inaction and blinkered mindset on safety in their communities and their slow action on the 2024 birth trauma inquiry report by Theo Clarke and the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield). That report recommended a national maternity strategy, which we committed to. Over a year on, a so-called rapid inquiry announced in June only has a chair with no experience in maternity services and an expectation to fix this national scandal by the end of the year. That is asking too much of one woman to support many women across the country. How will the Minister address ongoing and widespread concerns, which we have heard again in the Chamber, react to the existing evidence and stop the belief that many women are being failed by this Labour Government?

Stephen Kinnock: I really do find it a bit rich that the Conservatives stand there and try to lecture us after the 14 years of neglect and incompetence that were the trademark of their time in government. Baroness Amos is chairing the independent maternity and neonatal

investigation, which will be a rapid investigation with two core roles: to conduct urgent reviews by the end of this year of up to 10 trusts where there are specific issues; and to conduct a systemic investigation into maternity and neonatal care in England, to create one set of national actions to drive the improvements needed to ensure high-quality care and ensure that women are listened to. That is responsible government; that is trying to fix the mess that the Conservatives made after 14 years. The Conservatives would do well to actually support us in that.

Young Disabled People: Labour Market Inequalities

5. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle inequalities faced by young disabled people in the labour market. [905466]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We want young people with disabilities and health impairments to secure good employment as soon as possible and to fulfil their aspirations. The “Pathways to Work” Green Paper proposed a youth phase in health and disability benefits, and we are currently reviewing the consultation responses.

Jim Shannon: Research by the national disability charity Sense found that more than half of disabled benefit claimants with complex needs between the ages of 18 and 34 say that there are few jobs that meet their needs as disabled people. What steps can the Minister take to ensure that more employment opportunities are available to young disabled people with complex needs?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. There are excellent examples of job carving for people with complex needs, and we need more of that. We look forward to the report being submitted soon by Sir Charlie Mayfield on what more employers can do to open up opportunities for people out of work on disability grounds, and I think he will have some very interesting proposals.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): The last Conservative Government left so many young disabled people in Ealing Southall who wanted to work consigned to a lifetime on benefits, but at West Ealing jobcentre we are already seeing a difference being made, with £1.3 billion of funding for employment support from this Labour Government. Does the Minister agree that the Mayfield review offers a once-in-a-lifetime chance to transform the workplace to make it more accessible for disabled people?

Sir Stephen Timms: I agree with my hon. Friend; she is absolutely right. Disengaging from work and learning in early adulthood can do lasting harm to career prospects and wellbeing. We are launching the youth guarantee so that all 18 to 21-year-olds in England, including disabled young people, can access quality training opportunities and apprenticeships or help to find work. I am glad to hear that things are developing so well in her constituency.

Topical Questions

T1. [905477] **Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): This Government are focused on breaking down barriers to opportunity for everyone. We are backing working families, saving them £7,500 through rolling out 30 hours of Government-funded childcare and rolling out free breakfast clubs in our schools. Building on the proud legacy of Sure Start, we will deliver 100 Best Start family hubs to give every child the best start in life. We are opening 10 new construction technical excellence colleges, backing our young people to learn a trade and to get on. Our plan for change will deliver for everyone.¹

Samantha Niblett: I am sure that the Minister will have seen research last week, which parents in my constituency will be really disappointed in, saying that mums earn £302 less per week than dads. For too long, the Tories were happy for those costs to fall on women. What steps is she taking to ensure that this Labour Government tackle the motherhood penalty?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend that that is totally unacceptable. This Labour Government will deliver for women, unlike the Conservative party—whose leader said that maternity pay was “excessive”—or the Reform leader, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who claimed it was a “fact of life” that women coming back from maternity leave would earn less. We know the difference that high-quality early years education makes, which is why I am delighted that, from this week, working families will be able to access 30 hours of Government-funded childcare.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Writer and comedian Graham Linehan was apparently arrested by five police officers at Heathrow, then questioned about three tweets that he says were based on his gender-critical views, a belief protected by the Equality Act 2010. Despite this Government’s claim to protect free speech, Mr Linehan has been banned from using that platform as part of his bail conditions. Can the Minister confirm whether it is now a crime in Britain to tell potentially offensive jokes, and whether those who do so may face armed arrest?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady will know well that I cannot comment on live police investigations, as the police operate independently of Government, but the Home Secretary has been clear that her priority and the priority of this Government is that the police focus on tackling antisocial behaviour and making sure that people can walk our streets free from fear.

T4. [905480] **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Reading’s University Medical Group, a GP practice in my constituency that was recently awarded the gold Pride in Practice award by the LGBT Foundation? When I visited that practice last week, the doctors raised the

1. [Official Report, 13 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

issue of transgender care. Many constituents have also written to me concerned about ongoing barriers to treatment for young people needing gender-affirming care, so what more can the Government do to ensure that young transgender people get the treatment they urgently need?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that work in her community. The Government have commissioned NHS England to undertake a LGBT health evidence review, which is being led by Dr Michael Brady, the national adviser on LGBT health. It will diagnose the problems we need to solve, making sure we have evidence-led recommendations in order to improve access to healthcare for adults.

T2. [905478] **Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): A constituent with muscular dystrophy reports facing a wait of eight to 12 months for AJM Healthcare to deliver a new wheelchair, which is far beyond the 18-week target. What steps will the Minister take with her health colleagues to address the really poor performance by AJM Healthcare nationwide, particularly its equalities implications?

Bridget Phillipson: If the hon. Gentleman will provide me with some more details of his constituent's case, I would be happy to make sure it is looked into by Ministers and that he receives a full response.

T5. [905481] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): A constituent and mum has got in touch because she has lost her entitlement to the 30 hours of childcare this Government so brilliantly rolled out, as well as the student finance version, because she is doing law as a mature student. Can the Minister look into closing that loophole so that women who retrain mid-career are not penalised?

Bridget Phillipson: We recognise the value of parents continuing in education, which is why there are often available mechanisms such as the childcare grant and the parents' learning allowance. As I do not know the full circumstances of her constituent's case, I would be grateful if my hon. Friend would write to me, so I can make sure that we give her constituent full advice on the childcare support that might be available to her.

T3. [905479] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Why has the Minister chosen to champion the rights of the residents of the Bell hotel over those of the local community?

Bridget Phillipson: That is just plain wrong.

T6. [905482] **Kirith Entwistle** (Bolton North East) (Lab): Parental leave is just as essential for families who adopt as it is for those with biological children, giving vital time for bonding. However, many adoptive families cannot access the same paid leave. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure equal parental leave for adoptive parents?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend raises an important area. We know that preparing for and adopting a child is an important time in the life of families, which is why we have committed to reviewing the parental leave

system to ensure it best supports working families, including those who adopt. I would be happy to discuss that further with my hon. Friend, or make sure a Minister discusses it further with her.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Have the Government done an equality assessment on how cancelling family reunion differentially impacts those from ethnic minority backgrounds?

Bridget Phillipson: The Home Secretary has set out our approach and the action we will be taking in this area, and I will make sure that the hon. Lady receives a response from the Home Office on the matter that she raises.

T7. [905483] **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Shelter's "My colour speaks before me" report highlights systemic discrimination in access to housing, from disproportionate scrutiny of applicants to barriers in both social and private rented housing. How are the Government ensuring that tackling structural racism is at the heart of housing reform and this Government's policies?

Bridget Phillipson: We are determined to ensure that we have high-quality housing available, including social housing for rent, and that people have the opportunity to buy their own home. There is no place for racism in our housing system. If my hon. Friend will share with me the details of the report that she mentions, I will look into that further on her behalf.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [905485] **Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 3 September.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): On Sunday, we won the contract for the biggest defence deal that Norway has ever placed. That is a £10 billion investment, securing 15 years of shipbuilding in Scotland and across the rest of the United Kingdom. One day later on Monday, we launched 30 hours of free childcare for working families. Not only does that save working parents £7,500 a year, but it will transform the life chances of our children, because every child will start reception with an equal opportunity to achieve their potential. That is a Labour Government in action, delivering for working people.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Dawn Butler: Economically deprived high streets and poorer high streets are flooded with gambling shops. The "aim to permit" legislation prevents councils from saying no. My summer campaign on gambling reform has received loads of support, including from Gordon Brown, who says that if we tax the gambling industry, we will get £3 billion for our economy. Will the Prime Minister join campaigners and help me to end "aim to permit", so that constituents such as his and mine can thrive?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. It is important that local authorities are given additional tools and powers to ensure vibrant high streets. We are looking at introducing cumulative impact assessments, like those already in place for alcohol licensing, and we will give councils stronger powers over the location and numbers of gambling outlets to help create safe, thriving high streets.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I know the whole House will want to send our condolences to the family of our former colleague, David Warburton.

I also welcome the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister has referred herself to the ethics adviser. She has admitted that she underpaid tax, so why is she still in office? There is not just a crisis at the very top of the Prime Minister's Cabinet; there is a crisis brewing for the whole country. When was the last time that the cost of Government borrowing was so high?

The Prime Minister: I join the Leader of the Opposition in her comments about Mr Warburton. I think the whole House would unite on such an issue.

In relation to the Deputy Prime Minister, she has explained her personal circumstances in detail. She has gone over and above in setting out the details, including yesterday afternoon asking a court to lift a confidentiality order in relation to her own son. I know from speaking at length to the Deputy Prime Minister just how difficult that decision was for her and her family, but she did it to ensure that all information is in the public domain. She has now referred herself to the independent adviser. That is the right thing to do, but I can be clear that I am very proud to sit alongside a Deputy Prime Minister who is building 1.5 million homes, who is bringing forward the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation, and who has come from a working-class background to be Deputy Prime Minister of this country.

On the question of borrowing costs, they have risen across the world, as the Leader of the Opposition well knows. We are driving them down by getting debt down. That is hardwired into our fiscal rules; those fiscal rules are non-negotiable. I am not going to take lectures on the economy from the Conservatives, who crashed the economy. Mortgages went through the roof and there was a record fall in living standards.

Mrs Badenoch: I am not sure we would have heard all that sympathy if it had been a Conservative Deputy Prime Minister who was being attacked. I remember when the Prime Minister said that tax evasion was a criminal offence and

"should be treated as all other fraud".

If he had a backbone, he would sack her.

But let us get back to the issue of borrowing. The Prime Minister did not answer the question about why it is so high. The Conservatives left him the fastest-growing economy in the G7. Under him, the cost of our borrowing is now higher than it is in Greece. Why does the Prime Minister think that is?

The Prime Minister: If it had been the Conservatives, there would not have been the accountability, which is now in place, because they spent years and years avoiding it. The right hon. Lady's claims about the economy on

their watch are about as credible as her place at Stanford University. *[Interruption.]* She leaves out of her account, because she wants to talk down the country, that we have the highest growth in the G7. I look forward to her getting up and welcoming that. We have had five interest rate cuts in a row, and, of course, £120 billion of investment in the first year of a Labour Government. That is a record.

Mrs Badenoch: It is a terrible record. I stand by every single thing that I have said. The Prime Minister cannot say why borrowing is higher under him. I will tell him why it is higher: it is because the Chancellor changed the fiscal rules so that she could borrow record amounts. She maxed out the country's credit card, and that has pushed up borrowing costs. These are their bad choices. Former members of the Monetary Policy Committee are warning that

"we are heading for an economic crash".

Why does the Prime Minister think that he is right and they are wrong?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady cannot resist it—she comes straight back to talk the country down at every opportunity. She does not welcome the highest growth in the G7. She could have got up and welcomed that, but no. What about the 380,000 jobs that we have created? She could welcome that, but no. What about the three trade deals that we have? Not only does she not welcome them; she opposes them. And, of course, she has not welcomed the Norway deal—the biggest deal for shipbuilding in a very, very long time. She should stop talking down the country and get behind the renewal that this Government are delivering.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister is dragging down the country. He is dragging it down. How can he stand there and say that he is creating jobs? Unemployment has gone up in every single month under this Labour Government. He does not know why borrowing costs are going up. Another reason is that the markets can see that he is too weak to control spending. Now we are reading that he wants to have another go at welfare costing. What makes him think that Labour Members will vote for it this time?

The Prime Minister: I think I saw that the Leader of the Opposition said this to *The Sunday Times* at the weekend:

"I have inherited a gigantic mess and I'm cleaning it up."

She said:

"It's very difficult...it's going to take a while."

I know exactly how she feels.

Hon. Members: More!

Mrs Badenoch: We are not the ones referring ourselves to ethics advisers. The fact is that he is floundering. He—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps he should have a read—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Badenoch: Perhaps he should have a read of the—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We do not want to start the session with someone leaving, do we? If someone wants to volunteer, please do so. If not, I will choose one.

Mrs Badenoch: Labour Members can do the fake cheers as much as they like. The whole country knows what a mess of the economy they are making.

It is clear that taxes are going up for everyone—except, perhaps, the Deputy Prime Minister. I warned before the summer that we would face weeks of speculation about which taxes would be going up. The former head of the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said:

“This sort of...uncertainty is actively damaging to the economy.”

And now we find that we have to wait until 26 November for a Budget. Does the Prime Minister really think that the country, or the markets, can wait that long?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady said that the Opposition were not referring themselves to the ethics advisers. That is among the reasons they got booted out of office last year. She complains that we are going through the due process for a Budget and going through the necessary steps. We tried a Budget on their watch without going through those steps. What happened? They blew up the economy. We will take no lessons from them.

Mrs Badenoch: This is desperate stuff from the Prime Minister. This week, he had another reset. This morning, the Prime Minister scrapped his five missions. After scrapping his three foundations, his six first steps for change and his seven pillars for growth, the truth is that this man has got no clue—zero clue. But this is serious. The Prime Minister’s incompetence is hurting real people. They are losing their jobs and the cost of everything is going up, from energy bills to the weekly shop. This is a crisis made in Downing Street. Is it not the truth that he is too weak to change course, and too arrogant to admit he got things wrong?

The Prime Minister: I do not know what social media sites the right hon. Lady has been on this morning, but I think the chair of the Tory party said that this Government are the “firefighters”. Well, in a sense we are, because we are putting out the fires that the Conservatives created. They were the arsonists—the biggest fall in living standards on record, blowing up the finances. We have spent the first year putting out their fires—quite right too—but now we are delivering on the cost of living: funded childcare worth £7,500 for working families, free breakfast clubs and opening new school-based nurseries. That is what we are fighting for: the best start for every child in this country.

Q2. [905486] **Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): The Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, is delivering growth and jobs by backing SMEs such as Booghe Toys in my constituency, which has just doubled in size. Will the Prime Minister join me in praising this success and confirm that boosting ambitious small and medium-sized businesses across the UK remains a key priority of his Government?

The Prime Minister: May I recognise and congratulate the businesses in my hon. Friend’s constituency? We have published our small business plan, which was very

well received. It includes new rules; cracking down on late payments, which has long been asked for; a £3 billion boost to more business loans; and fairer business rate systems to support small businesses. That is why it was so warmly received.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On behalf of my hon. Friends on these Benches, may I join the Leader of the Opposition in sending our condolences to the family of David Warburton?

I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to Annette Brooke, who served in this House for 14 years and sadly passed away last month. Annette dedicated her life to public service and serving the people of Dorset, and she is greatly missed.

We have all seen the horrifying images from Gaza: the babies so thin from starvation that you can see their skeletons; the bodies of children killed while queuing for water; the emaciated hostages still held captive by Hamas. The Prime Minister has rightly said he wants to stop all that, so when the one man in the world who has the power to stop that comes to our country on a state visit, will the Prime Minister look President Trump in the eye and urge him to use his influence on Netanyahu and Qatar to make it stop?

The Prime Minister: May I join the right hon. Gentleman in his comments about Annette Brooke, and also in his description of the horrifying situation in Gaza? It is horrifying. We are looking at a man-made famine, on top of everything else. That is why we are expending so much of our time, with partners, on seeking to bring about a ceasefire, to get humanitarian aid in at pace, to get the hostages out and, of course, to put forward a peace plan that can actually take us to a two-stage solution. Of course I will talk to all international leaders about that. I gently say to him that if he had not refused the invite to the state banquet, he could have been there two weeks on Tuesday speaking to President Trump himself. I am surprised; it is not an act of leadership to pass up that opportunity.

Ed Davey: I have to disagree with the Prime Minister on that—we are now debating this issue.

Here is an issue on which I hope the Prime Minister will agree with me. The European convention on human rights is a British creation that protects all our basic rights and freedoms: the rights of children, disabled people, survivors of domestic abuse, victims of horrific crimes—everyone. It protects care home residents from abuse and families from being spied on by councils, but the leader of the Conservative party and the leader of Reform want to join Russia and Vladimir Putin by withdrawing from the convention. The Liberal Democrats disagree, and so do the majority of the British people. Will the Prime Minister categorically rule out withdrawing from the ECHR, suspending it or watering down our rights in any way?

The Prime Minister: We will not withdraw from the European convention on human rights. We do need to make sure that both the convention and other instruments are fit for the circumstances we face at the moment, and therefore of course we have been, as we have made clear,

looking at the interpretation of some of those provisions. It would be a profound mistake to pull out of these instruments, because the first thing that would follow is that every other country in the world that adheres to these instruments would pull out of all their agreements with this country. That would be catastrophic for actually dealing with the problem.

Q5. [905489] Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Scotland has a proud heritage as one of the world's great shipbuilding nations. On behalf of the defence industry workers across Ayrshire and beyond, I welcome the largest export deal for new warships ever secured by the UK. Does the Prime Minister agree that this shows how, under Labour, we can build on our proud past to secure a brighter future for our shipbuilding industry?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I was very pleased to get the call from the Prime Minister of Norway on Saturday night, telling us that the UK had won this contract, beating off competition from the US, France and Germany because of the quality of shipbuilding in this country. This is a £10-billion deal—15 years-worth of shipbuilding, particularly in places like the Clyde, and thousands of skilled jobs in Scotland. It shows the importance of the defence industrial strategy, and the importance of Britain being taken seriously again on the international stage. It comes on top of the record investment in defence that we have already announced earlier this year.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I am joined today in the Gallery by the leadership of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, an organisation and young people who are passionate about youth work, our rural countryside and the future of farming and agriculture. Agriculture policy is devolved, but the Prime Minister's agricultural inheritance tax is the thing that has them and young farmers across all the country despairing not just for their future, but the future of food security. When will the Prime Minister change course on the farm family inheritance tax, now that he is taking control of tax policy?

The Prime Minister: First, I welcome the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster to Parliament. I take this opportunity to say to the hon. Member and to them that we have invested more than £2.7 billion in farming and nature recovery—that has been welcomed—and of course we are developing a 25-year farming road map to make the sector more profitable. Again, that has been warmly welcomed. Their future will depend on that road map, and we will work with them.

Q6. [905490] Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): This week, the Global Sumud flotilla, which includes British citizens, set sail for Gaza to break the illegal blockade and deliver much-needed aid. In June, a British boat, the Madleen, was threatened and its crew detained, but we took no action. Can the Prime Minister say what has been learned from this, and what steps are being taken to protect the British citizens on this flotilla?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue in relation to the horrifying situation in Gaza. The Israeli Government are preventing urgently needed aid from getting in, which is why we are now

seeing a man-made famine, and that should cause us all to pause and reflect. We are working with other countries to get aid in by any practical means, but land routes are the only viable and sustainable means of getting aid into Gaza on the scale that is required. Israel must lift the restrictions to allow aid agencies to deliver the life-saving supplies that are so desperately needed.

Q3. [905487] Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): So the Budget date has finally been announced, and once again, Scotland is some sort of distant afterthought. The Budget date has been left to the 11th hour because the Government do not know how to resolve their countless counter-bûrachs. It is a Budget date that has practically wrecked Scotland's budgetary process, leaving it almost impossible for us to pass a budget before Christmas, and leaving great uncertainty for Scotland's public services. Did you know, Mr Speaker, that they could not even be bothered to notify the Scottish Government, leaving them to find this out on social media? I ask the Prime Minister: how is this reset in relationships working out?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman overlooks the fact that at the last Budget there was a record settlement for Scotland—£50 billion a year. He talks about support. We have just won the Norway frigates contract. That is 15 years of shipbuilding in Scotland. The SNP First Minister has said what about that since Sunday? Absolutely nothing. I know we have another SNP question in just a moment. Perhaps that will be the opportunity to welcome the deal that we have won, and the jobs now for Scotland.

Q10. [905494] Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): Prime Minister, last year, my online safety forum of children and young people from every secondary school and college in Darlington found that 71% of our year 10s and 12s had been contacted by a stranger online, a shocking failure that our Online Safety Act will hopefully prevent going forward. Will he join me in calling on the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), and all opposed to this vital Act, to pick a side? Are they with us, parents and child protectors, or are they with the predators harming our children online?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is not here to represent his constituency in the House that he was elected to. No, he has flown to America to badmouth and talk down our country. It is worse than that, Mr Speaker: if you can believe it, he has gone there to lobby the Americans to impose sanctions on this country that will harm working people. You cannot get more unpatriotic than that. It is a disgrace. The Online Safety Act 2023 protects children from material on suicide, self-harm and online predators. Reform says it would scrap it. When its leader was asked, "Well, what would you replace it with?", his answer was:

"There needs to be a tech answer. I don't know what that is". You cannot run a country on "don't know" answers.

Q4. [905488] Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sure that you, like me, got to enjoy everything that UK hospitality has to offer over the summer. Fifteen local pubs received nominations in my community pub awards. I visited places including the

Bull Inn in Battle, the Castle Inn in Pevensey, the Swan Inn in Dallington, the New Inn in Westfield and Sidley working men's club. Many of them told me how hard-hit they have been by Labour's jobs tax. UKHospitality estimates that 80,000 jobs have already been lost, and the British Beer and Pub Association says that a pub a day will close this year. Can the Prime Minister name a single pub landlord who thinks that the Deputy Prime Minister's Employment Rights Bill will help, rather than just make things worse?

The Prime Minister: I hope the hon. Gentleman paced out the visits to all those pubs, and did not do them all in one go. UKHospitality has welcomed our small business plan, which obviously applies to pubs. *[Interruption.]* Yes, it has. The reason is that it permanently lowers the business rates that they pay, and it tackles late payments—something for which it has been asking for a very, very long time. The Conservatives talked about fixing that, but they never delivered. We are delivering.

Q13. [905497] **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): My constituents have endured four major fires in recent months across our community, including one that caused the devastating destruction of Cumbernauld's iconic St Mungo's church, yet the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is consulting on downgrading Cumbernauld fire station, increasing response times and putting lives at risk. Will the Prime Minister make representations to the Scottish Government that they should not risk lives with cuts to our vital emergency services?

The Prime Minister: I think the whole House is sorry to hear about the awful fires that my hon. Friend's constituents have faced, including the destruction of St Mungo's. I know just how important that church was to the local community. The Scottish Government have received the largest settlement in the history of devolution—£50 billion a year. That should be focused on the issues that matter to her constituency. I will take this up, and make sure that we raise it with the Scottish Government.

Q7. [905491] **Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): First of all, I refer to my comments earlier in the week, since the Prime Minister's research is not up to scratch.

George Reid, a former Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament and MP, passed away over the summer. He was a humanitarian to his very fingertips. He abhorred the demonisation of asylum seekers, including those desperate enough to cross the channel in small boats. Figures published by the House of Commons Library show that the number of asylum seekers who are forced to cross increased dramatically after Brexit, as a result of our leaving the Dublin regulation. Instead of punching down and joining in with the victim blaming of Reform and the Conservatives, will the Prime Minister reject their isolationism and look to rejoin the Dublin convention, which every other country in western Europe has joined?

The Prime Minister: There is nothing progressive about people crossing the channel in small boats—nothing at all. We need to ensure that that stops.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman on the question of the Dublin agreement. We had a returns agreement with the whole of Europe, but it was ripped up when we left the EU by people who made promises that that would not be the case. We are rebuilding that relationship—we have reset it—and we now have a returns agreement with France. We would not need a single returns scheme with France if we had not ripped up the Dublin agreement.

Q15. [905499] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): We are at a very dangerous political moment, with opinion polls warning that for the first time in our country's history, we risk the election of an extremist far-right Government. We all have a duty to prevent that. To do so, do we not need to rebuild support through a return to real Labour values, with real action to tackle poverty and inequality, a wealth tax on the super-rich, and ethical foreign policy that takes a strong, principled stand on war crimes, whoever commits them?

The Prime Minister: We do stand at an important moment: we can have the politics of renewal under this Government, or the politics of grievance under Reform. Reform does not want to fix the problems; it wants the grievance to continue. The last thing it wants is improvement in the lives of working people in this country, because it feeds off the problems and grievances being there. That is the difference.

Q8. [905492] **Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Admiral Lord West was head of the Royal Navy, Chief of Defence Intelligence and a Labour Security Minister, and he sits on the Intelligence and Security Committee. When he writes in the national press denouncing what he calls the

"disgraceful decision to hand over ownership of the Chagos archipelago",

adding that he does

"not accept that the move is 'absolutely vital for our defence and intelligence', as the Prime Minister claims",

should we rely on his professional judgment or not?

The Prime Minister: I have the misfortune to disagree with him.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): New mums and dads in my constituency tell me that one of the things they worry about most is whether they can afford the childcare that they need to be able to go back to work. That is why it is great that parents will be able to save up to £7,500 a year on nursery fees, thanks to this Labour Government. Does the Prime Minister agree that not only is investing in childcare important for tackling the cost of living crisis, but it will help to remove barriers to deciding to have children in the first place?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. I was very proud to make our announcement about childcare on Monday. As she says, rightly, it will save families on average £7,500 in a cost of living crisis, but crucially, it also applies from nine months to four years. Under the previous Government, there was a disparity at age four between children arriving at reception, with some barely out of nappies, and others quite articulate. That locks in inequality for

life. I am really pleased that the measure that we announced on Monday unlocks that, ensuring that every single child aged four gets to the starting line in reception with a fair chance of going as far as their talents will take them.

Q9. [905493] **Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): While the Conservative party deludes itself with the myth of endless fossil fuels, the rest of us know just how ridiculous and reckless that is. Extracting more oil and gas from the declining North sea basin will do nothing to protect energy security or jobs. The Prime Minister himself has stated:

“Climate action is at the heart of this government’s mission for the protection and prosperity of Britain and the world.”

With a decision looming on the Rosebank oil field, will the Prime Minister prove that his words mean something, and finally put an end to this climate-wrecking project?

The Prime Minister: I did notice that the Leader of the Opposition went to Scotland, I think, this week to announce that if she ever became Prime Minister, which is extremely unlikely, she would pull down £50 billion of investment in renewables in Scotland. This is good, secure jobs of the future—absolutely reckless behaviour. The Opposition have not learned anything.

The Greens have a new leader—unfortunately for the hon. Lady—and we can now see what they really stand for: withdrawal from NATO at a moment like this; totally unfunded spending that would blow up the economy; and blocking all planning proposals. They also have a leader who has made—to say the least—some very strange comments about women. There is only one party delivering fairness and tackling the climate crisis and that is the Labour party.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Prime Minister, in September 2021, you met ex-Arsenal player Michael Thomas in Portcullis House alongside other former footballers of the V11, when I hosted them in Parliament. Last night, the BBC broadcast the V11 documentary, exposing the fraud perpetrated against them and the financial abuse that they have suffered within the footballing system. They have all suffered terrible financial loss, but His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is still chasing them for taxes from funds that were defrauded from them. Prime Minister, will you join me in meeting Michael Thomas and other players to see how we can protect victims of fraud and, instead, go after the perpetrators of fraud?

The Prime Minister: I will, and I have met Michael Thomas a number of times. Of course, he has a special place in my heart, having scored that winning goal at Anfield when we won the league—although the less said about winning at Anfield at the moment probably the better. The serious point is that these are sporting heroes who have brought us so much joy, and they should have proper support from their sporting bodies on both health and welfare. Michael Thomas and others are running an important campaign to bring this to our attention. We do need a trusted system that takes the wellbeing of our sports people seriously, particularly those in vulnerable positions. I know that the Minister for Sport is in contact with the campaigners.

Q11. [905495] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): On a recent visit to the UK Space Agency, based in my Oxfordshire constituency, I learned of the huge value created by our space sector, generating more than £7 for every £1 invested. Given the Government’s decision to scrap the UKSA as an executive agency, will the Prime Minister guarantee its international credibility, its operational independence and its budget? And will he visit Harwell Campus to hear what our brilliant space companies need from Government?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important issue, and reassure him that we do want to keep the huge expertise and knowledge of the UK Space Agency staff, including those working in his constituency. We have already secured almost £300 million in contracts from the European Space Agency and this will cut costs, reducing duplication, so we can really focus on growing this important sector.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Since the start of the full-scale invasion into Ukraine, Russia has stolen, abducted and indoctrinated at least 19,546 children. It is one of the most heinous crimes of this war. I warmly welcome this morning’s announcement of an additional package of sanctions on those perpetrating these crimes, and will the Prime Minister assure the House that he will do everything possible to return these children to their homes?

The Prime Minister: I acknowledge my hon. Friend’s campaigning on this really important issue. Russia’s policy of forced deportations and indoctrination of Ukrainian children is despicable, and anybody who has heard the stories or seen the pictures cannot be other than profoundly moved. We have taken firm action. This was one issue that we discussed two weeks ago in Washington when I went over with other leaders to ensure that we are all imposing maximum pressure. Among the very many horrors of the Ukraine conflict, this is right up there as one of the absolute worst.

Q12. [905496] **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): Like many, I was deeply concerned that a police force deemed it necessary to take five armed officers to arrest a comedy writer from a flight. Some may have found Mr Linehan’s comments offensive, but that is not the point. If we do not support speech that we do not like, we do not support free speech. Will the Prime Minister commit to reviewing our speech laws to ensure that legitimate free expression is protected and will he condemn the culture within the public sector that prioritises this dangerous and perverse nonsense?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this point. He will have seen that the commissioner put out a statement this morning in relation to this case. I have been clear throughout that we must ensure that the police focus on the most serious issues and the issues that matter the most to our constituencies and all communities. That includes tackling issues such as antisocial behaviour, knife crime and violence. We have a long history of free speech in this country. I am very proud of that, and I will always defend it.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): In a week when the Prime Minister has worked tirelessly to place Clydeside, Glasgow and Govan at the epicentre of Type 26 shipbuilding, is he as perplexed as I am at the

radio silence from the SNP and the contempt that the SNP continues to show for the defence sector? Does he agree that it is a contempt for jobs and growth and an 18-year-long contempt for Scotland?

The Prime Minister: I am perplexed that the First Minister has not welcomed the deal. It is a massive deal for Scotland—it is 15 years of shipbuilding. I would have expected the First Minister to hold a press conference to celebrate what we have done with this deal. Those 15 years of shipbuilding are extremely important to the Clyde and many industries, and they are a reflection of the professionalism and dedication that workers in Scotland have shown over many years. I urge the First Minister to come forward and welcome this deal.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Sir John Hayes.

Q14. [905498] **Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Mr Speaker, I know you will agree

that flags and banners, in bringing national pride, nourish individuals' sense of worth and nurture our shared sense of belonging. Will the Prime Minister take steps to ensure that across every part of our kingdom, alongside the crosses of St George in England, St Patrick in Ireland, St Andrew in Scotland and the red dragon in Wales, our flag is flown on every Government and public building—hospitals, schools, police stations and railway stations—for every Briton deserves the chance to see a forest of flagpoles and the flutter of the Union Jack?

The Prime Minister: I share the right hon. Gentleman's pride in our country's flag. It represents our history, our heritage and our values. That is why we display it. I was the Labour leader who put the Union Jack on the membership card for the Labour party, and I was very proud to do so. It belongs to all of us. We should be proud of it and value it.

Point of Order

12.38 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am chair of the Public and Commercial Services trade union group in Parliament. As Members will know, PCS members from the House's security division are taking strike action today. These are professional, dedicated and committed staff, and it takes a lot to motivate them to take strike action: their sense of grievance. There is a clear difference of view between the management of the House and the union about how we have arrived at this situation. Could I use this mechanism to urge the senior management of the House to seek another meeting with the union to clarify the situation and to come up with a reasonable offer that will resolve this dispute? I do not wish to see our dedicated staff outside of work on this basis. They provide us with the security that we need.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. While it is strictly not a matter for the Chair, I would agree that it is in everyone's interest to work together to resolve matters. I hope that we can get people around the table rather than striking. I do not want to go into further details, and I think it is better we leave it at this stage.

Methanol Poisoning (Travel Advice)

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the ten-minute rule motion, I wish to make a short announcement about the House's sub judice resolution. A coroner's inquest has been opened into the death of Simone White, and those proceedings are now sub judice. However, given the significant public interest in addressing this matter, I, as Speaker, have decided to grant a waiver from the House's resolution relating to matters sub judice in respect of any inquests into the deaths of UK citizens or residents resulting from methanol poisoning overseas. Members may therefore refer to the case in the course of proceedings, but I would urge them to avoid saying anything that might prejudice any future criminal or civil proceedings in the UK.

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

12.40 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require travel advice issued by the Secretary of State and other persons to include guidance about the risks of methanol poisoning; and for connected purposes.

I have been working closely on this issue on behalf of one of my constituents, Chloe Lassetter, who alongside her family, Sue, Neil, Tom and Amanda, have been fighting to raise awareness of the dangers of methanol poisoning abroad following the tragic death of Simone White last year. As Members may have seen from media coverage at the time, Simone was travelling with her friend Bethany in Laos. They were staying in a small riverside town about two hours north of the capital. It is a hub for backpackers travelling across south-east Asia. It was there that Simone and her friend consumed free shots of alcohol offered at the hostel.

The next day both felt unwell, but they carried on with their plans. Hours later, after boarding a bus to their next destination, things worsened: Bethany fainted; Simone vomited. They were eventually taken to a local hospital, but doctors had no idea what was wrong and initially suspected food poisoning. Still confused and deteriorating, the girls made it to a private hospital. I cannot imagine how frightened and confused they must have been at this point, but sadly, by then it was too late for Simone. She started having seizures during dialysis and was eventually taken for emergency brain surgery. The surgery relieved the pressure but caused bleeding and the other side of her brain started to swell. The results confirming methanol poisoning were not available until two weeks later, but by then Simone had sadly already passed away.

Although Bethany recovered following her hospitalisation, six other young people fell victim to suspected methanol poisoning, having drunk at the same hostel. Two young Australians, two young Danish women and an American all lost their lives. As the Australian Prime Minister said in November, this is "every parent's worst nightmare". My heart goes out to all the families who lost loved ones in the most unbelievably tragic circumstances.

Over the last year, I have learnt so much about Simone, who was a much-loved young woman. She had a brilliant life ahead of her, and when I attended her funeral, it was clear that she was deeply loved by her friends and family.

A year ago, like so many of us here, I did not know much about methanol poisoning, yet over 1,000 people die from it every single year worldwide. This is such a huge danger, but barely any of us know about it. I also went backpacking after university but never knew about the dangers, and sadly, the same is true of so many of our young people. That must change. For Members who are less aware than we should be, methanol is tasteless and has only a faint smell, making it impossible to tell if a drink has been contaminated. When consumed, it can lead to a coma, convulsions, blindness, nervous system damage and death. Medical specialists say drinking as little as 25 ml of methanol can be fatal, but it is sometimes added to drinks because it is cheaper than alcohol.

Since their devastating loss, Simone's family have campaigned tirelessly to prevent similar tragedies from affecting other families. Alongside Simone's friend Bethany, they have been raising awareness of the dangers of methanol poisoning, and it was an honour earlier this year to help to arrange a parliamentary drop-in session on the subject, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) and the hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson). The family were joined by representatives of the travel industry, the National Poisons Information Service, the British Toxicology Society and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to educate MPs, and the message was clear: awareness saves lives, but only when Government guidance is accurate, clear and consistent.

Sadly, current official travel advice is falling short. In some high-risk countries, there is very little warning at all. Where advice does exist, it is vague and understated. Travellers are told that certain drinks "might carry a risk" or that they "should exercise caution." This is not a matter of caution: this is about a lethal, preventable danger. I appreciate that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has updated the health section of the travel advice on its website, but we must do more to make the warnings clearer and more explicit, so that information is more readily available to everyone. The Government's Travel Aware website has an informative section on methanol poisoning, but more must be done

to make that advice and guidance better known to young people before they travel. As things stand, they really have to search to find it.

My Bill, supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington and the hon. Members for Dartford, for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) and for Lewisham North (Vicky Foxcroft), proposes a straightforward, proportionate solution. It does not attempt to police alcohol sales abroad. It does not require costly programmes or enforcement. It simply requires the Government to provide prominent, clear and consistent guidance about methanol poisoning for countries where the risk is known to exist. Other Governments have already taken steps to warn their citizens. Australia's Smartraveller service provides unambiguous, practical advice and reaches young travellers through targeted campaigns. We should do no less, and we must not be left behind.

Families such as Simone's, who have endured unimaginable grief, are not asking for the impossible. They are asking for honesty, clarity and actionable guidance, so that other families do not have to suffer the same loss. We have already shown in this House that collaboration between families, experts and parliamentarians can and does raise awareness. Now it is time to turn awareness into action. I know that Ministers in the Foreign Office are well aware of Simone's story, as we have exchanged many letters on the topic, and the Foreign Office kindly hosted me, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington and the family at a meeting earlier this year. I thank them for their engagement to date and I look forward to continue working with them, as I know they understand the grave risks at stake.

As Simone's mother, Sue White, said:

"If it can happen to Simone, it can happen to anybody".

So let's start the process today to prevent future tragedies. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Laura Trott, Gareth Bacon, Jim Dickson, Tom Morrison and Vicky Foxcroft present the Bill.

Laura Trott accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 May 2026, and to be printed (Bill 300).

Opposition Day

[10TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Property Taxes

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected the amendment. I call the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

12.49 pm

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes recent reports that the Government is considering a wide range of increases to taxes on property; notes the Prime Minister's commitment last year not to impose Capital Gains Tax on primary residences; and calls on the Government not to introduce an annual property levy which would tax the family home, higher rates of Council Tax, or a land value tax, or to lower the thresholds or further increase liability to Inheritance Tax, for example, by changing the seven-year gift rule.

I trust you had a good recess, Mr Speaker. I am absolutely certain that the Deputy Prime Minister also had a good recess. We saw many photographs of her down at the seaside, just off the coast in a rubber dingy—rather like many of the other photographs we saw over the summer, given this Government's reckless policies on illegal migration. She was probably celebrating the acquisition of another property for her property empire, but that celebration was perhaps slightly tinged with a nagging doubt as to whether she had indeed paid enough stamp duty. Well, we will get to the bottom of that in due course.

Those who could not avoid paying the taxes imposed by this Government are businesses right up and down our country, many of which I took the time to visit during the recess. In the leisure sector alone, some 80,000 jobs have been destroyed by the national insurance rises, and this has particularly affected those taking their first job, younger workers, part-time workers and female workers. Jobs are being destroyed.

While the Deputy Prime Minister was lounging on her boat with her wine, this Government were all at sea, like a cork bobbing on the tide, with no control over the events swirling around them. When it came to the economy, although eclipsed by the calamities around illegal migration, we saw recently the panicked reshuffle of the Treasury Front Bench. I offer my congratulations to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson) and warmly welcome him to his new role. However, I should also tell him that he is joining a sinking ship, whose captain has just had all her authority stripped from her, while all his comrades down below deck are fiercely trying to bail it out. I also offer a fond farewell to the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who no doubt thought he was very clever when he leapt off the sinking ship. He will not be feeling quite so clever when he discovers that the place to which they have sent him is even more dysfunctional than the Treasury Front Bench.

Among all this news of arrivals to our shores, we have had a cruel summer of speculation around tax. We have seen in the skies clouds of kites flown largely by

the Treasury as to what taxes it is going to put up. It has all been tax, tax and tax. I am reminded of the Beatles' song "Taxman":

"I'll tax the street,
If you try to sit, I'll tax your seat,
If you get too cold, I'll tax the heat,
If you take a walk, I'll tax your feet."

When it comes to tax, it is not so much "Good Day Sunshine" as "Help!" [*Laughter.*] Okay—it was a bit hammy, but it was worth a try. I was going to try "Penny Lane" as well, but I drew the line there.

It is worth examining how we got to this point, for a reckoning for our country is surely coming. This will be a story for all time.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Mel Stride: I will do so momentarily.

It started with broken promises. This was a party that said during the run-up to the general election that it had no intention of raising taxes left, right and centre, and yet within a month or two, this Government did precisely that, with devastating consequences: tax rises on businesses that stifle growth. They talked down the economy by confecting a £22 billion black hole that did not exist. What an irony it was that it was they who brought in the Office for Budget Responsibility to decide whether that £22 billion black hole existed and that the OBR said it could not legitimise the claim—the Government were wrong.

What happened with spending and borrowing? It got completely out of control. The combination of passing on price rises because of the national insurance increases, and the extra borrowing and spending, has led to higher inflation. We are an outlier when it comes to inflation.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir Mel Stride: In a moment.

That in turn has seen interest rates higher for longer and the servicing costs on our national debt now running at over £100 billion a year—more than twice our defence spend. I will now give way to whoever was trying to intervene behind me.

Sir Oliver Dowden: Would my right hon. Friend agree that correcting this loss of market confidence demands decisive action from the Government at the Budget, and that that decisive action cannot be taken solely on the tax side? The tax side is what has driven us into this loop. We need decisive action on spending and particularly on welfare if we are to see some restoration of market confidence and get ourselves out of this rut.

Sir Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend, as ever, is absolutely right. The reality, as we see in the bond yields at the moment, is that the markets have no confidence in the ability of this Government to get on top of spending. We saw the farce of a Government who came into office scrapping the £5 billion of welfare savings that were already baked into the OBR's scorecard because we had brought them in, and attempting to bring forward their own reforms only for their Back Benchers to vote

them down. My right hon. Friend is so right; this Government do not have the will or the plan to deal with spending, and that is at the heart of the reason why we will all be punished and pay the price of more taxes come the Budget in November.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the shadow Chancellor for bringing forward this subject for debate. He clearly shares my deep concern that I have, and that I think everyone in this Chamber should have, that the Government are considering a further tax on property, despite the fact that the Prime Minister committed to not imposing capital gains tax on residents of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Last year, it was the family inheritance tax; this year, those who own property—those who have scrimped and saved for their house, those who are middle class, those hard workers—have now become the latest target of Labour tax policy.

Sir Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. Of course, if the Government have got into a situation where they are having to scrabble around and look at property taxes, as we are debating this afternoon, than really nothing is safe from the taxman under this Government.

Helena Dollimore: I gently remind the right hon. Member that since this Labour Government came to power, interest rates have been cut five times—a vote of confidence in our Chancellor, fixing the foundations of our economy. That saves the average family on an average tracker mortgage in my constituency over £100 a month. Will he remind me what happened to interest rates when his party was in power?

Sir Mel Stride: As the hon. Lady will know, interest rates are one of the key tools in monetary policy and are applied to bring down inflation. While she is right that there have been five reductions in the level of the base rate, there should have been many more. The reason is—the evidence is there—that this Government have stoked inflation. Inflation is still rising. It is at twice the level or thereabouts that it was on the day of the general election. When a Government stoke inflation, we pay the price through higher interest rates, and that is precisely what has been happening.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the massive impact of these tax rises on so many families and businesses up and down the country. Will he comment on how we can have a Deputy Prime Minister who has admitted avoiding paying the tax that she owed and who continues in office? And this, from a party that called for the resignation of people for far lower offences! Does that not expose the rank hypocrisy that seems to run right through this Government?

Sir Mel Stride: If the right hon. Lady wants to make the rules, she should live by them. That message will go out to businesses and families up and down the country. There is no way that they can avoid the juggernaut of taxes that are coming down the track.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In return for the right hon. Member's generosity in giving way, I will say something pleasant about the last

Conservative Government. [*Interruption.*] I know—wait for it! It will be just one thing.

The last Government allowed councils like Westmorland and Furness, run by the Liberal Democrats, to double council tax on second homes. It is right to do that because excessive second-home ownership annihilates communities in the lakes and the dales, the west country and elsewhere. But can I encourage the Conservatives and the party in government now to do something that would do much more to limit the number of second homes than that: bring in a new planning category of use, so that national parks and councils can manage the numbers and save communities?

Sir Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about the Conservative party—I am sure that they are deeply felt and very genuine. What the Deputy Prime Minister should be doing is delivering more homes. It is quite clear that the target of 1.5 million homes, which the Government claim they will deliver at the rate of 300,000 a year, will not be met. I am quite happy to be proven wrong, but I very much suspect that I will not be, unfortunately.

We have ended up in a situation in which a huge black hole is looming. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research puts it at possibly as much as £40 billion. The economic mismanagement of the Labour party is a recurrent theme. In the October Budget—the Government's first—there was headroom of about £10 billion against the fiscal rules. That, plus £4 billion more, was blown by the time of the spring statement—the emergency Budget. Once again, it appears that considerably more has been blown all over again.

That is no surprise. The U-turns on winter fuel payments and on welfare reform, which we have already discussed in this debate, led to unfunded commitments of around £6 billion—unfunded commitments after the Chancellor had said that the Labour party would never find itself in that position. What she said has simply not happened. What signal does it send to the markets when the Government cannot control spending? In the long-term, it will be interesting to see what the Office for Budget Responsibility has to say about its forecasts for growth. In recent times, 30-year bond yields have hit a 27-year high. We are paying more to borrow than Greece. There is a potential debt crisis looming, and this country could be on the brink—all on Labour's watch.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): The Government inherited bond yields higher than those in many other countries. Right now bond yields are going up in Japan, Germany and the United States. Is the Chancellor responsible for all that?

Sir Mel Stride: There is no doubt that under the previous Government there was a need to support the economy. That involved the expenditure of £400 billion, not least on the furlough scheme. I do not remember the hon. Gentleman's party arguing at the time that we should not do that; in fact, it argued that we should go further still. The Conservative Government stepped in, supported jobs and saved us from going into mass unemployment that many feared would be worse than even in the 1980s, and I take great pride in that. But we are where we are now, and what the Government should be doing is growing the economy, stoking up

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business sentiment, getting taxes down and getting the economy moving, but they are doing precisely the opposite.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Is not the difference now that we are seeing stagflation—high inflation and the economy not growing as it should be? We are therefore seeing job losses and unemployment going up every month under this Labour Government. Unless they do something drastically different, it will only get worse, and that will impact on our growth prospects and therefore on the prosperity not just of our nation but of the individuals who work and try to thrive here.

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are seeing high inflation, anaemic growth, high gilt yields and a pound that has been plummeting in recent times. All those are signals flashing red on the dashboard.

Instead of getting a grip on spending and getting taxes down, the Government have been out there pitch-rolling yet more taxes. Over the summer, we have seen briefings to the press suggesting tax rises on property. The Labour party has an opportunity this afternoon to rule out those possibilities, and the Minister should do just that when he responds.

First, there has been a suggestion that there will be changes to the private residence relief under the capital gains tax regime. That would strike at the heart of our country as a property-owning democracy. People would be penalised simply for selling up and moving home. It would have clear implications by bunging up the property market, and clear economic implications by causing friction in the process of people moving from one part of the country to another, often in search of work. It would discourage downsizing, even though that would be beneficial in providing more homes for people to live in. Before the election, the Prime Minister said that there never was a policy of that type so it did not need to be ruled out, but let us rule it out just in case anyone pretends that there was such a policy. When he responds, will the Minister confirm that he stands by the words of the Prime Minister?

Secondly, there has been a suggestion of an annual tax on homes. What a tax on aspiration! What a tax on people who have saved hard and managed to get on the property ladder, but who will then be stuck with annual taxes. What about those who are asset-rich but income-poor and cannot afford to pay—are they expected to sell up? Will the Minister rule out that possibility and put people's minds at rest?

If that was not enough, we hear that the Government may be considering changes to the gifting regime in inheritance tax. They are not content just to pulverise farmers and family businesses, and to see those businesses and farms broken up when they are passed on from one generation to another, because of the imposition of tax. In fact, it was a Labour Government in the 1970s who brought in the reliefs that this Government have chosen to abolish. The inheritance tax yield will double over this Parliament. The Opposition say, "Enough is enough." We should not punish parents who wish to pass something on to their children. Socialists do not understand that we do not all stand as atomised individuals; we work

together as families and communities. We care about each other, we care about the people we love, and it is right that we have the opportunity to pass something on to them.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I thank the shadow Chancellor for introducing this debate on such an important issue. Properties and assets are vital to the country and to people. On the lifetime limit for inheritance tax, over the past year everyone will have heard the Government telling farmers and family businesses to get their affairs in order and to plan. Not having a limit on the lifetime cap was what allowed them to plan. If that is cut or the cap is not in the right place, it will negate every argument that the Government have made in the past year to justify their family farm and family business tax. Will the Minister please acknowledge that and rule out any change to the cap, which would penalise family farms and businesses?

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend has put it brilliantly and succinctly, and she is absolutely right. In their horror—in their recoil from the inheritance tax changes—that is exactly what farmers and family business owners have been doing: thinking about alternatives. The seven-year rule has been one of those alternatives, and it would be a really heartless and extraordinarily cruel moment if the Government were to shut that down as well.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is explaining the situation in his usual powerful way. If, as seems likely, the Government impose capital gains tax on a person's principal private residence, will he, as mitigation, consider whether there should at least be indexation allowance to provide some relief from the horror that I fear is about to be inflicted on my constituents? He will remember that the Finance Act 2008 abolished that relief on other property. I suspect that the Government will not be sympathetic to such a suggestion given what happened in 2008, but it would at least take the edge off the imposition of taxes on the sale of a person's principal private residence.

Sir Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend raises his point in his usual eloquent manner. That is a question for the Minister, and I hope that, when he rises to the Dispatch Box, he will rule out our concerns in their entirety. In the event that he cannot, perhaps he will choose to answer my right hon. Friend's inquiry.

Is it not the case that those in the Labour party have a clear misunderstanding because they have no business experience? Those on the Government Front Bench have no business experience in setting up companies or understanding the meaning of business taxes—the experience is simply not there. Labour will talk about taxing wealth, but does it not understand that if we tax wealth, we will get less of it?

It has been estimated that about 15,000 high net worth individuals have left our country in the period in which this Government have been in power. A consequence of that tax just walking out of the door is that we will require somewhere around a third of a million to half a million people on average earnings to make up the difference. This is not a case of good riddance to wealth; the Government should—as the Conservative party would—encourage and turbocharge wealth at every turn.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Mel Stride: If I am an hon. Friend, I will certainly give way.

Andrew Pakes: I am sure *Hansard* will correct me.

The right hon. Gentleman just made some comments about high net worth or high value individuals. In my constituency, I am particularly interested in individuals on low incomes. In Peterborough, I represent a city with one of the highest levels of those employed on zero-hours contracts and in chronically insecure work. Does he not agree that his party often wants all the spending, but none of the funding for delivery? He talked about reducing taxation for some of those with higher net worth, but will he also talk about which doctors' surgeries in my constituency would suffer cuts under his plans, which individuals would receive no protection for their employment rights, and how the people of Peterborough would be worse off because he wants to reduce the spending that will fix the foundations of this country?

Sir Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman refers to cutting spending. His party attempted to cut spending, but entirely failed to do so. My point is that if he wants money to spend on public services, he needs to cut welfare and should worry about how to do so. I do not know how he voted when that was put to the test in this House, but if he in any way voted against his own Government and against getting on top of the welfare bill, he should ask his own question of himself.

As for those on low incomes, they are precisely the people who are now being devastated by the increase in national insurance. There is not just an increase in the rate, but a substantial reduction in the threshold at which national insurance kicks in, which has meant higher unemployment, in particular among younger workers, part-time workers, women and people getting that vital first job so that they can get themselves on a career path. They are the people whom the Labour Government are punishing most.

Dr Luke Evans: Is that not exactly the point—that the top 1% of earners pay almost 30% of income tax? If we lose them, we damage the people who need the support and the investment from the very taxpayers we have just scared off. Should not the reverse be happening? We should attract more people into this country to spend more money, so that we have more money for such services through tax collection.

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have already shared with the House the classic example of the number of people who have left this country because of a punitive tax regime and the costs of that.

Sir Oliver Dowden: Further to the excellent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), the Labour party denigrates wealthy individuals who choose to come to this country. However, it is about not just the tax that they provide, but the jobs and opportunities they create by investing in constituencies up and down the country. This country has prospered for hundreds of years by being open and welcoming to

inward investment. If we lose that, we lose a key plank of the competitiveness and growth that have been associated with our economy.

Sir Mel Stride: That is right. We live in a highly mobile world; it is easy for people with substantial wealth or money to invest to go anywhere in the world. We have to remain competitive, and this Government are making us less competitive. My right hon. Friend refers to unemployment, but just look at the record—should we have expected any more from this Government? No, not really. Every single Labour Government in history have left unemployment higher when they left office than it was at the time they came into office. What have we seen on unemployment since this Government have been in office? It has increased every single month since they have been in power.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has spent the past five minutes circling around figures gathered by a consultancy that aids the super-wealthy to migrate from this country. Where is the Conservative party getting its economic ideas from? It speaks volumes that he has spent so much time up to this point speaking for the 15,000 high net worth individuals served by that consultancy; and his previous point was about inheritance tax, which is paid by only 4% of all estates in the UK. If he has any ideas, what will the Conservative party do to grow the economy for the benefit of all people in this country?

Sir Mel Stride: The hon. Lady asks where we are getting our ideas from; where we are not getting them from is from academics and researchers who believe in taxing wealth and who now sit there on the Treasury Bench, or in other places where they advise No. 10. They talk on a regular basis about taxing property, wealth, shares and assets of any description that they can think of, but that is the road to ruin. She asked where we get our ideas from, and I will tell her. I set up my own business in the 1980s, from absolutely nothing. I grew it from scratch, and then I took it over to America and grew a business there. I have lived, breathed and eaten business most of my life. I also go up and down the country to speak to other such businesses. They are the people who understand what needs to be done on the tax front and who have to live with the red tape that her party is bringing in to tie them down. They are the people whom this party is listening to.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has talked at great length about taxing the wealthy, but he has omitted one of the suggestions that came forth over the summer, which was to get rid of the punitive council tax system, which taxes poverty and deprivation in this country. The former Conservative leader of Hartlepool borough council famously cheered when he put up council tax on deprived people in Hartlepool. Why are the Conservative party and now Reform—that former Conservative leader has now defected to Reform—so attached to that regressive system?

Sir Mel Stride: I think that council tax, different variants of it, revaluations and so on are things that Government should look at, because we do not want them to be entirely static; there can always be reform and change. I will observe, however, that the average

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council tax paid in Labour areas is demonstrably higher than the equivalent taxes in Conservative areas. That comes down to the approach that a Conservative council takes to spending and to ensuring that councils are efficiently run, rather than the profligate approach of the Labour party.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): One of the suggestions made to the Government earlier this year was from Conservative-run Hampshire county council, to increase the council tax on my constituents by 15%. That was blocked by this Government, by the Secretary of State. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in condemning Conservative-run Hampshire county council's proposal to increase council tax by 15%?

Sir Mel Stride: I am not going to get into specific things going on in the hon. Gentleman's area. How can I be expected to opine with authority on something of that nature relating to his constituency? [*Interruption.*] Hold on. My general point stands: the simple fact is that Labour-controlled local authorities charge more in council tax than Conservative-run councils do.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members cannot keep standing up and waving their hands in the air; the right hon. Gentleman has to give way.

Emily Darlington: What the right hon. Gentleman has said is not a fact. The reality in my region is that Milton Keynes, the Labour-run local authority, has lower taxes than all the surrounding Tory authorities, including in Northamptonshire, which has failed over and over again. Two Conservative and now Reform councils have failed, as has Buckinghamshire, while Milton Keynes has been labelled by the Local Government Association as one of the best-run councils. It still delivers lower council tax than all those Tory-run authorities.

Sir Mel Stride: It is a simple matter of logic that even if the hon. Lady's assertion is true—I do not know whether it is or not—it does not contradict the point that I made.

Dr Luke Evans: Was it not the current Prime Minister who said

“not a penny more on your council tax”?

Is the shadow Chancellor aware of how that worked out?

Sir Mel Stride: In a word, badly.

Luke Murphy: A moment ago, the shadow Chancellor suggested that he would not get into speculation, but this whole debate is premised on media speculation. I asked him to comment on an actual proposal that was made to the Government by a Conservative-run county council to increase local council tax for my constituents by 15%, so he is asking us to vote on a motion about media speculation but he will not comment on an actual proposal.

Sir Mel Stride: My point is very clear—I need to make some progress as I have been fairly generous in taking interventions—that when it comes to council tax, it is a fact that Conservative-controlled councils charge less, because their whole approach to running the council is the same as our approach to running the economy: to ensure it is done efficiently and not to impose undue burdens on people by way of tax.

We were told by the Chancellor that the tax hikes in the Government's first Budget, last autumn, were a “once in a Parliament” event. It is now a question not of whether there will be further tax increases, but which taxes will be increased. The uncertainty that has flowed from the disastrous situation over the summer has meant that, because of Labour's choices, a hold has been put on businesses investing, on property transactions and choices, and fundamentally on some of the freedoms that we, as citizens, often take for granted.

Labour Members will desperately dismiss all of this as press speculation—I expect to hear that from the Minister in a moment—but is it not the truth that this sorry tale is entirely of their own making? It is the inevitable result of their choices and the failure that has followed, with much of this speculation seemingly fuelled by briefings from within the Government. This House and the public deserve answers.

The Chancellor cannot borrow more and has shown no ability to control spending. That can only leave tax, but which taxes will it be? Are family homes safe or are they simply fair game? If Labour Members fail to vote for the simple motion before us today, then the answer will be clear: under this Labour Government, nothing is safe—not people's homes, pensions, savings, businesses or farms, and not that which they simply wish to pass on to their own children. The message to hard-working people up and down our country could not be clearer: Labour will always duck the hard choices and tax the living daylight out of your family's future, to pay for its failure.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): The hypocrisy!

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope somebody did not use the word “hypocrisy”. I am sure that was not the case.

I call the Chief Secretary to the Treasury—and congratulations on your promotion.

1.23 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): I thank the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride) for opening the debate. I can tell that he spent his summer polishing some of his rhetorical flourishes, which he has shared with us today, but I suggest that he could have spent his time rather better.

Thank you for your words of congratulation, Mr Speaker. It is a real honour to be here as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. May I put on record my tribute to my predecessor, now the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for all his fantastic work, notably delivering the spending review? I welcome the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson), to his new role. I thoroughly enjoyed the role myself, and I am sure that he will be excellent in it.

Conservative Members will appreciate that today's motion, as tabled, simply cannot form the basis of a specific debate on individual tax measures. Members from across the House will know that the Government do not respond to speculation in advance of a Budget, which the Chancellor has today announced will take place on 26 November. This has long been the case: the shadow Chancellor knows it well and he knows that it would be irresponsible to engage in that speculation. Whatever political rhetoric he and his colleagues will use in today's debate, and no matter how many variants of the same question they ask, I know that he will understand that I cannot engage with speculation about individual tax measures ahead of the Budget.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman says that he cannot speculate on individual tax measures, but will he deny that the No. 11 machine has been leaking these stories to the national press over the summer?

James Murray: I am not going to engage in speculation about tax measures or any of the mechanics around them. The hon. Member and his hon. Friends will simply have to wait until 26 November to hear the specifics of the Budget. At that point, I am sure that he and his colleagues will have plenty to say.

Sir Oliver Dowden: I genuinely congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. I have always found him to be an honest and straightforward speaker in the House and he deserves his position. On the point about speculation, can he confirm reports that the Government are looking again at welfare? Surely he will agree with me that, in any process of fiscal consolidation, one must look to tax rises and to spending cuts. There has been a lot of reporting about there being further measures on welfare, so will there be further measures on welfare under consideration—yes or no?

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Member for his kind words. As he will know, welfare measures are already going through Parliament and being investigated by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Social Security and Disability through the review that he is undertaking. This Government are determined to ensure that the safety net is there for the people who need it, and that the people who can work have the support they need to get and maintain a job.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): What is not speculation is that the largest rise in property taxes happened under the Conservatives, when Liz Truss crashed the economy and increased interest rates for everyone in my constituency. Will the Minister speak to the fact that house prices are different in different parts of the country, and that must be reflected in Treasury thinking about tax and the Budget this year?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman is right to remind everyone of the record under the short-lived Prime Minister, Liz Truss. I notice that Conservative Members do not refer to that themselves when evaluating the economic situation, but the British people will not forget it. On his wider point about housing across the country, we want to ensure that we are building affordable

homes in every part of the country. One of this Government's priorities has been to reform the planning system, to enable the building of 1.5 million homes and ensure that every community has those homes, so people have homes that they can afford to live in, in the area where they grew up, where they want to live or go to work. That is a central mission of this Government.

Harriet Cross: On that point, will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I will give way one more time, but then I will make some progress.

Harriet Cross: The fact that the Government hope to build all those new homes shows that they recognise the importance and value of a home to a family. The Minister says that he will not talk about specific tax measures, but does he recognise the principle that we should not tax people's homes if we are a country that values home ownership?

James Murray: I gently remind the hon. Member that council tax—a tax on property—exists in this country, so the principle of applying some taxes to property is well established in the UK, and has been for some time. She is trying to tempt me to engage in more speculation, but as I said to the shadow Chancellor, I am not going to engage in speculation about what may or may not be in the Budget.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way—he is always very generous with his time—and congratulate him on his well-deserved promotion. The Conservatives are not fans of tax, but sadly they are also not fans of supporting public services. Under their Government, thousands of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs compliance officers, including my mum, were made redundant and we were not able to collect the right amount of tax that people owed. Is that partly why this Government inherited such a large financial black hole?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Minister responds, I will say that we have quite a few colleagues hoping to contribute, so interventions should be short. The Minister should be aware of that and consider how much longer he wishes to contribute.

James Murray: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—the hint is taken.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for his intervention, and I thank his mother for her service to HMRC in the past. People at HMRC do an absolutely critical job in collecting the tax that is important in funding our public services and ensuring that our economy functions effectively. One of our priorities as a Government has been to close the tax gap that existed under the previous Government. At the Budget last year and in the spring statement earlier this year, we set out plans to raise an additional £7.5 billion in tax revenue as a result of hiring people to do those really important jobs, as well as investing in new technology and modernising the service to ensure that people pay the tax they owe.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I am going to make some progress, because a few moments ago I said I would do so. I have been gently reminded by Madam Deputy Speaker that I really must live up to my promise on that front.

The right hon. Member for Central Devon asked me questions in his opening remarks—indeed, his colleagues have their sheets from the Whips, and they have been dutifully following up in their comments—but they are on matters that we cannot talk about today. There are of course other important facts that the right hon. Gentleman does not want to talk about, but the British people have not forgotten them. There is the £22 billion black hole in our public finances, which the previous Government hid from the light. There is the disastrous mini-Budget, which caused damage to households across the country and to our reputation around the world. We had stalled housing, unfinished infrastructure and public services brought to their knees by under-investment and disinterest. The Conservatives do not want to talk about those things because that is the legacy of the last Government. We found out just today that the right hon. Gentleman does not even want to talk about things happening in Conservative councils, as my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) raised so importantly in his contribution earlier.

Now that the Conservatives are in opposition, the right hon. Gentleman's party and Reform Members are talking Britain down. They want to claim that Britain is broken, but I believe that Britain is unbreakable. Our country is full of potential. It is home to hard-working people, brilliant businesses, world-leading universities and research institutions, cultural giants and the promise that if people work hard and contribute to the country, it will be a place where they can succeed. Yet undeniably, after 14 years of Tory mismanagement, far too many working people feel that the economy is stuck.

Dr Evans: Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I have been asked by Madam Deputy Speaker to make some progress, so I will return to the hon. Gentleman a little later.

I hear from my constituents, as I am sure many other Members in the Chamber hear from theirs. They tell us that no matter how much effort they put in at work, their careful management of household finances and their diligent efforts to save for a brighter future, they do not yet feel that they are getting enough in return, and it has become harder to get ahead. At the same time, our roads and railways seem slow and less reliable and our classrooms seem fuller, while the NHS has a massive backlog. The root cause of all that is the chronic under-investment by the previous Government. That under-investment over many years has slowed our productivity growth to a rate not seen since the Napoleonic wars.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is thanks to the tight fiscal rules that this Government have introduced and the changes in the Budget that since the election my residents in Dartford have seen an investment in the lower Thames crossing? They have wanted that for 15 years, and it was not

delivered under the last Government. They have also seen a £25 million hospital rebuilding project at Darent Valley hospital and a £1 billion structures fund from the Department for Transport, which will repair the ruined Galley Hill Road in my constituency. Is it not thanks to the Government's rules and Budget changes that we are seeing those changes?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is only thanks to the fiscal rules that the Chancellor introduced at last year's Budget and our decisions—the right decisions—to ensure that those fiscal rules are non-negotiable and that we keep to them at every stage that we have been able to boost investment by £120 billion over the course of this Parliament in many projects, including those that he mentioned and those in constituencies right across the country. That is the right thing for our country.

We were just talking about chronic under-investment. We are tackling that through ensuring that the Government invest across the country and by encouraging private-sector investments to get businesses across Britain growing.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I will take a very short intervention, then I really will make progress.

Alison Taylor: Does the Minister agree that taxation is intrinsically linked to economic growth and that there are already green shoots of recovery in the economy, with three trade deals and five interest rate cuts?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; economic growth is of course critical to our plans. She points to the trade deals that we secured. She and other hon. Members will know that the UK was the fastest-growing G7 economy in the first half of this year. There is much more for us to do, but we are showing that because of the right decisions that we have taken we are starting to move in the right direction.

Tim Farron: Will the Minister give way?

James Murray: I probably should. I will give way one more time.

Tim Farron: I do not want the Minister to speculate, but I want him to consider something. We talked about people not paying taxes. A significant minority of owners of second homes in my constituency let their property out for just a few days a year; as a result, they can claim to be a small business and pay no council tax or business rates. People on the minimum wage in my constituency are subsidising those people who pay no council tax at all. Will he change that situation to protect our communities?

James Murray: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on an inventive way of encouraging me to speculate on tax measures. I am aware of the issue that he points to, and I thank him for raising it in this context, but I am not able to make any decisions on taxation at the Dispatch Box today.

Let me go back briefly to the broader context. It is absolutely crystal clear from the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Central Devon, and from what all his colleagues have said so far, that Conservative Members are still in total denial about any responsibility they have for the situation that the country finds itself in. They act as if being behind the wheel for 14 years is irrelevant to where we find ourselves now. It may be that they think that if they do not talk about it, the British people may forget the last Government's responsibility for getting us into the current situation, but the British people know that the Conservatives did this to our country. That is why the British people put their faith in us at the last election.

While there is clearly more to do to bring down inflation and the cost of borrowing, it is clear that we have turned a corner by taking the right decisions for our country. We have taken the decisions to address the black hole in the public finances, fix our foundations and clear up the mess that we inherited from the previous Government. As a consequence, as I mentioned a moment ago, in the first half of this year we were the fastest-growing economy in the G7; we outpaced France, Germany, Japan and the United States.

Since taking office, this Government have welcomed around £100 billion in investment into the UK, with 384,000 jobs being created over the same period. We have cut red tape and changed planning regulations to deliver 1.5 million new homes over the course of this Parliament. We already have nearly 100,000 new homes on large developments that were previously stuck in the planning system or simply not progressing as fast as they should be; they are now being given the support that they need to make that progress quickly. In just over a year, the Bank of England has cut interest rates five times, which means that someone on a tracker mortgage of just over £200,000 will be better off by around £100 a month. Crucially, real wages have risen more in the time since the last election than they did in the first 10 years of the previous Government.

The choice at the next Budget is clear. Over 14 years, the last Government made wrong choices time and again. They, their many Prime Ministers and many Chancellors all embraced the cycle of austerity, debt and decline, and we will never repeat that. We will continue to invest in Britain's renewal, using every power at our disposal to drive forward an economy that works for working people. As I said, the Government do not respond to speculation, especially ahead of a Budget, and in any case we are not writing a Budget this far out.

The Budget that the Chancellor delivers in November will be carefully considered and designed to get the balance right between making working people better off and raising enough money to fund our public services and getting the country moving once again through investment and growth. Of course, it will also undergo proper scrutiny by the OBR. I was going briefly to address the taxes mentioned in the motion, but I suspect that I should skip over that part of my speech. *[Interruption.]* I am getting a gentle indication from you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have come to the right conclusion.

If we are to get this country moving again, investment from both businesses and Government is essential. We must therefore strike the right balance in our tax system, so that we can put more money in the pockets of

working people while supporting the private sector to invest and grow and funding our public services. Members on both sides of the House will have their own views on what the right balance is, and I look forward to hearing those views today. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members in advance for their contributions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, I inform the House that all Back Benchers will be on a time limit of four minutes.

1.39 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I begin by adding my voice and that of my party to the others who have welcomed the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson) to the Front Bench.

Like so many other things, property taxes in this country are broken and hopelessly out of date. Council tax is regressive; stamp duty is a transaction tax that slows growth; and business rates are a tax on bricks and mortar that bear no relationship whatever to the amount of money a business might make. It is quite extraordinary that the official Opposition have chosen to debate property taxes, given that I can barely remember any discussion at all in the last Parliament about things that they wanted to tackle in that area. In particular, they did not tackle any of the three things I have mentioned. If it is true that the Labour Government are now thinking about biting the bullet and bringing forward fairer alternatives to those things, I commend them for looking at the issue. However, I caution the Government not to repeat the jobs tax fiasco. Going after property simply as a Treasury tax grab will be a disaster if the Government do not set out a broader vision for property taxation and for housing as a whole.

We agree with parts of the Conservatives' motion today. We agree with their call to rule out capital gains tax on primary residences. In the general election, we Liberal Democrats set out a way of reforming capital gains tax to make it fairer, one that would reduce that tax for two thirds of people already paying it and increase it for the super-wealthy. That would have raised more revenue than the *carte blanche* measures that the Labour Government have pursued, so we agree with that part of the motion. We also agree with the Conservatives that the property levy that has been described in newspapers would be a disaster. It would choke up the housing market, stop people from downsizing and slow economic growth, so I hope that if Ministers are considering any of these things, they look at the reaction there has been.

Freddie van Mierlo: In my constituency of Henley and Thame, the average house price is £515,000. Does my hon. Friend agree that the property tax described by the Government so far would be a tax on the south-east and London?

Daisy Cooper: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He will know, as I do from my constituency of St Albans, that many people have spent decades and decades living in their property, which they might have bought for a few thousand pounds. It might now be worth a huge amount, but they might be asset-rich and cash-poor.

[Daisy Cooper]

People in that situation are incredibly scared by the reports they have seen in newspapers of a potential tax of the kind that has been described.

There are parts of the Conservatives' motion we agree with, however we are open in principle to the idea of a land value tax. In principle, land value taxes can create more fairness in the system and produce a more efficient use of land, but of course, the devil is always in the detail. It would depend on the design of any land value tax and any exemptions that might be introduced. We Liberal Democrats have previously set out policies for how we would replace the broken business rates system with a commercial landowner levy. That is an example of how the principle of land value could be applied to commercial land.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Many tourism industry businesses in Torbay raise concerns about the impact of Airbnb, both on safety and legality. Surely the Government should publish their long-awaited short-term let registration scheme as a matter of urgency.

Daisy Cooper: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I would love to see that registration programme, although we Liberal Democrats have repeatedly said that it is only the first step. Registration is something that the Airbnb-type platforms actually want, because it enables them to pinch properties from other platforms. It does not solve the problem we have of lots of additional homes being used as Airbnbs, not by young people—or, in fact, by anybody who wants to be able to rent a property in their area. It is important that local authorities have the power to strike the right balance between tourism and enabling the people they need in their local area to afford to live there.

Tim Farron: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. In my constituency, we have seen a collapse in the long-term private rented sector, which has pushed hundreds of people out of our communities—they are not able to contribute, to be part of the workforce, or to send their children to our schools. Surely, an answer would be the ability to create short-term lets as a separate category of planning use, just as we are calling for with second homes. That would allow councils and national parks to make sure there are enough homes for local people to live in.

Daisy Cooper: Again, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I recall—as I am sure he does—that in the previous Parliament, we Liberal Democrats tabled a number of amendments to legislation introduced by the Conservatives, to try to make that happen. Unfortunately, those amendments were not accepted by the now official Opposition.

In principle, a land value tax could help address land banking. All of us in this House say that we want to build on brownfield first, but of course, part of the problem is that big developers can land bank. We Liberal Democrats have repeatedly tried to table amendments to ensure that local authorities could buy

that land at land value, rather than hope value. In principle, there are some merits to at least considering a land value tax, but the devil will be in the detail. If the Government bring forward any such proposals, we will scrutinise them closely.

There are a couple of major omissions from the official Opposition's motion, one of which—as I have already outlined—is business rates. Business rates are a property tax facing small businesses, and the business rates system is broken. We have heard repeated promises, both from the previous Government and this one, that business rates will be fixed, so it is incredibly disappointing that as yet, we have not seen an ambition to replace the business rates system. Instead, we have seen tinkering around the edges, and the Government's proposals will potentially make business rates a little bit worse, particularly as they will target hospitality. There is another major omission: the motion should refer to giving local authorities real power to regulate the location and number of short-term lets, particularly in the south-west and Cumbria, but also in many other areas.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Queen Camel Community Land Trust is working to create much-needed homes in south Somerset, but it is often hampered by lack of access to finance and an outdated planning system. Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government should focus on community-led development to deliver the affordable homes that are so greatly needed—homes that communities want, and will appreciate?

Daisy Cooper: I agree. We are discussing property taxation, but of course, taxation on its own without a broader vision for property may well lead us towards the kind of fiasco we had with the jobs tax. There absolutely should be a community-led planning system, rather than the top-down planning system we had under the previous Government, and have under this one, too.

In my constituency of St Albans, Airbnbs are a real problem. A previous Conservative Housing Secretary gave approval for offices to be turned into blocks of flats, but local authorities were given no power to control how that happened. That means that many young people who get a job in my constituency cannot afford to take it up unless they live with mum and dad. They cannot even afford to rent a place, let alone get on the housing ladder. It is absolutely essential that the Government not only come forward with a registration scheme for short-term rentals, but give local authorities real power to regulate the number and location of Airbnbs, so that we can get the balance right between tourism and homes for young people and others who want to live where they work.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the King has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Universal Credit Act 2025

Armed Forces Commissioner Act 2025.

Property Taxes

Debate resumed.

1.49 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate. I want to take on the challenge set by the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride), so let us talk about how we got to this point, and the devastating consequences. Under the last Government, despite 27 tax rises, Government debt rose from 60% of GDP to 100.5%. They were borrowing for day-to-day spending. The shadow Chancellor talks about unfunded commitments; he knows about those, because the last Government left a £22 billion black hole of unfunded commitments. He says he cares about property ownership, but the last Government were responsible for a 6% fall in home ownership among people aged between 25 and 34. That was on his watch. This Government are building 1.5 million new homes, including record numbers of council homes and social properties. We also have renters' rights reform, and we are looking into mortgage reform. That is about ensuring a fair and more affordable housing mix for all.

What drove that fall in young people owning homes? We have to look to inflation, which peaked at 11.1% under the last Conservative Government, almost hitting Margaret Thatcher's record of 17%. The Conservatives seem to be comfortable with high interest rates; in 2022, food inflation hit a 45-year high. In 2023, the UK recorded the highest inflation rate in western Europe; it was the only country to have double-digit inflation. Under this Government, we have had five interest rate cuts in only a year.

The real cost of high interest rates can be found in the number of children living in poverty. There was a 20% increase in child poverty between 2014 and 2024. Food bank demand rose by 3,772% under the Conservative Government. In 2010, approximately 2.3% of children were living in relative poverty. In 2024, the figure was 4.5%, and that is shameful. It was the biggest fall in living standards on record, but under this Government, wages are finally rising faster than prices. We have seen the results of cuts in spending, particularly on youth services, which had a 73% real-terms cut under the last Government. This Government are putting £88 million back into youth clubs. Is that what the Conservatives want to cut?

Finally, I want to talk about businesses. The shadow Chancellor said that nobody on this side of the House had experience of starting, running and growing a business. I, for one, have done that, as have many others on the Government Benches. He should get to know his colleagues before he makes those assertions.

1.53 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): After a summer of rumoured tax rises, my constituents are deeply concerned. They are already paying more, because Labour broke its promise to freeze council tax, broke its promise not to increase national insurance, and broke its promises to first-time buyers, small businesses and farmers. Thanks to the Chancellor's anti-business policies, growth forecasts are collapsing, borrowing costs are sky-high, and our national finances are shot.

Instead of looking at its reckless decisions, Labour is now calculating the best way to raise taxes, and my constituents are worried that the Chancellor is eyeing up their family home. In Bromley and Biggin Hill, on the edge of Greater London, homes are expensive. The average house price is well over half a million pounds, and there are rumours that the Government may scrap the private residence relief, which would be devastating. It would slap my constituents with an average £33,000 tax bill when they sell their family home. If someone has scrimped and saved, and been lucky enough to see the value of their home go up, they should not be handed a punitive tax bill. It only serves to knock working people back down when they are trying to get ahead.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Residents in Bromley, like those in Bexley, have been hit by the Mayor of London's 77% increase in his share of council tax since he took office, alongside various driving taxes. Does my hon. Friend agree that this increase in property taxes would be the straw that broke the camel's back for many residents?

Peter Fortune: I agree that the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, is causing residents in Bromley and Bexley real financial hardship. However, I in no way believe that this will be the final straw—the final way that the Mayor of London can find to damage my constituents and those of my hon. Friend. I am sure that he has plenty more straws, and a lot more camel to lay them on.

As I was saying, scrapping private residence relief would be irresponsible and economically ruinous. Imagine if somebody bought a house in Bromley in 2010 for £350,000. Today, it would cost somewhere in the region of £550,000. If they wanted to move to a new area for work or to be closer to family, without that relief, the tax bill would be somewhere in the region of £50,000. That eye-watering bill would stop people moving and wreck the housing market. That is why I urge others to support the motion, which rules out any further reckless tax rises. Working people cannot afford to keep bailing out Labour.

1.55 pm

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): It is wonderful to be back for another Opposition day debate, as I am sure we can all agree. It is another debate about imagined proposals. It must be a difficult time for Opposition Members, because for so many years, this was the time of year when they were preparing for their conference and for the Budget, but this year, scant attention will be paid to them—and, of course, they are not writing the Budget anymore.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Thank God.

Mark Ferguson: Indeed. Thank God the Conservatives are not writing the Budget, because we have seen what their Budgets led to. I understand Opposition Members' frustration. It is nice to see that they have settled into the most comfortable aspect of being in opposition. As I have said before in these debates, as a Labour party member of many years' standing, I have a huge amount of experience of the comfort of opposition; you start to

[Mark Ferguson]

create straw men, talk about what the Government might be doing and your fears, rile your supporters, and spark up a bit of concern among them. However, the Opposition are not willing to set out their actual plans for the country. [Interruption.] An hon. Friend makes a good point: they do not have any.

All the Opposition parties—again, this is the nature of the easy early years of opposition—want the benefits that result from our difficult choices, but they are unwilling to say how they would pay for them. I am sick and tired of listening to the never-never from those on the Opposition Benches. They are confident and comfortable with the imaginarium of the Budget that they believe will happen, but they are unwilling to come up with real, meaningful proposals—incapable of doing so, perhaps.

Proposals floated by the Conservatives include cutting maternity pay, means-testing the state pension and attacking the minimum wage. We know the impact of a Conservative Budget: the grotesque chaos caused by Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng. I would call that Budget a bombshell, but bombshells go off only once, and that bombshell is going off in homes and communities across this country every single day. Families on mortgage rates that were fixed for five years or longer would have had lower interest rates now if it had not been for that Budget. Despite the five admirable and welcome interest rate cuts made under this Government, those families will be paying hundreds or thousands of pounds more a year.

Opposition Members express concern today for those in valuable homes. Many of those in valuable homes will understandably have significant mortgages, and many of them will have seen their mortgages go up by hundreds or thousands of pounds, thanks to the actions of the previous Government—actions that Opposition Members were cheerleading at the time. We are all still living with the results of those actions. That is not imaginary; that is the real consequences of their Government, and it is what we are trying to put behind us.

1.59 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The Treasury has been flying more kites than we saw at the end of “Mary Poppins” in the papers over the last few weeks, but if they are genuine, the Chancellor is preparing the most destructive raid on homeowners in living memory. Families across my constituency are bracing themselves for new taxes on homes worth more than £500,000, capital gains tax on family houses, a revaluation of council tax, and even a land value tax. This is not reform; this is a sledgehammer aimed squarely at aspiration, mobility and stability, and once again it is the south and the south-east that will be punished the most. In Farnham, where the average house price now exceeds £608,000 with the price of detached homes at nearly £900,000, families could face annual bills of nearly £5,000 on top of mortgages, council tax and energy costs. In Haslemere, Liphook and Bordon, households will not be spared; these levies will strip thousands from budgets already stretched to the limit. And what of pensioners and downsizers in Grayshott, Churt, Bramshott, Tilford, or Frensham? They will face the grotesque prospect of capital gains tax on their primary residences.

Peter Fortune: My hon. Friend talks of pensioners. Does he agree that this is an extra pressure on them, following all the concern that was caused to them by the cut in winter fuel payments?

Gregory Stafford: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Once again, the Government are showing that they do not understand and do not value pensioners and the sacrifice that they have made. Everyone—pensioners, farmers and business owners—is seen as a cash cow for this Government.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Conservative Government raised taxes 25 times in the last Parliament. How many of those tax rises did the hon. Gentleman oppose?

Gregory Stafford: I do not want to correct the hon. Gentleman, but I was not here to oppose or support any of them. I gently remind him—I use the word “gently” because I know that the Minister loves the word “gently”, so I have used it twice now—that there was a pandemic that had to be dealt with, and that had to be funded. There was a war in Ukraine, and dealing with that had to be funded. As we have gone back in history a bit, let me add that we also had to deal with the deficit that the last Labour Government left us. That is the reality of the situation.

Tim Roca: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregory Stafford: No, I will not. I have already given way a couple of times.

This is a tax on the family home, and it will hit hardest those who have worked hard, saved responsibly, and played by the rules. Let us be clear: this is not simply a question of numbers on a balance sheet. It is about whether families can stay in the communities where they raised their children, whether pensioners can pass on their homes, and whether young people will ever see the ladder of opportunity come down again. A capital gains tax on main homes will trap people in their properties, create a locked-in market, and dry up the supply of homes. Transactions will slow, chains will break, and first-time buyers—the very people whom Labour claims to champion—will be shut out even further.

The Government have tried to defend this agenda by talking about “fairness”, but there is nothing fair about a pensioner in Greatham being forced to sell his or her family home to pay the taxman. There is nothing fair about young families in Lindford choosing between childcare and a new annual property levy, and there is nothing fair about placing the heaviest burden on one region of the country simply because the value of its housing stock is higher. In truth, this is a south and south-east tax dressed up as national fairness; and it is part of a pattern.

From scrapping the pensioner fuel allowance, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune), to threatening VAT on private schools to punitive business tax rises, every single decision seems to be about sending a political signal rather than supporting families or growing the economy. The consequences are plain to see: falling business confidence, another year of negative hiring expectations, and growing unemployment. Wasn't the Government's White Paper meant to be called “Get Britain Working”? All we are

seeing is Britain grinding to a halt. The Chancellor may talk of fairness, but she is stripping away the last sanctuary for working people—the roofs over their heads. Over-taxation, without clarity, will paralyse the housing market, punish my constituents, and undermine economic stability.

If you tax homes, you tax hope, and that is the surest way in which to drain ambition from our country. We should be protecting families, not forcing them to sell up. We should be supporting aspiration, not taxing it into extinction.

2.4 pm

Louise Sandher-Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I think the record that we, the Labour Government, had to deal with when we took over last year bears repeating. We have heard theories propounded on the relationship between tax and growth and public spending, and we have heard that if we only lowered taxes, we would enter a glorious period of growth and even better public services, but the fact is that the impact of those theories and that ideology over the last 14 years has been clear to see. Austerity cut the engines of our economy, leaving us with public services that were not delivering for British people. Investment in our services and our country was cut, which left us at the mercy of global shocks that we were less well prepared and less well placed to withstand.

The upshot of that in my constituency has included GP waiting lists that are far too long, and bus routes disappearing from rural villages that badly need the opportunities they provide in, for instance, connecting families. We have seen NHS waiting lists increase, whether the waits are for serious surgery, dentistry or GP access. That has resulted in serious ill health issues, restricted opportunities for young people, and, throughout the constituency, a restriction of opportunity and growth for the very people who will drive growth in the economy: those who start and drive small businesses.

We have heard from Conservative Members again and again about the 1%, and they have come out fighting for that 1% very hard today. They say that they are concerned about yearly charges on people who are just starting out in life and have just bought their first homes—and yes, I would love to talk about charges that have no connection with service. I am thinking particularly of “fleecehold” and charges from estate management companies that bear no relation to the services that they provide. That is a real problem in my constituency, and I know that many of my hon. Friends have raised it repeatedly.

In Wingerworth, in my constituency, FirstPort has raised service charges repeatedly, but the charges are for services that my constituents have not received and have been imposed for very spurious reasons. I have also heard that some residents have been forced to pay for a play park when no such play park has been provided by FirstPort or any other company in the area. This means that people who are starting out—they have their mortgages, they have their homes, and they just want to get on and live their lives—are being subject to, in many cases, charges amounting to thousands of pounds each year by a company that is not delivering the services that they deserve, and the same problem is occurring elsewhere. We have heard horror stories of charges and ground rents rising exponentially. None of these problems—

I think we can all agree that they are problems—were dealt with by the Conservative Government. I did not notice any particular concern being raised about them at the time. However, we will continue to fight hard for solutions on this side of the House.

Let us look at what this Labour Government have achieved since coming to office. We have seen real wages rising faster than prices for the first time for ages, and I cannot stress enough how important that is. Three million people have seen the minimum wage rise. This is exactly the sort of thing that led me to join the Labour party, and it is one of our proudest achievements. We are seeing a rise in the wages of the very poorest in society, including those under 21 who are starting out in their very first job. Let me highlight another of our massive achievements. We in the Labour party believe that taxes are what we take to ensure that we can deliver public services. Lower taxes and lower public services will not result in a rise in living standards. Yes, we have had to make some difficult decisions, but we have seen NHS waiting lists fall month after month, and I know that my constituents have already begun to feel the effects of that. Why? Because they have told me so.

2.8 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I begin by referring the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I represent a rural, agricultural community. As we look forward to a Budget for Christmas, this Labour UK Government's last autumn Budget remains of significant concern. The wide divide between rural Wales and Westminster was made clear as day last year when the Chancellor announced plans to restrict full inheritance tax relief from April next year to the first £1 million of combined agricultural and business property. Combining APR and BPR means that the asset value of the tools and the machinery necessary to operate a farming business are affected, as well as the agricultural land and property.

While the Government maintain that this policy will affect only about 500 estates a year and that small family farms will not be affected, the calculations of the Farmers' Union of Wales and NFU Cymru show otherwise. When I told the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs that 92% of one local accountancy firm's clients would be hit, it was totally dismissed, but now even the producers of the research used by this Government to justify their plans have conceded that working farmers are more likely to suffer under the policy than the wealthy.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Over half of UK farms have a net value of over £1.5 million. Farmers are already worried about the family farm tax and are now looking at the potential tax rises that the Government are floating for the upcoming Budget, including increased rates of inheritance tax and other forms of property taxes. These are our food producers, and they are writing to me to ask why they should continue to sow the seeds. Does the hon. Lady agree that farmers need a break?

Ann Davies: Absolutely, and I will come on to that in a minute. In Wales, between 75% and 90% of farmers will be affected by the policy, according to NFU Cymru and FUW.

[Ann Davies]

It is clear that this Government's APR changes will not hit tax-avoiding wealthy land hoarders. Instead, they will punish working farmers in Wales, whose income dropped by an average of 34% last year, forcing many to sell what their parents and grandparents spent lifetimes building. And it is not just farm business owners. Family Business UK estimates that the changes will cause a £15.5 million reduction in GVA in my constituency of Caerfyrddin alone, along with the loss of 282 full-time jobs.

The new inheritance tax rules will be introduced amid mounting financial pressures on our farmers, from the financial implications of bluetongue restrictions and testing requirements to the effect of Wales's hottest summer on record on crops and pasture. Our rural businesses will also suffer, with car garages, food wholesale businesses and uPVC project businesses among those in my constituency that are hard hit by this Government's BPR changes. All employ hundreds of my constituents.

We cannot afford to lose our rural businesses or our family farms. We cannot lose the knowledge, the heritage and the community—the work that sustains and feeds our nation. Ahead of the autumn Budget at the end of November, I call on the Government once again: please reverse these changes before it is too late. Diolch yn fawr.

2.12 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be called in this debate, even if I must start by questioning the wisdom of the Opposition's decision to bring forward today's motion. After all, the memories and consequences of their so-called mini-Budget are still fresh—the culmination of Liz Truss's economic policies, which the present Leader of the Opposition said were “aspirational and inspirational”. Their dreams became our constituents' nightmares—to say nothing of the Conservatives' failure to pass renters' rights reform, which this Government are now putting through, or of their dreadful record on wages, which left people in my constituency with £300 a month less, after inflation, every month.

It cannot be reasonably denied—although the Conservatives have tried—that the incoming Government faced a bedevilled inheritance last July. For all the sound and fury, there is little mystery about this now. As Richard Hughes, the chair of the OBR, told the Treasury Committee:

“When we had a high-trust relationship with the Treasury those things were being well managed, and managed within the total. That system very clearly broke down... there was about £9.5 billion-worth of net pressure on Departments' budgets, which they did not disclose... which under the law and under the Act they should have done.”

What a disgraceful set of affairs, and decisions that awaited the Government on public sector pay had been ducked and delayed until after the election.

We need to be clear about this: Conservative Ministers already knew the recommendation of the schoolteachers review body. They also knew that the recommendations of each pay review body tend to be similar. Why were those recommendations delayed, given that the pay year started not in July or even at the beginning of the

pre-election period, but in April? It was because Conservative Ministers and their Departments submitted the remit letters and their evidence late.

As the Office of Manpower Economics said in its 2022 efficiency review:

“The work of the PRBs is demand led and essentially non-negotiable—departments set the remits and timetables.”

There we have it: the additional cost was always coming, and the only reason why it came seven months into an election year was because Conservative Ministers were content for it to be so delayed. Today Opposition Front Benchers claim that they would have rejected the recommendations, but not once has any Opposition Member had the courage to say how much less they would have paid nurses, paramedics, teachers, police officers and armed forces personnel in each of our constituencies.

Are any Opposition Members able to enlighten us today? No. The reality is that they want the investment that means 25,000 fewer people are on a University Hospitals Birmingham waiting list compared with last year, and which is almost doubling the free school meals entitlement in my constituency of Birmingham Northfield, but they do not support a single measure to pay for it. We should be clear in saying that strong public services create value. Businesses and working people in all our constituencies need roads, schools and hospitals that are resourced and decent.

Mr French: As the hon. Member represents Birmingham Northfield, does he believe that residents in Birmingham deserve to get their bins collected in return for their council tax payments?

Laurence Turner: The hon. Member tempts me to get drawn into a discussion to which, in one minute and 30 seconds, I do not have enough time to do justice. Of course we need a bin service that is fit and decent—I have spoken about that many times in this House.

What my constituents did not need were the sharpest cuts in resourcing of any unitary authority in the entire country, coupled with the sharpest increases in council tax, and those were signed off by Conservative Ministers. I have in front of me the impact assessment of the 10% council tax increase from January last year, which says:

“The decision for Ministers across Government, as No. 10 and HMT clearance will be needed, is whether to grant these increases.”

That is the legacy of the hon. Member's party for my constituents: the highest spending cuts and the highest tax rises. The last thing they need is a return to the failed approach of the Conservatives, who deserve to be reminded of that every time they bring such a debate to this House.

2.16 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): This Government were elected on a manifesto to increase spending by £9.5 billion. That was to be paid for through £7.3 billion of extra taxes and £3.5 billion of extra borrowing, all of which was set out in the Labour manifesto. It was a modest plan with a prudent margin—exactly the sort of plan one might expect a party in opposition to put forward to show that it can be trusted to run the public finances. Labour Members might reflect on the fact that had they implemented the plan, the British economy would be in better condition than at present.

In its first Budget, Labour increased public expenditure not by £9.5 billion, but by £70 billion. How those on the Labour Benches cheered with delight at the thought of all the extra spending: pay rises for train drivers, with no conditions; pay rises for junior doctors, with no strings; money for Great British Energy; and more money for the British Business Bank—all so the Government can invest in projects that the private sector does not think will make a return.

We all know how this story ends: Labour will use all the business acumen that the Cabinet has at its disposal to create a modern version of British Leyland. It is what Labour does best: spending other people's money, and borrowing yet more money that other people's children can repay. But all this extra spending and borrowing comes at a price, and the Government are now paying 5.7% interest to borrow money for 30 years. That is the highest level since 1998, and this surge in borrowing costs reflects the market's lack of confidence in the Chancellor's ability to manage Britain's finances.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the surge in borrowing costs actually started with Liz Truss's mini-Budget and has not really stopped since the trajectory started?

Sir Ashley Fox: I do not accept that at all. This surge is entirely due to the Chancellor losing control of public expenditure, and the increased cost of servicing our national debt adds further pressure on the British taxpayer.

Having presented her Budget, the Chancellor said:

"We're not going to be coming back with more tax increases, or indeed more borrowing."

The problem is that no one believes her. The markets do not believe her, and Labour Back Benchers certainly do not believe her. They now know that they only have to threaten to rebel on any item of public expenditure and the Chancellor will cave. We saw that on the welfare reform Bill, which was brought forward to save a modest £4.5 billion. What happened? The first whiff of a rebellion, and the Bill was gutted, leaving the taxpayer to pick up the cost.

In that context, over the summer we saw briefings from the Treasury testing the water on a whole series of potential tax rises: higher rates of council tax, a land value tax, capital gains tax on family homes, lowering the thresholds for inheritance tax and an annual property levy on the family home. No wonder the Deputy Prime Minister is being so careful about which of her many homes is her primary residence.

The Chancellor is clearly desperate to raise more money. It is a cruel irony, is it not, that having invented a £22 billion black hole to justify her taxing and spending, the Chancellor now finds herself facing a black hole entirely of her own making? It is her jobs tax and other tax rises that have caused the economy to slow and unemployment to rise. Her increase in public expenditure has fuelled inflation, which has led to higher wage demands and increased benefit costs.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): That is exactly the problem. Many businesses in my constituency—and, dare I say it, in others—are saying to us as Members of Parliament that they want to but dare not invest in growing their businesses, because they do not know what increases in taxes are coming down the line from

this Chancellor. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that businesses are reluctant to invest right now in the projects they want to deliver for the growth of their own enterprises?

Sir Ashley Fox: I agree. It is the threat of higher taxes that is causing the economy to stall.

Rather than reducing the size of the state so that it is affordable, the Government give every indication of wanting it to grow further. The fundamental reason that this Government need to raise taxes is that they are incapable of controlling the fiscal incompetence of their own Back Benchers. At their core, Labour MPs genuinely believe that the state can spend our constituents' money better than they can spend it themselves. They do not believe in thrift or self-reliance, and they see no limit on the size of the state.

Opposition Members know that it is businessmen and businesswomen across Britain who create wealth and growth. Success is the result of hard work, taking risks, satisfying customers and employing neighbours. The Government should provide the environment for those businesses to thrive, rather than threatening every part of the economy with higher taxes.

2.23 pm

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) pointed out, the motion we are debating is based purely on media speculation. It also conveniently overlooks the Conservatives' own disastrous record. Let us not forget that it was the Conservatives who presided over 14 years of failure, during which the very foundations of our economy rotted away. It was on their watch that taxes were increased 25 times in the last Parliament and the costs of mortgages soared, crippling family finances across the country.

We have heard Conservative Members talk about covid, and Russia and Ukraine—and some even seem to acknowledge the travesty that was Liz Truss. However, a 2021 report from the cross-party Treasury Committee highlighted that the OBR had been warning since 2011 about an "unsustainable" fiscal trajectory in the public finances, although the Government failed to engage with that fact. Who was the Chair of the Treasury Committee making that shrewd analysis? It was of course the current shadow Chancellor. Before we got to Russia, covid and the disaster of Liz Truss, the Conservatives had already been mismanaging our economy.

Now the Conservatives come to this House to complain about a Budget that has not even been written, offering no credible economic plan of their own and continuing to make unfunded promises. This Labour Government took immediate emergency action to stabilise our economy, and made difficult but absolutely necessary decisions. We are already seeing the early signs of promise: wages are now rising faster than prices; we have had five interest rate cuts, bringing down the cost of mortgages; and we have secured three major trade deals.

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Member and a number of his colleagues have referred to the reduction in interest rates as the sign of a growing economy. If he even googled it, he would realise that the first explanation for the Bank of England reducing interest rates is that it is worried about a weakening economy. Does he not realise that?

Luke Murphy: The foundation for being able to cut interest rates is a stable economy, and that is exactly what the Bank of England has done.

We are putting more money directly into people's pockets, lifting the minimum wage for 3 million workers and delivering free breakfast clubs for all primary school pupils. We are getting Britain building again by reforming the planning system to cut through red tape, bringing in hundreds of new planning officers and making a record investment of £39 billion in affordable housing. We are committed to building 1.5 million new homes, so people are not locked out of the dream of home ownership. We are correcting the mistake of successive Conservative Governments with the crucial £113 billion in extra capital investment right across the country to boost our infrastructure and catalyse high-growth sectors.

Crucially, we have had to make difficult but fair decisions on taxation—decisions that ensure that the richest and larger businesses pay more—because we urgently need to invest in the public services that the Conservatives ran into the ground. That means vital investment in our NHS, schools and other essential services that all my constituents tell me we need. It is only because of the revenue measures applied by this Government, which the Conservative party repeatedly opposed, that we are able to make that investment.

As many others have said, the Opposition parties want all the benefits of our difficult choices, but refuse to say how they would pay for them. They talk about growth, but they consistently attempt to block measures to get our country building and they have been holding our economy back for far too long. As the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have said, the next phase of this Government is singularly focused on making working people better off, improving living standards across the entire country, boosting British jobs and delivering the renewal that our country desperately needs. We will not be swayed by Opposition motions based on their fantasies, or by those who offer no credible solutions themselves.

2.27 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I have been told that we are speculating today, so I do not know whether I have to refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. However, in an abundance of caution, I declare that I am a homeowner and I also have properties for rent.

The kids in Downing Street—whether in No. 11 or No. 10—think it is clever to fly kites about tax rises. We had it last year, from 4 July onwards, with briefings to the press saying there would be tax rises because of a wholly fabricated £22 billion black hole in the economy. That was fabricated as a fig leaf for tax rises that were not in the manifesto. From July to October, those stories dripped in one after the other—and what was the impact? It has been the collapse in business confidence to pandemic levels, the collapse in consumer confidence as a result, and unemployment beginning its inexorable rise month after month for every single month that this Government have been in office.

Now the Government are at it again. They have not realised their past terrible mistake, and they are doing it once more. Despite raising taxes by £40 billion last October and increasing borrowing by another £32 billion,

they have created a genuine black hole, which the National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggests means that about £51 billion is required in higher taxes or lower spending. The briefings have started again—a property levy on mansions, the replacement of stamp duty with a national property tax, national insurance contributions on rental income and capital gains tax on primary residences with a value of more than £1.5 million. Even *Which?* magazine has said there may be changes to the in-life gifting regime to reduce inheritance tax.

Sir Ashley Fox: Does my hon. Friend accept that speculation about all those new additional taxes causes more uncertainty, which itself causes the economy to slow further?

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Do the Government not recognise that posturing from the Government Benches does not come for free? Construction activity has had a bigger fall recently than in the last five years due to the leaks from No. 10 and No. 11. The commercial property sector is in recession. There are hiring freezes and staff are being laid off. People are losing their jobs because of the Government's kite flying. Residential property prices had a surprise fall last year.

We are asked to believe that growth is the No. 1 priority of this Government. They say they are going to build 1.5 million houses during this Parliament. Merely saying that does not make it true, when their policies serve to do exactly the opposite. If Members do not believe me, look at the markets—they are not politicians. Look at the 30-year gilts that the Government are paying today. Government debt is now running at 5.73%. That is the highest rate this century. The markets think that further tax increases will damage growth. That means they will damage the fiscal environment in the future. We will have less tax in the future because of the tax-raising decisions the Government are apparently going to take in November. Labour is planning, literally, to rob Peter to pay Paul. This is no way to run an economy.

As someone much more famous than me once said, the problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money. Stop now. Stop before it is too late to avoid a vicious debt spiral. I fear—I genuinely fear this—that the Government will be forced to cut spending. They have two options: they can be forced to do so by the markets in a chaotic fiscal event, or they can take the responsibility of government seriously and take the difficult but necessary decisions on spending that the country needs them to take as a responsible Government. Otherwise, they will be swept away by their own incompetence.

2.31 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I rise to speak against the motion on tax. I welcome the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray), and his well-deserved promotion.

We all know that if we share in growth, we make the country more prosperous and we make it stronger. Tax, of course, helps to pay for the investment that makes us all more prosperous. Under the previous Government, we did not invest in our country and we saw a weaker

nation as a result: the highest energy bills in the G7; the worst waiting lists ever seen in this nation; and the worst transport infrastructure in western Europe. That is what this Government are fixing and that is what we are doing with the taxes we have raised.

The Opposition motion speaks of property taxes—this from the party that dashed the dream of home ownership for my generation. Some 40% of those under 30 live with mum and dad. Young people living in big cities pay 40% of their income on rent, unable to save for a house because of the amount they are paying in housing costs. That is precisely the kind of thing we are fixing when we invest to build social housing—£40 billion-worth. But of course, all that needs to be paid for and that is exactly what we do with the taxes we raise. That is why we are proud of the country we are building, where every single one of us is better off.

Crucially, the taxes we raise follow three principles: that they are progressive, raising more from those on higher incomes than from those on middle and low incomes; that they are growth enhancing, both in the way that they are applied and in the investment they pay for; and that we can implement them easily. Those are the three principles that our taxes faced in the autumn: closing a non-dom loophole for those at the top of society; asking the largest businesses to pay more, so we can reduce our waiting lists; and increasing the taxes on second homes, so we can build homes for every single person in this nation. The revenue raised from those who can most afford it makes each one of us better off—that is what this Government are about.

The Opposition want to leave us with a nation where we are weaker: where we do not invest in our collective prosperity, as they did not for the last 14 years; and where we see, instead of a nation that is united and sharing in our prosperity, one that is divided. A house that is divided against itself cannot stand and a nation that is as divided as ours will not stand. It is for us to invest in every corner of this country, so that every person can benefit. That is exactly what we are doing in our economic programme and that is exactly the kind of investment we are paying for through our taxes.

We build a stronger nation when each of us shares in our prosperity, and we help to achieve that through our tax system when we invest to get wages rising, waiting lists down and energy bills down—a stronger nation where each of us is doing better, raising living standards that for too long have been far too low, helping people to be able to afford a home, helping them to raise a family, helping them to pay their bills without having to worry about their overdraft, and sharing, each of us, in our nation's prosperity. That is what this Government are doing, that is what we are building and that is what we are proud to be a part of.

2.35 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Here we are, well over a year into this new Administration, this new Labour Government, and it is clear that they have fundamentally mismanaged the economy in their first year in office. What do we see? Borrowing costs up, growth flatlining, taxes rising and businesses being absolutely hammered. To fix this mess to the tune of £50 billion—who knows what it might be—Labour is now threatening to hike taxes on anyone they have not already squeezed into submission.

It is clear that the Labour Government are coming after people's property. It was not enough for them to legislate to compulsorily purchase people's gardens and homes by giving local authorities and Natural England more power through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and to acquire them not at market value, but at a disregarded value relating to agricultural property value if they are a farm. If the Government do not manage to grab it, they certainly intend to tax it.

As if that tax on people's homes or gardens was not bad enough, Labour is also coming after people's businesses. Through the changes to inheritance tax relief, agricultural property relief and business property relief, the Government have destroyed one of the sole business environments that our communities and businesses rely on—the ability to pass an asset on to the next generation and for them to earn an income from it. Across my constituency, soft furniture makers such as Fibreline, brewers, farmers, hotels and those involved in the hospitality sector have all actively taken the decision to slow the amount of investment they are willing to put in to grow their own businesses. Why? Because of the threats coming out of the Labour Government's previous Budget in October last year and the Budget coming down the line.

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. He mentions the hospitality sector. Does he recognise the Government's cruel decision to reduce the business rates discount for the hospitality sector from 75% to 40%? It does not sound too bad, but it is actually a tax increase of 140% on the struggling hospitality sector. What impact does he think that has on future investment plans?

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Many of our family businesses, whether in the hospitality sector or in other sectors, are actively withholding a level of investment in their businesses which they want to grow and thrive. I have spoken to many farming businesses and many family businesses in my constituency who have worked out what their BPR or their APR liability is likely to be over a 10-year plan, and are therefore holding the level of investment back, because they may have to give it to the Chancellor and not invest it for the future growth of their business. That is not good for the health of the communities and businesses we represent.

Then there is council tax, with the looming threat of council tax revaluations potentially coming down the line, raising the council tax liability on many constituents, with properties potentially moving into higher tax bands. Bradford residents, who include those in Keighley, Ilkley, Silsden and the Worth valley, have already had our council tax raised by 10%. This threat is being added by the Labour Government when council tax is increasing. And then there is the cut to business rates relief, which is impacting many of our businesses.

With the threat of a revaluation process coming down the line, I want to raise the case of the Valuation Office Agency. Just this morning, I spoke to the Rock family, who have developed Providence Park in Keighley, with a huge amount of public funding going into the project. Despite the project completing its construction phase in April, they are now being told that despite an application being submitted, the valuation office is not even progressing with providing the business rate liability.

[Robbie Moore]

It will therefore be more difficult for the Rock family to let those business premises. What is the Minister doing right now to put pressure on the valuation office to get a grip, pull its finger out and get those rates looked at, not just for Providence Park, but for the many businesses up and down the country that are struggling to get understanding from the valuation office?

This debate is about property taxes. We know that the Government have indicated that they are going to come for property owners in the Budget that is coming down the line—they indicated it in the previous Budget through the changes they made to inheritance tax. The Government must change course for the health and the good of the economic prosperity of our country.

2.41 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Like my family and friends and the people of my city, I saw at first hand the economic failures and harms done to the people of this country under 14 years of the previous Government—harm to our council services, armed forces and public services, the special educational needs and disabilities system, NHS waiting lists, rents and mortgage costs, wages, prison place numbers, police numbers and safety on our streets. It was 14 years of made-up unfunded promises and commitments—14 years in which the previous Government gave up on Pompey, on Britain and on everyone in it, leaving us as a Government to clear up their mess. Fourteen years cannot be cleaned up overnight—it takes time—but, Madam Deputy Speaker, cleaning it up we are.

I welcome the investment in my constituency, including £13.8 billion for flood defences to protect our homes; £2.2 billion for the defence sector, which will protect jobs in my city and provide greater opportunities for our small and medium-sized enterprises; £4.8 million for better buses, allowing better transport; £2.7 million on fixing potholes to repair the crumbling streets we live on and stop the damage being done to our vehicles; £2.3 million for upgrading schools and college buildings so that our young people have a safe environment to learn; £1.9 million in additional SEND funding to start the process of patching up the mess, which the previous Government said was a lose-lose situation; and £1.2 million in additional funding for temporary accommodation to house some of the most desperate families in my city. We are seeing investment into solar panels on public buildings to reduce costs and protect the environment, safer streets programmes in North End and Cosham, in addition to named police officers, as well as free school meals and breakfast clubs to support pupils.

Robbie Moore: I just want to pick up on the hon. Lady's point about free school meals, because these meals are not free. I spoke with a school in my constituency just last week that has been mandated to provide these so-called free school meals. However, the meals are having to come out of the school's own budget. Can we change the narrative associated with the rhetoric that this Labour Government are putting out?

Amanda Martin: As a former teacher, I say no. I will continue with the term free school meals.

We are also seeing breakfast clubs to support pupils and families at the start of every day, additional nursery allocations to help working parents with the crazy cost of childcare, and investment in our NHS. All of those measures are the result of having a Labour Government and two Labour MPs in Portsmouth. I could go on, because that is just the tip of the iceberg of the investment and initiatives that are very much needed by the people of my city. This is reality, not imagination, speculation or politicking—not, in the words of the motion today, “considering”, but action.

None of that would have been possible without the decisions of this Government. Some, I admit, have been difficult, and some have been very necessary, such as placing the burden of tax on the very wealthiest, with private jet tax up 50%, stamp duty on second homes, changes to inheritance tax on big landowners, the scrapping of non-dom status, the ending of offshore trusts to stop inheritance tax avoidance, and VAT on private schools. Does the Minister agree that the investments like those in Portsmouth North are possible only because of the decisions and actions we have taken to raise revenue?

Those decisions, Madam Deputy Speaker, were repeatedly opposed by the Opposition. In bringing this debate, which is—in the words of Willy Wonka—one of “pure imagination”, they appear not to be considering an alternative, but to be going back to the status quo of 14 years of cuts and damage to Britain. This debate has been full of amnesia and sloping shoulders, with no regret and not one apology. It is a debate set to talk Britain and its people down—a debate ignoring the most positive things this Government have brought to the people of my city and this country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): For the final contribution from the Back Benches, I call Melanie Ward.

2.45 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Here we are, with another Opposition day debate and another tedious motion from the Conservatives that completely ignores the catastrophic economic inheritance they left for this Labour Government coming into power. Their decision to put Liz Truss into Downing Street is something they will never quite live down. It really does stick in the craw to be lectured on sound economic management by them. We have had some fine examples of that today, with the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) stating his belief that speculation about future measures damages the economy. Why, then, have the Conservatives today put down a motion that is entirely about speculation? It makes no sense, even on their own terms.

In government, the Conservatives did untold economic damage to the UK's public finances, and the Chancellor is right to prioritise investment in our infrastructure and public services while ensuring sound economic management. The Conservatives talk of wanting to put more money in people's pockets, yet they presided over the worst pay growth of any Government for a century. Had the Conservatives—and, we must not forget, the Liberal Democrats for a while—grown wages between 2010 and 2024 at the same pace as the previous Labour Government, the average worker would be £117 a week better off. [Interruption.] Opposition Members may

heckle, but that is real money that could be in my constituents' pockets which is not because of what their Government did.

It is this Labour Government who are putting money back in people's pockets. Our increase to the national minimum wage means that wages are rising faster than prices, and 8,000 low-paid Fifers this year received a pay rise, including thousands in my constituency of Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy. Let us not forget that the Leader of the Opposition said that the minimum wage is a burden and that maternity pay is excessive. It is the Labour Government's stewardship of the economy that means interest rates have fallen five times and average mortgages are now £1,000 a year less than when the Conservatives were in power. Again, that is real money in the pockets of my constituents. My constituents know that it is this Labour Government and this Labour Chancellor who have prioritised Kirkcaldy for multimillion-pound regeneration funding as part of the growth mission fund, beginning the transformation of our town centre, which was neglected for a decade and a half by the Tories, and for almost two decades by their enablers in the Scottish National party.

The old cliché that to govern is to choose is correct. All politics is about choice, and the difference between this Labour Government and the Opposition is that we have chosen to invest in our communities, in our public services and in increasing economic activity and wages, after they failed to do so under five Prime Ministers and seven Chancellors.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the wind-ups. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

2.48 pm

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Before I get into my speech, I genuinely welcome the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson), to the Treasury Bench and to his position in the Treasury. I give the House due notice that I do not intend to take interventions; the hon. Gentleman will have a tough enough job defending the indefensible as it is, and I do not want to curtail his time any more than I strictly have to.

The Labour party loves tax, and that has been on display in the Chamber this afternoon. When given the opportunity, Labour has been very critical of us. It is only fair to say that in government we did put up taxes more than we would have wanted. However, I do not remember Labour Members criticising our expenditure when we were supporting businesses and individuals through furlough; I do not remember them criticising our decisions to support people with their fuel bills in response to Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. Labour likes the spending when it comes.

A number of Government Members stood up and criticised us for putting up taxes—a bold move, bearing in mind that that is exactly what they are going to do later on this year. If I am wrong in my estimation, if I have been unfair, or if I have mis-categorised the heart and soul of those on the Government Benches, I will break the rule that I made just a moment ago and take an intervention from any Government Member who is willing to stand up and say that they want to see taxes coming down—I thought not.

Luke Murphy: *rose—*

Sir James Cleverly: No, I will not give way. The hon. Member had his chance.

This is the point: the Government love putting up taxes. We in the Conservative party put up taxes when we had to; this Government put up taxes at every chance they get. And the reason they put up taxes whenever they get the chance to do so is that they think taxes are not a necessary evil, but a good in and of itself. That is at the heart of the problem. The fact that gilt markets, bond markets, businesses and individuals know in their heart of hearts that taxes will go up under this Government has produced the stagnation and the stifling that Labour Members are criticising.

I was about to say that we have had a number of good contributions from both sides of the House, but that is being generous. The simple fact of the matter is that a key indicator of confidence in a Government is the cost of borrowing, and, currently, that is at a multi-decade high. As we have said, it has not been higher this century; it is trending in the wrong direction. The Bank of England, when setting interest rates, made it clear that it is concerned about the trajectory—specifically the trajectory on property taxes. Those on the Treasury Bench say that they do not want to speculate on what might be in the Budget later this year. They did not want this House to investigate what they claim to be speculation. They probably should not have spent so much time briefing the media over the summer. They cannot have it both ways. We are asking legitimate questions of the Government, because the markets and the country are worried about what is happening and we want to allay their fears.

Gregory Stafford: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir James Cleverly: No, I will not give way.

Let me just say this: if we are to address the slowing of the housing market, we should make sure—*[Interruption.]* I say “we”, but Labour is in government now and it should therefore make sure that it does nothing to stagnate the market further. Speculation is rife that there will be a £14,000 tax bill on average for UK households, a £23,000 tax bill for those in the south-east, and potentially an average tax bill of £33,000 for property transactions. That is the Government's fault. They have the opportunity to put that speculation to bed and they choose not to do so. Despite the fact that they are now in government, they do not seem to have learned the lesson that when they speak—whether it be on or off the record—markets move. That is why speculation among those on the Government Benches is so damaging and so dangerous. They are causing economic problems because of their kite flying. We have given them an opportunity to put one of those pieces of speculation to bed and they have failed to do so. In that failure, the mask has slipped—they want to put up taxes. They love putting up taxes and they are going to put up taxes.

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

2.54 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for bringing the debate to a close for the Opposition and for the welcome that he has given me as I move down to the Front Bench. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for his speech and congratulate him on his promotion to Cabinet. He was a fantastic Exchequer Secretary, and I will do my best to carry out the role with the same diligence and effectiveness.

I also wish to put on record that, although I may be standing at the Dispatch Box for the first time, my respect for this place and for the Members on both sides of this House and on all Benches will remain. The Commons, after all, is the heart of our democracy. The importance of Ministers being held to account and of MPs voting and debating on big issues—and on Opposition Day debates—and, crucially, of the public being able to hold us all to account will never diminish in my mind. I look forward to continuing to work constructively with Members from all parts of the House as we discuss and debate the important and very interesting topic of tax policy.

Under the leadership of the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, this Government are turning the page on 14 years of economic mismanagement. We must and we will put an end to the years of sluggish economic growth and squeezed living standards—issues that have typified the past two decades. We must turn this country around and build an economy that works for everyone.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position, which is hugely well deserved. This motion gives the impression that the Conservatives care about homeowners and renters, but does he agree that it is Labour who are giving homeowners greater powers and protections through leasehold reform, giving renters stability so that they can stay in their homes for longer, and building 1.5 million more homes to tackle the terrible housing legacy of the previous Government? They did too little and we are sorting it out.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for that very kind intervention. I agree with every word that he said.

The subject of today's debate is, of course, taxes and which taxes may or may not change in the future. Let me be clear: I will not be writing the Budget today or any day in this role. That is a job for the Chancellor. Just as she delivered a Budget that fixed the foundations for the country last year, I am confident that the Budget this year will showcase the right choices for the country for the long-term health of public and family finances.

Property taxes make a significant contribution to the public finances, raising more than £75 billion a year. That is crucial for funding our schools, our NHS, our emergency services and our armed forces and for filling in potholes too. They help to provide a broad tax base, which underpins good fiscal policy. I know that that is not something to which the previous Government gave much thought. They were happy, it seemed, to run our economy and public finances into the ground, leaving us with a £22 billion black hole, which we of course had to fill.

We believe in a tax system that is fair and sustainable and that supports economic growth. At the autumn Budget in 2024, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor took a number of decisions to raise taxes on the wealthy to help fix our public finances and support public services such as the NHS and education. These tax changes included: abolishing the non-domicile tax status; raising the rates of capital gains tax; limiting inheritance tax reliefs; and increasing air passenger duty for private jets. Thanks to the work of my predecessor and the great work of HMRC officials, whom I am looking forward to working with, we are also increasing work to make sure that the wealthy pay their fair share of the tax that they owe. These changes and others that we have made demonstrate the fundamental truth of politics in 2025.

Graham Stuart: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment. In the Labour manifesto on which he will remember he stood along with his colleagues, it was suggested that there would be tax rises under a Labour Government. I think the figure was £7 billion. In the event, £40 billion-worth of rises came forward in the autumn. Will he commit the Government to being more transparent in future in preparing the markets for tax rises, and, indeed, the people who have to pay them?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. I would ask him if I could whether he could identify £40 billion of spending cuts, if he wants to have £40 billion of tax cuts. I do not want to see NHS waiting lists grow in my constituency, in his constituency, or in any of the constituencies that we all have the privilege of representing.

The tax changes that have been introduced demonstrate the fundamental truth of politics in 2025. The bedrock of this Labour Government is fiscal responsibility, while the cornerstone of the Conservatives' economic plans is fiscal fantasy. It is simply incredible that they have opposed every single one of the tax increases that we have put forward. Willing the ends without having any of the means is coming to define the economic policy of the Conservatives. Frankly, it should concern us all how unserious they have become. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead Central and Wickham (Mark Ferguson) said, it is clear that the Conservatives are enjoying the comfort and ease of opposition. Long may that continue.

I must say, it is surprising that the Conservatives would wish to raise the subject of property, given their abysmal record in that area. There can be no doubt that a big part of the mandate that this Government were given was to build more homes. The public had grown weary of years of sluggish growth, and over-budget projects that were first stalled, and then delayed. The public needed change; they needed us to build for this country's future, and that is what we are setting about doing.

From infrastructure to planning reforms, which I have been championing for the last year, and our mission to build 1.5 million new homes. The Government have put housing at the heart of our approach, which will create jobs and opportunities for those who build the homes, and give families and individuals the opportunity to call somewhere home. As I said when I gave my maiden speech from a few rows back, housing is central to my politics. The aspiration of everyday families up and

down this country is to have a home to call their own, maybe with a garden and a spot to park their car, in a community supported by public services that work. People do not want the world delivered to them on a plate by Government. They just want a good life for themselves and those they love. Building more housing and improving public services are essential ingredients of meeting their aspirations.

I have made many notes on all the fantastic contributions from Members on both sides of the House, but I can see that Madam Deputy Speaker thinks that it is almost time for me to conclude, and I am sure that the Opposition Whip thinks so. *[Interruption.]* Ah, it turns out that there is more time, so I shall begin with my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), who made a powerful intervention about the success of Milton Keynes city council, and the importance of this Government investing in public services.

The hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) gave a powerful example of house prices in his constituency, showing how prices have surged in this city—I know that, as I represent a north London seat—but that is why we must build more homes. I hope that he will support all the planning reforms going through this House, and the reforms that will come soon, because we need them to bring down house prices and improve the living standards of people in this country.

The hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) made an interesting and thoughtful intervention about support for pensioners, but he should talk to the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride), who has said that the triple lock is unsustainable—a view with which the Government do not agree. I would like to give a pleasant mention to my hon. Friends the Members for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones), and for Loughborough (Dr Sandher). I congratulate them on their marriage over the summer. It is fantastic to see them both contribute to the debate, and they both bring so much to the Labour Benches.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) had a very good line on Liz Truss. He said that her dreams became our constituents' nightmares, which is very true. We know it, and I think the Conservatives do, too. I will certainly be stealing that line for future contributions in this House.

To conclude, as the new Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, I look forward to returning to this Chamber and to Committee corridor on many occasions to discuss tax policy. The people of this country work hard for everything that they earn. They deserve an efficient and fair tax system, whether that tax relates to property or other areas, and for Governments to spend every penny of public money wisely. That is why everything we do is underpinned by fiscal stability, our sticking to our rules, and our managing the public finances well in this uncertain world. We do not turn to more borrowing, as Liz Truss did or the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) would, but put economic stability at the heart of all we do. That is the foundation for what really matters: higher growth for higher living standards in every part of the country. That is what this Government are working every day to deliver.

We are working to lift the crushing burden of the cost of living crisis, to back those who want to invest in the future of this country, and to give as many people as

possible a home that they can call their own. That is the future that I fought for on the Back Benches, and that is the future that this Government can and will deliver.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 98, Noes 335.

Division No. 274]

[3.5 pm

AYES

Andrew, rh Stuart	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Argar, rh Edward	Lopez, Julia
Atkins, rh Victoria	Mak, Alan
Bacon, Gareth	Malthouse, rh Kit
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	McVey, rh Esther
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Bedford, Mr Peter	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Bhatti, Saqib	Moore, Robbie
Blackman, Bob	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Bool, Sarah	Mundell, rh David
Brandreth, Aphra	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Burghart, Alex	Norman, rh Jesse
Cartledge, James	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Chope, Sir Christopher	O'Brien, Neil
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Patel, rh Priti
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Paul, Rebecca
Cocking, Lewis	Philp, rh Chris
Cooper, John	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Costa, Alberto	Rankin, Jack
Davies, Gareth	Robertson, Joe
Davies, Mims	Robinson, rh Gavin
Dewhurst, Charlie	Rosindell, Andrew
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Shannon, Jim
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Simmonds, David
Evans, Dr Luke	Smith, Greg
Fortune, Peter	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Fox, Sir Ashley	Smith, Rebecca
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Snowden, Mr Andrew
French, Mr Louie	Spencer, Dr Ben
Fuller, Richard	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Glen, rh John	Stuart, rh Graham
Gordon, Tom	Swann, Robin
Griffith, Andrew	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Griffiths, Alison	Thomas, Bradley
Harris, Rebecca	Trott, rh Laura
Hayes, rh Sir John	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Hinds, rh Damian	Vickers, Martin
Hoare, Simon	Vickers, Matt
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Whately, Helen
Hollinrake, Kevin	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Huddleston, Nigel	Wild, James
Hudson, Dr Neil	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Wood, Mike
Jenrick, rh Robert	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Johnson, Dr Caroline	
Jopp, Lincoln	
Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	
Lam, Katie	
Lamont, John	
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jerome Mayhew and
Gregory Stafford

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Akehurst, Luke
Abbott, Jack	Alaba, Mr Bayo
Abrahams, Debbie	Alexander, rh Heidi
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Al-Hassan, Sadik
	Ali, Rushanara
	Ali, Tahir

Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Cready, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex

De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa

Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex

Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Payne, Michael
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike

Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie

Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia (*Proxy vote
 cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

**Kate Dearden and
 Christian Wakeford**

Question accordingly negatived.

Hospitality Sector

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the second Opposition Day motion. I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected any amendments. I call the shadow Secretary of State to move the motion.

3.19 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the combination of catastrophic choices made by the Government causing the closure, downsizing and lack of hiring by pubs, restaurants, hotels and hospitality businesses across the United Kingdom, with an estimated 84,000 job losses over the last 12 months and an average of two site closures per day in the first half of 2025; further regrets the Government's policies that have led to this such as the omission of the hospitality sector from the Government's industrial strategy, increases in the cost of pavement licences, the reduction in retail, hospitality and leisure business rates relief from 75 per cent to 40 per cent for 2025-26, the increase in employers' National Insurance contributions to 15 per cent and the lowering of the secondary threshold to £5,000, and measures in the Employment Rights Bill which will make hospitality employers liable for the behaviour of customers and others; and calls on the Government to publish a dedicated strategy for the sector, to consult with hospitality employers prior to any future changes to the National Living Wage, to amend the Employment Rights Bill to protect seasonal and flexible employment practices vital to the sectors' contribution in providing a ladder into employment for young and often excluded groups and to introduce targeted support measures to prevent further business closures, job losses and damage to local communities.

From the great British pub to the family-run restaurant, from the small seaside bed and breakfast to world-leading hotels, hospitality businesses are the beating heart of our communities, our high streets and our economy. Yet today, under Labour, they are hurting like never before. We were promised a Government for jobs, for opportunity and for prosperity. What have we got instead? A concoction of catastrophic choices causing a lack of hiring and the closure and downsizing of pubs, restaurants, hotels and hospitality businesses across the nation; a jobs tax that goes out of its way to savage the part-time, entry-level opportunities that hospitality offers in abundance; soaring business rates; and over 300 pages of additional job-killing red tape.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My hon. Friend might have been like me: the first job I ever had was as a porter, and then a barman, at the Crown and Mitre hotel in Carlisle. These are opportunities for people who are coming into the labour market for the first time or trying to get back into the labour market. The hospitality sector offers opportunity to people who otherwise have none, and that opportunity has come under devastating attack from this Government.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. Opportunity is a word we are going to hear again and again, because of the huge contribution that the hospitality sector makes to the economy and to getting people on the ladder of opportunity with their first job in life.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab) *rose—*

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Gentleman is trying to get his first opportunity, and I will give him that. We are going to have a good debate, and I will make some progress after this.

Mr Quigley: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that, under the Tories, a pub closed every 14 hours? That was 10,000 in total, so whether it is 14 hours or 14 years, the Tory party cannot be trusted with the economy.

Andrew Griffith: All I can suggest, and I say this in all seriousness, is that the hon. Gentleman should spend a lot more time in local pubs in his constituency, because the people there will talk about the horror show that is the Employment Rights Bill. They will talk to him about the soaring business rates, the reduction in relief under this Government and the national insurance job tax—that swingeing £25 billion attack on the private economy.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): If we are going to exchange numbers, does my hon. Friend agree that it is shocking that over 1,000 pubs and restaurants have closed since the autumn Budget, and that 84,000 hospitality workers have lost their jobs? That is one in every 25 since the autumn Budget alone—and that was when the autumn Budget was actually in the autumn. Does he agree that that is having an impact on our high streets and the very viability of our local town centres and that it needs to stop? The Government need to stop holding our hospitality sector responsible for everything that happens in the local economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We must keep interventions short. We have close to 50 people trying to contribute today.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. It is about the numbers, and it is important that we should be instrumented. This is a sector that is extremely well instrumented, and groups such as UKHospitality do a great job at calling out the impact. But it is not just about the numbers, because behind every one of those numbers is a story: a family, a striver, a risk taker, an entrepreneur, a community or a high street whose life is being sucked out of it by this Government. Hospitality is where the character of our nation lives, in the welcome of a restaurant host, the laughter in a dining room and the clink of a glass, and it is the fact that that life that is being extinguished that is so tragic.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): One thing that is not picked up in the figures is the fact that cafés and businesses up and down Hinckley and Bosworth are having to reduce the man-hours that people are working to reduce their staffing costs because of the taxes that are being put in place. This is a real problem. Does my hon. Friend agree that we are not getting the growth that we want in this country because people are having to deal with this toxic concoction of legislation and tax?

Andrew Griffith: I do agree. My hon. Friend puts it extremely well. It has been an enormously difficult summer. The weather should have been a tailwind, but the tailwind was not significant enough to offset the headwind of the impact of that jobs tax. And who does

it hit? Labour Members say that they stand up for opportunities for young people and the most vulnerable, but the change to national insurance thresholds in particular—the reduction from £9,100 to £5,000—has hit the part-time workers, the young mums trying to balance the responsibilities of family life and the young people trying to get their very first step on the ladder.

In her first Budget, the Chancellor said that she had made her choices. Well, we warned her, businesses warned her and even the Office for Budget Responsibility warned her, and what has happened? As my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) said, 84,000 jobs have been lost in hospitality since the Chancellor took office. That is a Wembley stadium's-worth of livelihoods shredded by this Labour Government, affecting the most vulnerable in society, those trying to juggle other commitments and young people trying to have their first shot in the world of work. If this Government are about protecting working people, I have to say they have a very odd way of showing it. It is not just us saying this. Last month, Kate Nicholls, the chair of UKHospitality, said:

“More than half of all job losses since October occurring in hospitality is further evidence that our sector has been by far the hardest hit by the Government's regressive tax increases.”

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): On that point, does my right hon. Friend agree with my constituent, Stephen Montgomery, who is the director of the Scottish Hospitality Group, that the very circumstances he is setting out have brought the industry to the brink, and that unless the Government start listening, it is going to go over a cliff edge?

Andrew Griffith: As it happens, I was in Edinburgh yesterday, talking to representatives of the hospitality sector and the hard-pressed tourist sector, and they made exactly the same point to me.

This is unnecessary. It did not need to be this way. And to what end? An increase in the jobs tax to fund tax cuts for Mauritians and cookery classes for illegal migrants, or to let the bloated public sector work from home another day a week? If proof were needed of where hospitality ranks in the priorities of this Government, we need look no further than the pages of their own industrial strategy, because in 160 pages of closely typed text and hundreds of thousands of words, the word “hospitality” features just three times, one of which was a typo where they misspelt the word “hospital”. Let's be frank, their attitude to hospitality is lamentable, and the bad news just keeps coming.

No Government that understood business would ever come forward with the Employment Rights Bill. Tony Blair did not. Gordon Brown did not. It is 330 pages that prove this Government are not serious about growth. They have zero appreciation for the seasonal and flexible work that suits the workers and the hospitality and tourism businesses alike. They are conscripting pub landlords into an attack on freedom of speech with a banter ban on overheard remarks—not harassment, but remarks that somebody could construe, misdirected at them, as offensive.

Any small business owner will say that the two words they fear the most in the English language are “employment tribunal”, yet the Government want to legislate to grow even further the half a million cases that are already in the employment tribunal backlog. There is no point

concocting and cooking up additional workplace rights if people cannot find a job in the first place. That is why the top five business groups in the UK—almost exceptionally—wrote an open letter saying that the impact on growth will be deeply damaging and lead to job losses and recruitment freezes. That is here right now; that is what is happening on our high streets and in our communities across this country thanks to this Government damaging the hospitality sector.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I agree with the hon. Member on the point about employer national insurance contributions, but in the *Press and Journal* today—one of the august daily papers in Scotland—there are reports that highland hoteliers are struggling to recruit. The large part of the blame for that is laid at the door of Brexit, and the current immigration policy does nothing to help the highlands and islands in Scotland. There is demand for a rural visa, which is fully backed by the Federation of Small Businesses—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind Members that there are 45 of you wishing to speak. Interventions must be a lot shorter. I am sure the shadow Minister has got the hon. Gentleman's point.

Andrew Griffith: The ability of people to find work in this wonderful sector, which provides those wonderful opportunities is, yes, a function of access to the labour market, but it is also a function of an employer's ability to take that risk on somebody—to take a chance and give them that opportunity.

I think we would all agree—occasionally we hear positive noises from those on the Government Front Bench before they are reigned into line by their own Back Benchers—that it would be far better for our nation and our out-of-control public finances if the 9 million people of working age could seize the opportunity presented by sectors like hospitality, which offers flexible working and the chance to start a career, and could join the workforce, regardless of which constituency they come from. Almost uniquely, hospitality is a sector whose contribution to our constituencies is something of which each and every one of us—all 45 of us who wish to speak today—is proud. That contribution is why Conservative Members value the sector so strongly.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): The shadow Minister talks about the 45 people wanting to speak. My first job was in hospitality. I want my young constituents in Lagan Valley to have the same opportunity, but does he agree that with these tax increases and not giving VAT cuts, it is so difficult for our hospitality businesses?

Andrew Griffith: I absolutely agree that we have to do everything we can to help. This is about tax and employment, because one of the characteristics that hospitality, tourism and retail share is the significant amount of employment they offer, but it is also about other taxes. It is about the tax system; that is why I referred in the motion and in my opening remarks to a concoction.

Take business rates, for example. From a business perspective, they are a terrible tax; they are paid before a business has made a single pound, and they get fewer and fewer services from local government in return. When we were in government, we shielded the sector

with generous reliefs and exemptions, yet one of the first acts of this Government was to more than double business rates for many in retail and hospitality. I agree with Emma McClarkin, the CEO of the British Beer and Pub Association, who says that “punishing rates and regulations” are at the heart of why so many pubs are closing.

This Government do not get business—and no wonder: there are more alumni of the Resolution Foundation in government now than there are Ministers who have ever run a business. I think many of them had their first opportunity in hospitality, but very few of them, sadly, stayed there. Business is not about numbers on some page in a policy wonk's pamphlet. We are talking about real people who took a risk, put their capital to work, gave their time and energy, and, as a result, grew our communities and the economy—people like those running the award-winning Tottington Manor in my constituency, Chalk restaurant in Wiston, the warm and welcoming Three Moles in Selham and the innovative Kinsbrook vineyard in West Chilton.

It is not just hospitality businesses being ravaged by these state-imposed headwinds; thousands of businesses say they are being impacted and are at risk because of these measures. We are witnessing collapse on many of our high streets, and in the Minister's own constituency of Rhondda and Ogmore, Porth has lost its last clothes shop because of rising costs imposed by his Government.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Last weekend, I attended the reopening of a wonderful pub in my constituency: the Star in Llansoy. It was one of the 10,000 pubs that shut on the Conservatives' watch, and it has now been reopened by the community. Does the shadow Minister agree that our policies are giving businesses confidence to reopen?

Andrew Griffith: My background is in business, and I celebrate anybody who succeeds and takes a risk in business, including the hospitality venue in the hon. Lady's constituency. One of the innovations that the previous Government pursued was the community ownership fund, which I know from personal experience saved or helped many hospitality venues. Sadly, it has lost its way under this Government.

I will conclude my remarks to allow as many colleagues as possible to speak. Let us be crystal clear about this. *[Interruption.]* There is nothing funny about this debate and what is happening in hospitality right now—people are losing their jobs. We cannot tax, regulate or spend our way to growth. Every pint pulled, every plate served and every bed made grows our economy: a job provided, a supplier supported, life breathed into a community. No Government are perfect, which is why it is often best for the state to stay out of the way. Yet under Labour, this vital, valued sector is being punished, not rewarded. This Government do not protect workers by destroying the businesses that employ them. They cannot claim to lead our country while draining the very life from so many communities.

British hospitality businesses deserve better. The Conservatives will always stand with those who dare to dream, invest, build and hire. We stand for every business, big and small, that is fighting to keep its lights on. We stand for every young person desperate for their first shot at work. Above all, we stand for the growth that this country so desperately needs.

3.36 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): If I might, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will start with an apology. As I told the shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), last night, I am not able to be here for the end of this debate—I do apologise.

Hon. Members: Oh no!

Chris Bryant: Well, I am glad that people like me being here—that is very kind. I am not going to be kind for the rest of my speech, so the shadow Business Secretary, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), should not get used to that.

What an absolute joy it is to see the shadow Business Secretary up close. He must think that amnesia has hit the whole country. I mean, he was the business adviser to Boris Johnson—and we know what expletive Boris Johnson used when referring to business, don't we? Did the shadow Business Secretary resign as a Minister when all the others were resigning, though? Oh no, he lashed himself to the Boris Johnson mast until the very end. In February of last year, still he was calling for the return of Johnson.

But that is not all, is it? When it came to the lettuce-defying catastrophe known as the Liz Truss premiership, the shadow Business Secretary was not just a casual supporter; he was the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. He actually helped to put together that disastrous Budget. He was not just in the room when it happened, to quote "Hamilton"; he held the pen! He was Kwasi's amanuensis; he was Truss's handmaiden. This is a man who could not see the writing on the wall even if it were spitting out fire 50 metres high. Even when the Bank of England had been forced to act to shore up the economy following the mini-Budget, he went out to defend it.

Graham Stuart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you have any advice for those in the hospitality industry listening to the Minister, who is so afraid to deal with the issue at hand that he has to resort to this ad hominem attack on our Front-Bench colleague.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and perhaps encourage all Members to ensure that they stay on topic and in scope this afternoon?

Chris Bryant: They don't like it up 'em, do they, Madam Deputy Speaker?

The shadow Business Secretary then said,

"We think they're the right plans because those plans make our economy competitive."

The problem with the argument that he has made today is that he has not learned a single thing since that mini-Budget. He still wants us to tax less and spend more at the same time. Yes, of course he wants to reverse the national insurance increase, but does he point to where the money should come from? No, of course he doesn't. He likes the additional spending on the NHS, he approves of our spending on prisons, he supports more spending on policing, and he clamours for more spending on defence—and, no doubt, on trains, telecoms, universities and schools—but he does

not want to pay for it, which is why it is as plain as a pikestaff that he has not changed a bit. He would re-run the Truss mini-Budget in the twinkling of an eye. It was doolally economics when Truss introduced it and it is doolally economics today. I give you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Minister for doolally economics. Let me deal with two specific points that he made.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will make a couple of points; then of course I will give way to the Father of the House.

The shadow Business Secretary condemned what he calls the reduction in retail hospitality and leisure business rates relief from 75% to 40% for 2025-26. Does the House note the sleight of hand there? When the Conservatives left office, they had no plans to extend the business rates relief beyond the financial year, and hospitality was facing a complete cliff edge, going from 75% relief to zero relief—so I am proud that our Chancellor introduced the 40% relief. I am also proud that the Government are creating a fairer business rates system that will protect the high street, support investment and is fit for the 21st century. The Conservatives had 14 years to do that. Did they bring in any amendment that would have improved the situation for hospitality? Nary a one.

We recognise the vital role that hospitality businesses play in driving economic growth and strengthening economic cohesion across the country. That is why from 2026-27, this Government intend to introduce permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values of less than £500,000. That is a permanent tax cut to ensure that hospitality benefits from much-needed certainty and support.

Sir Edward Leigh: This is all good, amusing, knockabout stuff—nothing wrong with that—but will the Minister say a few words of comfort to the small family businesses that are closing all over the country and about whether, as the Minister with responsibility for hospitality, he is making representations to the Chancellor to relieve some of those small businesses from such taxes in the Budget?

Chris Bryant: I will be very straightforward with the right hon. Gentleman: of course we recognise the problems that small businesses are having—I have heard from many—and I am about to come to the issue of national insurance contributions, which I accept, of course, have provided difficulties to many different businesses. However, it is all very well everyone campaigning against the tax, but if they are not prepared to say where the billions are to come from otherwise, then they will the ends but they do not will the means.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Last week, saw the opening of West Bromwich's brand-new indoor market and the return of the much-loved Firkins bakery. People were queuing from 7 am for the famous lemon iced buns that Firkins has sold for many years. Does the Minister agree that food and hospitality are at the heart of our high streets, would he like to come to taste one of those iced buns, and does he agree that that is what we can achieve when Labour Governments work with Labour councils and communities?

Chris Bryant: I am more of a Chelsea bun person than an iced bun person, but my hon. Friend makes a good point: there are businesses up and down the country opening anew and afresh. Far from such businesses dismissing the opportunity of having a national health service that works more effectively, a rail service that works effectively and a secure set of working rights for people; they welcome that provision, and they want people to have a proper wage when in work because they know that motivates their staff better.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Talking of businesses opening, in my constituency of Harlow we have just welcomed a new branch of IKEA. It is the first business in my constituency that has spoken to me about the Employment Rights Bill; it is really excited about it and wants us to hurry up and get on with it—*[Interruption.]* It is no wonder that IKEA employees across the country are very happy in their jobs, are loyal to their jobs and like working for that company.

Chris Bryant: I agree. I note that an awful lot of Conservative MPs are saying, “Oh, they’re Swedish”, as if foreign investment in the UK were a bad idea. *[Interruption.]* Yes, that is what they were doing—they can furrow their brows as much as they want.

The shadow Secretary of State pointed to the increases in employer national insurance contributions. Yes, of course the Government have taken a number of difficult but necessary decisions on tax, welfare and spending to fix the public finances, to fund public services and to restore economic stability after the situation that we inherited from the previous Administration, but I have to point out to the hon. Gentleman—because he does not seem to understand the facts—that the hospitality sector is made up predominantly of smaller businesses, and we took decisive steps to protect the smallest businesses from the impact of the increase in employer national insurance by increasing the employment allowance from £5,000 to £10,500. That means that 865,000 employers will pay no employer national insurance contributions at all this year and that more than half of all employers will either gain or see no change. Employers will be able to employ up to four full-time workers on the national living wage without paying a penny of employer national insurance contributions.

Mr Quigley: Unlike most, if not all, of the Conservative Members listed on the Order Paper as supporters of the motion, my wife and I own two successful hospitality businesses. We welcome the increase in national insurance contributions and the improvements in workers’ rights because they are good for our employees, our businesses and our customers. Does the Minister agree that the Tories only know how to race to the bottom and not how to give workers a leg up?

Chris Bryant: I passionately support what we have done about the national minimum wage. I remember when we had to sit through the night in this Chamber to ensure that the national minimum wage was introduced in the first place; incidentally, I remember that the Liberal Democrats voted against that, as well as the Conservatives. We want people who work for a decent number of hours every week to be able to put food on the table, pay a mortgage and give their children the opportunities in life that they may not have been able to

achieve. That is why it is important that in this sector, perhaps above all other sectors, we ensure that people are properly paid.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): UKHospitality says:

“At a time when the country needs jobs, the Government should be encouraging hospitality to grow and create jobs, not tax them out of existence.”

Is it right or wrong?

Chris Bryant: We are not taxing them out of existence, as I have tried to explain to the hon. Gentleman. He is another one of those people who is awfully nice when you meet him in the bar—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Secretary of State is saying that that sounds terrible, but he was saying earlier that every single pint that is pulled represents an increase to the economy, so the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) helped out. The point that I am trying to make—not very well—is that it is impossible to simply say, “We are not going to tax,” and still want to see the same level of expenditure. That is what got us into the trouble in the Truss Budget, and for family finances that meant—

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): On that point, will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will not give way again. That meant that mortgage rates rose faster than they have ever risen in our history, which made it almost impossible for people to survive economically.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister is an entirely charming chap and a great entertainer—I worry that his Equity card might be getting out of date. He praises the changes that have been made to the employment conditions of bar staff, for example, but does he really think that it is a good idea to have them policing the comments of people who use public houses, when it takes as many as five members of the constabulary to arrest a comedian over inappropriate tweets?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly legitimate point. No, of course I do not want that. I want the police officers in my constituency to be policing the streets, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said this morning, not policing tweets or private conversations between individuals—*[Interruption.]* I have made my point. The police in my constituency, where, incidentally, we lost large numbers of police officers during the time that the Conservative Government were in office, are hard pressed enough to deal with the problems they have without trying to take on ludicrous and preposterous elements as well.

My biggest complaint about the speech made by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs is that he is so determined to do down the Government that he ends up dragging down the sector as well. The honest truth is that the UK hospitality sector is absolutely amazing. Whether it is the Lake district, the night life in Manchester and London, the gastropubs in the Cotswolds, the movie locations up and down the land, the Royal Oaks, the White Harts, the Red Lions, the Prospect of Whitby, the Moon Under Waters, the Eagle and Childs,

[Chris Bryant]

Bamburgh castle, Chester zoo, which I loved visiting last week to feed the giraffes, the British Museum, all the V&As and the Tates, Windsor castle—the pub and the castle—Stratford-upon-Avon—

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD) *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Whether it is St Mary Redcliffe, Canterbury cathedral, the O2 or the Stadium of Light, we should celebrate every single part of our hospitality industry across the whole of the UK and be proud that we are British.

Manuela Perteghella: Does the Minister agree that in Stratford-upon-Avon, hospitality is not just an industry, but the lifeblood of our visitor economy? Every pub, café or restaurant closure is a blow not only to jobs, but to our high street and our community's sense of place.

Chris Bryant: Yes, and I would add another point to that. In Stratford-upon-Avon, as in many other parts of the United Kingdom, the hospitality industry, the tourism industry and the creative industries are intrinsically bound together. A number of people will go to the theatre, stay in a hotel, go to the Lazy Duck or one of the other pubs—apparently other pubs are available in Stratford-upon-Avon—and go to the most visited church in England, which is in Stratford-upon-Avon. It is a multifarious concoction of different industries that fit together, which is why we need to try to foster all of them so that they can all flourish together. The hon. Lady makes a very good point.

One of the arguments I have been trying to make is that as much as I love Stratford-upon-Avon—which, incidentally, is very difficult to get to by train; that is one of the things I would dearly love for us to sort out—a lot of international tourists come only to London and the south-east and perhaps to Oxford, Cambridge, Stratford and Edinburgh. I want them to see the whole diversity of the hospitality industry and the tourism sector across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I was looking in the direction of the right hon. Gentleman, so I think I will have to take his intervention first. I will then take an intervention from my hon. Friend.

Mr Carmichael: I think the Minister may need to add a few more island venues to his travel itinerary in the future. May I take him back to the question of tax? He is right to say that if we will a reduction in tax, we should look for a reduction in expenditure, but it does not always work like that. When we cut the rate of duty on spirits, we did it with the expectation of a loss of £600 million, but it actually brought an increase of £800 million. That can sometimes happen. For years, the UK hospitality sector has been asking for a reduced rate of VAT on its services, and that would be sector specific. It has given evidence, backed by some of the

biggest consultancies in the area, that that would in fact bring an increased tax take. Will the Minister make that point to the Treasury?

Chris Bryant: At nearly every meeting that I have with any sector in my portfolio, the sector says to me, “Can we have a cut in VAT?” While people in the hospitality sector have said to me many times that they would like a cut in VAT, that is also said by people in the theatre industry and a whole series of others. These are matters for the Chancellor, not for me, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about islands. We are an island nation, and we should embrace that as part of our tourism and hospitality industry across the whole of the UK. Specific challenges arise for coastal areas and islands, and I hope we will be able to address those when we come to produce our tourism strategy later this year.

I will take an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran), then I hope to make some progress.

Uma Kumaran: We have been talking about Stratford, but I am waiting to hear about Stratford and Bow in London, where I am really pleased that the Government are backing our bid for the 2029 world athletics championship. My constituency, like so many others, thrives when more tourists and visitors come from across the UK and overseas, but we want to see that spread across every region in the country. The Minister is developing a visitor economy growth strategy. Will he set out how it will spread tourism beyond London so that all the other regions can thrive as well?

Chris Bryant: One of the first things I did when I became the Minister was to set an ambitious target of reaching 50 million international visitors to the UK by 2030; we are at something like 43 million visitors at the moment. If we are going to get to that target of 50 million visitors, we will have to ensure that we have the mix of accommodation across the whole United Kingdom. That poses some challenges around how we deal with short-term lets to ensure that there is more of an even playing field and that coastal areas and areas that are heavily dependent on tourism do not end up being completely denuded when the tourists go away at the end of the season. We need to do more to extend the season so that it is not just the summer months. We can do a whole series of things to ensure that that happens, but this is not just about international visitors.

When an international visitor comes to the UK, they bring dollars, euros, yen or whatever it may be to the UK. That is a net gain to our economy, but I argue that when a domestic visitor decides, “You know what? I’m not going to go to Spain this year, because I know that there is so much here,” they will then stay in the UK, and that is a net gain for us as well. Frankly, there is also a climate in the summer in the UK that is rather more agreeable for human beings nowadays. We need to explore all those different elements.

My hon. Friend referred to the east end of London. Of course, quite a lot of sporting events happen in the east end of London, and sport is just as much of an intrinsic part of why people come to this country. The number of international visitors who come to the UK

solely for a premiership match is very large, but the number of people who went to the theatre last year in the UK is double the number who went to a premiership match, so we need to get the whole of this sector moving as much as we possibly can. We need to make sure that there is investment in the right parts of the sector, and that that investment takes place across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will the Minister give way on that point, very quickly?

Chris Bryant: It will not be quick—I know it will not, least of all my answer—but anyway.

Dr Evans: Wales has introduced a tourism tax, or is planning to do so. In light of what we are talking about today, can the Minister rule out the UK introducing a tourism tax in the upcoming Budget?

Chris Bryant: I am not going to do the Chancellor's job, but we have no plans to introduce a tourism tax. Of course we are looking at different places in the country that have gone forward in different ways—Manchester, for instance, has a system that has been voluntarily agreed, and there is the situation in Scotland and in Wales, which the hon. Gentleman referred to. We want to look at how all of that progresses, but many people in the sector have made the point to me that they feel taxed enough. I do not know that we would want to add any more to that.

As I say, there is a job of work to be done on short-term lets, because it seems intrinsically unfair for somebody who is effectively providing hotel-like accommodation to not be subject to any of the same rules, or the same taxation, that a hotel—even a small hotel—would be. That is one of the areas in which we want to take forward the work that was done by the previous Government.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP) *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Every time I deal with something, another person stands up, but we have not had anybody from the SNP intervene yet.

Chris Law: Apart from my hon. Friend the Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter). I thank the Minister for highlighting the V&A museums, one of which is in my city of Dundee, which has numerous hospitality businesses. Scotland makes a £9 billion contribution to the UK Exchequer through hospitality, and 200,000 jobs depend on it. There are consequences from the national insurance contribution rises; for example, just this year, one third of venues in Scotland have reduced their staff numbers and almost one fifth have shortened their opening hours, which means fewer jobs, less income tax and less tax from profits.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The interventions are very long. The Minister has now taken longer than the shadow Minister did in opening the debate. I am sure he will bring his remarks to a conclusion very soon.

Chris Bryant: I have just binned that bit of the speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

When the Government took office, the sector was already under strain. The aftermath of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis left hospitality and tourism businesses facing real difficulties. In particular, domestic tourism had struggled to get back to pre-pandemic numbers, which is still the case in many parts of the country. We inherited a very distressed sector, but we have acted quickly and decisively to stabilise it, supporting jobs and laying the foundations for growth.

We continue our work to get people into jobs, in collaboration with the Department for Work and Pensions. The sector-based work academy programmes have seen nearly 10,000 starts in hospitality over less than two years, and we have extended the destination hospitality SWAPs to 26 areas across England, which aim to specifically help jobseekers gain the skills and experience needed to enter employment in hospitality and tourism. The one area in which I agree with the shadow Minister is that this is a unique sector in one sense: that a person can go from having no skills, no qualifications and no experience to being a skilled worker in the sector within six to nine months. That is absolutely transformational for many people, and I want to make sure that more young people in this country do not think of it just as a job, but as a career. Representatives of the sector have repeatedly told me that there is a skills shortage, particularly of people who are five or 10 years into the sector. We want more people to stay, because nearly every chief executive you meet in the sector is somebody who started on the shop floor—pulling pints, working as a barista, changing beds or something like that. For us as a Labour Government, this sector is essential to social mobility.

In July, the Government set out our plan for small businesses, which is the most comprehensive package of support for small and medium-sized businesses in a generation and will be transformational for the sector. We are slashing red tape to overhaul planning and licensing rules, making it quicker and easier for new cafés, bars and music venues to open in place of disused shops, and we are increasing access to finance for entrepreneurs through a massive £4 billion finance boost. We are ending the scourge of late payments, which cost the UK economy £11 billion annually and close 38 businesses daily. That is another issue that is repeatedly raised with me.

We are not complacent at all about the sector. We want to get 50 million international visitors to the UK by 2030. As was mentioned earlier, we are preparing to publish a visitor economy growth strategy later this year. It will set out how the UK can capitalise on global opportunities, increase investments and strengthen the long-term resilience of the sector.

The hospitality and tourism sectors are the beating heart of our towns, cities and rural economies, as the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) said. They are vital to our high streets. They provide jobs and skills for young people, entry routes into work for those who might otherwise be excluded from work, and vital social spaces that bind our communities together. This Government will continue to back them with action, not rhetoric. Finally, I encourage every single Member of the House to find a business in the sector—not in their constituency, but in somebody else's—that they can boost this weekend.

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

4 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The economic landscape is extremely difficult for many businesses and industries, and hospitality is one of the sectors facing the most acute challenges. Pubs, restaurants, cafés and hotels are dealing with huge pressures—unfair taxes, soaring energy bills, skills shortages, and a broken business rates system. The Labour Government have had more than a year to address these issues, but instead of throwing businesses a lifeline, their policies have only made it harder for businesses to keep their head above water. Changes to employers' national insurance, the reduction in business rates relief and the absence of any meaningful action to bring down commercial energy prices are all factors contributing to job losses, business closures and stagnant economic growth.

Although this Government's decisions have made things worse, business sentiment certainly was not rosy during the last Parliament. Years of dire economic mismanagement by the previous Government forced business owners to make cuts, hike prices and work longer hours. Even though we Liberal Democrats are supportive of today's motion, we feel obliged to point out that the Conservative Government's chaotic approach caused so many of these problems, including soaring energy costs, a staffing crisis, and the vast increase in regulation and red tape brought about by their dismal Brexit negotiations.

According to UKHospitality, the measures in last year's autumn Budget delivered a hit to the sector worth a cumulative extra £3.4 billion annually. Meanwhile, data from the Office for National Statistics shows that the hospitality sector has shed nearly 70,000 jobs since last October. That works out as an astounding 3.2% of all jobs in the sector, and it is 266% higher than the number of jobs lost in the overall economy. Those figures lay bare the slow dismantling of the hospitality sector as a direct result of this Government's policies. A recent survey conducted by UKHospitality found that since the autumn Budget, a third of hospitality businesses are now operating at a loss, with 60% cutting jobs, 75% having increased prices, and two thirds reducing staff hours. These cuts are a last-ditch attempt by businesses just to stay afloat as they cry out for support. Small businesses are the beating heart of our economy.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): This morning I received a letter from Kelly Mariner, the manager of an independent coffee shop in my constituency of Horsham. She said:

"Since the last Budget I have been unable to hire new staff and cannot grow my business. I am spending every day doing the job I love in front of the customers, but it means I can't develop or follow up new ideas. Paperwork is a juggling act and I spend very little time with my family."

She asked to meet me. Does my hon. Friend agree that meeting those in the hospitality industry is exactly what the Chancellor needs to do before digging her budgetary hole any deeper?

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend gives a striking example of exactly what I was saying about the pressures faced by the hospitality sector. He is absolutely right that the Chancellor needs to hear these calls from the hospitality sector as she puts together her Budget, which we now expect at the end of November.

Small businesses are the beating heart of our economy. They are at the centre of our local communities, and they create the jobs we all rely on. We are glad that raising the employment allowance will shield the very smallest employers, but thousands of local businesses, including many in the hospitality sector, will still feel the damaging impact of the national insurance increase. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have voted against the Government's misguided jobs tax at every opportunity, and I once again urge them to scrap these measures, but I also press the Minister to at least spare our treasured pubs, restaurants, café and hotels by exempting the hospitality sector from this tax rise. Whether they were aware of it or not, the Government's decision to raise the rate of national insurance contributions while reducing the salary threshold at which it is levied has significantly increased the cost of employing part-time workers, delivering a disproportionately large blow to the hospitality sector.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Minister has talked about social mobility. Does my hon. Friend agree that when a company cuts hours, it is those who work part time—some of the most disadvantaged members of society—who lose out, and lose their jobs?

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is why this jobs tax has been so damaging, not just to the hospitality sector but to the many people who rely on the sector for flexible work that can fit in with their caring demands or other issues that they are experiencing.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is trotting out a whole load of helpful suggestions, of which the hospitality Minister is no doubt taking careful note for the time when he makes his representations—which he said he would not be making—to the Chancellor. Does the hon. Lady agree that he could also make recommendations to the Deputy Prime Minister, especially in relation to the Unemployment Bill, that would have no particular cost attached? I am thinking of the "banter ban", which even the Equality and Human Rights Commission has said is absolutely bonkers, and is likely to make hospitality venues even less attractive to those who need to use them.

Sarah Olney: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I entirely disagree with him about the banter ban. The Liberal Democrats agree with the concerns expressed in the motion about the challenges facing the hospitality sector, but we do not agree with the part of the motion that expresses regret about measures in the Employment Rights Bill on workplace harassment, which we do not believe have been accurately represented. As is clear from what has been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) and the significant work done on this issue by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), we welcome the introduction of reasonable and workable measures to protect employees from harassment in their place of work.

The Government must take steps to boost the hospitality workforce, and that includes showing much more urgency in introducing a youth mobility scheme. It took nearly a year for them to listen to calls from the Liberal Democrats and others for the negotiation of a youth mobility system, and I hope that Ministers will not continue to

drag their feet on an agreement that will truly benefit the hospitality sector. Changes implemented in April 2024 that increased the minimum salary threshold for skilled worker visas shrank the talent pool from which businesses can recruit, contributing to greater staff shortages, and in a 2024 survey of nearly 1,700 employers from a range of sectors, including hospitality, almost 40% of employers with hard-to-fill vacancies said that a reduction in the availability of overseas talent was one of the main causes of staffing issues. At a time when so many businesses are considering whether they can remain viable, we must give hospitality businesses the tools they need to grow and help boost the wider economy, and access to global talent is part of that. I therefore ask the Minister once again whether the Government will finally set out a timeline for the introduction of a youth mobility scheme.

We also need serious action from the Government on boosting the domestic workforce by supercharging apprenticeships and investing in skills and retraining opportunities. Can the Minister assure the House that Skills England will function as a properly independent body, with employee rights at its heart?

Businesses across the country continue to struggle with sky-high energy costs, and I recognise that the recent industrial strategy provided some welcome measures on that front, particularly for the manufacturing sector, but as the motion points out, there was very little in the strategy to help support hospitality firms with their soaring energy bills. Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for energy market reform, which would include reducing our reliance on expensive fossil fuel imports by investing in home-grown renewable energy. In recent months we have set out a plan to cut energy bills by half within 10 years by breaking the link between gas prices and electricity costs, so that households and businesses can see the benefits of cheap, clean power in lower energy bills.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): May I intervene, please?

Sarah Olney: Yes.

Mr MacDonald: It is difficult to get a word in. *[Laughter.]* I am married; I know about these things.

I have 100 staff members in the hospitality industry in the highlands, and I can say that all is not well in hospitality by any means. Those who are not on mains gas are paying for electricity, by and large, and we are paying four times as much for energy as people in the city. Moreover, we in Scotland do not receive the same business rates relief as the rest of the UK. *[Interruption.]* I thank my Scottish National party friends, who are sitting next to me. Our staffing costs, including employers' national insurance contributions, have increased by 12.4%. So we have real problems, and I must say to the Minister that all is not well.

Sarah Olney: Well, I think I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is, of course, absolutely right about the cost of energy and the difficulties that it presents for businesses up and down the country. His point about Scotland in particular is well made. Will the Minister consider the proposals put forward in our plan, which could help to truly ease the burden not just on the hospitality sector, but people across the country?

Finally, I turn to business rates. Today's motion rightly reflects many of the economic mistakes made by this Government. However, it is important to highlight that it was the last Conservative Government who broke their manifesto promise to reform business rates, leaving small businesses trapped in an outdated and unfair system. Of course, the current Government have also pledged to replace the system, with no action taken thus far. The Liberal Democrats will continue to hold Ministers accountable for their pledge, because there is a need for a fundamental overhaul of the unfair business rates system. It penalises manufacturers when they invest to become more productive and energy efficient; it leaves pubs and restaurants with disproportionately high tax bills; and it puts our high-street businesses at an unfair disadvantage, compared with online retail giants. In too many places, pubs, restaurants and shops are being forced to close, taking with them jobs, opportunities and treasured community spaces.

More broadly, the outdated tax system inhibits business investment, job creation and economic growth, holding back our national economy. These problems have persisted for too long, and it is high time the Government took action. Our proposals for fair reform would cut tax bills, breathe new life into local economies and spur growth. Equally importantly, they would provide long-term certainty for businesses, which in today's commercial environment is needed more than ever.

The value of our hospitality sector goes beyond economics. Pubs, restaurants and cafés are the beating hearts of our towns; they brighten our high streets and bring our communities together. The economic landscape created by the last Government did so much to damage them, and this Government continue to push many to the brink of collapse. I hope today that Ministers will listen to the Liberal Democrats' calls and reverse the jobs tax, bring forward plans for business rate reforms, and seriously consider our plans to cut energy bills for people and hospitality firms across the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): There is now a five-minute time limit.

4.12 pm

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): Over recess, I had the pleasure of visiting more than 20 fantastic small businesses in my constituency during my small business summer roadshow. My aim was to promote these businesses and hear what I can do to help them thrive. I visited a large number of hospitality businesses, including Nino's in Pangbourne, the Avenue Deli in Calcot, Bradley's Café and the Street Food Shack in Theale, Mortimer Café, Dee Caf on the Dee estate, Blackbird Café in Chapel Row, The Pantry in Yattendon, the Swan pub in East Ilsley and the Mad Duck in Purley. These wonderful businesses do not just serve amazing food and drink; they are at the heart of our community, providing places for people to be together—places where members of our community can look out for each other. I thank every single one of them for everything that they do.

From all the conversations I have had, I know how hard it can be to run a business. Owners face many costs, and can struggle to afford advertising or access finance, and there are high business rates and endless red tape. I am glad that the Government's recently published small business strategy starts to address this.

[*Olivia Bailey*]

We are transforming business rates, introducing permanently lower multipliers for hospitality, cutting red tape and admin costs, expanding access to start-up loans and other finance, simplifying licensing, and establishing hospitality and night-time economy zones. For the many pubs and independent breweries in my constituency, we have also cut duty on draught products and are consulting on improving access for guest beers.

I thank the Conservative party for providing the opportunity for this debate, but I gently say to hon. Members that they have conveniently ignored the contribution that their 14 years in government made to the challenges they outline. Yes, this Government have had to make some tough choices in order to fix our public services, but it is the Conservative party that left our public services on their knees. It left a huge hole in the public finances and oversaw skyrocketing inflation, mortgage rate chaos and higher energy bills for everybody, including our businesses. It was on the Conservatives' watch that families stopped being able to afford a meal out, because the Conservatives caused an unprecedented fall in living standards. It was on their watch that businesses had zero stability and certainty to plan for the future, because they went through Prime Ministers so fast that it felt like each one was a daily special.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): We have heard a lot from opposition parties about the taxes they are not happy to see go up, but we have heard very little about the spending or investment that they would cut as a result of taxes going down. Does my hon. Friend not agree with me that this is a case of opposition parties having their Banbury cake and eating it?

Olivia Bailey: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank him for his intervention.

This Government are cleaning up the mess that the Conservative party made, fixing the foundations of our economy by restoring stability and presiding over rate cut after rate cut. We are supporting people with the cost of living through measures such as expanding free childcare, tackling the antisocial behaviour and shoplifting that plague our high streets, and transforming the apprenticeships and skills system to train up young people and get them into secure jobs.

For Conservative Members to pretend that they presided over some sort of golden age of hospitality is simply farcical. Over 6,000 pubs and bars closed on their watch, with many high streets becoming nothing more than rows of shuttered shops. Yes, we have made some difficult decisions to get our public services back on track, and I firmly believe that that is the right thing to do for our country, and to step out of the black hole the Tories left us in. However, we are also focusing on positive measures to support our local hospitality businesses, rather than waxing lyrical when it is simply too late. For the businesses I met over the summer, actions speak louder than words, and that is the difference between this Labour Government and the Opposition.

4.16 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The hospitality industry is often the unsung hero of our local communities. We often do not appreciate it enough

and we take it for granted. It is everywhere: it is in every village and every town, and in every corner of our constituencies. This opportunity to debate the importance of the hospitality industry is extremely timely given the challenges it is facing.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (**Andrew Griffith**) said, the hospitality industry offers many people the first opportunity to get into a first job. It offers opportunity for those who want flexible working, and it offers opportunity for career progression for those who wish to move into management and maybe aspire to own their own hospitality business one day.

As the proud representative of Bridlington and The Wolds, hospitality is vital to my constituency. I represent two seaside towns—Bridlington and Hornsea—and a huge rural inland area, all of which is reliant on the hospitality industry that is part of the tourism we so enjoy. Five million visitors come to Bridlington alone every year, all of whom enjoy hospitality of some sort in the pubs and the cafés, with the fish and chips and the ice creams. All of these businesses are under serious pressure. We have heard about the 84,000 job losses across the sector nationally, and the pressures felt by individual businesses from the rise in national insurance contributions, the Employment Rights Bill and other measures taken by the Chancellor in her first Budget.

One particular area on which I want to concentrate—it was raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (**Mr Carmichael**)—is the serious issue of VAT, particularly on the pub and restaurant sector. I was told by a local landlord of a very successful pub in my constituency that he has 500 covers a week, and still struggles to make a profit, because although he is buying food without VAT, he has to charge it to the customer. That puts a serious squeeze on his ability to achieve a profit, even though he is running a successful business. Of the 500 people who come in for a meal every week, the Government is taking the first 100 covers.

VAT is quite a hit on such businesses, and I think the Minister should make more significant representations to the Chancellor on that specific point. I know he says he is approached by every sector about VAT, but it seems to be a particularly acute problem for pubs and restaurants.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): My hon. Friend referred to the Minister's representations to the Chancellor, but I think the Minister said he was not going to make any representations to the Chancellor.

Charlie Dewhirst: It is not for me to say whether the Minister will or will not, but he should do so, and he should be shouting much more loudly on behalf of the hospitality sector.

Chris Bryant: I am always happy to make representations to the Chancellor on lots of different things, but I have no intention of sharing them with the House.

Charlie Dewhirst: There we go. Let us hope the Chancellor listens this time.

Another point, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (**Dr Evans**), was on the tourism tax in Wales. This has caused significant concern in my coastal communities of Bridlington,

Hornsea and the other coastal villages. As the Minister said, the tourism industry is already heavily taxed and people are already feeling the pressure. We certainly do not want to see any sort of tourism tax expanded from Wales into the wider United Kingdom.

It really is not possible for these businesses to continue in the current climate. As we have heard, over a third are unable to make a profit in the hospitality industry and yet our local pubs are the lifeblood of our communities. They are so important. We saw that during covid, when we were not able to go to the pub and the impact that had on communities for people to be able to mix, particularly those who live alone whose social contact is perhaps limited to visiting friends for a pint after work in the evening.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend is rightly articulating that hospitality businesses are the lifeblood of our communities. Epping Forest has fantastic local pubs, such as the Theydon Oak, the Forest Gate Inn and the Bull, and fantastic restaurants such as Mila and the India Grill in Loughton. They are all really suffering under the punitive taxation regime from the Labour Government—the jobs tax and the business rates rises. Does he agree that everything they are doing is damaging our local communities?

Charlie Dewhurst: Absolutely. As I say, hospitality is the lifeblood of our local community and we should be doing more to look at this as a special case, because it really, really is damaging when we see pubs close. When a village loses a pub, it loses part of its heart and soul. We absolutely need to protect these businesses. They want to make money, but they are not out there trying to fleece their customers. They want to make a living; they do not want to make millions out of what they are doing. Our landlords and landladies are a fantastic part of our communities, so we should be doing more to support them.

The Chancellor, when we eventually get to our Christmas Budget, has a chance to say to our hospitality businesses across the country that we do value them, that we do accept there are pressures that have been created by the rise in national insurance contributions, that there are pressures through the Employment Rights Bill, that there are pressures they already have through the existing VAT rate and that we want to help.

Now, I know the Chancellor says, “Where are you going to cut money, if you take money away from those particular taxes?” I say, let us be inventive. Let us have a look at what we value. This is not about service delivery; this is about whether, if we reduce taxes, we might, as we have heard, get more take from the overall tax bill. If more people are going into pubs, restaurants and cafes and spending more money because it is more affordable to do so, the Treasury might actually end up with more money. I ask the Minister to use this opportunity. Please do make representations. He does not have to make them public, but please shout loudly for our hospitality industry.

4.22 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Bournemouth relies heavily on hospitality and tourism. In my constituency alone, hospitality generates £162.8 million in revenue and employs 3,700 people across more than 30 venues.

The sector creates vibrant communities, accessible jobs and attracts investment. Take Kris Gumbrell, the CEO of Brewhouse and Kitchen. He chairs an industry apprenticeship programme and has invested over £3 million to revive a derelict pub in Southbourne, creating a community hub and over 40 new jobs. Take Emma Sclanders of Wild & Ginger or Ricky Knowlton of Syds Slaps, who the new the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), was so happy to visit just a few short months ago. Take James Fowler of the Larder House, Jon Roberts of Little Perth or Rich Slater of Sobo Beach. The list really does go on.

In Bournemouth East, we are blessed with fantastic hospitality owners. That is because, as entrepreneurs, they are investing time, money and personal risk to create jobs and community hubs. They shoulder costs and were often overlooked in policy discussions over the past 14 years. They want, as do we on the Labour Benches, balanced and targeted support for businesses to ensure that their efforts are being supported.

Hospitality matters so much because it is woven into everyday life. Whether it is coffee with friends, football at the stadium, a drink down the pub, date nights or quick bites before events, the hospitality sector provides so many of the events that we find so meaningful in our personal lives. They are a critical community space and social infrastructure that bring us together, and create belonging to each other and to the places we live in. And by God, over the last 14 years have we not seen our social infrastructure attacked and decimated?

We need to support our hospitality sector, and that is especially important for Government Members who represent coastal communities. Labour now represents more coastal communities than at any time since 1997, after nearly half the coastal seats in England and Wales were won from the Conservatives in 2024—that is no wonder when I hear my constituents talk about how Bournemouth has been left behind and how coastal communities have been forgotten. Labour is committed to putting that right, which means supporting our hospitality and tourism sectors.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate argument for the hospitality sector in our coastal communities. Plymouth has some of the best pubs in England, and I am convinced that beer tastes better in pubs in Plymouth than in any other place in the UK. I have a question for my hon. Friend: does he not think it is important to acknowledge that the previous Conservative Government's catastrophic mismanagement of the hospitality sector during covid is still wreaking havoc?

Tom Hayes: I am astonished that nobody raised a point of order there. Of course Plymouth does not have the best beer in the country; Bournemouth East does. If not Bournemouth East, I am sure that many other constituencies would claim to, too. However, I agree with my hon. Friend that the hospitality sector has endured difficult time and again, whether during the pandemic, the cost of living crisis or the previous Government's reckless disregard for the sector's needs, and so Labour needs to fix the foundations of the hospitality sector. We need to support our economy by stabilising it and, in so doing, supporting our hospitality businesses.

[Tom Hayes]

Coastal communities like Plymouth and Bournemouth have faced significant challenges, whether it be worse health outcomes, lower life expectancy, poorer education, lower pay or higher deprivation. We need to support our coastal communities, particularly given that they are so heavily reliant on tourism and industries that have struggled over recent years, such as hospitality. According to the Office for National Statistics, coastal communities have a higher proportion of hospitality businesses than inland areas. The hospitality sector in our coastal communities can therefore be a powerful economic driver at a time when we are desperate to raise productivity from its sluggish levels and grow our economy.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to reflect the importance of coastal communities in driving the Government's growth agenda. My constituency has the coastal community of Bracklesham, a small village where the Beach Café, Rewild Sauna and GOAT Coffee are doing incredible things in all coming together to bring so much more tourism to what is a beautiful part of my constituency. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that there is a quid pro quo with businesses that are trying to drive growth, but are being hamstrung by the Government's increased taxes and business rates?

Tom Hayes: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point on behalf of her constituents and businesses. I would, of course, say that were it not for the tax rise that allowed for investment in our NHS, we would not be seeing so many hospital appointments and such dramatic falls in NHS waiting lists, and we would not then be seeing people who were once ill returning to the workforce, so that they can earn, work and contribute to our economy, and then help our hospitality sector.

Mr Angus MacDonald: Would the hon. Gentleman admit that what actually happened in the Budget was a transfer of 2% of GDP from the private sector to the public sector? That private sector is, to a significant extent, the hospitality sector.

Tom Hayes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, although I do not recognise what he is saying. I hope he is welcoming the NHS investment that his constituency is receiving, as well as the free breakfast clubs, place-based nurseries, stimulation of his local economy, improved pothole filling and improved connectivity. If he wishes to stand up and say that, I would be happy to give way to him again.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab) *rose*—

Tom Hayes: The hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) does not wish to, so I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank).

Euan Stainbank: Does my hon. Friend agree that the constituents of the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) will have the opportunity to welcome those measures if Scotland votes next year for a Scottish Labour Government?

Tom Hayes: I think my hon. Friend has said enough—and I welcome what he has said.

I also want to recognise the difficult financial inheritance of this Government: how they needed to raise money to fix the foundations, to invest in our public services, and to deliver the change that people were calling out for during the general election and long before. All of us on the Government Benches, and I hope on the Opposition Benches too, are hearing from our constituents about the green shoots of recovery in our NHS, about schools finally starting to get the investment that they need, about those place-based nurseries and about childcare being rolled out on a larger scale.

What I want to see from our Government is a continuation of their hard work. I welcome the fact that the empty shops rental auction is under way in Bournemouth. I welcome, too, that the Government are moving ahead with supporting the hospitality sector. I would particularly like to see the valuation office properly pay regard to the issues that need fixing and that have been stated to me in places like Boscombe. At the last valuation, which was done under the Conservatives, neighbourhoods like Boscombe saw their rates stay flat or even increase, harming independent retailers. As a Labour Member who wants to support hospitality, I would like to see that corrected. I would like to see proposals including the raising of the rateable value threshold for 100% relief from £15,000 to £25,000 with tapered relief, the introduction of high street survival discounts, and the simplification of the appeals process with open data and fast-track support for SMEs. Those are just some of the ideas that I am hearing from constituents. I am sure that other colleagues will have many more that they wish to share, so I shall rest there.

4.30 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): As we have heard, hospitality is a crucial part of our economy. Our pubs, restaurants, hotels and other businesses employ 3.5 million people—over 5,000 in my North West Norfolk constituency alone, contributing £136 million to my local economy—but this Government's decisions have hammered the sector. As the owner of the Crown and Mitre pub in King's Lynn, which I highly recommend, recently put it in the local *Lynn News*:

"How many rising costs can you face before collapsing face-first into the till?"

Will's grim humour says it all. He says that costs are piling up faster than a

"bad soufflé in an over-heated oven".

But the reality is no laughing matter. When we were in Government, the Conservatives supported the sector. We boosted growth and helped it to recover from the difficult decisions that we had to make during covid. That record stands in sharp contrast to what we are seeing today. All Members will know from talking to hospitality businesses in their constituencies this summer just how worried they are about the increased costs.

When I was at the Rose and Crown in Harpley during the summer, talking to the team that reopened that pub and had pubs across Norfolk, I heard just how damaging the increase in the national insurance rate has been. The lowering of the threshold to £5,000 has also been a real challenge. That change alone has brought 750,000 workers in the sector into national insurance for the first time—and

what has happened? Well, as UKHospitality's TaxedOut campaign shows, Labour's decisions have already cost nearly 90,000 jobs in the sector, particularly hitting younger people, part-time workers and those starting out in entry-level positions, which they can then grow into the career that the Minister said that he hoped more people would have an opportunity to do.

The jobs tax is costing the sector as a whole £3.4 billion a year. Little wonder that a third are now operating at a loss. Three quarters have had to put up their prices to cope with the increased costs that they are facing, and two thirds are reducing the hours of their existing staff, and are not taking on the people that they otherwise would have done. Little wonder, too, that UKHospitality has called the Government's decisions a "hammer blow" for the sector.

But it is not just the jobs tax; the Government's choice to almost halve hospitality and leisure business rates relief from 75% to 40% will hit a quarter of a million businesses. I was very surprised, as I am sure the sector would be, to hear the Minister boasting about this damaging decision, given that the average pub is paying £5,500 more and restaurants are paying £9,000 extra. How does he expect them to absorb those costs without the consequences for employment that we are seeing? Depressingly, there is even more to come. The Deputy Prime Minister's Employment Rights Bill—or whoever picks it up after her—will add £5 billion a year to employer costs, making it less likely that firms will take on people.

Our hospitality firms are resilient, and they need to be with all they are having to weather. This Government are putting them under the cosh. With creativity, investment and the high-quality staff across the sector, hospitality firms can attract customers and support our local communities. I have seen many impressive hospitality businesses in my constituency, including ones that have newly reopened—the Ship in Brancaster, the Chequers in Thornham, the Pub in Clenchwarton, and new enterprises such as Nopa and VinedMe, which are also in Thornham—but the Government are making it far too hard for firms like those to thrive and grow. Members have the opportunity today to back our very sensible motion to back the sector, to think again about the doubling of business rates, and to amend the damaging Employment Rights Bill to protect seasonal and flexible work.

With borrowing costs at a 27-year high, hospitality businesses cannot afford for a Government to be making such damaging economic choices. Ahead of the Budget, the Chancellor and her team of tax raisers should listen to employers and take action to live within our means, otherwise more pubs, more venues and more jobs will be lost.

4.35 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk about our hospitality sector and how we value and reward the people working in it, the rising confidence that business is reporting and the evolving nature of our high streets.

High streets and hospitality are changing, but sadly what has not changed is a Conservative party in opposition that wants to talk the country down. The reality, as reported by 1,200 businesses in the Lloyds business survey,

is very different from the picture that the Conservatives want to paint. The survey, which is in its 15th year, last week reported that the overall business confidence index, which combines firms' trading expectations and economic optimism, rose for a fourth consecutive month in August, reaching its highest level since late 2015. Let me set that out plainly: business confidence under this Labour Chancellor is higher than it was at any point under any of the last six Conservative Chancellors who occupied No. 11 Downing Street.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Does he agree that confidence of consumers is also rising, with a number of cuts to interest rates, a rise in the minimum wage and many other benefits for working families?

Andrew Lewin: I do agree. I have spoken to constituents on two-year fixed-rate mortgages who were being hammered two years ago by Liz Truss and are now paying hundreds of pounds less per month because we are getting a grip on the economy.

Sixty-two per cent of firms plan to increase headcount over the next 12 months, and confidence in retailers surveyed rose by 13 points to 57%, also marking a five-month high. This is all welcome news, but I am far from complacent. Of course there are real challenges for some hospitality firms. I turn now to how the Government are seeking to address them and why it matters to my constituents.

A fitting place to start is the people who work in the sector. The average age is 35. Our shops, restaurants, pubs, cafés and cinemas are powered by younger people. When I bought my last suit at the Galleria in Hatfield, I received much-needed sartorial advice from an employee younger than me. *[Interruption.]* I will go back again for my next suit! When I pop into a Simmons branch for a coffee, it is invariably a younger person who serves me—as it is when I head in for a pint in one of the fantastic pubs in our two towns or the villages.

People working in hospitality are just as deserving of rights and protections in the workplace as anyone else. That is why it is so important that the Employment Rights Bill brings forward day one protections at work. It introduces protection from unfair dismissal, bans exploitative zero-hours contracts and strengthens statutory sick pay.

Earlier this year, the Labour Government increased the national living wage by 6.7% to £12.21 an hour—an increase comfortably above inflation that was welcomed by millions of workers, though seemingly not by the Conservative party. The Conservatives' motion seems to cast doubt on the role of the Low Pay Commission, and sadly they have refused to welcome the pay rise we gave to the country last year. If any of them wants to say thank us for the minimum wage rise, I will happily give way.

On business rates, the Conservatives left the Treasury with no funded commitment to continue with the retail, hospitality and leisure relief, as the Minister set out powerfully in his opening remarks. It is right that this Government stepped in to make the 40% reduction in rates permanent, giving confidence and security to business owners. I hope we can go even further in future.

[Andrew Lewin]

I know how much civic pride people have in their town centres. Although we will not return to the high streets of the 1990s, there is real demand in towns for variety: shops, places to eat, entertainment and events. A mixture of permanence, such as our iconic John Lewis store in Welwyn Garden City, and the events that the business improvement district puts on in our town every year, such as the world food festival, which draws thousands of local people and tourists from across the world.

This is a Government who have listened to business, strengthened the rights of workers and given millions of lower earners a pay rise. Sentiment is improving and confidence is rising. Let us not talk down our hospitality sector; let us champion it and seize the opportunities that are in front of us.

4.40 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): As the Member for Melksham and Devizes, I represent many rural villages and communities, a number of which I visited over recess. I have long been struck by the importance of the village pub as a hub of community—a place for good conversation and friendly banter, and for connecting with friends and neighbours, which is in fact vital for good mental health. Indeed, while on my summer tour of the constituency, I hosted a drop-in session in the lovely village of Urchfont, outside the Lamb, a friendly community public house.

In communities such as the one I represent, transport links and broadband connectivity can, on occasion, leave much to be desired, creating in their wake a sense of isolation and loneliness, especially for those working at home, raising children or trying to enjoy their well-earned retirement. In such instances, a feeling of community, of knowing one's neighbours and of having someone to talk to becomes so important. In rural villages, it is often the pub that makes that possible. We have all heard the headline statistics—the closure of 1,100 pubs and restaurants since the tax on jobs was introduced in last autumn's Budget, leaving 84,000 people out of work, with two pubs shutting every day—yet those statistics do not show the whole impact, with landlords and bar staff often putting in superhuman efforts to try to keep their businesses afloat.

I recently met my constituent Hannah, who runs the Swan at Enford. She came to talk to me about the increasing pressures that her business has faced since the Budget. In addition to diversifying her business, including by running a butcher's shop, the Swan plays a vital and diverse role in the community, running a monthly "hub in the pub" event and helping with the yearly village fête and fireworks night. However, the costs on the business have risen exponentially since the Budget. The cut to hospitality relief has more than doubled the business rates she must now pay, from £167 to £444 a month. That, combined with the increase in employer national insurance contributions, means that landlords like Hannah are under greater financial pressure than ever.

Given that taxes make up 40% of turnover and that £1 in every £3 goes to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, with just 12p made on each pint sold according to the British Beer and Pub Association, surely it is time

for the Government to review the burden that they are placing on these vital hospitality businesses. If the pressures continue, we will likely see more and more villages being stripped of their pubs and community spaces; greater numbers of people will prefer to drink at home. If the Government do not act, we risk losing the time-honoured tradition of the farmer drinking shoulder to shoulder with the accountant, the builder with the postie and the vicar with the carer—in short, the bedrock of village life.

In addition to lowering the tax burden on those businesses, the Government should also look at the support they can offer to community pub schemes, through which villagers can come together to buy and run their local pub. We have already had one such success in my constituency. The Hop Pole in Limpley Stoke offers a shining example of such schemes, and I hope to see this success replicated by the Friends of the Ivy in Heddington, who I am proud to support in their effort to get their local reopened.

Matt Rodda: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point about the importance of pubs as the heart of our local community life, and that is the case for towns as well as for villages. Does he agree that the measures announced by the Deputy Prime Minister yesterday to support community assets will help exactly the type of pub he is describing, and would he perhaps like to offer a word of support and congratulate her on her work on this?

Brian Mathew: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, but more is needed. The Minister's Department must support these schemes and the pub trade or risk losing a vital component of rural life.

Lastly, let me make the point that profitable businesses pay taxes, but closed pubs pay no taxes.

4.45 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): It is interesting that the Conservatives' motion acknowledges the important role that hospitality businesses play in offering a first step on the employment ladder to "young and often excluded groups".

If they care so much about young and often excluded people, I would have thought they would have backed Labour's Employment Rights Bill, because right now in Ealing Southall, young workers and the many workers of Indian heritage in my constituency can be sacked for no reason whatsoever in their first two years in a job. These are often hard-working, qualified people but they are completely at the mercy of bad employers because the right not to be unfairly dismissed applies only after two years in a job.

There are some great hospitality businesses in Ealing Southall, including the Plough in Northfields, a Fuller's pub I visited recently, which does a lot to train and support its staff. However, over half of employees under 30 have been with their current employer for less than two years, and 42% of black, Asian and minority ethnic employees have been with their current employer for less than two years, compared with 28% of white workers. The very young, black and Asian workers that the Conservatives claim to care about are therefore exactly the people who will be helped most by Labour's

Employment Rights Bill. In fact, it is an all-too-common trick for bad employers to sack workers just before the two years are up. The Conservatives need to explain why they think it is okay that a young worker can be sacked for no reason after 23 and a half months in the job, just so they do not get their rights.

The Conservatives' motion also objects to Labour's plan to end exploitative zero-hours contracts. Who do they think is most likely to be on those kinds of contracts? Oh yes! It is exactly the same young and often excluded workers, but they obviously do not care about them at all. Exploitative zero-hours contracts do not just mean that workers do not know from week to week if they will be able to afford the rent; they also put power into the hands of managers who can use the threat of people losing their hours to threaten and bully—you've guessed it—young, black and Asian workers, who are often the most vulnerable at work.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Small businesses in my constituency often tell me that they want to be really good employers. That is something that they take great pride in, but they get undercut by some of the bad employers. Does she agree that the Bill is good not only for the worker but for the business?

Deirdre Costigan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Labour's Employment Rights Bill is all about levelling the playing field so that the efforts made by the great employers that we have in this country, including hospitality employers, to look after their workers can be broadened out to the whole of the industry.

The Conservatives also need to stop pretending that this change that Labour is bringing in would stop seasonal working in the hospitality sector. Stop making things up! A worker can stay on a zero-hours contract if that is what they want. Many people will choose to do that if it fits with their lives, but where there is clearly a regular job and someone has been working those hours for at least three months, they will have the right to a guarantee of those minimum hours. What is wrong with that? The Tories need to explain why they think it is okay for young and often excluded workers to remain at the beck and call of bad managers, with no control over their hours and no financial security.

Our hospitality businesses are indeed often the first step on the employment ladder, and McDonald's in Southall is another great example of that. The Conservatives are busy trying to knock people off that ladder. With Labour's Employment Rights Bill, we are helping workers climb up the ladder into decent, well-paid jobs that their families can thrive on.

4.50 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I will speak about some of the hospitality businesses in my constituency, but I say to the hon. Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) that that was an interesting speech; I do not think much of it was based in reality, however, and I am more than happy to explain. The Employment Rights Bill will cost £5 billion by the Government's own assessment. The businesses that will bear the costs of that will then have to make cost-cutting measures, and it is usually young people—I trust her that it might be ethnic minorities who are at the

vanguard—who are at risk. They are the ones who will suffer and lose their jobs, because those businesses still have to make a profit.

I broaden my point out to the Government Benches. I listened to the opening speech by the Minister. It was sometimes an entertaining speech, especially when he took my intervention, but sitting here, I thought, "There is a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to make a profit and how important that is to businesses." That is literally the reason people go into business: to make a profit and generate cash. The rise in national insurance contributions—the jobs tax—and the Employment Rights Bill, which will cost £5 billion, are costs imposed by the Labour Government. They made a choice to impose that on businesses. Hospitality businesses suffering at the hands of the Labour Government are having to make tough choices, and that means seasonal workers will not be employed, or not as many of them will be. We are already seeing that.

When I quoted the chair of UKHospitality to the Minister, he denied that and said it was not happening, but the stats say something different. Over half of the jobs lost since the Budget have been lost as a result of Labour's Budget. I have been speaking to businesses since then, including Visit Knowle, Eric Lyons and the Barn at Berryfields—these are beautiful businesses that we have. We have the National Exhibition Centre, which is a great importer of tourism and which the Minister spoke about, backed by Birmingham airport. We have the Greenwood pub, Nailcote Hall, Three Trees community centre—I could go on and on. There are huge numbers of hospitality businesses, but they are all suffering the cost of the jobs tax, which disproportionately affects them. It means that those businesses are not investing because they are having to save that money to pay the Chancellor.

Sam Rushworth: The hon. Member mentioned costs on businesses. One of those costs is the cost of sick days, which has increased by £30 billion since 2018. I visited a business recently in my constituency, and I am not going to lie: they said, "Yes, it's a bit of a squeeze having to pay an increase in national insurance," but then they said, "But we're saving money on sick days because people are getting the appointments they need in the NHS." He will know that there have been 7 million more GP appointments. Does he welcome that investment in the NHS and the fact that there were nearly 14 million fewer sick days in the last year?

Saqib Bhatti: I have a rude awakening for the hon. Member, and it is a broader point about the debate. Having listened to Government Members, and I suggest that they turn on the news and start looking at what is happening to the bond market, because we are seeing record interest rates when the Government have to borrow. Last year, all these Government Members backed the Chancellor's fictitious black hole; now she has a real black hole that she created, which she will have to deal with. I do not know what they think will happen at the Budget, but it will either be the cuts that they opposed in the welfare Bill and other cuts that they find unpalatable, or it will be further taxes raised on working people, who they purport to defend and support. When those taxes are imposed on businesses, it will hurt either consumer sentiment or the business themselves. They will then have to make further job cuts to survive. That is the reality; everything has a consequence.

[Saqib Bhatti]

What Labour Members fail to understand is that it is absolutely essential—particularly because they talk about supporting such businesses—that they lobby the Chancellor to get a grip on the situation, instead of allowing it to balloon completely out of control as a result of the measures they backed last October. The consequences of that have been tens of thousands of job losses and thousands of businesses going under. I am deeply worried for my constituents.

As much as I found the Minister's speech interesting and sometimes entertaining, I thought that it was quite disrespectful to the hospitality sector, which is very worried. The chair of the biggest representative body of the hospitality sector is saying that there is a problem, but she is being ignored or told that there is no problem. Hospitality businesses in the constituencies of Labour MPs will be knocking on their doors and asking for answers. I ask for a degree of humility because the reckoning is coming—respected economists and think-tanks are saying it—as a consequence of the Chancellor's decisions. I restate my request for a bit of humility and understanding of what the hospitality sector is going through.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. After the next speaker, I will reduce the time limit to four minutes. Members might like to think about the length of interventions, or indeed whether interventions are needed at all, given that plenty of colleagues still wish to speak.

4.55 pm

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): The hospitality businesses across Gedling are more than just places to eat and drink; they are the backbone of our community and the beating heart of our high streets. From Carlton to Arnold, Mapperley to Netherfield and Burton Joyce to Bestwood Village, those businesses make Gedling a great place to live, work and socialise. To every café owner, chef, pub landlord and staff member, and to all our small businesses, I say thank you. Their hard work keeps our towns and villages alive and our local economy moving.

Just last week, I was proud to welcome the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), to Gedling to meet some of our fantastic small businesses—many of them in hospitality. At Mapperley Top, we held a roundtable in La Zenia, a tapas restaurant that opened a year ago—I send huge congratulations to Lucy and her brilliant team on their first year of business. My right hon. Friend also heard directly from Copper, Steve's Bar, Deli-icious and Coosh bakery. In Arnold, we met the passionate teams at Cleo's deli, Taste First, the Empress, Chambers butchers and Paradise café. I thank my right hon. Friend for visiting and listening to Gedling's fantastic small businesses, and congratulate him on his new role as Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister.

May I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Woodlark Inn in Lambley, and its landlady, Emma, on recently being named one of the best 500 pubs in England by *The Telegraph*? Over the summer, I had the

brilliant opportunity to enjoy a pint at the Abdication in Daybrook, the Four Bells Inn in Woodborough, the Waggon and Horses in Redhill—my local—and the Bread and Bitter at Mapperley Top, among the many other brilliant pubs in Gedling.

I will always fight the corner of Gedling's many amazing small businesses. That is why, last year, I launched my own annual small business awards to celebrate small businesses throughout Gedling. With so many amazing businesses across Carlton, Netherfield, Burton Joyce and beyond in the wider Gedling area, our door is always open to Government Ministers who wish to come and listen and support our local small business community.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing an amazing job of talking about the importance of small hospitality businesses to the local community. Does he agree that that extends beyond economic value to their value more generally? The Golden Smog, a friendly family pub in my constituency, supports an inclusive basketball team and has raised £700,000 from its annual “pALEgrimage”—it is like a pilgrimage but involves ale, so it is even better. Will he join me in congratulating that pub?¹

Michael Payne: I congratulate the Golden Smog on its initiative. I look forward to having a pint there with my hon. Friend next time I am in his constituency.

Gedling has nearly 3,000 businesses, 98% of which are small or micro. Retail and hospitality alone support over a quarter of the jobs in my constituency. Those are not just numbers; they represent livelihoods, families and futures. That is why I welcome the Labour Government stepping in where the last Conservative Government left a cliff edge. Instead of pulling the rug out from under small businesses, we are providing a lifeline: a 40% business rate relief, targeted where it is needed most. Labour does not turn its back on small businesses; we back them. More than 10,000 pubs and bars shut under the Conservatives. By contrast, this Labour Government are acting: permanent business rate cuts from 2026; high-street rental auctions; and a ban on unfair rent clauses—real measures to make our high streets revive and thrive.

The Conservative motion mentions “catastrophic choices”, but Conservative Members should take a long, hard look in the mirror. On their watch, inflation peaked at 11.1% in October 2022, and food inflation hit 19% by March 2023. [Interruption.] I can hear chuntering on the Opposition Benches, but those inflation levels did not just hit household budgets; they scarred small businesses in Gedling and across the country.

Mr Angus MacDonald: When the hon. Gentleman prepares his agenda for the next small company roundtable, will he ask companies how they are getting on with the 8.7% national insurance increase, and the total employment cost increase of 12.4% as a result of the Budget? That is four times inflation. I think he will be surprised how uncomfortable the answer is.

Michael Payne: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, the businesses did a grand job of telling the Minister their views directly. I do not think that they need any lectures from him on how to run their businesses.

1.[Official Report, 16 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

While café, pubs and shops fought to stay open, the Conservatives were too busy fighting among themselves to help small businesses. This Labour Government are turning the page. Through our plan for small and medium-sized businesses, Gedling employers are getting the support that they need to recover, grow and thrive, and we are already seeing the results. The Opposition talk about job losses, but the facts is that employment has risen by more than 625,000, and economic inactivity has fallen by 338,000. That is not rhetoric; it is progress under this Labour Government.

The previous Conservative Government wrecked the economy, left inflation spiralling and turned their back on the high street. In Gedling, the damage is clear for my constituents to see: vacant units on the high street; council cuts that have left our town centres less clean; and, yes, crumbling pavements and roads in and around our high streets. In just over a year, under this Prime Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), Labour is turning things around. It is backing small businesses, especially in hospitality; getting people back into work; delivering a new deal for working people; and, yes—although the Conservatives do not like the facts—growing the economy faster than any other G7 nation. That is what we get with a Labour Government, and by gosh, after 14 years of Conservative neglect, it cannot come fast enough for my constituents, and for businesses in Gedling.

5.2 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The hospitality sector is all too often overlooked, yet it is one of the most vital pillars not just of our economy, but of our communities. My constituency has 215 registered businesses in accommodation and food services, contributing at least 4,000 jobs—nearly one in 10 local jobs. The sector really matters to Cheshire's economy. Each year, it contributes £370 million in Cheshire East, and £390 million in Cheshire West and Chester. Hospitality, however, is being punished with higher taxes and even more regulation.

Since being elected, I have been meeting and listening to our local business owners, and I hear the same message time and again: times are tough, and they need policies that deliver stability, champion growth and secure the future of the sector—none of which this Government have delivered. Instead, policy after policy has punished small business owners, especially in hospitality. Do not just take my word for it. Earlier this year, I sat down with Woody Barlow who runs the Swan in Tarporley and the Lion at Malpas, two of our fantastic local village pubs. Woody told me that the 2024 Budget hit his business hard through increased employer national insurance contributions and reduced business rates relief. What struck me most was his concern for his staff and community. He was not just worried about profits, but about young people. Their first job in a local pub can be vital; they learn soft skills, gain confidence and work in a team.

I also met William Lees-Jones, managing director of JW Lees brewery, a seventh-generation family business, approaching its 200th anniversary. It supplies and runs well over 100 pubs across the north-west, not to mention its inns and hotels. William raised serious concerns about proposed changes to business property relief.

The brewery has consistently reinvested its profits to grow and innovate, creating jobs, supporting communities and contributing to our economy. Before the Budget, it forecast the creation of 178 new jobs in 2025, but after the spring statement, William told me that he is not sure those jobs will be possible.

Jake, at the Fire Station in Malpas, spoke to me about the impact of VAT, along with increasing wage costs, and how that threatens his ability to run a much-loved café at the heart of the local community. Add to that the surging cost of utilities and the anti-growth, anti-business measures in the Employment Rights Bill, and it is clear that the sector is under immense pressure.

I want to emphasise just how important hospitality is in rural communities like mine. Yes, a pub is a place to grab a pint, and a café is a great place to get a coffee, but they are so much more. Just last Thursday, I attended the first “chatty café” at Tilly's in Bunbury, a scheme that provides vital social contact, particularly for older people. I met Charles, who is 86 years old and travels from Crewe every week to have his breakfast and a chat at Tilly's. For many in our rural areas, cafés and pubs are lifelines. They host community groups, offer local services and provide a space where people feel connected.

With their unfair taxation, economic mismanagement and poorly thought-out legislation, this Government are putting pubs, cafés and restaurants, and the jobs that they create and support, at risk. I will continue to speak up for the hospitality businesses in Chester South and Eddisbury, and I thank them for everything that they do for our local economy and our communities.

5.6 pm

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): Anyone who knows my constituency of Leeds North West will know how much our pubs, cafés and restaurants mean to people. Do not get me started on the coffee from Woodlawn, the cakes from the Bramble Bakehouse, the croissants from the Underground Bakery and the curry from Daastan. We have nearly 300 places to eat, 72 pubs and three fantastic breweries. They are where people meet, celebrate birthdays and meet their friends, and they help to keep our high streets alive. I am in them most weekends, and with typical Yorkshire honesty, the owners never sugar-coat it—they tell me straight about the pressures that they face.

I listened to what the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) said about humility, but let us be clear that the pressures that we are talking about did not come out of nowhere, and they did not start in July last year. Under the Conservatives, more than 6,000 pubs and bars closed. The legacy of a decade of neglect is shuttered shopfronts, struggling high streets and local people losing the places that hold communities together. I know that things are tough and how hard businesses are working, and I applaud and appreciate all that they are doing. I commit to being a champion for them.

I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are beginning to address the challenges by cutting red tape and providing for new hospitality and night-time economy zones to simplify licensing, boost footfall and support al fresco dining. I am proud to be part of a Labour party that is revitalising our high streets. The new high street rental auctions are absolutely brilliant.

[Katie White]

In Otley, I am working with local businesses on the “Take Back Fultons” campaign. For many years, there has been a huge empty building on the high street, which has been an eyesore. We are looking to bring it back into use, through initiatives introduced by this Labour Government. Ministers from across Government are meeting me next week to talk about the campaign, because these are cross-Government initiatives.

We are on the side of hospitality. Earlier this year, businesses were staring at a cliff edge, with temporary business rates reliefs due to expire. This Government stepped in with a 40% discount for retail, hospitality and leisure properties, up to a cash cap of £110,000, and a freeze in the small business multiplier. Together, that support package was worth over £1.6 billion in 2025-26, saving the average pub more than £3,300 in 2025. I know that Ministers are looking closely at business rates over the next few months to ensure long-term certainty, and small businesses across my constituency would certainly welcome that.

This Government have done what every pub-goer can cheer: they have cut duty on draught beer and taken a penny off a pint. Through the hospitality support scheme, I am proud that this Government are backing Pub is The Hub, giving community pubs the support that they need to keep delivering for their communities. It is breathing life back into the high streets, backing community pubs and supporting the cafés and restaurants that make places like Otley, Yeadon, Adel and Horsforth such brilliant places to live.

We in Leeds North West can already see what success looks like. Bavette in Horsforth took over a vacant high street unit, and within a year it was awarded a Bib Gourmand. In Otley, a wave of female-led businesses is driving a revival, from Belle beauty salon and Mollie & Mauve florists to the Secret Garden café and the Bookshop on the Square. Vacancy rates in our town are now well below the national average, and footfall is hitting record highs. That is the strength and spirit of our local entrepreneurs, and with Labour backing hospitality, I know that we will hear many more stories like those. With Yorkshire honesty, I will say it plainly: if we want strong communities, we have to back hospitality. Under Labour, that is what we are doing, and will continue to do.

5.10 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The pubs, restaurants, cafés and hotels in our hospitality sector are not just places to eat and drink; they are the heart of our communities. They provide jobs, keep our high streets alive and make our communities better and stronger, but many of them tell me that they feel abandoned as a result of the Government policies that we are discussing.

Across the country, an average of 30 pubs close their doors every week. In Taunton and Wellington, Shane Fisher, who runs the lovely Allerford Inn at Norton Fitzwarren, has recently taken on the Racehorse Inn in Taunton town centre. He describes policy effects that are simply unsustainable. The business rates that he pays are now greater than his lease—than the cost of the building. Business rates at that level simply cannot be right.

The Castle hotel in Taunton, an iconic landmark that has been a hotel since 1786 and has famously been run by the Chapman family since 1950, faces similar challenges. In 2024-25, it paid £21,000 in business rates; the very next year, it is being asked to pay well over double: £52,000. That is an increase of £30,000. When that is combined with the damaging increase in national insurance last year and other cost increases, upwards of £200,000 has been added to its costs in a single year. The Little Wine Shop in Taunton’s great independent quarter told me that this kind of increase in costs, coupled with VAT, is killing the industry. I hope the Minister agrees that these increases are simply unsustainable for small family businesses. As a result, all these kinds of businesses are in survival mode.

Hospitality businesses need support, not just through fair taxes, but by seeing the benefit of their taxes being invested in public services, such as policing. That is why I am delighted that our Liberal Democrat town council in Taunton is introducing street marshals, who will provide reassurance, safety and support to people in the town centre. I welcome the Government’s 10 extra police officers in Taunton and west Somerset. We have campaigned to restore proper community policing, which reassures people. Visible patrols are essential for the confidence of traders and customers alike. Too often, Government treat policing purely as a cost, and fail to see its economic benefits. Lifting town centre businesses by providing safe environments that attract customers is hugely valuable. Nowhere is that more true than for hospitality, and I encourage the Government to go further on that.

The Government’s business rates hit hardest the bricks-and-mortar businesses that make up our town centres. On top of that, there is the rise in national insurance, which is nothing more than a tax on jobs. The burden falls most heavily on businesses and sectors like hospitality, which have a large proportion of part-time workers.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I recently visited the General Tarleton in Ferrensby, which has just reopened. A fantastic group of people have created the Jeopardy Hospitality project, which reopens pubs that have closed down; those involved include the celebrity chef Tommy Banks and Matt Lockwood. Pubs are the heart of the community. Does my hon. Friend agree that people who take these risks and try to put the heart back in our communities deserve help, not a clobbering from this Government?

Gideon Amos: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and look forward to visiting them with him when I am next in his constituency.

Hospitality is not asking for special treatment. Rather, it is asking for fairness, a level playing field and the chance to compete, invest and thrive without being penalised by the tax system. That is why Liberal Democrats have long called for business rates to be scrapped and replaced with a fairer system, one that shifts the burden from the tenants to the landowners, and it is why we opposed the rise in national insurance contributions, which squeezes small firms and workers alike. The Government need to listen to the hoteliers, publicans and restaurateurs in towns such as Taunton and Wellington, because unless things change, more doors will close, more jobs will go, and communities across the country will be poorer for it.

5.15 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I spent my summer on a tour across my constituency, holding over 80 surgeries, meeting residents face to face and hearing about the challenges in their communities. In the largest constituency in England, which takes in parts of Newcastle and stretches all the way up to the Scottish border, you certainly get a variety of casework and conversations. It would not have been possible to complete that summer tour without the generous hospitality of many hospitality businesses throughout the constituency. Cafés, pubs, restaurants and hotels all opened their doors to me and my team, allowing us to meet local residents and hear the concerns that matter most to them.

I thank the St Mary's Inn; the Shoulder of Mutton in Longhorsley; the George Hotel in Chollerton; the Crown Inn in Humshaugh; the Hemmel in Allenheads; the King's Head in Allendale; the Rochester Relish; the Duke of Wellington in Riding Mill; Oddfellows in Haydon Bridge; the Blenkinsopp Castle Inn in Blenkinsopp; the Engine Inn in Walbottle; the Poacher's Cottage in Callerton; the Tea on the Train in Bellingham; the Northumberland Arms in West Thirston; Battlesteads Hotel and Restaurant in Wark; the Rose and Crown in Slaley; the Lord Crewe Arms in Blanchland; the Village Store and Coffee Shop in Matfen; the Blacksmith's Coffee Shop in Belsay; the Running Fox in Kirkharle; and the Bowes Hotel in Bardon Mill, alongside a lot of churches, village halls and community organisations. It is incredible to sit down with a cup of tea with your constituents and speak about the issues that matter to them, be they international issues, national ones, or things such as road markings and speeding concerns. I was also able to visit the Bridge End Inn in Ovingham, which recently reopened after a refurbishment, something that has been much welcomed by locals.

I know the impact that the hospitality industry has on rural communities or communities on the outskirts of Newcastle. As has been said many times, pubs and cafés define those communities, and an empty pub—an empty building in the heart of those communities—can truly blight them and lead to declining confidence. That is why the first letter I wrote after my election was to a Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, urging them to release the money to allow the Samson Inn in Gilsland to reopen. I will now stop naming quite so many local businesses.

One of the issues that businesses raised with me was that poor investment in road infrastructure and in public transport often led to delays in workers getting to and from the business. Another was that a real issue with road surfaces and road resurfacing communication from local government is impacting their ability to open properly—for example, falconry days near Simonburn had seen the road from Chollerton up to Wark closed. Larger businesses had been notified, but they did not feel they had received notice from the county council. That cost them bookings and potential footfall, and it really does cause concern. It is one of the many ways in which I feel that Northumberland county council—which, sadly, is still led by the Conservatives—lets down the west of the county.

Colleagues have already identified the many issues facing the sector. These are things that I hear about from its representatives every day—I go out and meet with them. I said that I would be a constituency MP,

and I hope that 80 surgeries in four weeks demonstrates that I will do my best on that front. Ultimately, I want to make sure that I hear concerns directly from local businesses, without the kind of political theatre that we are often all too guilty of in this place. That enables us to make sure we have the proper conversations with Government and reflect those conversations back in the most effective way possible.

If we do not recognise how vital hospitality is—as the first foot on the ladder for young people, as a defining enterprise in a town, or as a local landmark—we risk losing something that is at the heart of not just our economy and our local economies, but of what it means to be English and to be British. Ultimately, there is nothing more emblematic of communities than sitting down, whether that is in Humshaugh, in Wark or in Callerton, having a drink or a coffee and speaking to the people who are at the heart of communities—those who define us and define themselves.

5.19 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have received hospitality below the threshold from UKHospitality, the British Beer and Pub Association, the Campaign for Real Ale and probably the British Institute of Innkeeping.

Hospitality, as has been said, offers more than just a place for food and drink. With Pub is The Hub, I was fortunate to see pubs in Cornwall that offer everything from the last village shop to jobs, clubs and even the village hairdresser and barbers. I think of the venues that provide drop-in sessions to tackle loneliness and isolation in our communities, and I think of all the pubs, cafés and restaurants up and down the country that fund grassroots sports and raise enormous amounts of money for charities and local good causes. That is why the previous Government worked so hard to try to support them. They scrapped Labour's beer duty escalator. There was a series of freezes and cuts in alcohol duty, and a new draught beer duty differential, so that a pint in a pub always pays less duty than equivalent beer bought in supermarkets. We had 75% business rate relief for hospitality businesses, taking three quarters off their bills. We must not forget the tens of billions of pounds invested in supporting hospitality during the pandemic and as we recovered from the effects of covid.

Even though that support made the difference between surviving and going under for many, it was still tight. Many still carry a lot of covid debt and they still need our support. Instead, they have suffered a continuous onslaught of taxes and higher costs caused by Labour's choices since the election. The changes to national insurance contributions, the national minimum wage and business rates have piled an additional £3.4 billion a year on to businesses, and the Government have hit hospitality businesses that rely on many part-time staff particularly hard.

It is no wonder that eight in 10 operators have been forced to raise their prices since April. Business rates more than doubling for a small independent pub or café have meant that thousands of pounds is out of the till before a single pint has been pulled or a single breakfast served. Those are fixed costs that many just cannot meet. Some 69% of businesses are running below required

[Mike Wood]

capacity because of staff and cost pressures. One in eight are planning to cut sites and two thirds have cut staff hours. As has been said, the chair of UKHospitality put it plainly last month when she said:

“At a time when the country needs jobs, the Government should be encouraging hospitality to grow and create jobs, not tax them out of existence.”

As we prepare for the pre-Christmas Budget, we need the Government to take this issue seriously and to take hospitality needs seriously. They need to fix national insurance contributions by raising the threshold, particularly for smaller venues. They should introduce exemptions for young people and returners to work. We need them to reconsider their plans to pile further burdens on small businesses next year. We need them to come good on their promise to reform business rates and make sure that when that reform finally happens, those businesses are paying bills that are lower, not higher than what they were paying last year. Finally, the Government should look at how some flexibility can be added to covid loan repayments so that those loans do not threaten otherwise viable businesses.

5.23 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Hospitality is at the heart of our economy, with the sector contributing as the third-largest employer in the country. Every one of our constituencies has beloved restaurants, cafés, pubs, hotels and high streets that contribute to our local economies, as well as our local communities and cultural landscapes. These venues provide places for families to meet and for friends to get together and to catch up for special milestones and celebrations. If you might indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I take a moment to congratulate my parents, Pat and Kelvin, on their diamond wedding anniversary. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Just two weeks ago, we celebrated with a pub lunch at the Jolly Topers. I thank the team there for making that lunch special; they really do know what customer service is. We had a slightly more boisterous evening with Artan and co. at Lartista, celebrating my niece’s brilliant exam results. [HON. MEMBERS: “Congratulations!”] Thank you very much. She did very well.

We in Luton are definitely a community that knows how to celebrate, and wedding venues are no exception. Venue Central, Crescent Hall and the new Grand Royale Banqueting are all fantastic hospitality venues. As part of these wonderful celebrations, we do of course have fireworks, but may I take a moment to say that we need to be considerate? Too often in Luton, fireworks are let off outwith the time when they are allowed, late at night, in places where they disturb our neighbours. I therefore support the private Member’s Bill tabled by my friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), which is intended to reduce the noise category available when fireworks are bought in public, and to review the current regulations governing their online sale.

Our Labour Government continue to invest in my constituency and across the eastern region, green-lighting the expansion of London Luton airport and approving plans for the new Universal Studios theme park in Bedfordshire. Both provide key opportunities for local hotels and restaurants to thrive, with a significant uptake

and footfall expected as the plans get under way—not to mention the hospitality venues associated with the new football stadium at Power Court, once it is built. I welcome the Government’s proposals to establish a visitor economy advisory council, which will drive efforts to fulfil the UK’s ambition of welcoming 50 million international visitors annually by 2030, boosting hospitality and cultural activity across the country.

Small businesses and hospitality do face challenges, but through our plan for change and our commitment we are turning the tide on 14 years of failure under the Conservatives. They dithered and delayed on business rates reform, creating a cliff edge for hospitality businesses, and I am proud that this Labour Government are committed to revitalising our high streets through permanent cuts in business rates. When the temporary business rates relief was due to expire, it was this Labour Government who stepped in to deliver a 40% discount to retail, hospitality and leisure properties with a cash cap of £110,000 per business, as well as freezing the small business multiplier. That support package is worth more than £1.6 billion in 2025-26, and from April next year high street retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values below £500,000 will enjoy permanently lower business rates.

I could go on. We are tackling the scourge of late payments, we intend to ban upward-only rent review clauses, and we will expand start-up loans for small businesses. All those measures will support hospitality. We will invest in our businesses to ensure that local communities not only feel the economic benefits, but thrive.

5.27 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): The hospitality sector is a major employer in my constituency. In Bromley town centre, in Hayes—which has the excellent New Inn—and in Biggin Hill, Coney Hall, Bickley and Keston, we are lucky to have many fantastic small and independent pubs, cafés and restaurants. However, they are struggling to afford Labour’s tax hikes.

The Government’s decision to increase employer’s national insurance contributions is a jobs tax. Businesses have to pay an average of £900 for every job they support, and the situation is made worse by the decision to slash business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. For an independent pub in my constituency with a rateable value of £98,000, the changes in relief and the increase in the standard multiplier have added £20,000 to its tax bill. All this is happening as energy bills and inflation rise again under Labour, increasing businesses’ costs and squeezing consumer spending. It is no wonder that few hospitality businesses can withstand Labour’s tax raid.

We have already heard about the 84,000 hospitality jobs that have been lost over the past 12 months, but I do not think the Government appreciate the damage that they are inflicting on communities. Much-loved businesses are closing their doors and local job opportunities are shrinking, and it is particularly affecting young people and older workers seeking part-time employment. This threatens to gut high streets, knocking local pride and leaving places poorer, and to add insult to injury, Labour has changed inheritance rules to tax any family business that survives its anti-business policies when the next generation picks up the baton.

It has been said many times that these decisions expose the lack of business experience in the Cabinet. Worryingly, the Government are looking to double down on this “tax everything” approach. They need to change course before we become a nation of shuttered shops and broken dreams.

5.29 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I declare an interest as a former barman, a former waiter, a former pie seller and someone who has done essentially every front-of-house job—except chef, unfortunately.

I come at today's debate from the position of a former hospitality worker. It might be slightly over three years since I last pulled a pint, but I have to say that in debates such as this, the insight from hospitality workers is oddly missing. Hospitality is a hard job, and it can be rewarding. I made lifelong friendships through the 14 or 15-hour back-to-back wedding shifts that I pulled to get myself through university, but hospitality is often treated corrosively as a secondary, less-worthwhile occupation. That completely wrong-headed perspective is dripping off the pages of the Opposition's motion today. It says that we must

“amend the Employment Rights Bill to protect seasonal and flexible employment practices”.

What that says to the 3.5 million hospitality workers in this country—it is the third largest sector in the UK—is that they should be part of a two-tier workforce and have less employment rights than every other worker. Which rights should hospitality workers be excluded from? Should they be able to be sacked in the first two years of employment for no good reason? Should they be disqualified from parity in sick pay? Should they not be entitled to a contract that reflects their hours worked? The motion states that if someone works behind a bar, they should be entitled to fewer rights than those who work behind a desk.

I would like to draw attention of the House to the recent victory of the young unionised workers at the Village hotel in Govan. These hospitality workers won a pay rise, backdated to 1 April 2024, on the terms of equal pay regardless of age. Young workers brought their employer to the table and, in a cost of living crisis, it will now value the value of their labour properly. Thanks to the universality of the Employment Rights Bill and the collective action of the workforce in hospitality, the era of poverty pay and contractual insecurity, which has been rife in the sector, will come to an end. Today's motion sets a targeted approach: to bring that era back just for the people who keep our hard-working hospitality sector ticking.

Not a pint is poured, nor a meal served or a single beat of music played, without the express permission of hospitality staff—a reminder for all of us in this House that the workers are the hospitality sector. I will be proud to stand up today for my pals I worked beside in hospitality, who do essential, hard, skilled work, which this motion seeks to diminish by suggesting that those of us who make laws, instead of making beds, should weaken their employment rights today.

5.32 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): We have heard a lot from those on the Government Benches about how they are improving the experience of businesses across

the country. I come in peace; I hope they will take me sincerely when I say that that is absolutely not the feedback I am getting from my hospitality sector, and certainly not from my publicans.

I represent 52 pubs and three breweries in my constituency, and please take me at my word: I am trying to get to all of them. The House may have heard of a cult YouTube channel and Facebook page entitled “The Great British Pub Crawl”, which is run by Dale and Holly and has a combined online followership of over 200,000 subscribers. Their mission is to highlight the state of the hospitality sector across the UK by having a drink at every pub in the country. I wish them every success and a responsible alcohol intake.

Rachel Hopkins: “The Great British Pub Crawl” was in Luton last week, and I just want to flag that Dale and Holly said that Luton had a variety of brilliant pubs and that they really enjoyed their time there.

Cameron Thomas: I do not doubt that. I am sure Luton is second only to Tewkesbury.

Over the summer recess, a friend of mine reached out, told me who Dale and Holly were and asked me to meet them. I did so when they visited Tewkesbury. I sat down with both of them at the Bell Inn, outside Tewkesbury abbey. They and I have very different occupations, but the great thing about pubs is that people often meet others from different backgrounds. We get to know other people and, without knowing it, our social skills and ability to speak and listen to others develop along the way. I got on really well with Dale and Holly. We discussed how our pubs are far more than just drinking spaces; they are as synonymous with British culture as drinking tea, complaining about the weather and even queuing.

For 800 years, pubs like the Black Bear in Tewkesbury have provided places to work and to tackle loneliness. I love to visit the King Teddy in Longlevens so that I can watch Tottenham Hotspur play—it is very convenient when I need to drown my sorrows afterwards—and I hosted a surgery there over the recess.

Dale and I agree that these vital spaces are under great threat, partly because of actions that this Government have taken. Beer duty costs patrons and puts venues under strain, and the Government must recognise the need to further reduce it. The rise in national insurance contributions disproportionately affects the hospitality sector. I do hope—and I say this in good faith—that the Government will change direction quickly.

5.35 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I am proud to be one of the vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for the night time economy. Like all of us, it seems, I have been taking the opportunity to engage with all the hospitality businesses across my constituency and companies that form part of the supply chain. When I say talking to all of them, I mean the independents, the tied pubs, the breweries and the franchisees. What they are not talking to me about is wages. They are also not talking about staffing hours and contracts. Even after pushing from me, they are saying that while the national insurance increase is a concern, it does not even make it into their top 10 problems.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware of the comments in the Scottish Parliament yesterday by the chief executive of the Scottish Tourism Alliance? He said that

“the first half of this year was brutal”,

and that the increase in employer’s national insurance contributions has resulted in a “loss of jobs”. Is he wrong?

Katrina Murray: I respect the comment, but I had not heard it, because I have been looking at other things today. I am reflecting what businesses are telling me, and as I think the hon. Member will have found in his own constituency, they are talking to me about far more fundamental issues for the hospitality industry in Scotland. They have reminded me that hospitality businesses in Scotland are closing at twice the rate they are in the rest of the country, and that although there was investment in the hospitality sector in the Scottish budget for the current year, it was the first time that had happened. The Scottish Licensed Trade Association has expressed to me that the Scottish hospitality industry is starting off £200 million behind the rest of the country because of how the Scottish Government are reacting.

Those businesses talk to me about the vow of silence from the Scottish Government on business rates and about the need for certainty, but also about improving of planning processes; for the big breweries and pub landlords, the sheer amount of time that development takes means that it is easier to invest in other parts of the UK than in Scotland. Planning for a new-build hospitality business or a change of use takes years. Disproportionate cuts to local government planning services in ongoing Scottish Government budgets have had a wider effect across the whole sector. The hon. Member is probably right that the NICs issue is in the mix, but these matters are much more of an issue, certainly in my sector locally.

Last weekend, as part of Scotland Loves Local Week, I was proud to join Kilsyth councillors Jean Jones and Heather Brannan-McVey in visiting the relatively newly owned Urban Grind coffee shop in Kilsyth. The owners Martin and Marie told me—over coffee—about their struggles in getting the facility open for business, getting the change of use from a vacant shop to a hospitality business, and the need to build a fence between the outside sitting area and the soft play area next door. But they also told me about their investment in a young workforce, who combine studying with working, and the importance of working with businesses in the area. It was good to see the place so full, and I hope those who go to watch Chris Hoy’s Tour De 4 going through Kilsyth on Sunday make a point of visiting not just Urban Grind, but the Coachman, the Scarecrow or the Boathouse, because it is a circular economy; local businesses support other local businesses and make sure that they invest.

When local businesses use hotels in the local community—the local independents—and do not bring people in from Glasgow, there is more chance of the local community benefiting. Everybody I spoke to talked about quality, a changing market and a more discerning customer. They said that a greater proportion of the business is about food and soft drinks than ever before, and that they had to work harder to get customers, but that when they did provide high quality and good value, they got loyalty.

In conclusion, our hospitality industry is continually changing as our habits change. That is a good thing. The hospitality sector should fulfil a key role in our communities, which is way bigger than the blinkered ways outlined in the motion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): The House will have seen that many Members are seeking to catch my eye. After the next speaker, there will be three-minute time limit.

5.40 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): As Members of Parliament, we receive campaign email after campaign email every week on dozens of issues, from environmental matters to recent calls for a general election. Amid all that, there is one concern that continues to cut through: support for our pubs and the wider hospitality sector. Why? Because the UK’s hospitality sector is more than just about business. It is a vital part of the social fabric of our communities. Whether it is the Nook café in Anstey, the Ex-Servicemen’s Club in Groby or the Coach and Horses in Markfield, these are not simply places to eat and drink; they are places of refuge from everyday life, places where people come together and places that sustain the spirit of our towns and villages.

Yet what do we see from this Government? With Starmer the pub harmer at the helm, it seems they are determined to call last orders on our fantastic hospitality sector. Since the general election, we have witnessed a series of reckless decisions that have shattered business confidence. Take the Chancellor’s disastrous autumn Budget, which slashed the rates relief for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors and imposed damaging rises in employer’s national insurance contributions; or look at the Secretary of State for Business and Trade attempting to push one of the most damaging employment Bills in a generation through Parliament—and I know so, because I sat on the Bill Committee. The legislation will do more to hinder job creation than to help workers.

In my own constituency, I have spoken to countless publicans and small business owners who are feeling the strain—none more so than the Royal Oak in Kirby Muxloe, which recently won my Mid Leicestershire best pub competition. Local hospitality businesses in Mid Leicestershire pose the same questions to me time after time. Should they raise their prices and risk losing customers, or should they cut staff and reduce their opening hours just to stay afloat? Neither choice is fair and neither is sustainable. Across the country, we have seen the consequences: 83,000 hospitality jobs lost as a direct result of this Government’s actions. And what for the future? We know the Chancellor is facing a self-inflicted £40 billion black hole as a result of her Budget, and with the recent reshuffle at No. 10, with supporters of high taxes and high spending being promoted, there is a worry among businesses in Mid Leicestershire that the worst is yet to come.

It does not have to be this way. If the Government would only listen to industry experts such as UKHospitality and the British Beer and Pub Association, or to brewers such as Punch Pubs and Everards, we could actually help the industry rather than hinder it. I urge the

Government to act boldly and continue to cut business rate reliefs for the hospitality sector, reduce duty on draught beer and lower VAT on products sold in hospitality settings, just as many of our European neighbours do. It is time that the Government stopped punishing the sector and listened to the rational arguments of those who work in and care so much about the industry they love.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I remind Members that we do not refer to other Members by name in this Chamber.

5.44 pm

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): In the spirit of the Minister's invitation, I invite any Member to come to one of our brilliant Black Country Desi pubs, or to come and eat orange chips with me next to the canal.

Everyone in this Chamber wants high and rising wages, and for their constituents to feel that they can just take the family out for a curry on a Friday night. That is why I was so disappointed to see in the wording of the motion before us today an attack on the Low Pay Commission—a piece of settled government machinery that has served Governments of all parties well. The commission is tripartite, representing business, unions and academics; it consults business closely, visits employers and talks to both managers and workers. If Conservative Members were to read the report of the last session of the Low Pay Commission, they would find that it visited hospitality businesses in the city of Glasgow, speaking both to workers and to the people running those businesses. It is one of the very best, most consensual ways of forming Government policy, and I am disappointed in the attack on it, especially as it is at present chaired by a Conservative peer.

I stand here today, as I always do, representing workers. Many hospitality workers are represented by my union, Unite. I am proud of the record of our Government, for far from being a Bill that attacks the hospitality sector, the Employment Rights Bill is written with the hospitality sector in mind. The extension of day one rights is a policy tailor-made for the hospitality sector; as 50% of all hospitality workers do not have two years' service, they can be hired and fired at will, as if we were America. That is not what we want in our economy. Why should it be possible for someone who has worked faithfully for an employer for a year and 11 months to lose their job overnight, with no process and no reason, meaning they cannot pay the rent next month? We will stop that.

Ditto zero-hours contracts, on which 18% of hospitality workers are employed—the highest of any sector. Let us remind ourselves of the reality of that. Workers on zero-hours contracts cannot set things up because they do not know when they will be working. They may get a text message when they are stood at the bus stop on the way to their shift saying, "Sorry mate, we don't need you today. Don't come in." We will ban those contracts.

My last point is on sick pay. Some 279,000 workers in the hospitality sector earn below the lower earnings limit, and we will make sure they are entitled to sick pay. This is Labour delivering for workers.

The Tories and the Lib Dems, along with their mates in Reform, have ganged up together in the House of Lords to try to gut the Employment Rights Bill, but we will not have it. I do not want the hospitality workers serving me a curry on Friday night—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Damian Hinds.

5.47 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I am sad to say that the number of payroll employees in this country has fallen by 149,000 in the past year. We now have unemployment inching up towards 5%, with youth unemployment much higher than that. Why do I mention that in the context of a debate about hospitality? It is because a disproportionate number of jobs—tens of thousands—have been lost in this sector. It is absolutely fundamental to employment, along with the retail and care sectors. It is a shame that hospitality was not deemed worthy of a chapter in the Government's industrial strategy, because if it had been—or, indeed, if the Government had an employment strategy—they would not have done what they did in the Budget.

The hospitality sector is incredibly important. It is important to me personally, as it happens; like many others, I had my first job in hospitality. Actually, it was where I spent most of my career before I became a Member of Parliament. More importantly, hospitality is important to my constituency, as it is to just about every constituency in the country. In my case, it employs around 2,000 people across some 200 establishments, including a number of historic heritage pubs.

Hospitality is important to our nation partly because of all those jobs, but also because an important part of the hospitality sector is overnight hospitality, which is fundamental to tourism, which in turn brings in such important export earnings. I do worry that with all this talk of tourism taxes, it is starting to sound like people think that tourism is, in some way, a problem to be mitigated. Tourism does have issues, of course, but fundamentally, tourism—especially inbound tourism—is an exceptional opportunity to be grabbed.

It is not just about the number of jobs; it is about who those jobs are for. This sector is a key source of first jobs and jobs for people coming back to the labour market, including those who are the very furthest from work. I think of some of the great work done by hospitality businesses—including by one of my old employers, Greene King—with people leaving the criminal justice system, for example.

Of course, we are talking disproportionately about part-time workers. The sector has suffered terrible blows from the big increase in business rates, and the two effects through national insurance contributions, both in the rates and in the threshold, have disproportionately affected part-time workers. We hope for some relief in the delayed Budget when it eventually comes, but there is something Ministers could do now ahead of the Budget to mitigate the situation. I am talking about the Employment Rights Bill.

I know that zero-hours contracts have had a sort of totemic importance for Labour Members ever since their last leader made it so, but we have to get past the idea that a zero-hours contract is necessarily trying to

[Damian Hinds]

exploit workers; it is not. The NHS has many bank workers in hospitals on zero-hours contracts. Students will often work on zero-hours contracts so they can stay in their jobs, even when they move between home and university. The two things the Government could do to mitigate the situation are to lengthen the reference period to reflect seasonality and to make sure that it is an opt-in right, rather than something that has to be offered repeatedly.

5.50 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): In my constituency of Stirling and Strathallan, castles and scenery may draw tourists, but it is the people in our pubs, cafés, restaurants, clubs and hotels who make them feel welcome. In my constituency, we have no shortage of world-class heritage, picturesque rural communities, scenery, and pubs, restaurants and cafés.

At Stirling castle, visitors can see the great kitchens that provided the hospitality to the court of many a Stuart monarch. After that, they can go to the Portcullis hotel or Stirling's oldest pub, the Settle Inn, which was built in 1733.

In Causewayhead, the Birds & Bees is nestled in the shadow of the Wallace monument. In Balmaha, we have the Oak Tree Inn on the shores of Loch Lomond. In Tyndrum, the Real Food Cafe and the wonderfully named Green Welly Stop are on the West Highland Way. Visitors to Bannockburn—where Robert the Bruce defeated the English—can go to the 1314 pub, the King Robert Hotel, the Borestone Bar, or the Tartan Arms, where the steak pie, in my opinion, is the best in Scotland.

Out west to Gartmore is the Black Bull bar and restaurant, which was taken over by the community and is now run as a charity. The macaroni there is a treat. In Kippen, we have the Cross Keys pub and the Woodhouse farm shop and restaurant, which are great for a Sunday drive. The Buttercup café in Doune is wonderful for lunch. In Kinbuck, Andy and Kim Murray are breathing new life into the Cromlix House hotel, and, of course, we have the world-famous Gleneagles as well.

In Fallin, a mining village, we have the Gothenburg—or simply the Goth—which is a community-run pub founded in 1911. It is one of the few remaining still running under the Gothenburg system with all the profits donated to the community. During the miners' strikes in the 1980s, it hosted soup kitchens and supported miners' strike funds.

When the Opposition talk about their conversations with hospitality businesses, what they leave out is as telling as what they put in. Too often, they are not talking to or listening to the employees themselves. Those employees deserve the best employment rights and a fair wage for doing their job, which is why I am proud of this Government's landmark Employment Rights Bill and our commitments on the living wage.

I set out this roll-call of hospitality not just to show my pride in Stirling and Strathallan, but because I have had to cut out all of my other points as the speech time limit has been reducing. I also want to make a point that is often lost in these debates: for every venue that struggles—and there are venues struggling, including in my constituency—there are many more that are thriving,

innovating and contributing to their communities. Let me end by offering my thanks to everybody working in hospitality in Stirling and Strathallan, and across the United Kingdom. They are doing a remarkable job, and our communities and our country are all the better for it.

5.53 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I congratulate the thousands of hospitality workers across South Devon for coming to the end of another summer season, catering to visitors from far and wide—from Brixham to Bigbury and from Start Point up to Dartmoor. With 2,618 establishments in my constituency, Members will be pleased to hear that I am not going to start naming them all—[*Interruption.*] I would miss someone out for sure.

Time and again, this sector is overlooked. Although it is the third largest employer in the country, it was barely mentioned in the Government's industrial strategy, which was a huge oversight. The combination of decisions taken by the Government since July 2024 is now pushing many businesses to the brink.

This summer I visited 52 villages across South Devon on my surgery tour—though I did not have a drink in every one of them. Over and over again, I heard the same message: the local pub is absolutely vital. They are not just places to eat or drink but a third space where communities can come together. They also offer a vital first step into the working world for young people, and those jobs are not just any jobs. They teach skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving and managing money. Those are real-world skills that stay with kids for life. I sold ice creams in the Edinburgh Lyceum theatre, and both my daughters earned their stripes in the local pubs around Totnes, so I know how valuable these jobs are. With almost a million young people aged 16 to 24 not currently in education, employment or training, we should be doing everything we can to make sure that sectors such as hospitality are open, thriving and hiring.

A couple of weeks ago I met Mitch Tonks, the successful owner behind Rockfish, which has 11 restaurants in Devon and Dorset. He looked me in the eye and told me directly that the choices made by this Government in recent months are killing the industry. The latest rise in national insurance alone has left his business facing extra costs equivalent to opening an entirely new restaurant in one year. The lower national insurance threshold particularly hits seasonal employers. At a time when the country needs jobs and local communities need to be revived, the Government should be encouraging hospitality to grow and create jobs, rather than shrinking and restricting hospitality with taxes.

Hospitality is not a luxury sector but a lifeline, especially in constituencies such as South Devon, where every single village pub, seaside café, family-run restaurant or hotel is a pillar of the local economy. I would briefly like to commend the team at the Bull Inn in Totnes, who this week launched the first ever level 3 award in regenerative and sustainable hospitality. The course will lead to bars and restaurants across the UK learning how to minimise their environmental impact, promote social responsibility, support regenerative farming practices and build long-term business resilience through regenerative practices. It is a truly inspirational new course for the hospitality sector.

5.56 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Last week I was delighted to attend the reopening of what was once my local pub when I first moved to Monmouthshire 25 years ago. The Star on the Hill in Llanfihangel Tor y Mynydd was one of 6,000 UK pubs and bars that closed during the 15 years of Tory neglect, but it has been revived by the brilliant local community and its new landlords, who have worked tirelessly to get it started again.

Other new hospitality businesses have opened recently, including the Fuzion restaurant in Abergavenny and Rustica in Monmouth. Monmouthshire is the food capital of Wales. We have the Abergavenny food festival, which was once described as the Glastonbury of food festivals. Members are welcome to visit on 20 and 21 September and see the incredible hospitality we have on offer.

Over 450 hospitality businesses, employing over 2,800 people, play a vital role in making Monmouthshire a fantastic place to live and visit—from the Black Bear Inn and the Boat Inn, to my new local, the Halfway. The Halfway is run by Rhi and Jason, who have also opened an amazing shop so that people do not have to drive to the nearest shop, because we are a bit out in the middle of nowhere. It is a community interest company, and it is doing fantastic stuff for our community and employing people from the community.

I am relieved that the Government are determined to deliver the support that pubs and hospitality need to survive and begin to thrive once again. Labour backs hospitality and, unlike the Conservatives, it is matching that message with meaningful action. This Labour Government have cut tax on pints and are getting rid of the red tape that stops customers being able to take their after-work pint on to the pavement. The Welsh Labour Government will help my constituents in Monmouthshire by providing a 40% discount on non-domestic rates for businesses in retail, leisure and hospitality for the sixth year in a row. This is the life support that our pubs need, and I know that the Government will continue to do the right thing by engaging with the sector about the challenges it is navigating and the help that it needs.

I look forward to spending as much time as this job will allow in the various pubs and cafés I have mentioned in Monmouthshire. I can now be hopeful that after over a decade of neglect, we can start to see hospitality businesses go from strength to strength.

5.59 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): There are over 300 hospitality businesses in South West Devon, and even though that may not be the highest number in a single constituency, considering the areas of countryside in mine, where the only residents are cattle and sheep, it is a hefty number. There are 316 venues, including the Woolwell Centre, the Who'd Have Thought It, the Black Cat Surf Club and the Plympton Conservative Club, the Exchange in Ivybridge, Nelli's in Yealmpton, School House at Mothecombe, the Odd Wheel in Wembury and Kingfisher Fish and Chips. The list goes on.

Hospitality in South West Devon means more than 2,000 jobs, a turnover of £91.7 million and an economic value to the local economy of £50 million. Hospitality plays a crucial role in our local community tourism

offer—in our area, there is everything from coast to moors to explore. Neighbouring constituencies have even more jobs and economic value at risk under this Labour Government. That is why a group of local businesses have taken matters into their own hands and formed a campaign to save hospitality across Plymouth and South West Devon. I am proud to support it.

The impact of increased employer national insurance contributions; of halving business rate relief; of bringing forward employment rights that noble employers and add undue cost and pressure; and of the minimum wage increase, even for the youngest employees, is hitting so hard that many businesses fear for the future. The sector is reeling. Businesses are simply not employing new staff, and they are less inclined to employ young people and students.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about the importance of these businesses to her constituency. Does she agree that those businesses are often the very heart of local communities, and that if residents lose them, they lose a vital part of their community?

Rebecca Smith: I will come on to that exact point in my remaining few minutes, but absolutely, they are a crucial part of our community.

Why does that all matter? As hospitality businesses across the country bring financial and social value to our communities, they are critical to a thriving tourism sector. They are also a key part of our everyday life, whether it is having the treat of an ice cream on the beach during a summer holiday, using a local memory café with a loved one, chatting over a pint to ease loneliness, or bringing family together for a meal that someone else has cooked, in order to mark a special occasion. However, the increased business costs imposed by this Labour Government mean that there are increased costs to the consumers who want to make the most of those opportunities. It means that fewer people go out; that is what I am hearing from constituents. Then those businesses face closure, which impacts the local economy. It is a vicious cycle and, sadly, the Labour party seems completely oblivious to it.

The equation is simple, and I am saddened and disappointed to see the Labour party stick its head in the sand, completely determined to ignore the issue. If we Conservative Members do not speak up, there will not be a hospitality sector in this country. As I have said, the Labour party keeps boasting about economic growth in hospitality, but I am not sure that we will see that in my constituency, because all the hospitality businesses feel massively under threat.

6.2 pm

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I am immensely proud of the hospitality sector in my constituency of Calder Valley. Our community has always been amazing, but it was recently made famous by the TV show “Happy Valley”. I always say to the public, “Come to our towns. They have the same amazing scenery, but far fewer murders.”

Hospitality is where neighbours meet, where milestones are celebrated and where people get to find out what is great about towns and communities. My constituency is a string of communities, from Brighouse to Todmorden, with a string of high streets. Between 2010 and 2018,

[Josh Fenton-Glynn]

our authority of Calderdale lost 50—nearly a quarter—of its pubs. They were among the more than 10,000 closures nationwide under the coalition and Tory Governments—and that was before the pandemic. Although I welcome the sudden interest in the hospitality sector from the Conservatives, theirs is a new concern.

Hospitality is vital to the future of our high street. As we see high streets moving away from retail because of the internet, we see people selling experiences and connection. An American friend recently asked about the difference between a pub and a bar. Drawing on my experience of both, I said that a bar was just somewhere someone goes to drink, but a pub is a community living room. Change has to include challenging some of the tied pub rules that meant that a pub in my constituency saw the amount it has to pay more than doubled by the pub company Stonegate, from £800 to £1,700 a week. That was because just one week after the six-month probationary period ended, the company invoked a clause to break the tie. That is the kind of irresponsible, rapacious practice that was allowed to thrive under the last Government, and I urge Ministers to look at that.

Conservative Members want to focus on one specific tax, not on the whole strategy for the high street, and it is that lack of holistic thinking that has landed us in this mess: too many tactics, not enough strategy. That is why I welcome this Labour Government's plan, which has been welcomed by the hospitality sector, to reduce business rates, tackle late payments, cut red tape and deliver a £1.6 billion package that will save the average pub £3,300 next year. That support will give the venues some space to breathe. It will help to keep Calder Valley's towns buzzing and help our hospitality to thrive, and when our hospitality thrives, our community thrives.

6.5 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Hospitality is under a huge strain. Pubs particularly are really struggling across the country, and indeed in my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley. Nationally, pub closures are estimated to be running at one establishment a day, thanks to this Labour Government's hike in employers' national insurance, the hike in the minimum wage and the looming threat of this Labour Government's Employment Rights Bill. The number of closures is only climbing, and these punitive measures are pushing our pubs to the brink.

That is coupled with disposable income tightening for families, including families who may want to support our pubs. In the Bradford district, council tax has been raised by 10%. That impacts all my constituents who want to spend money at their pubs but cannot because they have to tighten their belt. The Dickie Bird in Long Lee and many other pubs are coming under a huge amount of strain as their overheads increase; they are, dare I say it, looking at closure. I met the owners of the Dickie Bird recently, and they expressed to me how much financial strain this Labour Government's policies have put on them; that has ultimately led to them having to make the decision to close.

Tom Hayes: My understanding is that the Airedale NHS foundation trust covers the hon. Member's constituency. The waiting list there has fallen from 14,779 to 13,846, there are 32,312 additional urgent dental appointments,

and £3.3 million is going to the hospital to support building and other safety works. Does he welcome that investment, which is partly funded by the national insurance contributions increase?

Robbie Moore: As all of us know, I have been campaigning tirelessly to secure the funding to rebuild Airedale hospital, and it was finally announced in 2023, but it was very disappointing to many of my constituents when the completion date for the rebuild was pushed back by this Labour Government from 2030 to 2035. My constituents and others from surrounding constituencies will now have to wait much longer for the rebuild to be completed because of the decisions made by this Labour Government.

The Airedale Heifer, the Busfeild Arms, the Brown Cow and the Black Hat are all fantastic pubs in my constituency, and I encourage everyone to go along and buy a pint of Timothy Taylor's—one of the finest breweries in this country. A pint of Landlord will go down very well. The Bridgehouse brewery in Keighley also produces fantastic ales. All these establishments want to be supported, but they are expressing to me the challenge of their increased overheads, resulting from this Labour Government, and particularly from the employers' national insurance increase. The Turkey Inn in Goose Eye is also experiencing the same challenges.

These punitive measures are directly impacting communities, as I have said. They hurt young people who want to start out in the workplace. The Government have rightly made a great deal of the importance of getting young people into work, but the Employment Rights Bill, the increase in employers' national insurance and the hike in the minimum wage are making it much more difficult for the hospitality sector to recruit young people and provide opportunities for them to thrive, get work experience and earn an income. That is impacting many constituencies, not least those across the Keighley and Ilkley area, which I represent.

6.9 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As the third-largest employer in Britain, hospitality supports 3.5 million jobs and is the beating heart of our high streets and communities, yet this vital sector has been let down by a decade of Conservative neglect; over 10,000 pubs closed between 2010 and 2024. This motion continues to let down businesses and workers, and as my hon. Friends the Members for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), and for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance), eloquently pointed out, our workers are our hospitality sector—workers like my cousin James, a fantastic head chef in my city. He has been a skilled professional for over two decades. He deserves the same workers' rights and protections from the Low Pay Commission as any office worker.

This Labour Government are turning the tide. We are backing hospitality with our new hospitality and night-time economy zones, cutting red tape, and supporting al fresco dining to boost footfall. We are delivering permanently lower business rates for hospitality in 2026 and developing our strategy for small and medium-sized enterprises. Through our safer streets mission, we are reducing crime and keeping our workers safe, but we must also recognise the unique challenges facing seasonal hospitality businesses, particularly in coastal communities. These areas have remarkable booms during the summer months,

but face economic hardship through the winter. This feast-or-famine cycle makes it difficult for businesses to budget. That is where the English devolution Bill is crucial. By empowering mayoral combined authorities with greater control over growth and resources, we can develop targeted support for seasonal economies—a great example of this Government working together to protect workers. Local leaders understand their communities' rhythms. They know when businesses need support, and understand the impacts, both positive and negative, on the local economy and our public services.

The hospitality sector—pubs, restaurants, hotels and leisure facilities, as well as the often forgotten and ignored security staff who keep us safe in those venues—is vital. I want to praise all the fantastic workers and businesses in Portsmouth who go above and beyond in our city. There are so many great places to spend leisure time. They provide employment and contribute brilliantly to our communities. They include the Café on the Green and the Cross Keys—the final pub left—in Paulsgrove; Bar Aroma, the Heath's tearoom and café, set up by two brilliant young sisters, and the Drayton Tavern in Drayton and Farlington; the Mardin café and the Star & Garter in Copnor; the Casemates and Hilsea Lines cafés in Hilsea; Makemake brewery and Beeny's in Baffins; the Palace café, the Highbury café and the Portsbridge pub in Cosham; and the Mother Shipton and the North End café in Stamshaw and North End, to name only a few. I thank all of them, and hope that they continue to flourish under our Labour Government.

6.12 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Hospitality has been battered by a perfect storm of punishing taxation, regulation and soaring operational costs, which has left pubs and restaurants fighting for survival. In recent months, I have visited 36 of the 55 pubs in my constituency and hosted a hospitality roundtable. I will shortly be sitting down again with the family chain, the Healy Group. Everywhere I go, the story is the same: rising costs, thinning margins and landlords asking, "How much longer can we keep the lights on?"

In this darkness, I can bring a little ray of delight and hope to my constituents. During the summer recess, I continued my constituency pub tour, part of my best pub campaign. I am delighted to announce to the House that the Crown at Arford has won that accolade in the Farnham and Bordon constituency. You may be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Fleetwood Mac's "Down at the Crown" was inspired by this pub, so if the Chancellor ever finds herself lost in East Hampshire, she might fancy a visit—though judging from Labour's economic stewardship, she would probably relate more to one called "Closing Down at the Crown".

I joke, but there is nothing amusing about the reality. Since May, four pubs in my constituency have been driven out by Labour's relentless war on small businesses, including the Wheatsheaf Inn at Grayswood, which has closed indefinitely. The sector is collapsing, despite what Government Members say. Six pubs are closing every single week. That is because, from April this year, relief collapsed to 40%, halving their protection while doubling their pain. The Budget hiked national insurance, increased the minimum wage and added £3 billion to their bills. The Chancellor's 1p off a draught pint gesture was not just laughable but insulting.

Jay at the Six Bells told me bluntly that on a £5.50 pint, pubs make about 8p. That is the future that Labour is offering. The Bluebell in Dockenfield, a family business run by Lucy and Robin Catchpole, is fighting tooth and nail to thrive. Pubs are the heart of our towns and villages, and Labour is ripping out that heart.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I do not want to rain on the hon. Gentleman's pub parade, but my constituency has a proud history when it comes to pubs, as for 60 years it was the only place in the country where the pubs were nationalised—although I am not calling on the Minister to reintroduce nationalisation of pubs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one thing that would help our pubs would be to extend the pubs code by introducing a guest beer agreement—like the one in Scotland—so that we get more independent products, and more people, into our pubs?

Gregory Stafford: That sounds like an interesting idea. I will support anything that will get the pub industry thriving, but to be frank, Labour is destroying the opportunities for pubs to thrive, and I am afraid a guest ale will go no way towards solving that problem.

I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will touch briefly on the fact that it is not just Labour in Westminster that does not understand the hospitality industry. The Liberal Democrats in Waverley are showing the same wilful blindness. Farnham is undergoing major infrastructure works, and its hospitality and retail businesses are struggling. I urge the council to act. It has the powers to provide business rates relief, but it has done nothing. Borelli's Wine Bar and Grill, for example, has operated since 1987, yet the Lib Dems sit on their hands, proving that they share Labour's contempt for small businesses.

Hospitality is being taxed, squeezed and regulated into oblivion. If Labour carries on like this, the last orders bell will ring not just for our pubs, but for the very character of British life itself.

6.16 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It was a great moment when my daughter pulled a pint for me as part of her duties as a barmaid in her first job as she worked her way through university. Although that job put vital cash in her pocket, it also gave her people skills and proof on her CV that she was reliable and trustworthy with cash valuable stock. Her work today is far removed from that bar, but the foundations of her career were laid there. Yet across Dumfries and Galloway, hospitality businesses tell me that they are pausing giving youngsters like my daughter that all-important first job. The increase in employer's national insurance contributions to 15%, and the lowering to £5,000 of the secondary threshold, are Labour's dreaded £900-a-head black spot curse on bright youngsters ready for the world of work.

In Scotland, matters are made worse by the anti-business SNP, which is not passing on moneys intended for business rate relief, and whose multiple unit pricing alcohol regime makes Scotch whisky more expensive in the land of its birth than in many other places. Shrouded in pious health messaging, MUP has had little discernible effect on problem drinking and seems more like the SNP fun police given free rein. Spirits prices are high; business spirits are low.

[John Cooper]

No doubt the wealth-finder general, the new Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister—tough on growth, tough on the causes of growth—will seek new ways to squeeze hospitality. Knowledge is knowing that the tomato is technically a fruit; wisdom is being wise enough not to put a tomato in the fruit salad. The Pensions Minister is, improbably, holding the pen on the nightmare-before-Christmas Budget. He has a lot of knowledge about taxes, but has he the wisdom not to deploy them in the growth basket?

Hospitality is a canary in the economic coalmine. The fact that pubs are closing and restaurants open only a couple of days a week at best is a leitmotif for this anti-business Government. They think that business is a dripping roast to be devoured to fund ruinous policies such as the Chagos surrender deal. Terrifyingly, hospitality is supping in the last chance saloon, but surely it is last orders for this maladroit Labour Government? Haven't they got three homes to go to?

6.19 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Hospitality is more than an industry; it is a way of life. My first jobs were in hospitality—potato rumbling in the basement of the Crown in Cowden, with my brother Spencer potwashing, and learning the bar at the King Henry VIII in Hever, where my sister Chloe worked—and for 14 years I ran a hospitality business in my constituency with my husband Paul. All my children, like so many others, have worked in hospitality. It is an amazing learning ground for life and deeply rewarding.

Through our business, we supported families through the happiest and saddest days of their lives. We befriended the lonely, offered a daily catch-up for regulars and became a hub for community groups and local businesses. But it is a tough life, with unsociable hours, low pay and insecure conditions the norm. In the nine months since the Budget, more than 80,000 people in the industry have lost their jobs, including my son Isaac.

I first got involved in local politics because of the crippling cost of business rates. I continue to campaign on that. I hear the argument that the Conservatives had no plan to continue the relief, and that interim measures are better than nothing—but that is cold comfort to businesses facing massive cost increases, uncertain revaluations and no assurance about what happens next April.

It is not just the rates, but the whole regime. Hall & Woodhouse, the brewery that runs so many brilliant pubs in Dorset, explained that revaluations after refits directly disincentivise investment. The Minister will say that he cannot pre-empt the Budget, but I want him to hear loud and clear that some hospitality businesses will not make it until April. For those that do, without permanently lower costs, the writing is on the wall.

On national insurance, I have to take issue with the claim that small businesses are not worse off. I have run a hospitality business, and with the front and back of house 12 hours a day, seven days a week, more than five full-time members of staff are needed. My constituent Craig from Bear in Wimborne explained that national insurance costs for part-time workers on the minimum

wage have increased 74.5%. Those costs have to be passed on. As well as affecting prices, they are likely to lead to slower wage growth and job losses.

The cost of going out impacts heavily on gen Z. As a mum of four of them, I welcome the reduced drinking culture and healthier lifestyle, but the reality is that they are preloading at home to reduce the cost of a night out. That is no criticism of the night-time economy—its costs have increased with the responsibilities of Martyn's law—but we must change our tax regime to reflect how our society is changing.

Hospitality is not just about food and drink; it is about people, community and the very identity of the United Kingdom. Let's not just save hospitality; let's celebrate it.

6.22 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality, events, major food and drink businesses in Wales.

The hospitality sector in Wales has enormous economic value. It contributes £4 billion to the Welsh economy and employs more than 165,000 people. It also has immense social value, creating strong communities and providing opportunities for local people, often young people whose first job is in hospitality. However, the tax changes introduced by this Government have placed huge pressure on the sector.

This summer, a report by Family Business UK showed that on Ynys Môn changes to business property relief and agricultural property relief could result in a more than £10 million reduction in gross value added, as well as the loss of 167 local full-time equivalent jobs. That pattern is seen across Wales. The report also finds that Wales will see some of the steepest forecast declines in investment, turnover and employment due to the changes to BPR and APR.

Beyond the statistics are the real impacts on family-run businesses, such as Kingsbridge caravan park in Beaumaris, which has been family-owned for 26 years. Those running it say that the increases to employer national insurance have already forced them to reconsider employing wardens next year and have affected their ability to reinvest in the caravan park.

Analysis by UKHospitality Cymru shows that of the 164,641 job losses in the UK since the Budget last October, some 89,000 have been in hospitality. About 2,600 of those are in Wales—roughly equivalent to the number of jobs lost at Port Talbot due to the closure of the blast furnace, but spread across our communities throughout Wales. The sector is crying out for the Government to recognise the urgent situation and to acknowledge that many businesses are barely treading water, unable to invest or grow.

Hospitality is an important source of skills and growth for Ynys Môn and Wales, yet this Government are putting the brakes on that growth through short-sighted decisions. Thousands of jobs have already been lost and future investment has been cut. To prevent a bad situation from getting worse, the Government must rethink their damaging increases to employer's national insurance contributions and the upcoming changes to business property relief, and give the Welsh hospitality sector the breathing room it needs to flourish.

6.24 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Hospitality is at the heart of our local communities. It is the best of British: the pubs we visit for a pint or two, the restaurants where we go to celebrate a special occasion, or the bars that power our night-time economy. My constituency is home to some truly incredible hospitality businesses—if you have never been for a night out in Yarm, you have never lived. We do not love pubs just because we love pints. The great British pub brings communities together. They tackle isolation, provide a safe environment where people can consume alcohol, support more than a million jobs and help many youngsters get their first foot on the employment ladder. The best ideas are usually the ones we come up with in the pub. Pubs are places where community spirit is found and fostered. If I had more time, I would tell hon. Members about the innovative and generous support shown to local charities by the Locomotion in Eaglescliffe and the Griffin in Thornaby.

Like several MPs, I host my own pub awards, recognising and celebrating the best of our local pubs. This year's winner was Courtney and the incredible team at the Myton House Farm pub in Ingleby Barwick. I am looking forward to celebrating more places in the coming years, such as Luna Blu, a fantastic local tapas restaurant and bar in Yarm; the Derry in Long Newton, where people can get a warm welcome, great grub and all the village gossip while enjoying one of the best beer gardens around—if Carlsberg made beer gardens, the Derry in Long Newton would be its aspiration—or the Masham in Hartburn, a must-visit eatery that arguably serves the best parmos on the planet. I would love to tell the House more about the incredible hospitality businesses in Stockton West, but time does not allow.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and demonstrating why he is such a great champion for Teesside. Does he agree that many businesses are not just facing the prospect of closing, but of possibly laying off more and more jobs? In my constituency, Mainstreet Trading, a fantastic award-winning bookshop, deli and café, wrote to all its customers earlier this year to say that opening hours were going to be reduced because of Labour's tax on jobs. Is he experiencing the same in his constituency?

Matt Vickers: Very much so; I could not agree more. These are opportunities for young people to get a first foot on the ladder in the job market. Between October 2023 and July 2024, the number of hospitality businesses increased and the number of jobs in the sector increased by 22,000. Surprisingly, after Labour's Budget, in exactly the same time period, we have seen 89,000 job losses—89,000 people unable to provide for their families or live out their aspirations and dreams. It is shameful, it is a disgrace, and people did not vote Labour for that.

Speaking to landlords in my part of the world, I am told how real the fight is to save the great British pub. Labour's jobs tax, its Employment Rights Bill and the slashing of small business rates relief have meant that 89,000 jobs have already been lost in the hospitality sector, and UK Hospitality believes that the figure could be as many as 200,000 by the end of the financial year. Labour's jobs tax means it costs £900 more to employ the average employee, meaning some hospitality businesses

are unable to provide opportunities for those youngsters to get their first job. It is part of the reason 14% more people in this country are unemployed and left unable to support their families or fulfil their dreams and ambitions—

Antonia Bance indicated dissent.

Matt Vickers: The hon. Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) should not shake her head—that is true. It is a fact.

In the last Parliament, I campaigned for the 75% discount on business rates for leisure, hospitality and retail businesses. It was game changing for many, but with the stroke of a pen, the Chancellor stood at the Dispatch Box and ended that lifeline thrown to many employers. With the average pub having seen its business rates increase from £3,938 to £9,451, and the average restaurant from £5,051 to a whopping £12,122, the Government are taxing the sector to death. Two hospitality businesses are closing every day and it is thought that more than—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Christine Jardine.

6.29 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I come to Parliament this week fresh from the Edinburgh festival—on which note I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Hon. Members will be pleased to hear that I was there not as a performer, but because every year I am tempted across the border into neighbouring constituencies by the absolute feast of music, theatre, dance, literature and comedy that is the Edinburgh festival. Every year it contributes £400 million to the city's economy, and it is hosted and supported by a hospitality industry that, in my constituency alone, is valued at £200 million and supports 6,500 jobs.

That is the big picture, but there is a much smaller and individual picture about the businesses who come to me every week with complaints. I have to say to Conservative Members that this issue did not miraculously start in July last year; it has been going on for the past decade and since the Conservative Government destroyed the economy on a whim a couple of years ago. These businesses are suffering and under threat.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Christine Jardine: No, actually—I think the hon. Member has said enough today.

Those businesses are suffering and they have been for years. Hon. Members know how important they are not just to my constituency, to Edinburgh or to Scotland, but to the United Kingdom, because of the jobs that they create and the people they employ. That little picture is about families who are dependent on those businesses and who tell me that they are unhappy with the national insurance changes.

John Lamont: Tourism tax!

Christine Jardine: Those families also tell me that bigger businesses, like Edinburgh zoo and fantastic tourist businesses, which the national insurance changes have added—

John Lamont: Tourism tax!

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman is beginning to sound a bit like a parrot.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Christine Jardine: No, I will not give way. We hear the hon. Gentleman. I will repeat the phrase for him again: tourism tax. Yes, we know that Edinburgh is taxing tourists, but it is doing that to support its hospitality business, which has been under threat for a decade.

We need to look at the burden that our businesses are carrying: the national insurance burden; VAT, which could be reduced; and the business rates in many places. I appeal to Ministers to listen to the constituents we have heard from today—to listen to my constituents. They should listen to the fact that if those businesses fail, our economy will not have the growth on which this Government and every Government depend so much for our future. Each of those small businesses makes up an important part of that big picture: the hundreds of millions of pounds—the billions—that hospitality brings to this country.

6.32 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): May I first thank Alex Leitch from my office for helping me to research what was going to be a long speech? I will use just little bit of it, given the limited time that I have in which to speak.

I spent weeks in my constituency over the summer recess, as other colleagues did in theirs. I spent one week volunteering with small businesses and another visiting pubs in my constituency. I heard at first hand from many owners and employees about the dire situation they face, not just because of Labour's increase in national insurance contributions, but because of its crippling Employment Rights Bill.

As someone with a small business background, I am appalled that these policies have been cloaked as favourable to the working person. I have always been in favour of supporting hospitality, which is the cornerstone of our communities. In my constituency alone, the hospitality sector added more than £76.6 million to our economy, and the hospitality sector in general is growing at almost double the rate of the UK economy.

The hospitality industry is one of the highest-taxed sectors in the UK economy, and I am very disappointed that the Government have continued to hammer our service industries with NIC increases and minimum wage increases, all while boosting the salaries of people like train drivers, who are already on £65,000.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mohindra: There is not enough time.

Others have already spoken about the retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme in 2023, so I will not dwell on that. Let me just say that the hospitality businesses I speak to remain disappointed that the 75% discount applied previously has not been adhered to. Small independent businesses like the Kitchen Croyley in my constituency have warned me of the job losses that will become inevitable just to keep their doors open on account of Labour's policy changes.

If we continue down this path, we will only see higher levels of inflation and unemployment and increasing reliance on our universal credit programmes. I have no doubt that, despite putting an enormous additional £40 billion burden on British taxpayers—taking the tax burden to its highest ever level—the apparent lack of foresight will only lead to more dismay in the future.

Other Members have spoken about the number of pubs that have closed, as well as the job losses in the hospitality sector. However, one point I have previously mentioned and I think is relevant to this debate is the lack of business experience among the Cabinet. Having run a small business and understanding the challenges associated with that would, I hope, lead to a better policy position than we are currently seeing. I look forward to further U-turns from this Government, because where they are doing the right thing, Conservative Members will support them. There is a long list of things they could be doing better, and I hope that when the Minister responds, he will give at least a glimmer of hope to the small businesses that are struggling.

6.35 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): First—strangely for this debate—I would like to directly address part of the motion that is before us this afternoon. I am concerned that the harassment of people in the hospitality sector would be made worse under part of the motion. However, I strongly support the motion as a whole. As somebody who was brought up in a guest house in Torquay, you could say that the hospitality industry is in my blood. In my mind, Torbay is the premier resort in the United Kingdom; sadly, it is also the most deprived constituency that rejoices in having a Liberal Democrat MP, so there are some wicked challenges there as well.

My constituency has an income of £371 million from the hospitality sector. That is £1 million more than the national constituency average, with 1,000 businesses across the constituency rejoicing in providing hospitality. I warned last November that the national insurance hike would rip the heart out of our hospitality industry in the west of England and, sadly, I have been proven right. The Office for National Statistics has highlighted that there are 84,000 fewer jobs in this sector than there were, and there were a quarter fewer vacancies in the sector this summer in Devon and Cornwall. As colleagues have already highlighted, those are often entry-level jobs—opportunities for students to get some extra money in the summer break to help them through their time at university—so this is extremely important. There has been a lethal cocktail of the national insurance hike; the cost of living crisis, which has impacted not only the industry but the punters who have less discretionary spend; and the failure to properly reform business rates, which is essential.

One sector of our tourist industry that has been particularly hit is our zoos and aquariums. They have also suffered from the bum Brexit deal, which has left them with some real challenges in being able to replenish their animals from other zoos across Europe and elsewhere in the world. As such, I ask the Minister to convene a summit for zoos and aquariums up and down the country to assist them with the real economic challenges that many are experiencing in the challenging world that we in the United Kingdom face.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. The wind-ups will start at 6.40 pm prompt.

6.38 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): The hospitality industry in Eastleigh contributes £113 million every year, generates £56 million in economic value, employs 1,805 people and sustains 84 pubs, cafés, restaurants and hotels.

My constituent Lorraine, the landlady of the Master Builder pub in West End, saw her wage bill rise by £1,500 compared with the same month last year despite having no extra staff. She now works 70 hours a week, earning the equivalent of £5 an hour, and in the past two years she has had just five days off. Jane is the manager of the Holiday Inn in Eastleigh, a popular base for those wishing to watch cricket at the Utilita Bowl and for families wanting to explore Peppa Pig World at Paultons Park nearby. She tells me that they have been unable to fill vacancies because of the increased payroll burden from national insurance hikes.

David, the owner of Steam Town Brew Co, tells me that for a part-time member of staff doing just 10 hours a week, costs have risen by more than 9% year on year. For small breweries such as his, these increases make it harder to keep staff on, to recruit and to invest in local jobs. Does the Minister acknowledge that the changes to employer national insurance contributions act as a disincentive for small, labour-intensive businesses—

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

6.40 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): Before I start, may I refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I have also taken hospitality below the declarable amount from UKHospitality and the BBPA—I am sure I am not the only one.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions from across the UK. We have heard some enthusiastic and supportive comments on the industry, but it is a pity that the policies are not so supportive. From the start I was left wondering what planet some of those on the Government Benches are on. They are clearly not talking to the same hard-working and angry people working in the hospitality sector as those on the Opposition Benches are. If they had been, I do not believe for one minute they would have been so enthusiastically supportive of decisions and policies that are doing such immense damage to an industry that supports 3.5 million jobs in the UK.

Hospitality is one of the most important economic sectors and is our third biggest employer. It was a British success story. While we were in power between 2010 and 2024, we oversaw the creation of 4 million jobs—that is 800 jobs a day—and nearly 20% of all those new jobs created were in the hospitality sector. However, since Labour's disastrous Budget, nearly half of all jobs lost have been in hospitality. Where Conservatives create, Labour destroys. The irony of this Government is that they say they are prioritising growth, yet they are implementing policies that do the opposite. The job losses in hospitality are a direct result of the unexpected and unnecessary employer national insurance increases that have added £1 billion to the cost of hiring people in

this sector. The Government also whacked up business rates on hospitality, costing the sector a further half a billion pounds.

As a result of Labour's decisions, a generation of young people will miss out on their first job opportunity in hospitality—a sector that is particularly enthusiastic about employing young people. Of the 164,000 job losses in the UK since last year's Budget, almost 89,000 have been lost in hospitality, and more are expected. According to UKHospitality, 79% of hospitality businesses have had to raise prices, and more than half have cut staff. That is before the Deputy Prime Minister's further attacks on business with her unemployment Bill, burdening UK businesses with more rules and regulations and costing businesses another £5 billion, according to the Government's own estimates. As I said last year, the Chancellor's Budget will go down in history as the most anti-business Budget that this country has ever had. Her legacy will be as the destroyer of jobs. We will see how much further she goes in this year's Budget.

This Government are well on the way to securing the unenviable record of every Labour Government since the second world war of leaving office with unemployment higher than when they started. It is the private sector, business and especially the hospitality sector that are paying the price for Labour's mistakes and poor judgment.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the shadow Minister give way?

Nigel Huddleston: I will not because of time, I am afraid. I spent a good chunk of the summer travelling around the country, meeting key players in the tourism, hospitality, heritage and leisure sectors. Everyone was complaining about how hard they have been hit by this Government's policies, and the sector is angry—so angry, in fact, that they have given the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor a middle name, and a good Anglo-Saxon one at that. They told me about job losses, inability to invest, and profit margins being eroded or disappearing all together. Seaside amusement arcades, for example, are closing their doors early, or on certain days, or all together, because it is no longer profitable to stay open.

The focus today is on hospitality, but it is clear that the wider tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors are all being hit. Nearly every sector overseen by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has been hit by Labour policies, and this is a big deal. Why do people holiday in the UK, or come here from overseas to visit? It is because of our heritage sites, our museums, our art, our culture, our theatres, our festivals and our sporting events. About a million people visit the UK every year just to come and watch football games. All these sectors are being hit, and the 40 million-plus overseas visitors who come to the UK each year spend £33 billion in our pubs, bars, restaurants, hotels and so on. All that is at risk. Tourism is a highly competitive global industry, but this Government's decisions are undermining our competitiveness in respect of both domestic and inbound visitors. We should always remember that inbound travel spend is all-important export revenue.

Let me respond to some of the comments made during the debate. The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism said that this Government had made the "difficult" decisions to increase taxes. What a load

[Nigel Huddleston]

of nonsense! The easiest—the laziest—thing for any Government to do is dip into other people's pockets and spend money on their behalf. The difficult decision is to be restrained about spending and to reduce taxes, which is what we were doing before the election.

The hon. Members for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) and for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance), among others, asked why we were not supporting the Deputy Prime Minister's unemployment Bill. The answer is simple: it will cause more unemployment. The hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) asked why we were attacking the industry and talking it down. We are doing no such thing: we are talking this Government down and talking this Government's policies down.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) pointed out that when we were in government, we rightly supported this sector to the tune of about £25 billion during the pandemic, with measures such as the furlough scheme, the cutting of VAT on tourism, the culture recovery fund and the sport survival fund. We were desperate to get the sector open as soon and as safely as possible while the then Opposition were saying that we should keep things closed for longer, so we will take no lectures from them on that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) rightly drew attention to the disgraceful fact that the hospitality sector is almost completely absent from the Government's industrial strategy despite its importance. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) spoke of the need to talk to industry and then talk to the Treasury, credibly and confidently, with statistics and information. I do not believe that the DCMS is doing that. It does not appear that it carries any weight with the Treasury, as evidenced by the policies that are attacking all these sectors. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) invited us all for a pint. I will take him up on that offer; the first round is on him. I believe that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas), my constituency neighbour, did the same.

Several Members, especially Government Members, asked where the money would come from if we did not increase national insurance contributions. The answer is simple. We would not have spent £10 billion on inflation-busting pay rises for union mates. We would not have spent £8 billion on the National Wealth Fund, £7 billion on GB Energy—which does not produce any energy—or £35 billion on the Chagos surrender Bill. There is the answer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) highlighted the additional concerns of this sector given the impending hits to inheritance tax, business property relief and agricultural property relief, which are especially worrying for rural and farming communities. That point was also made by my hon. Friends the Members for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) and for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth).

It is clear from its policies, and from today's debate, that Labour simply does not get business. Perhaps that should not be surprising, given how few members of the Cabinet have actually started or run a business, or even worked for or spent any significant time in the private sector. Few Labour Members have any understanding of, or appreciation for, the hard work and effort put in

by entrepreneurs, risk-takers and owners of businesses, especially small businesses, who work so hard to employ others and generate taxes. Labour certainly knows how to spend other people's money; it just has no idea how that money is generated in the first place.

On the Conservative Benches, we have a party that is unapologetically pro-business, because the Conservatives know that we can have good public services only if we have a dynamic private sector generating the taxes to pay for them. Supporting the private sector and enabling it to succeed is good for public services, too. The hospitality and tourism sectors know that they have a friend in the Conservative party. We appreciate them, and we want them to succeed. We stood by them during the pandemic, we appreciated and applauded their growth when we were in power, and we will be there again to work with them when this Government collapse and we pick up the pieces once more.

We will back business. We will revive the economy and bring opportunity and prosperity back to this country through pro-enterprise policies based on core Conservative principles: lower taxes, smaller Government, light regulation, personal responsibility, fiscal responsibility and living within our means—principles that my party, and only my party, understand and abide by. The British people deserve so much better than this shambolic Labour Government, and we will not rest until they get it.

6.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): Only yesterday I sat down with some of Britain's great publicans—award-winning Tommy Higgs and Mike Dove of the Three Horseshoes, Emma Gibbon from the Plough in Prestbury, Justine Lorrigan of the famous Royal Dyche in Burnley, Matt Todd of the Wonston Arms, and the excellent Steve Alton of the British Institute of Innkeeping—to go through the details of the challenges they are facing, so I welcome the chance to underline the Government's recognition of the importance of hospitality businesses in all our communities to the economic, cultural and social life of our country.

In this debate we have heard many other examples of great hospitality businesses, notably in the excellent speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey), for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), for Gedling (Michael Payne), for Leeds North West (Katie White), for Hexham (Joe Morris), for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray), for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance), for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane), for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes), for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) and for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin).

Hospitality is a sector that contributes well over £50 billion to our economy and employs millions of people across the UK. It is particularly important for young people, who need to gain essential skills and experience to pursue successful lives. It is also often an entry point for those who want a second chance in life, and I pay tribute to Greene King for working with 65 prisons across the UK to provide inmates with hospitality training. It aims to hire 400 prison leavers by the end of this year.

What all the contributions to this debate underline once again is that hospitality is truly the backbone of our high streets and the lifeblood of our communities. However, pubs, caf  s, restaurants and hotels felt the full force of the headwinds unleashed by the economic incompetence of the Conservative party. We had 14 years of Britain's hospitality entrepreneurs being let down. The Conservatives unleashed a cost of living crisis, and interest rates rose 14 times. We had double-digit inflation, with food prices driven higher by the disastrous Brexit deal that they signed. The Conservative party said that it was against red tape but made it ever harder for hospitality businesses to change and innovate. According to the British Beer and Pub Association, the last Government's watch resulted in 10,000 fewer pubs. When both shadow Ministers held key roles in government, a total of 185,000 hospitality businesses closed their doors for good between 2017 and when they left office.

We are turning the page on that grim period with an industrial strategy to boost the whole economy by driving business investment, productivity and innovation across the economy. Businesses across all sectors have welcomed this approach. Frankly, they welcome the marked departure from the permanent chopping and changing of policy that marked the 14 years when the Conservatives were in power. We had austerity, the disastrous trade deal with Europe, and then the revolving door of Prime Ministers and Chancellors. We are doing things differently by setting out comprehensive, research-backed and business-informed strategies to help businesses plan not just for the next 10 months, but for the next 10 years and beyond. Focusing on our core industrial strategy sectors will benefit the rest of the economy, too—for example, the creative industries are a key sectors that will help drive benefits and opportunity for the hospitality sector.

It is a little rich for the Opposition to talk about omissions from the industrial strategy, when they gave up on having any kind of industrial strategy in their final years in office. All our work is complemented by our small business strategy: to back entrepreneurs, to invest in the high street, to improve access to finance, to open up overseas and domestic markets, and to build business capabilities. Inspired by the US's Small Business Administration, we have launched our Business Growth Service, which will be the go-to place to get the advice and information that businesses and entrepreneurs need. We are determined to tackle the scandal of late payments, which the Conservative party never did.

On business rates, let us remember what the Conservatives promised six years ago. In their 2019 manifesto, they said they would begin a fundamental review of the business rates system, but they never did. They were due to reduce business rates relief to zero from April this year. We stopped that—we have kept the relief—and we will deliver on our manifesto commitment to create a fairer business rates system that protects the high street, supports investment and drives growth. We will deliver permanently lower multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, and I certainly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch that it is staggering that the Scottish Government will not commit to do the same.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer had to take difficult decisions in the Budget last year to fix the £22 billion black hole in the public finances. The decisions she took

were vital to help build the long-term stability that is essential for investment, creating jobs and, crucially, putting more money in people's pockets. While I understand the sector's concerns about the increase in national insurance contributions, we are protecting the smallest businesses by increasing the employment allowance to £10,500. Some 1 million employers, of which thousands are hospitality businesses, will pay no NICs at all, and more than half of employers will see no difference or will gain from this package.

We are committed to reducing regulatory burdens to bring down the cost of food, which is why we negotiated a sanitary and phytosanitary deal with the European Union. It is also why we launched the licensing taskforce, with proposals to rebalance the licensing system to better support business growth, cultural vibrancy and public safety. We will bring forward further work in that space shortly. We have also introduced the hospitality support scheme to co-fund projects in line with Hospitality Sector Council priorities, including by supporting initiatives such as Pub is The Hub to encourage local investment, particularly in rural communities. Indeed, the Conservative party axed all funding to support pubs, including support for Pub is The Hub.

Successful pubs, caf  s and restaurants depend on people having the money in their pockets to go out and enjoy what are the best hospitality businesses in the world. Wages grew faster in the first 10 months of this Government than they did in the first 10 years of the Conservatives' time in office. Disposable incomes are set to rise during this Parliament at twice the rate they did during the last Parliament. Business investment is up, almost 400,000 jobs were created in our first year in office, we have had five interest rates cuts and business confidence is rising.

The Conservatives gave up on pubs; they gave up on entrepreneurs; they gave up on caf  s, restaurants and hotels; they gave up on small businesses; and they gave up on high streets. They never had a strategy for growth, they certainly did not have a strategy to back hospitality, and they certainly have not offered any new ideas today. We do have a strategy for growth, and we will continue to work with the hospitality industry to address the challenges it faces. I urge the House to reject the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 158, Noes 334.

Division No. 275]

[6.58 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon	Cane, Charlotte
Aquarone, Steff	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Argar, rh Edward	Cartlidge, James
Atkins, rh Victoria	Chadwick, David
Babarinde, Josh	Chamberlain, Wendy
Bacon, Gareth	Chambers, Dr Danny
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Chope, Sir Christopher
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Cleverly, rh Sir James
Barclay, rh Steve	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Bedford, Mr Peter	Cocking, Lewis
Bhatti, Saqib	Coghlan, Chris
Blackman, Bob	Collins, Victoria
Bool, Sarah	Cooper, Daisy
Brandreth, Aphra	Cooper, John
Brewer, Alex	Costa, Alberto
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Burghart, Alex	Dance, Adam

Darling, Steve
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew

Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Harriet Cross and
 Jerome Mayhew

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir

Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadiq
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan

Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire

Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela

Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan

Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris

Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

**Kate Dearden and
 Christian Wakeford**

Question accordingly negated.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today at Prime Minister's questions in relation to the Norwegian Government's £10 billion investment in the Scottish defence sector, the Prime Minister stated, "I am perplexed that the First Minister of Scotland has not welcomed this deal." The problem for the Prime Minister is that the First Minister did in fact welcome the order from the Norwegian Government to Scottish shipbuilding, meaning that the Prime Minister's statement today was untrue.

The First Minister said:

"The announcement by the Norwegian Government of their intention to buy frigates from BAE is obviously a significant boost to employment and opportunity in the defence sector in Scotland. It's an indication of the steps that have to be taken to ensure that countries are able to defend themselves. And I welcome the investments in Glasgow."

This is an open and shut case and a serious one where the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom was today engaged in advancing a completely false accusation against the First Minister of Scotland. I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how we might get the Prime Minister to come to the House to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. The content of Members' speeches or responses by Ministers are not matters for the Chair. However, the Treasury Bench will have heard the Member's point of order, and I am sure that if there is a need to correct the record, the Prime Minister will do so.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Free-Range Poultrymeat Marketing Standards (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 1 July, be approved.—*(Martin McCluskey.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LIMITED LIABILITY PARTNERSHIPS

That the draft Limited Liability Partnerships (Application and Modification of Company Law) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 30 June, be approved.—*(Martin McCluskey.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPANIES

That the draft Register of People with Significant Control (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 30 June, be approved.—*(Martin McCluskey.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPANIES

That the draft Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 (Consequential, Incidental and Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 30 June, be approved.—*(Martin McCluskey.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

FEES AND CHARGES

That the draft Online Safety Act 2023 (Qualifying Worldwide Revenue) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 26 June, be approved.—*(Martin McCluskey.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Recognition of Palestinian Statehood

7.14 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North. The petition declares that my constituents believe that the UK should recognise Palestinian statehood. For too long now, we have witnessed the most unimaginable horror inflicted on the men, women and little children of Gaza, as the Government of Mr Netanyahu seek to create a desert and call it peace. This is an existential moment for the Palestinian people. The International Criminal Court has described war crimes and crimes against humanity. We in this House cannot now turn away. We have a duty to act as a country, and we have a responsibility to act now.

One hundred and forty countries have recognised Palestine. We should act, and we should act unconditionally, unreservedly and urgently. The Government have set out a plan to recognise Palestine. They must now follow it through—to uphold international law, challenge claims of annexation, and show that we in this country match words with deeds. My constituents call for recognition as part of a plan to stop this barbarity and killing and to surge in aid and release the hostages. The petitioners therefore

“request that the House of Commons urge the Government to recognise Palestinian statehood.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the constituency of Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North

Declares that the residents believe that the UK should recognise Palestinian statehood. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to recognise Palestinian statehood.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003108]

Diabetes in Sport

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Martin McCluskey.) 7.16 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is a real privilege to speak on the vital topic of diabetes and sport. I thank Chris Bright and the Diabetes Football Community, Breakthrough T1D UK and Diabetes UK for their invaluable support and work.

I am so grateful to the many people who have contacted me with their stories, which have been both uplifting and heartbreaking. The fact that we are debating this issue in the Chamber is a huge moment for those who have championed it for a very long time. I hope it marks the start of a national conversation about unlocking the potential of young athletes with diabetes, reassuring their families, and supporting the incredible volunteers and coaches who make grassroots sport such an asset.

Diabetes affects 12 million people in the UK. That means that one in five adults are living with diabetes or pre-diabetes. It is not only a serious condition in itself but a gateway to other devastating health problems. Each week in this country, diabetes contributes to more than 980 strokes, 184 amputations, 680 heart attacks and 3,000 cases of heart failure. It accounts for almost 30% of cardiovascular disease deaths. This is a public health challenge on an immense scale. The good news is that physical activity is one of the most powerful tools we have to combat those outcomes. Exercise improves how effectively the body uses insulin, whether naturally produced or injected, and helps to keep blood glucose levels within the target range.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): As a type 1 diabetic myself, I completely agree with what the hon. Member says. Exercise is an excellent way of moderating blood sugar levels, but it can also bring stresses and strains, as diabetics do worry about hypoglycaemia, which I am sure he will come to. I am a big fan of anything we can do to support people to take up sport, so I congratulate him on securing this debate.

Chris Bloore: I thank the hon. Member for her contribution. I will come on to hypos, as we call them, in a minute, but she is right that reassurance and education are so important.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for bringing forward this debate; he is right to highlight these issues. I want to tell him about a young boy from back home. I recently read an article on diabetes.co.uk about a young man called Ryan Nixon-Stewart from Lisburn in County Down who has his sights set on Olympic victory in athletics after being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. I know that the hon. Gentleman wants to inspire people, and this young man similarly wants to inspire others. His story is inspirational to those who wrongly believe that diabetes and sport do not co-exist. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place; she is always helpful. Does the hon. Member not agree that we must do more to educate our young people to break down the barriers to sporting victory? Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker; I should have declared an interest as a type 2 diabetic.

Chris Bloore: The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise that point. Today I want to talk about the issue of stigma connected with diabetes and sport, particularly type 1 diabetes, and some of the inappropriate stereotypes that put people off taking part in sport, which then impacts their health.

Exercise can reduce the amount of insulin needed, help maintain a healthy weight, improve blood pressure and cholesterol, and support mental health by reducing stress and improving mood. There is no single best form of exercise for everyone with diabetes; what matters is moving in ways that people enjoy and can sustain, whether that is playing football, dancing or simply going for a walk.

I want to tell the House about Chris Bright, who is in the Public Gallery. I met Chris playing futsal, a fast-paced, small-sided football game that uses a heavier ball and which started becoming popular in leisure centres about a decade ago. For those unfamiliar, futsal is a sport loved by many football fanatics; indeed, hon. Members might know Max Kilman, currently at West Ham, who played futsal as a young man and represented England. Chris and I lived close to each other in Redditch and often travelled to games together. He was not only a special talent but someone who worked incredibly hard, took great care of himself and always strived to be better.

Our team was successful—a modern-day Crazy Gang of players of many nationalities—but none of us knew the extra challenges Chris faced managing his diabetes alongside training. One day, on driving him home from a game, I was shocked when I noticed that he was injecting himself because his levels were not where they needed to be. Looking back, I cannot believe how underprepared we were, as a club or even as his teammates, to support him.

Chris is an unrelenting personality. That is why he went on to play international futsal for Wales. More than that, Chris has been a pioneer in the diabetes community, setting up the Diabetes Football Community in Worcestershire. The group runs football teams for all ages and genders, holds family days and provides peer support, making sport accessible and welcoming for people with diabetes. Chris's work is exactly the kind of grassroots leadership we need to replicate across the country, but these personal efforts cannot replace systemic change. That is why I want to share some stories from parents whose children with diabetes have faced exclusion, misunderstanding and stigma when they have tried to take part in sport.

Parent One told me their 10-year-old child was virtually forced out of their football team because the manager said he could not cope with the child's condition, even though the parent attended every match and training session and never asked for special treatment. They moved their child to another team where the manager also had type 1 diabetes, which helped. Parent Two described being actively discouraged from sending their son to a swimming lesson. They offered to monitor and treat him as needed, train a staff member and comply with safeguarding checks, but were told no parents were allowed in and their offers were refused. They only found another swim class after contacting Swim England directly. Parent Three shared their experiences with karate. After diagnosis, they were initially welcomed

[Chris Bloore]

because the sensei's stepson also had type 1 diabetes, but after a hypo incident treated on the sidelines, they were asked to leave the dojo for

"eating and not keeping still,"

which was deeply upsetting and led them to stop going to classes.

Another parent spoke of their child not being selected for a school cricket tournament because the sports lead did not want the "hassle" of caring for him, even though children with no interest in cricket were picked. Another child was sidelined from hockey matches after a coach showed clear misunderstanding and frustration about managing a hypo incident. The child eventually switched to football where the support was better. Even at elite level, a young player in a premier league performance squad experienced exclusion from games after a hypo, despite family reassurance that he was fit to play. The coach never checked in and the player did not get a single minute in an important match, leaving him deeply upset. He ultimately left the club despite the apologies and offers of training for coaches—all because of stigma about something that affects millions of people in this country.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for encouraging awareness of the often unnecessary barriers faced by people with diabetes. We know the huge physical and social benefits of sport, yet stigma, lack of awareness and poor policies, as described, often hold people back. Only a small fraction of coaches have diabetes training and nearly half of people with diabetes say they have been told they cannot be active. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need sporting bodies to prioritise awareness and education and to tackle stigma, so that everyone can enjoy sport?

Chris Bloore: I thank my hon. Friend for a very articulate summary of where we are. We cannot risk losing these athletes from the system—or even risk losing the people who want to play sport at a grassroots level, just to keep fit and keep up friendships.

The stories that I have told today expose a systemic failure: many coaches, schools, and sporting bodies are ill-equipped to support people with diabetes, creating unnecessary barriers to participation and enjoyment. Of 184 national governing bodies in sport, only 20 mention diabetes on their websites or in policy documents, and just four have specific policies to support people with diabetes. That is simply not good enough, especially as chronic health conditions become more common. We need national sports bodies to show leadership, and to work with healthcare professionals and organisations such as Breakthrough T1D and Diabetes UK on training coaches and volunteers and on providing clear, accessible policies.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): Diabetes is a disability that is often hidden and not well understood, and people with it suffer from all the stigma that my hon. Friend has described so well. It is complex to manage, especially being metabolic, and especially in relation to sport, so listening to parents and families, and young people and others with diabetes, is vital. We have benefited in Worcester from the fantastic Warriors Foundation

and the Chris Pennell rugby academy, and I have seen the incredible advantages they have brought for people with type 1 diabetes in our area. They have shown how sport can facilitate community, better awareness and better management of the condition for people with diabetes. Does my hon. Friend agree that in sport, diabetes should be managed at an elite level, so that there is a real opportunity for people with diabetes to own the condition and their sports performance?

Chris Bloore: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for his contribution. He is absolutely right. It is incredible how sport can be used to reach people and inform them about health conditions in a way that many other areas of our public policy cannot.

The Equality Act 2010 provides legal protection against discrimination but a gulf remains between policy and lived experience. People with diabetes—often a hidden disability, as my hon. Friend said—face ongoing discrimination and a lack of adjustments in schools, workplaces, leisure centres and community settings. Diabetes is a major public health crisis with far-reaching consequences. Physical activity can prevent complications, improve quality of life and reduce the burden on our NHS, where diabetes prescriptions account for 15% of total medication costs. Health inequality is stark. People from the most deprived areas are twice as likely to develop type 2 diabetes, and are less likely to have access to green space and safe affordable places to be active. We need targeted support for these communities to close this gap.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about health inequalities; we know that people of some ethnicities are more predisposed to diabetes, so as well as sports organisations focusing on improving information and support for people with diabetes, does he agree that they should also support people from different ethnicities to ensure that health inequalities are ironed out at every level?

Chris Bloore: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I know he is a champion for reducing health inequalities in his constituency. I completely agree with him, and I hope that will be part of what we do on this.

In conclusion, the unpredictability of diabetes is a real obstacle to physical activity, but ignorance and stigma should never be. People with diabetes deserve to feel safe and confident participating in sport and exercise, and coaches, teachers and volunteers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to support them. The status quo simply is not working, and I hope that the Minister, after today's discussion, will be willing to meet me, community leaders and stakeholders, so that we can work together and plan how to deal with this. Together, we can put in place a clear pathway to ensure that everyone, regardless of their health condition, can participate in sport, and that as a nation, we can reap the rewards of improved health outcomes.

7.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I am really pleased to be responding to this debate, and I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) on securing it. This has been a well attended Adjournment debate, and I put on record my thanks to Members for their attendance and the

interventions. We have had interventions from across the House, including from the hon. Members for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) and for Smethwick (Gurinder Singh Josan). That shows the real interest in this incredibly important topic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch made a powerful speech outlining why this is such an important issue and debate. This Government have set out a bold and ambitious agenda for change, and sport and physical activity have an important role to play in it, as my hon. Friend outlined. I will discuss that before addressing specific issues that he raised. Not only does physical activity play a vital role in tackling the health challenges facing our nation by helping to treat and manage a wide range of health conditions, but community sport can play a major role in building confidence and teamwork, supporting life skills for future generations and improving community cohesion.

Despite those benefits, over a fifth of adults—almost 12 million—are inactive, and over a third of children do less than 30 minutes of activity a day. The data shows us that this varies by geography, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. I have seen that at first hand in my constituency; people in Stairfoot live seven years fewer than people on the other side of Barnsley. That is just one example; too often, that is replicated across the country.

Put simply, too many people are inactive, and the number is disproportionately higher among certain demographics, including people with long-term health conditions, such as diabetes. Our ambition is that everyone, no matter their background, should be able to take part in sport. Being physically active is particularly important in helping to reduce the risk of chronic diseases in adults and manage long-term health conditions. Evidence shows that physical activity directly prevents 3.2 million cases of long-term health conditions per year, including 600,000 cases of diabetes, equating to over £10 billion of healthcare savings each year.

Moving more can substantially reduce the risk of diabetes. For example, moving more can reduce the adult population's relative risk of type 2 diabetes by 40%. For people living with either type 1 or type 2 diabetes, being active helps manage the condition; in particular, it reduces the likelihood of serious complications, such as stroke and heart disease. In fact, moving more can, over time, help people with type 2 diabetes manage their blood glucose levels. Of course, being physically active is incredibly good for mental health as well as physical health.

My hon. Friend knows all this, which is why he brought forward the debate. The challenge for all of us is how we ensure that those with long-term health conditions, such as diabetes, can benefit from physical activity. While every person's experience is unique, common barriers for people with diabetes include pain, fatigue and sometimes the necessity of regular injections. I was particularly concerned to hear that people with diabetes have also reported that stigma has held them back from doing more physical activity.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for bringing forward the debate, and for so brilliantly setting out the challenges, but also the opportunity to

give people with diabetes far more benefits from sport. One of the brilliant innovations in mental healthcare in recent years has been social prescribing in general practice. So much of that revolves around encouraging people to be physically active and to socialise. Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely vital that we ensure that when we signpost people to support, it is available to people with diabetes, so that they can reap the benefits, rather than feeling the stigma of rejection from spaces, which she and my hon. Friend mentioned?

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, and I will come on to discuss that shortly.

We all share a responsibility to enable, support and include people who are managing health conditions such as diabetes, including in sporting environments. Increasing physical activity and reducing inactivity is part of the Government's health agenda to shift from treatment to prevention. Our 10-year health plan published in July 2025 commits to taking a place-based approach to physical activity. We will invest £250 million in 100 places through Sport England, invest £400 million in local community sport facilities, and develop new school sport partnerships to support schools and families in establishing healthy physical activity behaviours early on. Sport England's place-based partnerships show that where investment in physical activity is designed with local people, physical inactivity rates were nearly 4 percentage points lower.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes, and over the summer, we visited the Northern general hospital in Sheffield. We met healthcare professionals who spoke about their one-stop shop for people with diabetes. They want to deliver services in communities, and in places with grassroots community sports. Does she agree that this might be a perfect opportunity that ties into what she describes?

Stephanie Peacock: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I would love to hear more about that example in Sheffield, just down the road from my constituency. He brings me neatly on to the example that I was going to share. I recently saw some of this work in action when I visited Essex. There, local council leaders are working in partnership with Active Essex, local health services and leisure providers to knit services together. They are building strong links between the health and leisure sectors, including by co-locating services, so that people have easy access to a wide range of physical activity opportunities. That means, for example, that people with long-term health conditions can access activities that not only improve their physical health, but are fun and social and, in some cases, contribute to getting them back into work.

Of course, excellent examples of the work being done are local NHS and social prescribing services, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) said. They can direct individuals with long-term conditions to various local physical activity opportunities, such as public leisure facilities, walking groups and nature-based exercise as part of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs funding for green social prescribing. Parkrun is linked with over 2,000 GP practices, and offers a free option for all abilities.

[Stephanie Peacock]

Sport England funds and provides guidance and education for their system partners. It funds “Moving Medicine”, a Faculty of Sport and Exercise Medicine initiative that provides resources to support healthcare professionals in integrating physical activity conversations into routine clinical care. That includes specific guidance on type 1 and type 2 diabetes. Sport England’s Buddle programme provides free learning and support resources to inspire and strengthen clubs and organisations offering sport and physical activity, as well the professionals who work with them. Buddle shares the latest information, training and tools, to help clubs and organisations overcome challenges and make the most of the opportunities available to them. That includes sharing case studies and signposting further guidance to enable those with long-term health conditions to exercise safely and effectively.

The national “We Are Undefeatable” campaign, funded by Sport England, inspires and supports people to be active by showing people living with a variety of conditions—both visible and invisible—on their journeys to being active. The campaign aims to address the stigma around exercising with disabilities and long-term health conditions, to reduce exclusion from physical activity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch gave incredibly powerful and moving examples of the impact that stigma can have, showing clearly that there is more to do to ensure that the sport sector provides the support needed for those with diabetes. We expect all national governing bodies to have plans in place to support those with long-term health conditions, and to make the most of the training and support on offer from the professional development body for sport and physical activity and from the NHS. Although the research that my hon. Friend referred to indicates a lack of clear, explicit policies on chronic conditions, such as diabetes, in many NGBs, the legal requirement not to discriminate and to make reasonable adjustments remains in force.

The research clearly shows that some areas of inclusion have more developed policies than others, as is the case with diabetes. That disparity suggests the need for a more co-ordinated and robust approach to supporting

individuals with chronic health conditions in sport. We will therefore continue to look for further answers, including through Sport England conducting research with Diabetes UK on the barriers to and opportunities for physical activity. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch and the organisations that he mentioned.

Ultimately, this is about every part of the system—from the NHS to national governing bodies, and from leaders to local partners—playing their part in making sport and physical activity easier to access and manage alongside diabetes.

Tom Gordon: I thank the Minister for being very generous with her time. One key point is that when it comes to exercise and sport, our most formative experiences are at school. When my sister was at high school, diabetes carried a massive stigma, and she was told that she would have to inject her insulin in a toilet, which was completely inappropriate. Does the Minister agree that we must ensure that people with diabetes have positive experiences, starting as early as school?

Stephanie Peacock: I absolutely agree. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work with the all-party parliamentary group.

In summary, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch and Members across the House for their contribution to this debate. As much as anything else, public awareness is key to this agenda. I hope that my hon. Friend can take from my response that the Government are committed to getting more people active, no matter their background. I am hugely passionate about this agenda, as I know that being physically active and playing sport is genuinely life-changing, and, if anything, can be even more important for those with long-term health conditions. I will happily continue to work with him on this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.38 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 3 September 2025

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

Use of Drones in Defence

9.30 am

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of drones in defence.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank colleagues for enabling me to secure this debate.

Contrary to what some people may think, drones are not a new tool. The UK first began testing unmanned aerial vehicles for training during the first world war and later developed them in the 1930s for anti-aircraft gunnery target practice. Much like the noble tank owes its name to Britain, the drone does too: the Hatfield-built Queen Bee radio-controlled aircraft is thought to have inspired the term “drone”. As technology has improved and drones have become more sophisticated, their military use has expanded over the decades to include reconnaissance, surveillance and targeted strikes.

From the Queen Bee to bomb disposal vehicles to today’s Reapers, the UK armed forces have long used drones, but while we were an early pioneer, we now risk falling behind. The slow evolution of drones is now fast revolutionising warfare. Their mass use has transformed combat in Ukraine, on the land, in the air and at sea, with cheap kamikaze drones causing immense damage. Staggeringly, up to 80% of Russian and Ukrainian casualties are due to drones. They have transformed combat on the frontline. Drones threaten infantrymen, fortified positions and vehicles up to 9 miles from contact lines. Moving positions and supplies has become a deadly task.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is outlining accurately the issue in Ukraine, where the Russians are deploying drones to devastating effect. Does he agree that, unfortunately, the west has not armed Ukraine sufficiently to counter that threat and ensure there is a pushback against the Russian aggressor, and we need to reassess that threat not just in Ukraine but across the globe?

Peter Fortune: It is right that we continue to support Ukraine. Our support of Ukraine is keeping us safe in the west, and we need to redouble our efforts to make sure the brave soldiers and people of Ukraine are well defended.

Drones are now an important part of supply chains and logistics, with Ukraine using ground drones to move ammunition and other supplies to the frontline. Operation Spiderweb saw Ukraine smuggle 117 cheap first-person-view drones to successfully strike a Russian airfield, disabling a third of Russia’s strategic bombers. That is drones worth a couple of hundred dollars inflicting an estimated \$7 billion of damage.

Sea drones have changed the balance of power in the Black sea. A third of Russia’s fleet was damaged or destroyed by relatively low-cost sea drones packed with explosives ramming ships. While Russia’s navy has adapted to make these attacks harder, sea drones carrying missiles or other drones are still causing immense damage—a \$300,000 sea drone can destroy fighter jets worth \$50 billion.

Drones are transforming warfare and levelling the playing field in asymmetric fights, but the change can be seen beyond Ukraine. Israel weakened Iran’s attacks on its territory by covertly transporting drones in suitcases and trucks to destroy Iranian air defences and missiles. Houthi rebels used drones to target HMS Diamond, requiring the ship to use its expensive missiles to stop a relatively cheap attack. Even drug cartels in Mexico are using cheap drones to launch targeted strikes against security services. Terrorist groups are also adapting commercially available drones for reconnaissance and filming propaganda, and they will undoubtedly be used in future attacks.

The pace of change is unbelievably fast, but the direction is clear: drone warfare is the future, and Britain must be the leader in the development, testing and mass deployment of drones. That means three things. First, we must develop an ecosystem of private enterprises that can innovate, test and build drone models—big and small, sophisticated and simple—at a larger scale. Ukraine is armed with many UK-made drones. We have supplied some 70,000 already and have a target of 100,000 by the end of the year, but that pales in comparison with the numbers required for drone warfare. Ukraine aims to produce 4.5 million this year.

It would take relatively little money to kick-start a collection of competing companies, capable of innovating to keep up with battlefield changes, to build inexpensive or sophisticated drones. We must also help commercial drone enterprises to thrive. Although they were not initially intended to, those machines can have military purposes and can provide the industrial-scale drone warfare that we require. It is disappointing and frankly unacceptable that, since the general election, the Government have purchased only three drones for the UK armed forces.

Secondly, if the UK procures many new drones, we will be able to start training our forces and learning the lessons from Ukraine. Although our brave service personnel use drones for many tasks, they are not as widely utilised as modern warfare demands.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, with which I agree. Like him, I have been part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme with the Royal Marines. Over the past year, he and I have seen drones deployed—I will not say where. More importantly, there is innovation in the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines, but it is compartmentalised and bitty, and it is not at the scale that he is talking about. Is it not time for the Government to use the innovation in the armed forces to expand out into the private sector?

Peter Fortune: This is a good point at which to mention the armed forces parliamentary scheme, of which colleagues from across the House are part. That great enterprise enables us to better understand the pressures and the reality that our armed forces personnel

[Peter Fortune]

face. My hon. Friend is right that we have visited sites where we have seen how drones can be used and how effective they can be for deployment on the battlefield. That drives my request to the Minister to look at how we can procure more drones.

We are steadfast in our support for Ukraine, where we have made the military links we need to learn how drones can make our British forces even more lethal. They can carry out unmanned assaults and provide the support that our personnel need.

Finally, and in equal measure, we need to look at how the armed forces can counter drones—what we can do to fight them off. HMS Diamond is a particular case in point, as it successfully destroyed nine Houthi drones, but at huge expense. We have seen the damage that drones have inflicted on prestigious targets—Russian jets, ships and bombers—so we clearly need to defend ourselves from them. As a nation, we cannot afford to let cheaply purchased drones with a grenade attached wreck a multimillion-pound piece of equipment. We are already developing solutions such as radio frequency directed energy weapons, capable of neutralising swarms of drones, but as we look to ramp up defence spending in a more dangerous world, the threat posed by cheap drones must be answered.

Drones will not make infantry, artillery, ships or aircraft obsolete; they are a new tool that will help to transform warfare. They must be an integral part of our efforts to strengthen the UK's armed forces and face down the threats our country now faces.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Yesterday afternoon, we were in this Chamber discussing the battle of Britain, and we spoke at length about the reforms made prior to the second world war to the British military—especially to the Royal Air Force, including the use of radar. In fact, I am currently reading a book on the pre-world war one Haldane reforms to the British armed forces. In the light of the defence review and the changing nature of warfare, does the hon. Gentleman believe that the current structure and make-up of the British military reflect the urgent, pressing reality that we will be facing war close to our borders in the next five years? Does he have any recommendations to the British military for the changes that are needed?

Peter Fortune: I was hoping to attend the debate yesterday—of course, Biggin Hill in my constituency played a huge part in the RAF's incredible efforts during the second world war and the battle of Britain—but sadly I was in the main Chamber in a different debate. Through those big conflicts at the beginning of the last century, we saw huge innovation and people learning, as the cliché goes, not to fight the previous conflict. We will always have to adapt and change. I know, especially through the armed forces personnel scheme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) mentioned, that senior people—and, I am sure, Ministers, with their huge experience—are considering all the time how we best get ready for the conflicts that we do not yet know we are about to face.

In conclusion, the Government must embrace a review of how we are developing drones, fast—

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): The hon. Member may be aware that some months ago a surgeon broke down while giving evidence to the International Development Committee describing what appeared to be some form of artificial intelligence or unmanned vehicles descending to shoot children in Gaza after bombing had occurred. Does he agree that drones should never be used to kill children? We must know whether drones developed or made in the UK that were exported to Israel before licences were suspended are being used to shoot children in Gaza.

Peter Fortune: It is not my place to talk about what the Israeli Government are doing, but I know that there are international laws of conflict, and everybody should adhere to them.

In conclusion—I have started so I shall finish—the Government need to embrace this issue, and fast. We cannot afford to wait and see. Britain must foster companies, train our forces and develop countermeasures to ensure that we master this new form of warfare.

9.41 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell.

The potential of drones first struck me shortly after I was first elected to this place. In August 2017, the new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth went on a tour of the north of Scotland and tied up at Invergordon. While she was there, an enterprising photographer flew a drone from the Black Isle across the Cromarty Firth with a view to taking pictures of the new aircraft carrier. The wind got up, and the drone automatically landed on the deck. That posed the question in all our minds: “How on earth did this happen? How did that drone get so close to an incredibly expensive warship—the pride of the Royal Navy?”

The photographer was quite open about what he had done, and he wittily quipped to the BBC that he could have put a couple of pounds of Semtex on the drone. Nothing was done about it, and the following week he did it again—he took photographs, but he did not land the drone that time. I made the point in the press that if that person had been of wicked intent, he could have flown the drone straight into the radar assembly and made a complete mess of our fine warship.

We have all seen the extraordinary effectiveness of drones, as has been referred to by the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune). I congratulate him on a thoughtful and timely speech—I will come to that in a second. We have seen what happens when a Ukrainian drone drops an explosive device through an open hatch on a Russian tank. Some military experts have argued that the massive explosion that happens is partly due to the way the munitions are stored in a circular fashion within the turret of the tank—it is called the “jack-in-the-box” effect. One thing is for sure: the crew have no chance of survival when that happens. The T-14 Armata tank was reckoned to be the last word in armoured vehicles, but Russia perhaps has not talked about it quite so much recently. We are pretty sure that drones may not get through its armour, but they have taken out the engine, and when a tank is immobilised it loses most of its effectiveness.

I suppose the point I want to make is an historic one. In 1906, Admiral Lord Fisher set about building HMS Dreadnought—it was very much his brainchild—and he completed it in nine months flat. Dreadnought completely transformed the way navies build their ships. It rendered every other warship in the entire world obsolete in one fell swoop, and all the other countries had no choice but to think that they had to build ships equivalent to Dreadnought—turbine powered, high speed, all big guns—and hundreds of battleships were just sent for scrap. The reason why I think this debate is historic is that it occurs to me that we may have such a moment on our hands right now.

I was my party's defence spokesperson for a number of years. We all knew about Challenger 2 being upgraded to Challenger 3, but just how drone-proof will Challenger 3 be? We have all read about constructing cages over tanks, in the hope that drones will bounce off, but the fact is that all tanks have weak spots—we have heard about the engine of the T-14 Armata. Tanks are designed with their armour forward or to the sides to deflect at very high speed a missile or a shell; the rear of a tank is the most vulnerable bit.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): My background is in armoured infantry and warfare, and I completely concur that the weak spots of a tank are probably underneath it or to the rear. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out with the Armata tank, we should consider the use of drones to immobilise, and not just the engine block. The weak spot of any tank is its tracks, which are very easily disabled—that is the point of an anti-tank mine. During the second world war the Russians trained dogs to find food under tanks, so that they could then strap explosives to them, send them under German tanks and detonate them. Should we be looking at the protection that we provide to the side of a tank, to further protect its tracked infrastructure and prevent it from being mobility-killed?

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He knows his subject—we can see that.

In conclusion, as we plough on from Challenger 2 to Challenger 3, and as we develop armoured personnel carriers and other armoured vehicles, have we in fact come to the Dreadnought moment, when we have to completely rethink how we design and indeed deploy armour? That could be the case, and if an APC is equally vulnerable to a drone, which it will be, we must think about how we move infantry around. I seek reassurance that the Government are taking a completely new look at that. As I say, I believe this is a Dreadnought moment, and we owe it to our armed services to have the courage to say, "Wait a minute, hang on. Do we need to start all over again with a blank sheet of paper?" Drones are here to stay, and the point made about us being at the forefront of constructing drones is true and I concur with it.

9.47 am

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell.

The nature of warfare has changed. During the last three years of conflict driven by the war in Ukraine and, perhaps controversially, two years of Israel Defence Forces operations in Gaza, we have seen a paradigm shift in the nature of warfare—a tangential move away

from the manoeuvre warfare that has shaped military thinking since the blitzkrieg illustrated the potential of speed and firepower. The previous Conservative Government recognised the direction of travel and introduced the UK defence drone strategy prior to the election, in February last year. Backed by an investment of £4.5 billion, the intention was to enable the rapid experimentation, testing and evaluation of uncrewed platforms.

The past year has seen the publication of the strategic defence review, which reflects the continued change of focus. It makes much of the need to adopt a high-low mix, combining exquisite capability with attritable capability such as drones—for high-low, read "expensive-cheap". At the recent Royal United Service Institute land warfare conference, the opening address of General Sir Roly Walker, Chief of the General Staff, directly referred to the change to a high-low mix in the British Army. He said:

"I want 20% of our lethality to come from the survivable layer, 40% from the attritable, and 40% from consumable. That does not mean I want 1/5th the number of crewed platforms in the Programme of Record, it's that I want each one to be five times more lethal, survivable and sustainable...And I want to spend 50% of our money on the 20% of crewed and expensive, and 50% on the remaining 80% of attritable."

We have all seen footage of first-person view drones and how they have been used in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. As a former infanteer, the sight of individual soldiers being stalked slowly by drones hovering just behind them, and menaced and killed at will, strikes fear into my heart for the future of being an infantryman. This is, hopefully, a temporary situation, and in much the same way that the improvised explosive device was in conflict with electronic countermeasures—ECMs—so too will drones find themselves, in time, at the mercy of counter-unmanned aircraft system solutions. Last week, there was an article in *The Washington Post* about the measures the Ukrainians are taking to combat Russian drone threats, which include going as far as using a biplane with a crew member firing them out of the air with a shotgun. That is the sort of inventive stuff that is currently going on in the east—we would not believe it if we saw it in a movie.

We have already seen the RAF and the Army begin to employ agile combat employment such as the penetrative threat of drones, as illustrated by the bold attack by Ukraine on airfields deep inside Russian territory mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune). There is, however, very little in place to prevent a copycat attack against our forces in the UK. If RAF Brize Norton can be breached by civilians on scooters, it can be easily breached by a swarm of drones. What price our air-to-air refuelling or heavy lift capability? That is not easily replaced and fairly easily defeated on the ground. What efforts are the Government making to ensure that we have permanent counter-unmanned aircraft systems capability at all operational flying bases? Agile combat employment will get us only so far and, as we have seen, it takes only a couple of litres of red paint to destroy a jet engine.

In Ukraine, we have seen that survivability is key: how we fight a vehicle is as important as how we physically protect it or conceal it. Before any talk about thermal camouflage or, increasingly, multispectral camouflage, we should consider how the age and capability of the kit we have makes it vulnerable to a drone threat it was never designed to encounter.

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

The strategic defence review outlines the British Army's intention to move to a dynamic high-low capability mix, as I alluded to earlier, of 20-40-40: that is 20% crewed platforms to control 40% attritable—preferably survivable—platforms, and 40% consumables such as shells and missiles, also including attritable one-way effector drones. For such a fundamental doctrinal shift in manoeuvre warfare around which the entire Army would need to be restructured, a single sub-paragraph on page 110 of the SDR does not really cut it. I would be interested to hear the Minister's view on how he plans to extrapolate such a paucity of strategic intent.

At the lowest consumable level, handheld off-the-shelf drones are a plentiful, cheap and effective tool. They are low cost and high volume. Our funding of capability in Ukraine should really be seen as an investment; it is not cynical to suggest that the current conflict is a helpful proving ground for our own future capability. First-person view drones have quickly become a stalwart of the modern battlefield and sit within what the Ministry of Defence considers to be tier 1 and tier 2—those that are consumable or attritable. It is those drones that will see the quickest development, the biggest leaps in capability, and the most effort going into combating them from an anti-personnel perspective. We have already seen the development of a counter-UAS ECM that has led to the impractical horizontal development of fibre-optic drones. The pace of development should force us to ask what the capability will be like by the time British troops are required to use them in anger.

Edward Morello: The hon. Member is right to point out the rapid change in drone technology in the field in Ukraine. We have also seen the deployment of artificial intelligence such that where drones are being jammed, the AI can take over and continue to lock on and have something in the region of a 70% success rate even after jamming. Obviously, there is an understandable shift in UK military thinking towards drones, but that needs to be supported by UK innovation in the AI space. We need to get greater ownership of that, especially in our technology sector and our universities, to support development. Does the hon. Member have any views on that?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I think AI will increasingly become a mainstay of the battlefield, and how we employ it will become incredibly important. My concern is about the control of AI and knowing that the target we are trying to prosecute is indeed still viable right up to the last safe moment. Once we lose control of a drone and it becomes AI-capable, in theory it could switch to a more preferential target, which may be a good opportunity, or it may be a catastrophe that ends up as front-page news. We need to think carefully about how we employ drones.

On the overall development of drones, another important factor to consider is how we employ the warhead. It is only a matter of time before we look at options such as the replacement of Javelin—I was a Javelin platoon commander when I was in the Army—which has a two-stage warhead, with the first stage penetrating the armour and the second stage going inside the vehicle, exploding and detonating to kill the crew. The application of something like a two-stage warhead to an FPV drone

is going to become an increasingly potent threat. It will be interesting to see at what point that emerges on the battlefield.

At tier 3—a level up—we have those platforms that are firmly considered to be survivable. The entry into service of Protector RG mark 1, replacing Reaper, illustrates how the Royal Air Force is moving further into the world of uncrewed air systems. With a ceiling of 40,000 feet and a mission endurance in excess of 30 hours, it marks the next evolution in our drone capability. With an ongoing project to enable it with the low-collateral Brimstone 3, it will be a potent weapons delivery platform, although that project is currently rated at amber.

Indeed, the introduction of remotely piloted aircraft systems—RPAS—as its own stream within RAF pilot training illustrates the complexity of how drones will be used going forwards. We have already seen the SDR outline the desire to introduce a hybrid carrier air wing, with crewed and uncrewed platforms operating alongside one another from our carrier strike group.

That leads us into the category of exquisite capability. The elephant in the room is GCAP—the global combat air programme—a trilateral endeavour with Italy and Japan that aims to deliver a sixth-generation fighter by 2035. I do not wish to derail the debate by talking about the merits and pitfalls of sixth-generation fighters, and whether by the time they arrive we will still need or want an exquisite capability, given how precious we are already about our fifth-generation F-35s, but there is a key issue with the platform as an exquisite capability.

The intention of GCAP is not to have massed squadrons of fighters flying into dogfights over Russia. Those days are long gone; in future, we should expect most, if not all, engagements to take place beyond visual range. Any near-peer conflict will involve formidable air defence that will render the low-level bombing runs of yesteryear the stuff of Hollywood. No, the intention is to operate GCAP as a system of systems: a crewed platform where the pilot is less of a pilot and more an integrated part of the system—effectively, a weapons platform operator co-ordinating the battle space—and where the uncrewed autonomous collaborative platforms, or loyal wingmen, operate as a squadron and conduct the task as an attritable but very expensive asset that can complete the mission without risk to aircrew, impervious to being disabled by ECM, and operating networked to GCAP itself.

The RAF's autonomous collaborative platform strategy aims to have ACP as an integral part of the RAF force structure by 2030, and we have started to see that being rolled out in recent weeks. This is a concept that I do not believe we can fully afford. The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority already has the future combat air system rated at red—that is not just GCAP but the ACP strategy that accompanies it. It would be one thing to achieve an ACP capability, and another to develop and deliver a sixth-generation fighter, whether on time or decades late, but to deliver both seems fanciful based on the Ministry of Defence's procurement track record.

In a world where the infantry are still using armoured vehicles that came into service the same year the Beatles released their debut single—closer to the end of the first world war than to today—with no current plans to replace them, I cannot envisage a situation where we

have a sovereign fighter jet that ranks as the best in the world and a squadron of drone fighters operating alongside it. We urgently need to start managing our expectation.

The Government talk a good game on RPAS but, for all the talk of increasing the defence budget, our drone strategy looks an incoherent mess. I am sure the Minister will set me straight on whether that is accurate. We are pouring money into exquisite capability while watching the war in Ukraine spiral-develop capability that we have no idea how to use in the last 100 yards. The pace of technological change that is driving the evolution of the threat environment is such that unless we leverage the spiral development capability that already exists here, coupled with the expertise that now exists in Ukraine, British forces will be left behind.

9.57 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship again, Ms Lewell. I commend the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) for setting the scene so well. I had hoped to see more people at this debate; I expected a full house. This is about modern technology—this is the future—and something we really have to look at. There are fantastic benefits to using drones in our defence sector. It is a real pleasure to see the Minister in his place again; he is becoming a regular in Westminster Hall. He is trying to catch me up, and I am sure he is almost there.

Drones can provide real-time intelligence and access hard-to-see areas, providing essential information for local armies and for the Government—I will mention some roles outside of defence in which they can be effective. We must make sure they are used correctly and to the best of our ability. It is great to be here to discuss that. I was sitting here thinking about drones, and I can remember, because of my age, the first episode of “Star Trek” with the laser guns and “Beam me up, Scotty.” We are not yet at that stage, but I do wonder whether one day we will be. It would be great for an MP living in Northern Ireland: I could be in my office at 9 o’clock and at 25 past be beamed over to Westminster. I know that is fictional and highly improbable, but drones were once highly improbable, and now they are not. They were once fictional, but now they are reality.

We can cast our minds back to *The Terminator* films, in which drones chase the Terminator and other people about. That shows what can happen, and that is what is happening today in Ukraine. Fictional things of the past that we thought were not going to happen clearly can happen—and perhaps they will. I am not sure whether anybody else saw in the paper yesterday that China seems to have a laser attack capability. There was a tank in the square, on parade yesterday, that has laser capabilities and could be the weapon of the future. Again, it is early days, but who can say it will not happen sometime in the future?

In February 2024, the UK Ministry of Defence launched a defence drone strategy backed by a £4.5 billion investment over the next decade. There is a need for new advanced technology, especially after the conflict we have witnessed in Ukraine. When I watch the things happening in Ukraine, I find them almost inconceivable; I know others feel the same. We see innocent civilians in their gardens or going to the shops and children coming back from school being targeted by Russian drones—the

Russians know fine rightly that those are innocent civilians and yet they attack and kill them. On the buses there are no army personnel; they are civilians. The Russians know exactly what they are doing with the drones. Russia has shown technology at its worst. We should be aware of what is happening.

I was watching TV last week. A civilian journalist and cameraman went down to the battlefield in Donetsk. A drone followed them; they got under the trees and hid there. When they were driving down there, there were net-type things over the roads that deflect the drone activity. These are some of the things that have to be done, but technology is moving so fast. What we thought in the past would never happen is happening today. That tells me that in the future, when I will probably not be here, there will be even more of the impossible becoming the reality.

The UK Government have invested over £40 million in radio frequency-directed weapons research. I thank the Government for that as well as the previous Minister, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). To give him some credit, when he was in government he made regular visits to Thales in Belfast and across Northern Ireland, and he—now the shadow Minister—recognised the importance of the new technology. I know the present Minister and the Government feel the same way, so there is no dispute and they will continue with that policy. I am convinced of that.

There are 135 skilled jobs at Thales in Northern Ireland offering further support in our defence. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and I visited Thales in his constituency last year to ascertain where it was going. I was incredibly impressed by the modern technology and how we are leading the way. I am also pleased that when it comes to technology in modern warfare, there is a real Government policy, of the previous Government and this one, to ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can take advantage of it. I thank them for that.

To look at a different angle, the Police Service of Northern Ireland uses drones in operational support and border surveillance. It can keep track of what is happening in border areas. It also supports police officers on the ground. There are other ways of doing things and we have to acknowledge what those ways are. Are they effective? Yes, they are. Can they help and do the job? Yes, they can. They assist in monitoring crime hotspots as well. When someone is involved in drugs, antisocial behaviour, attacks, assaults or whatever it may be, a drone in the air can spot that person, providing an evidential base for the future. Drones are used in search and rescue and managing public disorder. Let us not forget that the eye in the sky is keeping an eye on us when we are on the streets, as happens in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

As everyone knows, I represent Strangford. Boats in Strangford lough have unfortunately got lost or have overturned over the years, and one of the ways of doing search and rescue is to use a drone. When young people go missing, drones are used to ascertain where they were. Unfortunately, on the occasions that I can recall us hoping to find someone alive, that did not always work out, but drones did help with the search and

[Jim Shannon]

rescue. That is what the PSNI and other organisations are doing, and we have to recognise the good that that brings.

Drones are crucial for situational awareness and enable personnel to make quicker and more effective decisions. The soldier of today is much better equipped, more able and more experienced in modern technology than soldiers would have been in the past. Drones allow for constant surveillance and the detection of enemy movements or illegal activity. More importantly, they enable early intervention, which can reduce casualties and military deaths, making sure that those who do their best for our safety are as protected and safe as possible.

Numerous manufacturers across this nation are more than capable of making and supplying drones for our defence industry. I am told by my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East that 60% of the workforce at Thales, in my neighbouring constituency, comes from Strangford. We are very pleased to make a direct contribution to the Thales workforce. The efforts that they make are critical for defence.

There is a real opportunity to progress technological warfare and to share data with our allies, especially the US. One day, we will have our drones, others will then find a way of deflecting the drone, another side will get another way of modifying the technology, and then we will have to come back again with something else—it is always going to evolve. We have to support the Government's commitment to spending money on cybersecurity and drone technology, and we thank the Government for it. Drones are a key element of UK defence. They aim to enhance our national security and, importantly, protect lives. We must invest wisely in their use.

We must also remember the opportunities for local people. Thales employed 200 new people, some of whom were apprentices. The apprentices receive a level of remuneration that makes them want to stay there. I know some of the young apprentices; the company was paying their student fees so that they would stay, because Thales wants to have a level of technological advantage by bringing in people at an early stage. That is a point about employment and job creation.

I look to the Minister to ensure that we can continue to be a leading nation in surveillance and drone defence, and to commit to proving that over the next decade. I know that he will, but we must all be focused on that.

10.8 am

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) for securing this important debate; I was sorry not to be able to hear from him yesterday in the battle of Britain debate.

The integration of drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles, into defence has transformed the way that nations think about security and the battlefield. Over the past decade, we have seen a steady growth in their use, and the war in Ukraine has made clear to the world just how central they have become. What was once considered cutting-edge technology is now an everyday feature of modern warfare. It is alarming that more soldiers today are being killed by drones in Ukraine than by any other form of warfare.

However, the benefits of drones are undeniable. Drones allow us to project force and gather intelligence without putting soldiers directly in harm's way. They give commanders a real-time picture of the battlefield, overcoming traditional line-of-sight limitations and extending awareness deep into enemy territory. They have become central to surveillance, targeting, logistics and even battlefield medical support. For example, drones equipped with advanced thermal imaging can locate casualties hidden in rubble, smoke or woodland. They can deliver medical supplies, bandages, medication and even defibrillators into remote or inaccessible areas, providing rapid aid while reducing the need to send medics into danger.

In defensive operations, tethered drones are able to remain airborne for hours, providing uninterrupted surveillance and protecting bases from surprise attack. AI-enabled drones can patrol throughout the night, automatically detecting and flagging suspicious activity, which reduces the pressure on human surveillance teams and cuts the risk of fatigue.

Cost is another factor. Compared with tanks, aircraft or armoured vehicles, drones are relatively cheap to produce, quick to deploy and often expendable. Ukraine's experience shows how even commercial drones adapted for reconnaissance or artillery targeting can deliver immense tactical advantage. Their real-time video and geolocation data have significantly improved artillery accuracy, reducing waste of ammunition and increasing strike precision. Drones have also enabled Ukraine to conduct long-range strikes deep into Russian territory, disrupting logistics and undermining morale.

However, alongside those advantages, we must acknowledge the challenges. Drones are not a silver bullet. They come with ethical concerns about remote warfare, accountability and lethal decision making, and the potential for escalation when operators can strike from thousands of miles away.

Technically, they are also highly vulnerable. Drones depend on data links—radio or satellite based—and GPS signals to navigate and communicate. Adversaries with electronic warfare capabilities can jam, spoof or hijack those links. That is not theory: as has already been mentioned, in 2009 Iraqi insurgents intercepted live US drone video feeds using cheap, commercially available software. In Ukraine, Russian jamming and interference has disrupted as many as 60% to 80% of drones before they reach their targets. That has forced Ukrainian forces to innovate using frequency-hopping communications, deploying fibre-optic cables up to 50 km long, and even experimenting with AI-based navigation when comms fail.

The lesson is clear: we must be realistic about what drones can do. Overreliance on them would be reckless. Ground forces remain indispensable for holding territory, engaging with civilian populations, providing humanitarian relief and responding to dynamic battle conditions. Drones can enhance these missions, but they cannot replace them. A balanced force of combined arms structure is essential.

I welcome the Government's announcement of a £2 billion drone investment package and the establishment of a drone innovation centre. Those are important steps, but technology alone is not enough. A fleet of advanced drones is only as effective as the people who operate and maintain it, and all three services will need drone pilots. That should form part of basic training.

Drone warfare requires highly skilled professionals—pilots trained to control aircraft in contested environments, engineers able to maintain complex systems, data analysts capable of interpreting live feeds and AI specialists who can design resilient autonomy. Without those skills, our investment risks being underutilised or, worse, ineffective. Recruitment, training and retention must therefore be a central part of any strategy. We need a robust pipeline of talent if we are to scale drone operations responsibly and securely.

We must also recognise the speed of innovation because our adversaries are not standing still. They are rapidly working to advance their drones as well; if we are to maintain our edge, sustained research and development is a necessity. That means investment not only in next-generation drones, but in secure communications, anti-jamming technology, counter-drone systems and resilient AI. It also means collaboration, working closely with universities, private sector innovators and start-ups that can bring new technologies quickly to the table.

It is essential that the UK can quickly adapt to the rapidly evolving nature of warfare. Drones are not just another tool; they are reshaping the character of conflict. They save lives by keeping soldiers out of harm's way, they improve precision and they provide persistent surveillance and awareness, yet they also carry risks—ethical, strategic and technological. Our task is to embrace their potential while also guarding against the vulnerabilities. We need investment in technology but also in people. The Government must work to balance technological innovation with conventional strength and ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of research and development, so that we are not only consumers of new technologies but leaders in shaping how it is used responsibly in defence.

10.13 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I know you take a great interest in these matters because you served on the Defence Committee when I was a Minister, and I am sure you regard this debate with great interest.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) on introducing this debate, because the issue of drones is so timely, interesting and, I dare say, urgent for defence procurement, defence training and all aspects of defence. He made a brilliant speech. It was not only delivered well but made some important and substantive points on, for example, countering drones, which should be considered as important in this debate as the acquisition of our own strike-reconnaissance capabilities and so on. I am pleased that we have the Veterans Minister here, and I know he is also very passionate about this subject.

I quickly say, especially as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is here, that people are still the most important capability, despite everything we will say in this debate. I hope he will be as robust as possible in standing up for our veterans in the weeks ahead, because this stuff will come to a head. All of us who care about the British armed forces have to stand by those who served all those years ago, so that we do not undermine the morale of those who serve today.

On the key subject of drones, my main argument is that they are an amazing opportunity for the United Kingdom to fundamentally modernise its armed forces in a way we have not done for a long time. In many ways, we are quite lucky, because drones bring mass and lethality to our existing forces relatively cheaply and relatively quickly. Above all, and this is underestimated, we are in an amazing position to capitalise on that in many ways, for reasons that have not been fully shared with the public. I will now try to do that.

The day I became Defence Procurement Minister in April 2023, there was a vote in the House of Commons. People came up to congratulate me as I walked through the Lobby, and every other colleague said, “By the way, you’ve got Ajax,” which is what defence procurement was known for at the time. Two months later, I made a statement to the House about Ajax resuming field training with the Army and the Household Cavalry, and how it is a highly capable vehicle.

However, I had a sense, as Defence Procurement Minister, that there was a parallel universe. There was business as usual, with long procurement times and many delays under successive Governments—the old way. On the other hand, there was what we were doing in the MOD for Ukraine. It was like a parallel universe. We acted at pace for Ukraine with incredible scale and innovation. We got thousands and thousands of shells from around the world and delivered them to Ukraine. It was an incredible exercise, of which I am very proud. I am also very proud that the current Government have continued it.

Nowhere was this difference more striking than in drones. I would not quite call it an epiphany—I do not know the right word—but my most memorable moment as Defence Procurement Minister came in the autumn of 2023, when I visited an SME in the south of England. It had developed a drone—at the time it was highly sensitive, dare I say classified—that went on to be used in Ukraine. It was a highly effective long-range, one-way attack drone, now a matter of public record. This SME, not a big prime, had developed a drone relatively cheaply and very quickly, and it made an impact on the frontline against a peer military of Europe.

That was extraordinary. Revolutionary. I was so struck by it, but what really got me—the thing that is most important about the uncrewed area—is that the SME was getting feedback from the frontline within days, if not hours. It was using that feedback to immediately upgrade the capability by changing various important but relatively subtle parameters. I was immersed, as all Defence Procurement Ministers are, in the endless emails about delays to the latest big platform, or whatever it was, so I was struck that there is a different way.

What did I do about it? As my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) and the hon. Member for Strangford said, I launched the drone strategy in February 2024. It was relatively simple. The Secretary of State always says it was only 12 pages, but the truth is that it was a lot shorter when it was first presented to me. I was pretty furious about that, because to me drones are a fundamental part of defence. The key point is that I wanted it to reverse the sense of living in a parallel universe. I wanted us to embrace what we were doing for Ukraine so that our armed forces could benefit in the same way. It is simple to summarise the strategy: to continue delivering drones at scale for

[James Cartlidge]

Ukraine—thousands of them, as we did and as the current Government have done—but, in parallel, to develop our own SME drone ecosystem for the British armed forces. That is what I wanted to do.

In February 2024, I also announced the integrated procurement model, which I am very grateful that you mentioned in the recent Defence Committee debate, Ms Lewell. The key thing is that it was also relatively straightforward. Instead of these very long development times for new equipment, it is about setting minimum deployable capability—to get things into use as quickly as possible, where they can be used if the balloon goes up, to put it bluntly—and then to develop them spirally in service. That is how the modern world works, and it is how software companies have always sought to work: get it going, and then constantly upgrade. That is the only way to keep pace with technology. That procurement model went live in April 2024, and the general election was called in May, so it is fair to say that there was not a huge amount of time to introduce some of it, but we made some progress.

I now want to talk about some key points about how to ensure that the UK seizes this opportunity so that our armed forces are world leaders in the use of drones. The first point is the most important. This has not been a political debate, and I am not trying to play party politics, but I have also been a Treasury Minister. When I was the Minister for Defence Procurement, I was in all the discussions about how to get to 2.5%, so I know what it is like to deal with the Treasury. What happened is that when the new Government came in—they are not the first to do this—the Treasury put a clamp on procurement as a way of controlling in-year budgets. It is very common. The Treasury frequently tried to do it with us, but Ben Wallace and Grant Shapps, the Secretaries of State, always pushed back. I tried to work with the Treasury to find compromises and to prioritise the procurements that were most important to the Department.

The consequence is that, for months, there has been an effective procurement freeze. Defence companies tell us that they are waiting and waiting. They were waiting for the SDR, and now they are waiting for the defence investment plan, which will put in place the decisions of the SDR. They have been waiting for the defence industrial strategy. They have been waiting for the appointment of a national armaments director, who will come in as a great white knight and solve all these problems. By the way, when the problems are really tough, the companies will turn around to the Defence Procurement Minister, who earns about a thirtieth of what they do, and ask them to solve it because it is political, which it always ends up being.

In the meantime, we need to get on with it, so let me suggest an idea. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill said that when we tabled a written question asking how many drones have been ordered since the general election, we were told three, which is extraordinary. When I raised the matter with the Secretary of State, he said that it was a specific answer to a specific question. It certainly is, but it is still fairly shocking. What we have found, particularly when we talk to those in the Army, is that there are drones coming into their units, but they are, for example,

through sports—they do drone sports. There is not yet a central push to transform the forces to fight with uncrewed systems.

So where could we get the money? My personal view is that the Chagos deal is basically bonkers. Next year, we as a country will spend £250 million leasing back a base that we currently own freehold—the islands too, of course. Half that budget could transform the UK drone ecosystem, because tens of millions of pounds would make a difference.

There is one risk: how do we buy drones when, in theory, they go out of date so quickly? There is no risk to what I would call a training order. We should buy enough drones from British companies so that the Army can start training with them at scale. But the crucial thing is not the manufacture or the initial buy; it is establishing the relationship between our forces and those SMEs so that they are constantly developing them in service. That is how new technology works. That is a relatively inexpensive step to take; it just needs leadership, and I know the Minister wants to make it happen.

Another key point is testing. In June 2023—two months after I became Defence Procurement Minister—I held a roundtable in Larkhill with what were then the main UK defence drone SMEs. It was a really fascinating meeting. I went round the table and said to all of them, “Name the one thing the Government could do to help you,” and they all came up with the acronyms CAA and MAA—in other words, the Civil Aviation Authority and the Military Aviation Authority. They all wanted it to be easier to test drones, particularly kinetic drones, in the UK.

I was encouraged recently when I attended the Royal International Air Tattoo and was told by a relatively senior military officer that there will be testing on the Outer Hebrides range—in Benbecula, I think, which I visited when I was a Minister—for firing what are still dummy drones, but testing them as far as we can in the UK. I fully accept that there is a limit to how we can test, particularly if the drones have explosives, but we have to be able to test more than we currently do.

It is not just testing for the SMEs. My team met some reservists recently who talked about the red tape and what they have to fill in even to be able to use a reconnaissance drone for Army training. As is so often the case in the MOD, others will assure us, “It’s all fine, Minister.” On the MAA and the CAA—we set up a working group with the Department for Transport—I remember being told, “Minister, it’s all sorted. It’s all fine,” but then the SMEs told me something different. We have to grip this competition because we want to win it and it is vital to our prosperity.

Colleagues talked about training. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) made a very good point about making drone use part of regular training. This is not so much my area of expertise. The Minister obviously has great expertise in this area, and I hope he will touch on how we are bringing forward training in the use of drones at a unit level.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon, having served in the infantry, obviously speaks with massive experience. He made the point that we need an Army that can fight with these things. It is all well and good talking about procurement, which is the side I have

seen, but how do we get them into the Army to rapidly boost its lethality and survivability? That is what we all want to see, and it is what the new head of the Army, the Chief of the General Staff, will deliver.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon raised an important point about GCAP. When I worked on GCAP as a Minister, it was primarily on the diplomatic side. *[Interruption.]* The roof is creaking slightly. Hopefully that is merely the power of my oratory and rhetoric, and nothing to be concerned about.

On GCAP, I will refer to a couple of points I made last September when we were invited to make submissions to the SDR. At the time, I was merely the interim shadow Defence Secretary while my party awaited a new leader. I do not know if anyone read our submissions—I think AI read a lot of the submissions—but my two points are still worth considering.

First, instead of focusing on 10-year equipment plans, which would become the defence investment plan, we need much more focus on a three-year war readiness plan in each of the forces. That is something that the Chief of the General Staff has, in effect, been talking about. If that were done with the RAF, it would be much harder for it to meld all the elements of GCAP into one. The other point I made is that we really need a two-pillar GCAP—a bit like AUKUS.

The first pillar is the platform, which is where the focus inevitably always is in defence—that is the old, platform-focused procurement model. Instead, we should have a second pillar with all the ancillary stuff. That would include, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon said, the “system of systems,” particularly electronic warfare capability and drones. That needs to come into service much faster.

The key thing to all of this is the threat. If the threat really is only two or three years away, we have to be stronger in two or three years. The aspects of RAF development that are to do with loyal wingman are about helping our current aircraft. Forget about the stuff that will arrive in 2040, important though that is; it is about the capabilities that can help the current Typhoon fleet and the F-35s to be even more lethal and capable. We know that drones can fly with them. We need to accelerate all of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill made an important point about the Red sea, which has also been a key testing ground for drones. The key point is that the drones were not only threatening Ukraine; they were threatening our own Royal Navy. HMS Diamond was attacked. As a Minister at the time, I had a real sense that this was a clear and present danger because the drone attacks had to be thwarted with much more expensive missiles, which is the key issue.

However, we know that Iran was supplying more and more sophisticated ballistic missiles to the Houthis. That is on public record. How could we defend against all those things? I therefore felt we needed to accelerate all ranges of technology that could help to intercept drones relatively cheaply, so that we could keep our missile stocks for the really exquisite threats. We need a balance between expensive and cheap capabilities, which is why DragonFire is a good example of something we should take forward.

All Members have focused on the counter-drone point. I cannot think of a better symbol of the parallel universe—the way we have delivered for Ukraine but not for our

own armed forces—than the fact that, if we visit the Army today, its electronic countermeasures will be the box that was used in Afghanistan. That was very good at the time, but it is not up to date. Nevertheless, a British company has been delivering, in real time, countermeasure kits to Ukraine that have been incredibly successful and are saving lives on a real frontline. We should be buying those for our Army at the same time. That is why I say it feels like a parallel universe, which is what we need to break. I know the Minister understands that and is as passionate about it as I am.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) spoke about how to defend against the drone threat, and he particularly spoke about armour. My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon spoke about tanks and the need to protect their tracks. I do not have that level of battlefield experience, but it is true to say that we must move quickly on lasers, directed energy weapons and, particularly, sound weapons that use radio frequencies—they are currently a bit indiscriminate, but they have a lot of potential if they are refined. We have to go at these things as fast as possible. Britain has an amazing science base.

That brings me to my final point, which is about autonomy. This is really about technology and the need to outthink one's opponent, as much as anything. If we are honest, we will never have every aspect of every drone made in the UK. The areas where we really need to lead are the brain—the science. Britain has an amazing science base. I always found the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory's advice fascinating. The DSTL has huge experience and works well with the military. We could go further on the way in which DSTL and the defence science base link in with SMEs. There has been a lot of progress on that, but we can go further. Going back to the drone I was talking about, the company was successful because its link to the data really gave it the edge. That is what we have to do: we have to enable SMEs to come into Main Building or other secure environments and to be constantly fed the battlefield data—what is really happening in warfare—so that they can respond quickly.

This is really about autonomy. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) spoke about the situation in Gaza. I know that there are people who are worried about the ethics of the autonomous use of weapons, and I understand that. I appeared before the AI in Weapons Systems Committee in the House of Lords, where the Bishop of Coventry asked me some interesting questions about the ethics of all this. I would simply say—okay, this is a defence point of view—that we should be very wary of in any way tying our hands on the use of autonomy, because you can bet your bottom dollar that the Chinese and the Russians will not be doing that. We have to maintain our ability to compete with them.

Phalanx is the gun on the side of some of our ships. When it is on, it is effectively autonomous. If something flies into its sight that fits certain parameters, it will fire. No one presses a button. The point, though, is that there is a chain of command and a way back that will have been built by someone from a country with a democracy and so on. So it is the whole life cycle that we have to take into account. We should really invest in autonomy. We should back our science base, working closely with our SMEs.

[James Cartlidge]

I finish by saying to the Minister that we are all patriots here. We want to succeed. We want to have the world's best armed forces. We want to lead in this. We know we can. We have done amazing things. When we supply Storm Shadows and leading drones to Ukraine, we are going to know a bit about how to use them. We have never been directly involved, but we have done so much that we are well placed to learn from it. I hope the Minister can drive this forward. He knows he has our backing in doing so, but we need to see greater pace and urgency and, ultimately, not just big defence documents, but kit in the hands of those who serve our country.

10.32 am

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am truly grateful to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) for securing the debate—I genuinely believe that we are at a pivotal time, so having it today is poignant. The opportunity to discuss the critical importance of uncrewed systems to our armed forces and our national security is a continual requirement in this place.

It will not be lost on hon. Members that I am not the Minister for Defence Procurement, but I have a vested interest in this subject. I have been helping a cross-ministerial team to design our strategy as we move forward. Why am I passionate about this issue? Mentioned in dispatches, combat; Military Cross, combat; Distinguished Service Order, combat; OBE, combat—I spent a lot of time in combat. What we are seeing now in Ukraine gives the soldier, the airman or the sailor the ability to disengage from combat and to send technology forward. We are seeing a revolution in technological affairs in Ukraine, and it is of the utmost importance.

The devastation and horror of war provide an imperative for rapid innovation. Each side pitted, racing to gain decisive advantage by innovating faster than the other. These developments define an era of conflict and innovation. Think the Parthian shot, the longbow, the crossbow, the musket, the tank, the aeroplane and, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) mentioned, the Dreadnought. They have all marked a pivotal moment in technological change. Today, I would argue that it is uncrewed systems. The lesson for the UK is that we must be a leader in the revolution in uncrewed systems—which has not changed the nature of conflict, as Clausewitz would say, but changed its character forever—or be left behind.

In no small part, this understanding motivated me to enter politics, and it was one of the key reasons I left the military: to galvanise change and to do what I could to safeguard this great nation, because I saw war changing the entire character of conflict itself. Today's discussion addresses an existential challenge, which this Government, the Defence team, and I are absolutely determined to grip.

Uncrewed systems have fundamentally changed the character of conflict—fact. In Ukraine, thousands of drones fill the skies every day and night. On average, thousands of drones a day—up to 2,000 or 3,000, and, at the very height, 6,000—are being flown on the frontline. A division has hundreds of drones that observe every

section of the battlefield 24/7 and cue strike platforms at a moment's notice. Drones are 22 times more lethal and accurate than an artillery round. For the first time since the first world war, more casualties have been caused by a system other than artillery or offensive support—that is, drones. Not training our people in drones would be like not training our people in artillery prior to the first world war.

A year ago, I was quoted as saying that uncrewed systems represent

“a machine gun moment for the Army, a submarine moment for the Navy and a jet engine moment for the Air Force.”

I also said that the inclusion of data, AI and quantum would only deepen the effects of this revolution. I would say now, one year later, that we are at an inflection point similar to the moment when armies fighting in world war one realised the utility of airpower. We know what happened then: the “Top Gun” generation was born, and airpower changed every nation's way of fighting.

We are approaching the 85th anniversary of the battle of Britain, which is a poignant reminder of the significant impact of cutting-edge technology, such as the Spitfire, radar, importantly, or our very first computers, on the defence of our nation. Unlike those previous advances, the impact of uncrewed systems across air, land and sea is simultaneous, undermining many existing, exquisite and expensive capabilities.

As I reflect over 24 years of military service, I recognise just how much of what I did could now be done by uncrewed systems. I mean that, because about 75% of everything I have done could be done by uncrewed systems. That would have made my life a lot safer, although it would probably have reduced the medal count.

We have seen this revolution shape Putin's war of aggression. On land, surveillance and attack drones stalk the battlefield around the clock. Thousands of drones, whether FPV—first-person-view—drones, surveillance drones or long-range strike drones, dominate the battlefield. There is a dead zone on the frontline, about 30 km deep, where no one moves: small teams or individuals are the only ones who survive, and they do not survive for long. Interestingly—the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) mentioned tanks earlier—tanks' sustainability on the battlefield is limited. Not K-kills but M-kills—mobility kills, taking off the tank's tracks, immobilising its engine, or immobilising the crew, the sights and the sensors—happen relatively quickly. Perhaps we can allude to what that will look like in the future later in the debate.

In the Black sea, we have seen a navy without a navy sink a navy—that is, Ukraine's unmanned vessels have sunk or scattered Russia's once all-powerful Black sea fleet.

James Cartlidge: The Minister is making a fascinating speech, and he knows that I am as interested in this subject as anyone. On the naval point, it was an incredible moment in May when a Ukrainian naval drone downed a Russian Su-30, I think. Does that not point to some of our looming procurements—for example, future air dominance, the Type 83, and all those things in the Navy's assumptions about how we defend this island in the future? We are an island, so the potential for us to be protected by uncrewed barges and sensors carrying effectors way out in our ocean is an exciting development.

Al Carns: I completely agree. I can see a future—we will talk about this later—involving a high-low mix, in which we have very sophisticated fifth generation capability matched by relatively low-end hardware with very sophisticated software. When we combine the two, we can increase our mass, our lethality and our overwatch of large swathes of land, sea and air. It is also worth noting—I will cover this later—that there are false lessons from Ukraine. The Black sea is not the Pacific or the north Atlantic. However, the technology, when designed with the right hull form, can absolutely survive in those environments.

Moving on to air, we see co-ordinated waves of drones penetrate the most sophisticated air defence systems in the world and strike far beyond the frontline. I mentioned yesterday, in relation to the remembrance of the battle of Britain, that we are hearing air sirens every day in Ukraine. We are not talking hundreds of drones; we now talking, in some cases, of thousands of drones attacking major cities and critical national infrastructure throughout Ukraine.

These capabilities are being enhanced, made increasingly sophisticated—with the capability to map and target-identify—and combined with the use of data and artificial intelligence to train training models, with profound implications for the way we fight warfare. Our adversaries understand that. Russia, other countries such as China, and large states are developing at a different scale. They are already producing drones on an industrial scale, and investing in innovation to make them more capable and deadly, and to remove the human even further from the battlefield. War is driving an innovation cycle that cannot be replicated in peacetime.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) talked earlier about the innovation cycle here with SMEs. SMEs that often have joint ventures or relationships with companies at the front in Ukraine are innovating faster than anyone else. We are talking 20 or 30 to 100 innovations in a year, in comparison with some of our contracts in the past, which have had one, two, three or four innovations linked into the contractual management.

I would argue that we need to do more. Ukraine reminds us daily that to safeguard the nation we have an obligation to lead in the development of uncrewed systems. We may not have the opportunity to fight differently. Historically, almost every major conflict has been characterised by short periods of manoeuvre, and long periods of attrition to build up capability and capacity and to innovate, which are then broken by periods of manoeuvre, with a focus on supporting the warfighter with the best technology. I would posit that, if it came to it, our adversaries would seek to draw us into an attritional conflict, which puts the burden on the defence industry, our economy and our society's ability to sustain the fight. At a tactical level, there is an argument that this will no longer be about supporting the warfighter, but about supporting the technology in the fight. That is a fundamental shift and change in opinion, and a critical and fundamental distinction in the way that future wars may be fought.

This Government have taken decisive action, as laid out in our strategic defence review, first to integrate uncrewed systems across the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, and to adapt our military culture to recognise that uncrewed systems are a core capability.

Several hon. Members mentioned the innovation cycle. In Ukraine early on in the war, a stalemate took place across the frontline, broken by periods of manoeuvre and usually initiated by dominance in GPS-guided munitions. The Russians quickly learned to counter a proportion of that, and as such the innovation of drones and uncrewed systems came into place on land, at sea and in the air. We have now accelerated along that line. We have gone from hundreds of different Ukrainian companies with different intellectual property swamping the battlefield with small start-ups, to the Ukrainians synthesising that capability procurement down to a set number of drones, and mass producing. They are using the innovation cycle on the frontline, with companies embedded in combat companies to drive that innovation cycle faster than ever before. They went broad to start with, and they have now gone narrow and are scaling. It is starting to work.

We must learn some of those lessons as automated platforms are bought by the Army, Navy and Air Force. Do they all talk to each other? Do they have the same software, or different hardware? Can they work together? Can they work on an integrated kill net? If they do not, we may repeat some of the same mistakes as Ukraine. A great quote is, "Slow is smooth, smooth is fast." There is a bit that we must watch, and we must ensure that we get this right, because if we get it wrong, it may be difficult to unravel.

I mentioned adapting our military culture, and the hon. Member for South Suffolk mentioned commander training within our organisations, whether that be Dartmouth, Cranwell or Sandhurst. I have been on that, as an individual responsible for people, to ensure that these things are inculcated at the earliest stage of training, whether that be defence from drones or the adoption of drones as a critical component, much the same as a machine gun is for a rifle section. We are moving forward in that space.

Secondly, as hon. Members have said, there is a requirement to work seamlessly with industry, transforming our procurement and industrial base to meet the demands of modern warfare and drive growth for the nation. To do that, we must encourage the best of Ukrainian industry to share its expertise with us. We must continue to foster a truly innovative and adaptive defence industry that draws on the best of Britain. What I am leading to here is that British start-ups and British companies, both primes and SMEs, must engage with Ukrainian companies on joint ventures and cross-IP sharing to enhance the best of both. If they do that, I genuinely think they will be world beating, above and beyond what British industry already is.

The Government's vision is to become a defence industrial superpower by 2035, and we are making that a reality. As a frontier industry, drone development is key to that economic transformation, which will attract major investment and create high-quality jobs. It is also vital to put the best systems into the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. Drone systems now will be out of date within six weeks on the frontline, but the training and the integration of the culture and the software may not be, so we must think carefully as we bring systems into the military and avoid 10-year contracts that buy the wrong drone in six years' time that is way out of date in six weeks.

[*Al Carns*]

The Government are doing everything possible to capitalise on this opportunity. We have committed to more than doubling our spend on autonomous systems over this Parliament. I pushed really hard to get £4 billion of investment in mass-produced both unsophisticated and sophisticated weapons. The hon. Member for Huntingdon mentioned GCAP and loyal wingman; I would see loyal wingman as a sophisticated, high-end, fourth, fifth or sixth-generation capability. I see mass uncrewed systems for the Army—and in some cases the Navy—slightly differently.

Ben Obese-Jecty: If we are talking about those low-end, attritable systems being introduced at Army or Marine level as section-level capability, like a light machine gun, at what point will we look at redesigning our entire military capability in terms of logistical supply of batteries and parts for those? We all know that soldiers already carry too much kit, and carrying more batteries for drones will be key in that. How can we effectively redesign the section attack to incorporate drones? As I said in my speech, this is a fundamental shift in how the Army fights battles. I appreciate that the Minister is doing everything he can to introduce drones into the ecosystem, but it seems to me that we are making huge changes here. This is almost the same as introducing the machine gun and then wondering why we do not know how to fight it properly when we get to the battlefield. I would be interested to hear what we are doing to further that.

Al Carns: It is a combination of the two. Yes, it is a machine gun moment for the Army, but it is also an Air Force moment for the whole military, so we need careful consideration of how we will integrate this. The Ukrainians, for example, have combat companies who will fly 150 FPV drone strikes a day. They will do that with separate teams flying in support of infantry, much as we would have had close air support in the past. A drone team may fly 50 drone missions a day with 80% lethality and accuracy.

I will leave it to the generals, the admirals and the air vice-marshals to work out how they integrate the system. However, it must be integrated at the section and infantry level all the way to the division level in the Army; from the single ship all the way to the fleet level in the Navy; and from the single aircraft, if not major drone, all the way to fighting formations in the Air Force. That is the level of integration that will be required—it is pretty seismic.

We talked earlier about the high-low end mix. We will help to deliver Europe's first hybrid carrier air wing. The hon. Member for Huntingdon mentioned, and I agree, that GCAP and the loyal wingman programme are sophisticated capabilities, but there is nothing to say that it is not—no pun intended—a Russian doll method where something releases something smaller that becomes more attritable and more mass-produced. That is probably where we are going with many of these systems.

We are also enhancing our uncrewed naval platforms. The patrol of the north Atlantic, protecting our continuous at-sea deterrent can adopt some of that technology. We will also, as the hon. Member mentioned, move towards a 20:40:40 capability mix for the British Army, which

I think is essential, as is being proven in Ukraine at the moment. As he mentioned, that is 20% crewed, 40% reusable and 40% disposable uncrewed systems. I would like to see a lot of those drones used as ammunition so that, much as we would have down the range with a magazine and 30 rounds of ammunition, we should be able to go down the range with 10 drones, fly them down, use them, get proficient in that and ensure that we are as accurate and lethal with a drone as we are with a rifle, if not more so.

It is a move to help deliver our goal of increasing the Army's lethality tenfold. I argue that we need to move on that as fast as is feasible. The critical component is our partnership with industry, and not just the big primes but SMEs are key to delivering those ambitions. That is why we have established UK Defence Innovation to connect with investors and get those SMEs, innovators and start-ups able to break into the defence market, which we know has been a problem in the past. That will ensure that we can rapidly identify and back innovative products that will give us a military, and indeed an economic, edge.

To integrate these new technologies across three military services—I think this is the critical component—we are creating an uncrewed centre of excellence, alongside a range and testing facility. It will be surrounded by SMEs and industry, with the people who know what they are talking about, because there is a lot of snake oil out there. We must put them in one place and then, as I mentioned, slow is smooth, smooth is fast. We must allow them to help the Army, Navy and Air Force to contract different hardware that has simultaneous and integrated software. That is how we will create capabilities that will be able to talk to each other in the future.

James Cartlidge: I called my reform the integrated procurement model, because I think the Minister is right: integration is so important, and it has been a deficiency of our bottom-down approach. However, does that not mean that we will need some kind of C2 system for our military? When I was in post, there was a lot of talk about ACCS, which was the system developed for NATO, but frankly was not fit for purpose. That would be a very significant investment. Is it something that the MOD is currently looking at?

Al Carns: In the SDR, there was a £1 billion investment in an integrated targeting web, and that is what ties all these systems together. The only way it will tie together is if the software is interchangeable. Indeed, if we were then to lay on AI in quantum, we would be taking it to the next step of starting to remove people further back down the chain. I believe we will always have to be in the chain, but we will move back. Our adversaries may not. That will be a pivotal change in the way of warfare again.

The uncrewed centre of excellence is one to watch within the SDR. It will be in place by February. It will provide centralised expertise, funding and standards. The Military Aviation Authority and the Civilian Aviation Authority were mentioned. The centre will help them to develop and get through some of the bureaucracies while remaining in line with the rules and regulations. It will help to develop skills across defence. For example, drone qualifications across the Navy, Army and Air Force at the moment are all starting to move in different

directions. We have to synthesise them, and make sure that they are correct and that everyone is doing the same, so that we can swap and interchange people. That will help to deliver a regulatory framework in which our companies can succeed.

In June, we announced a landmark partnership with Ukraine to share technology, harness the innovation expertise from the frontline and increase our industrial co-operation, which is critical because innovation is moving at such a pace on the frontline. Our plans are a shot in the arm. We need to continue to push as hard as is feasible for what is already one of the leading uncrewed systems sectors in the world.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Recently, we saw the ACUA Ocean Pioneer granted a licence by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. Do we think that by pushing out more civilian licences to enable more companies to develop those autonomous platforms, including for things that have maritime applications, drones will be enhanced more quickly? I appreciate that a drone can be set up and flown relatively easily, but getting something that floats in the water, particularly something sizeable that has a civilian application, is quite difficult. Do we think that advancing the number of licences given to companies working on autonomous maritime capability would be an advantage?

AI Carns: The reality is that the governance and compliance of some of these systems has not kept pace with the innovation in the technological-industrial world. The drone centre of excellence will cut through that. Some countries are using dual-use technology, from drone delivery of shopping through to resupplying in disaster zones, and mapping and tracking forestry for carbon capture. We are on the very cusp of a change. It is interesting to look at the key capabilities of what each drone requires to sustain itself to innovate, and where those capabilities come from. That may give us a lead on where we should be focusing from an economic perspective as well.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a really interesting point. He mentioned “Star Wars”. It feels a bit like that. When I watched the first destruction and sinking of a Russian frigate, I said it was a cross between “Star Wars” and “The Dam Busters”, because that is the leap it was making in war. Three ships were sunk in three weeks by relatively simple uncrewed systems, taking out the most significant naval platforms in the world. A lot of people would say that, as these ships get removed off the line of march, one of the biggest mistakes would be to replace them with the same capability.

Drone warfare is today’s reality. Capabilities are evolving faster than any of us can possibly imagine in Ukraine. That is why the Government’s response has been both immediate and decisive, but we have to go faster, and we have to go harder. Through clear leadership, unprecedented investment, closer work with industry and, importantly, our Ukrainian partners who are at the cutting edge, we

will ensure that Britain remains at the forefront of this revolution. I genuinely believe that we will get there, and that it will make us stronger abroad and secure at home.

10.54 am

Peter Fortune: I thank the Minister for responding to the debate. I have huge personal respect and regard for him, and I feel confident that he not only heard what we said today but was already on top of it and recognised it. I trust him to have the grip, the focus and the pace to move forward with this, and he will have our support when he does so.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), gave an excellent speech that literally nearly brought the roof down, with a range of well-informed views that showed his huge experience. His story about going to an SME and hearing about how these small businesses can prepare drones quickly and get them out on the frontline was very striking.

I turn to the contribution from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). As someone who trained as a loader for the Challenger 2, I think it is always good to spend half an hour talking about how we blow them up. That was rather disturbing, but he was right to talk about the Dreadnought moment and the fact that we are at a point of change. That was developed by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), who continued to talk about how he would blow me up. Using the knowledge from his previous career, with passion and compassion he talked about how we must rethink modern conflict.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) talked about the reality of warfare and how drones can be used to keep our soldiers safe, especially with developing AI technologies. She also touched on the ethical and moral issues, which we did not discuss for too long today and are possibly something for further debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the pace of change he has seen, with the marvels of science fiction becoming a reality of modern warfare today. To build on the “Star Wars” theme that he developed, I think we all recognise that, with his wisdom, kindness and sagacity, he remains the Obi-Wan Kenobi of Westminster, and we thank him for his contribution.

Mostly, what has struck me has been the positive tone of the debate. It goes to show that we in this place are all patriots. As patriots, we recognise that the battlefield is changing, and we have a duty to our brave service personnel to ensure that they are prepared and equipped to fight on our behalf.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the use of drones in defence.

10.57 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Vaccination Harm

11 am

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): I will call Sir Christopher Chope to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for people harmed following covid-19 vaccinations.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. This is a hot topic. The Secretary of State told my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) in June that it was on still on the boil. We hope today to find out a bit more about what the Government will do in response to the representations that have been made.

I have been campaigning on this issue since the summer of 2021, when it first became apparent that some people had suffered serious adverse reactions—in a few cases fatal ones—as a result of having taken vaccines against covid-19. That summer, over four years ago, I presented a petition calling for reform of the vaccine damage payment scheme, to

“maintain vaccine confidence and provide urgent support for those injured/bereaved through covid-19 vaccinations”.

The complacent Government at the time responded:

“Once more is known about the possible link between the vaccine and potential side effects, it will be considered whether a wider review of the VDPS is needed”.

Is it not regrettable that four years on we are in exactly the same position? The new Government’s line is, “We are not sure whether we’re going to review the VDPS and, if we do, how we’re going to review it and in what respects.”

What has happened since the summer of 2021? On 10 September 2021, in speaking to my Covid-19 Vaccine Damage Bill, I expressed my concerns about the victims of these vaccines. At that stage, there had been only 154 applications under the vaccine damage payment scheme. Four years later, as of June 2025, the number of claims had risen to 21,444. This is a big and serious issue, yet the Government continue to be in denial about the validity of causal links between covid vaccines and injury or death.

Now, in the face of evidence, the Government have had to change their tune, not least because, as of May 2025, 224 awards of £120,000 had been paid in respect of people who had been proved to have suffered death or serious injury as a result of having the vaccines. It is no longer open to the Government to deny that causality, but it seems that they are still intent on playing hard to get for those people who are still seeking compensation or redress for what they have suffered.

This fits closely with the whole issue of vaccine confidence. We have heard recently about the declining take-up of measles, mumps and rubella vaccines and other childhood vaccines; our levels of take-up are now well below those recommended by the World Health

Organisation. The vaccine damage payment scheme was introduced to give confidence to people who did the right thing in public health terms: they got themselves vaccinated, and they knew that if something went wrong, the Government would come in and support them. That now is not happening, or at least it is not happening in sufficiently large quantities. As a result, the word on the street is that if someone takes a vaccine—if they take that risk for the sake of public health—and something goes wrong, they will probably have to pay the consequences themselves, and the Government will not help.

It is now universally accepted that covid-19 vaccines were not absolutely “safe and effective”, as was claimed at the time. For a few people, the vaccines have been a disaster. The charity UKCVFamily continues to campaign fearlessly for those victims; later this month, it will host in London a two-day seminar with leading lawyers and medical practitioners to consider some of these issues. In January, UKCV and others gave evidence on module 4 of the covid-19 inquiry, arguing for reform of the vaccine damage payment scheme. The hope at the time was that there would be an interim ruling or report, before this point, basically asking the Government to get to grips with reviewing the scheme because of the injustice that was being caused. So far, nothing seems to have happened about producing an interim report in relation to module 4.

The recognition that the reluctance of Government to face up to the facts about covid-19 vaccines is widespread globally led to the publication of “Canary In A Covid World”, a collection of essays from 34 contributors across different countries. I was privileged to be one of them. Another contributor and co-author was Dr Peter McCullough, whose latest book, “Vaccines: Mythology, Ideology, and Reality”, was published in July and for a time was in the *New York Times* bestseller list. The importance of this issue for tens of thousands of people cannot be overstated, yet the Government continue to vacillate.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend not just on securing this debate, but on all the work he has done on this subject. He knows that he and I and our right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) and others have been raising it for many years now. He also knows that the Secretary of State has said he wants time to think about the appropriate solution. That is reasonable, but he has had plenty of time to think about it now, has he not? Are not our constituents who are affected now entitled to know what the Government have decided to do, not just in the interests of those affected but, as my hon. Friend said, in the interests of the effectiveness of Government policy on vaccination?

Sir Christopher Chope: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. I have before me the answer that he received from the Secretary of State when he raised the matter at Health questions on 17 June:

“I reassure the right hon. and learned Gentleman, the constituents of his I have met and other campaigners that I am having discussions with the Cabinet Office about how we deal with that and other issues that have been raised this morning...He knows the complexities involved, and I have been grateful for his advice as a former Attorney General. I do not have specific progress to report now, but I reassure him and campaigners that this issue has not gone off the boil and we are working to find a resolution.”—[*Official Report*, 17 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 159.]

That was almost three months ago, so what has happened in the interim? I hope that the Minister, whom I am pleased to see in her place, will be able to deliver a response to the questions as to what review is being carried out, which aspects of the scheme are being reviewed, when evidence will be invited, if that is to happen, and what the timescale is for all this, because at the moment people are in the dark, as my right hon. and learned Friend said.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I, too, want to acknowledge all the work that my hon. Friend has done. He has been absolutely tenacious on this issue. I was a Minister in the Cabinet Office, so I know. I had the calls, the questions on the Floor of the House and the meetings. I hope I can help the Minister here today, because a lot of the heavy lifting has been done in the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health and Social Care. One of the key questions that my hon. Friends raised was about the amount of compensation. Why has it not been increased, at least by inflation, in decades? A lot of that was put forward in the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health, and a lot of the work has been done and should have come to fruition by now, a year into the new Government. The other issue was about people fearful of being clocked out and not having enough time to be compensated. We need the clock to start once they are in the system and not when they are out of it. Work has been done on that as well.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. I hope that the Minister listened to her and will have direct answers to the questions that she raised. Having spent so much time badgering my right hon. Friend, when she was a Minister in the Cabinet Office, to get something done on this issue, I perhaps need to take the opportunity to say this. I think in the end I reached the conclusion that she had been badly let down by the officials in her Department. It was unfinished business at the time of the general election, and if the current Secretary of State is in discussion with the Cabinet Office, then another 15 months have gone by. Having regard to the work that was done before, I would hope that we are getting close to having answers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is not just about the damages figures; it is also about those who do not qualify through the vaccine damage payment scheme, which states they must have a 60% permanent disability. I have spoken to the hon. Gentleman about this. Many of my constituents have serious but not qualifying conditions. Those who suffer long term but do not meet the threshold may get nothing. Does he agree that there must be a better way to provide assistance than creating an unrealistic threshold that excludes those who are suffering but do not qualify?

Sir Christopher Chope: I agree absolutely. If someone has suffered serious adverse effects from a covid-19 vaccine, it is not much consolation to them, their loved ones or those whose confidence we are trying to build to be told that because they are only 30% disabled they are not entitled to a penny. Someone who is 59% disabled is not entitled to anything, even if that disability was caused by the vaccine.

To put all this in context, the VDPS was set up in 1979 to boost confidence for those receiving vaccines. Between 1979 and 31 March 2025, the total number of non-covid vaccine claims was 958. As of 31 March, 331 were still live, 88 of which had been waiting more than 12 months, and only nine had been successful. That is hardly a confidence-building measure, but as I mentioned, as of the end of June, there were more than 22,000—more than 22 times as many—claims for damage caused by covid-19 vaccines. It is hardly surprising that there has been a decline in vaccine confidence. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) said, we need some urgency.

When I ask questions about this, I keep getting fobbed off with unsatisfactory answers. Mostly recently, on 7 July, a Minister wrote in answer to my question:

“I am not in a position to comment on timelines for the consideration of options for reform or recommendations for change.”

Are those options not being considered now? When are they going to be brought forward? The answer continued:

“Ministers continue to consider options covering both potential reforms...and the situation of those who have suffered harm.”

But they will not tell us the timescale.

What are we to do? What are the punters meant to do about this? We are still waiting for the report from the inquiry, in particular on module 4, but the evidence given to the inquiry was compelling. In conclusion, I will quote briefly from the evidence that was given in the introductory statements before Baroness Heather Hallett:

“During the early months of the vaccine rollout, those who experienced adverse reactions found it nearly impossible to access information about vaccine injuries in the mainstream media. This lack of coverage contributed to feelings of fear, isolation, and a heightened likelihood of being disbelieved. Adverse reactions to the Covid-19 vaccines were largely absent from mainstream media discussions. When they were eventually covered, the stories were often framed with an emphasis on the rarity of such reactions, the safety of the vaccine, and the millions of lives it had saved. Members of the Covid Vaccine Adverse Reaction and Bereaved Groups who participated in interviews with mainstream media often had to agree to censor themselves, or had their words altered during editing.”

We now know that they were right. Their concerns that these injuries and bereavements had been caused by the vaccines were correct, although the Government at the time were in denial. That has added to the trauma of the victims and their families. I hope that the Government, which I always hope will be sympathetic to those in need and in plight, will now wake up and put a proverbial under the UK Government authorities that are trying to forestall any action. One can see the way in which the previous Government's Ministers were disregarded on this issue and how the NHS carries on doing its own thing and being in denial. I hope that the Minister can tell us the timescales for this, exactly what is being discussed and what is not, and when we will be able to report something positive to those of our constituents who continue to suffer.

11.16 am

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Ms Lewell. I am speaking today on behalf of the Minister for public health and prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton),

[Karin Smyth]

who cannot be here for other parliamentary reasons. I know that she agrees with me that debates such as this are important to uphold the British people's trust in public health measures, so I thank the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for securing it.

I want to start by giving some assurance, particularly to people watching at home. We know that over 53 million people, following the example of Her late Majesty the Queen, took the jab during a once-in-a-generation health emergency, and that covid vaccines helped to keep millions of people out of hospital and, in many cases, saved lives. It is important to remember that the vast majority of people who took the jab did not suffer adverse effects. The hon. Member for Christchurch has made some of those points publicly, and I am grateful for that. However, that does not mean that we should turn a blind eye to the rare and tragic instances where things have gone wrong, as he eloquently highlighted.

I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to some of the campaigners, Kate Scott, Sheila Ward and Kelly Hatfield, for their tireless campaigning on this issue, and to Gareth Eve and the family of John Cross, all of whom have raised the issue of vaccine injury with my ministerial colleagues. Their loved ones took the vaccine because they wanted to protect their families and the NHS.

Today, those brave campaigners are still fighting for all people who suffered adverse reactions. They are not statistics—as hon. Members have said today, they are people. They are our constituents. Their voices must be heard. I am glad that they continue to have the opportunity to raise their concerns with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and with my colleague, the Minister for public health and prevention. The conversations are difficult, but they are essential to making Whitehall understand where the system falls short and where we can make a meaningful difference. It is not just a question of making sure that systems are in place to support people when things go wrong. As the hon. Member for Christchurch outlined this morning, it is about maintaining public confidence in our health service and vaccination programmes. That is what is at stake in this debate, and that is why it is helpful that he secured it.

That said, I do not think I will be able to assure the hon. Gentleman on the exact timelines that he asked for. However, I assure him that we are neither being complacent nor playing hard to get, as he said of even his own Government. Indeed, I echo the Secretary of State's comments to the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) back in June.

We are taking tangible steps to improve the administration of the vaccine damage payment scheme. As hon. Members know, the VDPS is a statutory route through which those who have suffered serious harm as a result of vaccination can apply for financial support. The scheme has been in existence for many years, but since the covid-19 vaccination campaign began, there has been a rise in the number of applications. That is to be expected, given the record number of vaccinations given in such a short timeframe, but it has put pressure on the processing time. That is why the Department has been working with the NHS Business Services Authority, the administrators of the scheme, to modernise operations, improve the experience of those who apply for an award

and process claims at a faster rate. To get that done, additional medical assessors have been appointed and the application process has been digitised.

The NHS Business Services Authority has also been working to improve the return rate of medical records from the healthcare providers required to assess claims through engagement with NHS institutions and using subject access requests as needed.

With regard to the ongoing work, we recognise that concerns about the scheme go wider than the application process. We have heard those calls from the hon. Member for Christchurch, other Members present and campaigners, and, as he references, during the covid inquiry hearings, when the Government were asked to look at issues such as the eligibility criteria for the scheme and the current award amount. Last September, the Secretary of State met campaigners to discuss that issue, and ministerial colleagues have had further meetings since. In those meetings, my colleagues set out that although any changes to the scheme would be a cross-Government decision, our door remains open to campaigners and we will do everything we can to keep progressing this at pace.

I recognise that individuals and their families who have suffered harm following vaccination are waiting on a more detailed update, but I reassure them that the Secretary of State and Ministers are continuing to look at the issues and a range of options. I reiterate the comments that the Secretary of State made at Health questions. We want to be clear in our response. I will not be able to offer the hon. Member for Christchurch the timeline that he wants today.

Sir Christopher Chope: The Minister says she cannot give us an exact timeline. Could she give us an approximate time? Is this going to be finished before the end of this year, for example? That is not an exact timeline, but it would be an indicative timeline. And when she talks about various options, can she not explain which of those options are being considered or which ones are not being considered? For example, is increasing the £120,000 payout being considered? Is reducing the disability threshold from 60% being considered? Is disapplying the three-year limitation period for the bringing of civil claims being considered? Please can we have a yes or no to those things? We are not asking for the decisions on those, but we are asking whether they are being considered or not.

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to give more details, which I cannot do today. But I will take back to the Department that broader request for timelines and what things are being considered. I will make sure we get back to him on that as a result of this debate.

On the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, the hon. Member for Christchurch and the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) asked about the effectiveness of the MHRA in monitoring harms. The MHRA is globally recognised for requiring high standards of safety. Vaccines used in the UK are authorised only once they have met robust standards of effectiveness, safety and quality.

Once approved, the comprehensive post-market surveillance of a vaccine begins, where the benefits and risks of the vaccine are very closely monitored. The MHRA collects data through the reporting of adverse reactions by the public and healthcare professionals to the yellow card scheme, as well as from other information sources domestically and internationally.

As hon. Members know, a dedicated team of scientists constantly reviews the information to look for safety issues or rare adverse effects. All reports of adverse events, alongside other information, are analysed and reviewed continuously to identify trends and patterns that may require action, with any information indicating a possible new safety concern thoroughly evaluated. Updated advice for healthcare professionals and patients is issued where appropriate.

The covid-19 vaccines have been scrutinised continuously since roll-out, with the MHRA having implemented a proactive surveillance strategy for monitoring the safety of all UK-approved covid-19 vaccines.

I just want to end by saying that the vaccine programme—

Sir Christopher Chope: Obviously, the Minister has a brief that has been given to her by officials on behalf of the Minister with responsibility for public health, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), who is not able to be here. Can this Minister give me some assurance that I, together with my colleagues who have participated in this debate, will be able to meet the relevant Minister, so that we can go over some of this stuff? I realise that this Minister does not have the discretion to be able to respond to this debate, but the public health Minister would have that discretion, so can she guarantee that we can fix up a meeting, please?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman is of course a very experienced campaigner, and he asks his question absolutely appropriately. I know that my hon. Friend the public health Minister is very happy to meet people and discuss this, but I can also assure the hon. Gentleman that the Secretary of State is very much looking at this personally as well. I will take that request for a meeting with the public health Minister back to the Department, and I am sure that she will be happy to do that.

The vaccine programme was an immense contribution to public health during a once-in-a-lifetime health emergency, and many of us remember the sense of relief that we and family members felt when we got that text with the invitation to come forward. But for a small number of people and their families, it brought pain, loss and hardship. We must never forget them, and our responsibility as a Government is clear. We are absolutely committed, as I have said, to further work to improve the scheme, as well as to continue to engage with those who are affected and have suffered vaccine harm, to consider how the system could better reflect their needs. That does include the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman, and other colleagues here today, on behalf of all our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Duty of Candour for Public Authorities and Legal Representation for Bereaved Families

[WERA HOBHOUSE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Before I call the Member in charge, let me say that 21 Members want to speak, which will mean two to two and a half minutes for each speech. There are also a lot of people who wish to intervene. I am letting the Member in charge know that in order to give him an idea of when he might want to finish his speech—I suggest that he takes no longer than 20 minutes.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered duty of candour for public authorities and legal representation for bereaved families.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I am here to speak about the urgent need for a statutory duty of candour and the full implementation of the Hillsborough law, and to oppose the forces that want to fight against this change.

Historically, the state has taken a defensive position to protect its own interests. From the Peterloo massacre to Bloody Sunday, Hillsborough, the Post Office scandal, Grenfell, the contaminated blood scandal and nuclear test veterans, to name but a few, the list of state cover-ups is long, exhausting and utterly shameful. So many families have been denied truth and justice because of the current system, which enables cover-ups. How and why has a system been left in place that has continually enabled the establishment to evade truth, accountability and justice for those wronged? That is a question that this place and this country should think long and hard about.

I was at the Hillsborough disaster in 1989 when 97 innocent women, children and men lost their lives and countless more lives were destroyed. It was not just a tragedy; it was a betrayal—a betrayal compounded over decades by lies, cover-ups and institutional failures.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate and for all the amazing work he has done on this subject for such a long time. Does he agree that if the Hillsborough law is not delivered as promised, it will be a massive betrayal of not only the people of Liverpool, the families and the survivors, but the whole country?

Ian Byrne: I agree 100%.

The then chief constable of South Yorkshire police said after the findings of the Hillsborough independent panel in 2012:

“In the immediate aftermath senior officers sought to change the record of events. Disgraceful lies were told which blamed the Liverpool fans for the disaster. Statements were altered which sought to minimise police blame.”

By that point, 23 years after Hillsborough, the game was up. Even South Yorkshire police had to admit that there had been a cover-up of the true facts on an industrial scale.

[Ian Byrne]

At the end of the Hillsborough processes in 2020, 31 years had passed. A jury at the inquests had found to the criminal standard of proof, beyond reasonable doubt, that those who died had been unlawfully killed by the gross negligence of the match commander. The police force involved had settled the cover-up cases, having publicly acknowledged that disgraceful lies had been deliberately told by senior officers to shift the blame from the police on to Liverpool supporters. Yet, disgracefully, no public servant or police officer has ever been convicted of any offence or even disciplined. In fact, one of the officers at the very heart of the cover-up, Norman Bettison, not only escaped sanction, but was rewarded. He received a knighthood—a title he disgracefully holds to this day. Truth, but no justice.

Would anybody in this place argue that it was right that those responsible for the 97 unlawful deaths of innocent people walked away without any consequences? I would wager not. However, 36 years after the Hillsborough cover-up, nothing has changed. The very establishments and vested interests responsible for this culture are once again looking to maintain the status quo and the ability to continue state cover-ups and deny justice to those wronged. This place, which has been at the heart of this culture and done so much to enable cover-ups, must acknowledge today that the game is up and act with clarity and moral courage to push back against those vested interests.

That is why we need a duty of candour, which was built into the proposed Hillsborough law of 2017. Establishing a legal duty of candour on public authorities, public servants and corporations that are responsible for public safety would set out a legal principle that they have to tell the truth. Is it not remarkable that that was necessary and remains so?

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that to change the culture of cover-ups that has caused so much harm to so many, we must have a duty of candour, with criminal sanctions for individuals as well as organisations and authorities?

Ian Byrne: My hon. Friend is spot on.

The second aspect of the Hillsborough law would put that new legal principle of truth into practical use by requiring public authorities, public servants and corporations proactively to assist investigations, inquests and inquiries, and providing a legal toolkit to help families and others to make them comply.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I wish to make it really clear that I am vice-chair of WhistleblowersUK, a non-profit-making organisation set up to protect whistleblowers. Nothing should slow down the promised Bill, and it is essential that those who hold public office are held fully accountable. If we are to prevent the now constant stream of scandals that blight so many innocent lives, we must not overlook the fact that the people involved in Hillsborough and every similar scandal speak up, but the system lets them down. Will the Minister address directly the fact that, as part of the important new Hillsborough law, the Government should commit to protect those who exercise their duty of candour from retaliation by also committing to the introduction of an office of the whistleblower?

Ian Byrne: I thank the hon. Member for those valid points.

The third aspect of the Hillsborough law would make new offences of wilfully failing to discharge the duty to fully assist inquiries, or intentionally or recklessly misleading the public or media. That would be an absolute game changer and would transform the country for the better.

That leads me to the current situation. In the 2024 King's Speech, the Government pledged to bring forward legislation to enshrine a duty of candour for public servants. They called it the Hillsborough law, and it was what was promised in the manifesto that I, and many Members present, proudly stood on in the 2024 general election. We thought it was the same legislation as the Hillsborough law that was first brought to Parliament by Andy Burnham in 2017 and written by Pete Weatherby KC and Elkan Abrahamson, two prominent lawyers who have represented Hillsborough families for decades and continue to work with the Hillsborough law campaign. The Government promised that they would ensure that public officials tell the truth and proactively co-operate with investigations. They also promised parity of legal representation for bereaved families. I, as lead for the Hillsborough law campaign in Parliament, and all the campaigners connected with it over the years, were delighted by that commitment, which the Government promised to deliver by the 36th anniversary of Hillsborough on 15 April this year.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who the whole House will agree is making an excellent and powerful contribution. I congratulate him on all the hard work that he has done to advance this issue. He is right to set out the essentials of any Bill, including the duty of candour, criminal responsibility, and the criminal sanctions to follow. Does he agree that any attempt to water down the Bill in any way will be rejected and be unacceptable to the House?

Ian Byrne: I thank my hon. Friend for that powerful point—I agree 100%.

The Government's promise to deliver that commitment by the 36th anniversary of Hillsborough was broken. Instead, they offered a watered-down version of the legislation, stripped of its moral force and legal teeth. Lawyers who drafted the original Bill refused to endorse it, negotiations stalled, and once again the families were let down. It felt a continuation of the betrayal by the state. Although the Paymaster General told me in this place in July that the Government remain "fully committed" to introducing a Hillsborough law, we still have no clarity on when or how those provisions will be enacted. There have been plenty of warm words, but warm words do not deliver justice—action does.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the hard work he has done on this issue since he entered the House. As he was speaking, I thought to myself that in all the cases that have led to these discussions—Hillsborough, the infected blood scandal, nuclear test veterans, the Primodos scandal and countless others—the victims and their families have had to deal with the initial trauma of the incident and then the prolonged trauma as a result of all the lies that have been told. Does he agree that

introducing a duty of candour would protect victims and their families from that prolonged trauma and that that should take priority over protecting the public body that is responsible? That is how the Government can show victims and their families that they are listening. This is why my hon. Friend is so forthright on bringing forward a Hillsborough law—because it would include the duty of candour.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short, as so many Members want to speak.

Ian Byrne: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point; she is spot on.

Out of sheer desperation at the situation, in July I used a private Member's Bill, the Public Authority (Accountability) Bill, to reintroduce the original Hillsborough law—the 2017 version. The Government rejected it, so here we are today, without the Hillsborough law, fighting against those same vested interests, and the clock continues to tick while people's belief in politics and politicians continues to erode.

Let me be absolutely crystal clear for the Government: a full duty of candour with criminal sanctions is non-negotiable in any legislation bearing the name of Hillsborough. It is not a technicality; it is a moral imperative, and it is a moral and legal imperative that it sits at the heart of every inquiry, investigation and inquest, local and national—no exceptions. Nothing less will change the culture, because carve-outs become cover-ups, and this must never be allowed to happen again. Simply, if it had been law at the time of Hillsborough, we would not have waited decades for justice. So much pain and suffering could have been avoided, and families could have grieved for those lost instead of fighting the state for truth and justice. The duty of candour is about accountability. It is about preventing cover-ups, and it is about restoring public trust.

The second pillar of the Hillsborough law is legal parity, which is equally vital. Time and again, bereaved families have faced the might of the state with no legal support, while public bodies are armed to the teeth with expensive teams of lawyers. Parity of arms is essential to stop false narratives being spread and families feeling like it is them who are on trial. That imbalance is not just unfair; it is grotesque. I pay tribute to Deb Coles and the team at INQUEST for their constant championing of this. Their work was highlighted in "All or Nothing: A report on the Hillsborough Law Family Listening Day". I urge everybody in this room and beyond to read it, to understand why parity of arms is so fundamental to gaining truth and justice.

If the Government resist a full duty of candour without exception, what does that say? Do they believe public officials should be allowed to lie with impunity? Do they believe families should continue to be denied justice? Opposition to this legislation is not about practicality. It highlights the power of vested interests. It is about protecting the status quo—a status quo that has caused untold harm to so many. The ball is now in the Government's court. More specifically, it is in the Prime Minister's court.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I should explain to my hon. Friend that I will have to leave the debate to attend a meeting about the violence

meted out in a demonstration outside an asylum hotel in my constituency, but I want to make this point very clear. Labour is going to Liverpool for its conference in three weeks' time. If this legislation is not sorted by then, it should not expect a welcome from the people in Liverpool, because we have waited too long.

Ian Byrne: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend.

The Prime Minister has the ball in his court. He has made personal commitments to Liverpool, to the Hillsborough families and to survivors of other state-related scandals. He is perhaps the most qualified Prime Minister in history to understand why this matters, but understanding is not enough. We need courage, we need leadership, and we need action.

I have met countless campaigners who are formidable, tireless and brave. They have been underestimated by the establishment for far too long, but they will not go away, and neither will I. As somebody who was at Hillsborough, I carry this fight in my bones. I will not rest while injustice persists, not just for those who died at Hillsborough, but for everyone who has been wronged by the state. Unless the state learns from its mistakes, it will repeat them, and lives will continue to be destroyed. The time for delaying is over, and the time for diluting promises is over. We must legislate, we must protect truth, and we must honour those who have died at the hands of the state, and those who have fought for justice on their behalf, not with words, but with law.

Several hon. Members rose—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. As I have indicated, a lot of people wish to speak. I will start with a formal time limit on speeches of two and a half minutes, but we might have to reduce that further.

2.45 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this important debate today. I recognise that he is a survivor and that he has had the courage of his convictions to talk about this issue. It is challenging not just on a personal level, but with the responsibility of carrying on his shoulders the families and what they have wanted for so many years. I give credit to him and everybody in this House who have carried that so well.

Above all, I want to pay tribute to the families and campaigners, some of whom are here today—it is fantastic to see that—who have kept the campaign for the Hillsborough law alive. We would not be here today without their courage, persistence and awe-inspiring efforts over the years. We have seen this many times in the UK; whether it is Hillsborough, Grenfell, the infected blood scandal or Primodos, it is completely endemic throughout our system and our politics. Coming from Northern Ireland, it would be entirely remiss of me not to state that many people in Northern Ireland throughout the decades have been most egregiously let down by the state.

I want to take some time to talk about my constituents, the Conroy family. Their father, Royal Ulster Constabulary Detective Chief Superintendent Desmond Conroy, was one

[Sorcha Eastwood]

of the people on board Chinook ZD576, which crashed in the Mull of Kintyre in June 1994, killing all 29 people on board. It was an absolutely immense tragedy, and a loss to the intelligence and security services in Northern Ireland at that time.

For 30 years, the Conroy family, the Phoenix family and many others have had their names and their family's names brought through the mud. Not just that, but the two people, Flight Lieutenants Jonathan Tapper and Richard Cook, who were piloting the craft that day, also had their reputations tarnished posthumously—normally people are honoured posthumously. All 29 people on board that craft—although it is not relevant materially—served their country with distinction. How were they honoured? They were honoured by their families being blocked at every cut and turn, and by being told that it was “in their head” and that they were conspiracists.

2.48 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see so many people here. We clearly cannot do justice to this subject in two and a half minutes, but in a way, the number of people here speaks more eloquently than any speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing the debate and for all the work that he has done on this issue. He has rightly identified two essential elements that are necessary to ensure justice where there is a major event resulting in death or serious injury.

This is something that the Justice Committee—and the predecessor Committee to the one I chair—has been calling for for many years. Four years ago in a report, the Committee recommended that

“Non-means tested legal aid should be automatically available at the most complex inquests such as those following public disasters. In all inquests where public bodies are legally represented bereaved people should be entitled to publicly funded legal representation.”

That is something that the Joint Committee on Human Rights has also found. Indeed, when considering the issue of the duty of candour in 2023, it recommended that a duty to be candid at inquests should be extended to all public bodies. That is essential if we are not to continue to make the horrific mistakes that have been made, not just in the case of Hillsborough, but in many other tragedies over the past years and decades.

In the short time I have, I will mention two other important elements. Yesterday, the Justice Committee interviewed an outstanding candidate for the Independent Public Advocate, Cindy Butts, who endorsed the need for legal representation and the duty of candour. If she is appointed later this week, as I hope she will be, she will be outstanding in championing these matters.

The final point I will mention is a national oversight mechanism, which is equally important. In many cases, even where there has been a proper hearing, recommendations have just sat on the shelf. I fully support the campaign of Inquest and other organisations to ensure that we have that mechanism in the future. It needs to be part of this package of measures going forward.

2.50 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) on bringing forward this debate and on the passion with which he is advancing the case. The attendance in the Chamber today demonstrates the strength of feeling on the issue. My contribution will draw attention to an area of Government where the duty of candour already exists, at least supposedly—the Department of Health and Social Care. I hope that the Government will learn lessons from the way in which that is conducted within the Department.

I relate the case of one of my constituents, Joe Poynton, whose daughter Sally was murdered by his undiagnosed paranoid-schizophrenic grandson Jacob in June 2021. For three years prior to her death, Sally battled unsuccessfully to get diagnosis and treatment for Jacob. He is now receiving that in hospital, but the family are devastated at the price that she had to pay—and they are paying—to achieve it.

There is a long tragic history of innocent people being killed by young people with schizophrenia, sometimes undiagnosed and sometimes diagnosed, but usually on the radar of mental health services. Sally Poynton had made repeated attempts to get her son diagnosed, but the service never got on top of the issues. I have already furnished the Minister with my questions, because the attempts to get reports out of the NHS have simply failed—reports have been heavily redacted.

What legislative changes can be brought in to correct the failings of the service in this case? What legislative changes are proposed to ensure that an adult discharged from hospital following a mental health admission has a GP assigned to them? Can the Minister ensure that measures are proposed to reverse the disappointing lack of professional curiosity within the service? Finally, can the Minister ensure that there is legal representation at all inquests? The NHS has professionals, barristers and lawyers supporting it, and individuals and families do not.

2.53 pm

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate. The day of 15 April 1989 will never leave us. On that day, fans went to the match and never came home. They were not “lost”. They were unlawfully killed: authorities protecting themselves; decades of denial, distortion and lies; that *Sun* front page; a cover-up; the systematic failure of the state; and still not one successful prosecution.

Charlotte Hennessy is a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Sir Mark Tami), who, as Government Deputy Chief Whip, cannot tell her story. Charlotte was six when her dad, Jimmy Hennessy, died. Jimmy was a plasterer, a man of morals, and a mod—he looked good. She was told that he died of traumatic asphyxiation, but in 2012 she learnt the truth: her dad was found alive on that pitch. Jimmy was carried to the gym, where he was meant to receive medical help, but he was declared dead. He was not; he was still alive when he was zipped into a body bag—he vomited inside it. Jimmy did not die in the crush; he died of his own vomit while zipped inside a body bag.

Charlotte told me that a Hillsborough law with a duty of candour is imperative. The Government must now match the courage of the families and campaigners who have fought for this. Will they be bold enough to lay the Hillsborough law?

Hillsborough was not a one-off. Again and again, the state has failed those who need its protection most. Last year, the Prime Minister promised to deliver a Hillsborough law, but the Government's own target to introduce the Bill by 15 April this year has been missed. Families have waited too long and there have been too many broken promises. I ask the Minister: when will the Hillsborough law come before Parliament? When it does, will it give justice to the 97? Will it be worthy of their memory? Will it be strong enough to protect every victim of state failure?

2.55 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I extend my immense gratitude to my friend, the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne).

On behalf of my independent alliance colleagues, I begin by paying tribute to the Hillsborough families, survivors and campaigners who for decades have fought with extraordinary courage and perseverance. Their demand has always been simple: for the truth to be told as it is so that families can find closure and not face barriers in their pursuit of justice for their loved ones. Their legacy is the Hillsborough law: a legal duty of candour on public authorities and officials, and equal representation for bereaved families. That was promised by the Government. With trust in politicians at an all-time low in our country and around the world, I appeal to the Government to please honour their promise. I am not asking for anything different or anything more.

With high-profile tragedies such as Hillsborough, Grenfell, the Manchester Arena bombing, Horizon and infected blood, the need for such a law is undeniable. I attended the statement made yesterday by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), on child sexual abuse. Without the Hillsborough law, that inquiry may not uncover the truth about what people withheld and how many victims could have been prevented from abuse or supported in their time of need, so please—this is critical.

I will skip to one additional point. Justice is about not just how we respond after a disaster but the systems we put in place to prevent injustices from happening again. Too often, families are forced into painful struggles because institutions have failed them. While we respect the work of our public servants, we must recognise that failures within the NHS, the police, local government and the courts are sometimes systemic. One such issue relates to critically ill children, where parents have to go through adversarial court battles to get second opinions and treatment for their children. I urge the Government to look into that and to pass the Hillsborough law as promised so that those things can be addressed.

2.58 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for

securing this important debate. As the MP for Sheffield and Hillsborough, who was living locally at the time, I will never forget the harrowing scenes—things that people really should never see—with many people just roaming around our area in complete shock. I pay tribute to the many neighbours who helped by letting people into their houses, giving them cups of tea and allowing them to phone to reassure their parents and families that they were okay.

No family should ever have to face the indifference, the lies and the avoidable trauma that the survivors of Hillsborough and the families of the 97 have experienced. I recall the debate we had on the Hillsborough families report more than two and a half years ago and the warm words and cross-party support on display for the Hillsborough law then. But warm words are comforting for only so long and, after 36 years of waiting the families deserve both the truth and justice. That was why I was proud to stand on a manifesto committing to the Hillsborough law.

Beyond that manifesto commitment, the Prime Minister pledged in 2022 that

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

We are now a quarter of the way through the potential lifespan of this Parliament and, while I appreciate that the legislative process takes time, we have not seen any public progress on that commitment.

To me, our manifesto pledge was a clear commitment to the Public Authority (Accountability) Bill of 2017, which was tabled by the former Member for Leigh and subsequently re-tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby. Importantly, we are in a position where we have a Prime Minister who has taken silk and is a former Director of Public Prosecutions. There is no man more eminently qualified to judge the Hillsborough law on its merits than him, and I trust that he would have considered the viewpoints of these anonymous detractors before making public promises.

The speculation about what form the Hillsborough law may take is only rampant due to an information vacuum that has regrettably been allowed to exist. Can the Minister outline for us, either today or later in writing, the timeline for the implementation of the Hillsborough law and commit to publishing a draft of that law, to give us proper time to review the Government's proposals? It is vital that we get this right.

3 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mrs Hobhouse, and I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this important debate and for his excellent speech. Let me take ten precious seconds to point out that, apart from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), not one single member of His Majesty's Opposition has come along to this debate.

Despite what the Prime Minister said on the 2 July, committing himself to the Hillsborough law, including criminal sanctions, *The Times* reported on 13 July that the Treasury was holding this up because of problems regarding funding for legal aid. My contribution to this debate is based on my long public service in health and social care, which spans four decades. Scandal, cover-up,

[Seamus Logan]

service failure and outright abuse over those decades says to me that, despite the Nolan principles in public life, our leaders cannot be trusted. They cannot be trusted to do the right thing unless they are legally required to do so.

There have been so many examples of whistleblowers in public life who, rather than being honoured for trying to put a stop to these failures, are hounded and harried by the very authorities they are seeking to challenge. That is why, more than ever, we need an office of the whistleblower, independent of Government and with the powers to enforce any duty of candour on public authorities. My public service began in the same organisation that was responsible for the Kincora children's home scandal. Many of us in this place remember, all these years later, that we have still not got to the bottom of that.

I also want to point out that, in ensuing years, I witnessed large-scale failures in the care of older people, people with learning disabilities, children in care and other client groups, not only in this jurisdiction, but in the Republic of Ireland as well. In each and every case, the organisational system worked overtime to protect its reputation. Senior public servants, who should have come clean from the outset, worked hard to cover up these matters from full public view. That is why this law is so important, and I completely agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby, who introduced this debate.

As I said, behind this law is the need to give it teeth through the establishment of an office of the whistleblower. Public inquiries simply do not provide the answers we need. Just think of the late Dr David Kelly, who died more than 22 years ago, and why details about his untimely death were sealed for 70 years by the Hutton inquiry. In conclusion, I simply ask one question: why have the Government not yet set out how they expect the proposed legislation to work? The clock is ticking. People need actions, not words.

3.3 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate.

I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Primodos, which I have led for over a decade alongside affected families in their fight for truth and justice. Primodos is one of the clearest examples of a systematic failure of candour in British medical healthcare. Between 1958 and 1978, around 1.5 million women in the United Kingdom were prescribed the hormone pregnancy test. From the 1960s, doctors and researchers raised concern that it was linked to miscarriages, stillbirths and severe birth defects.

Instead of acting, the regulators actively suppressed the evidence and colluded with the pharmaceutical companies. When Dr Isabel Gal published her study in 1967, officials undermined her work rather than investigating it. Later, archives in the UK and Germany showed that they knew of the concerns, but kept patients in the dark, even though other countries had withdrawn the drug from the market.

After years of campaigning, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency finally established an expert working group in 2017. Its task was to examine whether there was a possible association. The final report said there was “no causal association”. That was not in the original draft; it was inserted late, under outside instruction, and caused misunderstanding by giving the impression of certainty. Moreover, the families were excluded from the process. We continued to campaign; in 2020 the Cumberlege review was set up and found that there had been avoidable harm, that people should receive redress, and that there should be a duty of candour and cultural change. However, five years later, only one recommendation—a patient safety commission—has been delivered.

The impact on the families has been horrendous. I call on our Government to recognise Primodos as a case study—[*Interruption.*]

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. We have been disrupted by a Division. I am expecting everybody to be back here in 15 minutes, at 3.20 pm. When we come back, the hon. Lady will have half a minute.

3.5 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.20 pm

On resuming—

Yasmin Qureshi: Meanwhile, the Government have pursued legal strike-out applications to shut down the families' cases—blunt tools that treat them as vexatious, even while Ministers have accepted in public that there was a failing. I call on the Government to recognise Primodos as a case study of breach of candour, to implement the Cumberlege review in full, including redress, to legislate for candour across public authorities, to guarantee legal parity, and to support the Hillsborough law now.

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne). I remember his debate in the main Chamber well; it was highly emotional. I am pleased to see his continued passion for justice, openness and transparency—well done.

It may interest the hon. Gentleman to know that, in the Northern Ireland Assembly back home, my colleague Paul Frew MLA is currently proposing a private Member's Bill on the duty of candour in the health sector in particular. All the issues the hon. Gentleman raised are applicable there, too. The Democratic Unionist party supports the introduction of an evidence-based statutory duty of candour within Northern Ireland's healthcare system that can hold people to account for failings where there was a deliberate withholding of information that could have prevented harm.

The Bill is currently out for consultation. We hope that it will make a change and maybe set a precedent for the United Kingdom. The measure, rooted in transparency and accountability, is crucial for restoring trust in our health services following a series of devastating failures such as the revelations of the infected blood inquiry and

the tragic hyponatraemia-related deaths. While healthcare professionals work under immense pressure, it is vital that transparency prevails—not as punishment for mistakes, but as a safeguard against deliberate misinformation or obfuscation, particularly when it leads to harm.

I believe that the duty of candour is necessary across Government Departments, while acknowledging the need for a balance to ensure that staff are not hampered from making hard decisions because they believe that they will be personally culpable for them. I can well remember that during my time in a council, when we considered going against advice given, we were warned that, in any legislative challenge, we would be personally responsible through surcharge. At times, that scare tactic would have prevented the right decisions being made. I believe that the duty of candour must be balanced with protections. I look to the Minister to ensure that that is the case UK-wide.

It is also important that, if legal cases are needed to bring openness, there are funding streams available, rather than the crowdfunding that currently seems to be needed. As always, protections against vexatious claims are also needed. Any legislation must find that delicate balance, but there must be no doubt that the right legislation is needed, and needed soon. The days of backroom dealings are done forever. The public demands and deserves better.

3.23 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. Let me begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing and leading this important debate. His personal testimony of that fateful day in April '89 is a moving one. He has used his voice in this place to continue the fight for truth, justice and accountability. Most importantly, I pay tribute to the family and friends of the 97, to the survivors of that terrible day and to my city, which has always stood together and continues to do so today. Their tenacity, resilience and dignity are a lesson to us all.

I would like to take a moment to quote Jenni Hicks, who lost her two daughters at Hillsborough.

"I'll never get that accountability for my daughters but we're still fighting on behalf of Grenfell, Manchester Arena and other disasters that are bound to happen in future.

What runs alongside the loss of my daughters is the knowledge that this is a country that's prepared to accept this injustice and that's why the system has to be changed. You can't just say that's it, that's how it is. If something's wrong, you have to try and do something about it."

Let's forget the legal speak. Can anyone name a better summary of the guiding light and principled mission of this campaign for change?

The truth is that none of us should be here in Westminster Hall today. Our Prime Minister promised this legislation at the Labour party conference in Liverpool last year, and in our manifesto. So, yes, I am angry that it is not yet on the statute book. Whether specific Ministers are to blame, or senior civil servants, or Government lawyers, I really do not care. This needs to be sorted, and sorted quickly. In the last week or so, we have seen several media reports that state we are near an agreement on the legislation, but I must place on record that the delay is one thing, but the watering down is another. It is quite frankly unacceptable, and should shame my party.

It should not take a backlash to focus minds to do the right thing. As MPs and Ministers, that should always be our guiding principle. We must deliver this legislation in full, no ifs and no buts. Anything else would be an affront and a betrayal to my city. The purpose of the state, indeed of our whole system of Government, is the service of people. The welfare of the people should be the highest law. I finish by asking the Minister to get this on the statute book as quickly as possible, and by saying: justice for the 97.

3.25 pm

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), who has spoken powerfully many times about his own experiences and has consistently pressed for justice for the 97. There is a longstanding, deep problem in this country that smacks of cover-up and of protection of the establishment and public bodies at all costs. We see it time and time again, with Hillsborough, Grenfell, the Post Office scandal, the infected blood scandal, covid-19 bereaved families and the longest-running scandal in British history: the fight for justice for our nuclear veterans. Those who are injured, suffering from ill health and deep trauma, and those who live daily with the heartbreak of missing their loved ones have to break every single sinew fighting the very people and the very institutions set up to protect and serve them.

I know from my constituents who lost their children in the Manchester Arena terrorist attack about the financial and emotional toil and the feeling of powerlessness from being done to by those with more agency, more power, and deeper pockets. Grief is impossible when someone is locked in that battle. The daily, monthly, yearly, decade-long grind that families have to suffer just to be believed, while those responsible carry on regardless, sickens me to my stomach. When justice feels like it may be close, the public apology comes from Ministers at the Dispatch Box, followed by promises of lessons learned and change, and that it will not be allowed to ever happen again. Yet it does. Lessons are never learned. Meaningful change never takes place.

People are tired of it, and tired of hearing empty promises. Trust in Government and institutions, and faith in our democracy are at the lowest levels I have ever seen. The Government promised to enact a Hillsborough law by April this year; they have not. There have been reports that the legislation has been watered down. It has been ready since 2017, yet we are being told more time is needed to get it right. Like many others, I struggle to understand what exactly the Government need more time for, and what they need to look closer at. The Hillsborough law as is, with no changes, tweaks or amendments, should be introduced to the House now. Nothing less will do. It matters to so many people.

3.28 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate. More than eight years after the Grenfell Tower fire, the fight for justice for the 72 who lost their lives, the bereaved and the survivors continues. Tomorrow is the first anniversary of the publication of the Grenfell Tower inquiry report,

[Joe Powell]

which shone a light on the systematic failure that led to the fire. I welcome the Government's acceptance of the recommendations from the inquiry, but there has still been no criminal accountability and the pace of change has been far too slow—just witness the families across the country still sleeping in unsafe flats that have not been remediated.

I pay tribute again to the Hillsborough families, who have fought to ensure that other communities do not have to suffer as they did. But we know, from Windrush to the Post Office, LGBT veterans, infected blood and many other scandals, that we need to reform how we approach injustices involving the very state that is supposed to protect people. That starts with the Hillsborough law: an essential levelling of the playing field between victims and the state, including, as others have said, parity of legal aid and a duty of candour. But we should not stop at the Hillsborough law. It is also vital that we ensure that lessons of past tragedies are never ignored. To go through lengthy and expensive public inquiries and then fail to change compounds the original injustice further.

The same goes for coroners' findings, including prevention of future deaths reports, which are vital early warnings to the state to prevent larger tragedies. Grenfell shows us the cost: after the Lakanal House fire in 2009, the coroner made clear recommendations to review building regulations, including guidance on external fire spread applicable to new and older housing stock. If those recommendations had been implemented, it is very possible that the fire eight years later would have been avoided.

I urge the Government to consider independent oversight of whether lessons from inquiries have been learned, including through a national oversight mechanism. This is not about taking power away from Ministers or Parliament. If the Government wish to reject recommendations, they can do so and explain why, but that should be done openly and transparently. I believe that an oversight mechanism would help the Government to improve, deliver on a public sector reform agenda, and deliver on justice and change for victims, including those at Grenfell.

3.30 pm

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for his contribution.

The issue here, really, is class. When we look at what happened at Hillsborough, what happened at Orgreave, what has happened with contaminated blood, what happened with the nuclear veterans, what happened with Windrush and what has happened at Grenfell, who suffered? Working-class people—that is the common denominator. As soon as people uncover it, and the establishment are questioned, they circle the wagons of injustice and discredit everybody other than themselves to try to protect the establishment.

This cannot continue—I really mean that. The default position of the powerful—the establishment—is to attack the powerless. We had 72 people killed at Grenfell, we had 97 people killed at Hillsborough, people with contaminated blood are dying weekly, and we have

other issues such as Orgreave. Still we have not sorted these issues out. It is an absolute disgrace from a Government that have promised so much—a Government that I am proud to be a Member of Parliament for.

It is reputations versus truth and accountability—that is where we are at this moment in time. It cannot continue. We have to get to the truth. The Prime Minister this week said “delivery, delivery, delivery”. He needs to make sure that we deliver on a proper, full Hillsborough law, which was written a number of years ago and accepted by all. We cannot let down the people in Liverpool, or any of the other people I have mentioned. We cannot let people down. We have to get to the bottom of the truth.

I have a question, by the way—in seven seconds. Why do we need a law for a duty of candour—for people to tell the truth? What on earth is this about?

3.33 pm

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate and pay tribute to him for his tireless work, for so long, to raise awareness of the injustice suffered by the victims of Hillsborough and their loved ones.

I know people who were directly affected by Hillsborough. I have tried to support them and their truth and justice campaigning in my time in politics. As council leader in St Helens in 2022, I took forward a motion, which I am pleased to say was backed unanimously, to support the introduction of the Hillsborough law and to support my hon. Friend's “The Real Truth” legacy project. There is not much that would give me greater satisfaction than voting to pass the Hillsborough law in this place, in the role that I now hold.

I am not trying to make anyone feel old, but I was just nine years old when Hillsborough happened. But I can vividly remember the news coming through that day. I can remember the newspapers and TV reports in the days and weeks that followed. I remember, in the aftermath, the shocking speed with which the completely false allegations were invented and deliberately spread—the lies that were told at the time about people like me, from communities like mine, by people in positions of power, including in this place. Well, we are in this place now, and we have a Government in power who have said repeatedly that they are committed to introducing the Hillsborough law and supporting victims and their families. We hold the power and we need to use it while we have it, because our enemies always do.

I know that the Minister rightly cannot and will not share the details of private conversations, but I can say that in every conversation I have had with her, her commitment and determination to get this right has come through loud and clear, for which I thank her. Enough is enough; nobody should have to fight for truth and justice over the death of a loved one. The way the Hillsborough families have fought for so long is inspirational but also unacceptable. They should never have been put through it. The state protected itself instead of the victims after Hillsborough, which it has done since time and again. It will be able to do it again unless we change things.

I will finish by saying publicly what I have said to the Minister and others privately: I cannot and will not support anything that the Hillsborough families do not support. This is not a time to be timid. The Government have been given the mandate to do this and to do it properly. If Ministers can bring forward a Bill, as I hope they will, which has the support of the Hillsborough families and those of other victims who have had to fight too hard for too long for justice, I will take great pleasure in supporting it fully and standing up to the vested interests that have delayed it for too long. Let us get it right and let us get it done.

3.36 pm

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. At the start of this Parliament, I was glad to hear that the Government promised a Hillsborough law, which would place a duty on public workers to act in the public interest. We know from Hillsborough, Grenfell, infected blood and Horizon that too often public bodies treat inquiries as reputational risks.

In Corby and East Northamptonshire, many constituents feel let down. Zena and Nicola Stanton spent years campaigning for Jorgie, Nicola's daughter and Zena's granddaughter, who died in Kettering general hospital in 2016. A coroner later found that hospital staff failed on five separate occasions in Jorgie's care. That led to dehydration, sepsis, multiple organ failure and ultimately her death.

Zena and Nicola never gave up. They exposed the unhealthy culture in the ward, later confirmed in a report. Senior staff have now admitted mistakes. I believe that without that family's fight, the truth may never have come out. I am glad that we finally secured meetings and apologies for them, but victims should not have to fight for years and rely on their MP simply to be heard. Families like Jorgie's are fighting for every other family who will come to rely on that same ward.

We need reporting systems that reveal failures quickly. Hospitals and other public services should have transparency. I also believe that this is about culture. We need to end defensiveness in public services. It is wrong that public bodies spend unlimited taxpayer money fighting victims. Staff must also feel free to speak up and speak out. For Jorgie's, Zena's and Nicola's sake, let us deliver a Hillsborough law worthy of its name, which makes candour a duty, gives families fair representation and ensures that yesterday's injustices never become tomorrow's.

3.38 pm

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), on his excellent speech.

I was present in this House in 1998 when the then Home Secretary Jack Straw made a statement on the conclusions of the Justice Stuart-Smith review of the evidence and papers relating to the Hillsborough disaster, which I will quote. If anything, this justifies and underlines why we need this change in the law:

"Taking those and all other considerations into account, the overall conclusion that Lord Justice Stuart-Smith reaches is that there is no basis for a further public inquiry. He also finds no basis for a renewed application to quash the verdict of the inquest, and

he concludes that there is no material that should be put before the Director of Public Prosecutions or the police disciplinary".—[*Official Report*, 18 February 1998; Vol. 306, c. 1085.]

The independent panel report and the subsequent inquest followed. How misspoken was that set of words in this House. That justifies why we need this change in law.

We are again seeing continued delay. This a question of government machinery. As we have seen through the history of the campaign, delay has followed delay. There is often pushback from Whitehall and the wider public sector machine, finding problems but not solutions. It is a concern that there are issues that have not been resolved by now, and the continued delay breeds suspicion and distrust in the state's ability to act competency and fairly. I do not doubt that there are legal matters that need addressing, but why have they not been resolved by now?

In previous Parliaments, progress was made with respect to the Hillsborough justice campaign when there was firm direction and action from Ministers, including from two previous Home Secretaries—the right hon. Alan Johnson and Baroness May of Maidenhead. They set up the independent panel and took action on its subsequent groundbreaking report. If there is a will, and direction and determination from Ministers, solutions can be found and barriers removed. There must be a duty of candour for civil servants and public servants, and parity of legal representation. Such a Bill could help to improve and repair public confidence in the Government.

3.40 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing it.

The Government committed to a Hillsborough law in their first year, and it should be delivered without delay and in full. The case for action is starkly illustrated by the experience of bereaved families in my constituency and neighbouring areas whose daughters died under the care of Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS trust, known colloquially as TEWV. Three teenage girls—Christie Harnett, Nadia Sharif and Emily Moore—lost their lives in that trust's care. The independent reports by Niche Health and Social Care Consulting into their deaths were unequivocal: the statutory duty of candour was not met, families were not told the truth and were not supported after the tragedy, and lessons were not learned. The candour that Parliament demanded in 2014 was absent in practice.

The trust has since acknowledged those failings, but wider evidence shows that that is not an isolated case. The Department of Health and Social Care's recent call for evidence found that only 40% of NHS staff thought that the purpose of the duty was clear, and fewer than a quarter believed that it was correctly applied after serious incidents. Most damning of all, 94% of patients and families felt that providers failed to engage with them meaningfully or compassionately when things went wrong. Rob Behrens, the ombudsman, said that avoidable deaths in mental healthcare are "too common" and that the duty of candour does not work.

That is why we need an updated duty of candour—one that binds public authorities and individual leaders with consequences when truth is withheld. Crucially,

[*Andy McDonald*]

bereaved families must have automatic access to funded representation. For too long, the state has been represented while ordinary families have had to fight alone. I therefore add my voice to those calling for a public inquiry into the deaths of Christie, Nadia and Emily. Indeed, other bereaved families have more than justifiable cause for complaint. Only a full inquiry can reveal the truth, demonstrate why the current duty is insufficient and ensure that lessons are learned. If “never again” is to mean anything, let us deliver the Hillsborough law in full so that openness, honesty and justice become the defining standards of public service.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Before I call Patrick Hurley, let me say that there are two Members who want to speak but are not on the list. I want everybody’s voice to be heard, so I will give them two minutes each at the end.

3.43 pm

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing the debate. We served on Liverpool city council together many years ago, so I know how long he has been fighting this fight.

Inquiries into all the disasters and scandals that have been mentioned have shown how difficult it can be for ordinary people to get to the truth. Too often, they face the immense challenge of navigating complex legal procedures and processes without the same resources as the public authorities involved. Too often, bereaved families have to crowdfund their own legal representation, while the state tools up with expensive barristers to defend itself. What will the Government do to ensure proportionality and parity for bereaved families at inquests?

The duty of candour seeks to change the current process. It would put a legal obligation on public servants to act openly and honestly in the public interest. Institutions must proactively co-operate with inquiries, rather than retreat into the usual defensiveness. There must be parity of legal representation so that the regular person on the street is not disadvantaged at inquests. Parity of arms is essential to uncover the truth and deliver justice.

This is not just about historic injustices. The current public inquiry into the murders in my Southport constituency last year will soon examine all aspects of failure that led up to the attack. A statutory duty of candour would make a real difference there, providing a duty to tell the truth, and an opportunity for the families to achieve justice. For me, this is not just about blame, but about building a culture of openness in public life—one that helps us to learn from tragedy, supports families and prevents future harm. If we get this right, that is how we respect those we have lost and how we protect future generations.

3.45 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I want to speak about transparency and accountability in healthcare, and about my constituents Ryan and Sarah, and their daughter Ida. Ida died in 2019 at seven days old. She died from brain damage caused by failings

in her care. Those failings could have been avoided. There were eight missed opportunities to save Ida, and in the wake of her death, Ryan and Sarah have had to fight every step of the way to get the truth. After the hospital trust’s completely inadequate internal investigation declared that there were no issues with Ida’s care, her death was graded as “moderate harm”. Ryan and Sarah had to contact a senior coroner to request a full inquest, and only during that inquest this year—six years later—did the trust finally accept its failings. That is five and a half years in which Ryan and Sarah have had to fight for the truth; five and a half years in which the trust not only denied its failings, but covered them up.

For truly safe healthcare we must strengthen the ability of staff to speak up and speak out safely. People need to be thanked for raising concerns. But when problems are covered up, there needs to be accountability. For Ryan and Sarah, the grief of Ida’s death was made even harder by the denial and cover-up that followed.

Iqbal Mohamed: This is a harrowing story about Ida and Sarah. Does the hon. Member agree that not every person who is impacted by failings of state, and who has lost family and loved ones, has the resources, time and energy to fight for five and a half years?

Lizzi Collinge: I absolutely agree. People should not have to have this fight. They should not have to have resources to take on hospital trusts or the state. They should not have to do that; his point is well made.

When mistakes are hidden or dismissed, families lose faith not only in an individual hospital or organisation, but in the very systems that are meant to protect them. It is our responsibility to ensure that no other family has to endure what Ryan and Sarah went through, and that no other baby dies in that way. Accountability cannot be optional, and honesty cannot be negotiable.

3.48 pm

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this timely and important debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on grief support and the impact of death on society, I approach this issue through the lens of what bereavement means for families, communities and society as a whole. The Hillsborough disaster, Grenfell and the infected blood scandal all exposed what happens when the bereaved are met with defensiveness instead of candour and support. The proposed Hillsborough law is therefore about much more than legal mechanics; it is about whether families can begin to process grief, secure in the knowledge that they have been told the truth and given a fair voice in the proceedings.

An inquest conducted in a spirit of candour can provide a form of closure. It cannot bring back loved ones, but it can help to answer the haunting questions of what happened and why—questions that, if left unresolved, prolong grief and deepen trauma. No legislation can make amends for the terrible treatment that the families of the victims of the Hillsborough disaster endured at the hands of our public authorities, but a duty of candour can seek to ensure that such treatment is never repeated. If we truly want a culture of candour, we must see it not only as an obligation to tell the truth,

but as a duty to work alongside the bereaved to give them closure where possible and to signpost them to the help they need. That is the legacy that the Hillsborough families have called for. It is the least that a compassionate state should provide.

3.50 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing this debate. On behalf of my party, I too pay tribute to the Hillsborough families in this landmark debate.

After years of delay by the last Conservative Government—the Conservatives are, shamefully, barely represented here today—Liberal Democrats in Parliament and Liberal Democrat councillors such as Carl Cashman welcomed this Government's commitment in the King's Speech to create a statutory duty of candour on public authorities to force them to tell the truth. However, given the urgent need for such a duty, it is unacceptable that the Hillsborough law was not introduced in time for the 36th anniversary of the disaster, as the Prime Minister himself had promised.

Ninety-seven men, women and children lost their lives as a result of the shameful events on that terrible day in 1989, yet the families of the victims were forced to wait decades for the truth, in the wake of institutional silence and deceit from state institutions. For years they were told that Liverpool fans were to blame, but they were not. It was police incompetence, a failure of safety and then a cover-up—a deliberate attempt by public officials to shift blame, rewrite the narrative and protect institutions instead of people. It was not only public institutions that were responsible for warping narratives. I will not name the title, but we all know a particular newspaper that still lives a legacy of shame for the way it demonised fans on that day.

A legal duty of candour would not erase that tragedy, but it might have spared the families years of gaslighting, indignity and conflict. Similar is true of the Grenfell disaster, as the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) has powerfully said. Seventy-two lives were lost in that shocking disaster, including that of emerging photographer and artist Khadija Saye, who I knew. It was a tragedy that should never have happened, and a scandal that revealed deep systemic failures in not only fire safety but the way public authorities treat working-class communities, especially when they are black or brown.

Even after the fire, we saw the same pattern again: a slow trickle of information, shifting stories and an instinct—a culture—of institutional self-preservation. We must ask ourselves, how many times will we allow this cycle to repeat? How many lives must be lost before we accept that the public deserve honesty from those in power?

Andrew George: My hon. Friend is right about the need for the state to be open and honest in all these cases. As I mentioned earlier, the duty of candour already exists in the NHS. Nevertheless, in inquests where the duty of candour should be to the fore, the state comes along with barristers, lawyers and their supporters, and the victims of actions in the past are not represented at all. If the same resource that went into protecting the reputations of NHS staff went into supporting patients, these issues would not happen.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. May I remind Members that we have very little time? Can we keep interventions short?

Josh Babarinde: The point my hon. Friend makes is testament to the importance of parity of legal representation.

To continue, how many lives must be lost before we accept that the public deserve honesty from those in power? When will we get to the truth proactively, not just when institutions are dragged to the witness box? That must change.

I pay tribute again to the tireless campaigners—the bereaved families of the Hillsborough disaster and the Grenfell tragedy, those wronged in the Post Office scandal and more—who have refused to accept institutional silence and deceit. However, it should not be up to victims or their grieving families to fight for decades to get answers; it should be the duty of the state to give them those answers—early, clearly and completely.

The Government must act without further delay. I therefore urge the Minister to announce a timeline for a new statutory duty of candour now. I urge that it is not watered down under any circumstances, and it must be accompanied with parity of legal representation for bereaved families during inquests and inquiries into disasters or state-related deaths. This Parliament must be the one that says, “No more lies, no more hiding and no more protecting institutions over protecting people.”

3.56 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this important debate. He has been a tireless advocate for bereaved families and communities affected by tragedy. His determination to keep these issues before Parliament commands respect across the House. We owe a debt of gratitude to the campaigners and families themselves. From Hillsborough to Grenfell, from the infected blood scandal to the Post Office Horizon affair, they have shown extraordinary courage in pressing for truth and accountability. Their persistence is the reason why we are here today, and it must not be forgotten.

The Hillsborough disaster in 1989 is the clearest example of why the call for a duty of candour has become louder over the years: 97 lives were lost and countless other people were traumatised, and it was very powerful for us all to hear from the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby, who was there on that day at a young age. In the years that followed, there were inquiries, judicial reviews and inquests, yet for far too long, the true circumstances of what happened were hidden.

In 2017, Bishop James Jones was asked to reflect on the experience of the Hillsborough families. His report set out in stark terms the lessons that need to be learned. He said that it was vital that the state ensure “proper participation” of the bereaved at inquests at which public bodies are represented. He identified four strands to achieving that: first, publicly funded legal representation for bereaved families when public bodies are represented; secondly, an end to the practice of public bodies spending limitless sums on their own

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

representation; thirdly, a culture change so that public bodies see inquests not as a reputational threat, but as an opportunity to learn; and finally, changes to procedures and the training of coroners so that bereaved families are placed truly at the centre of the process.

His report also served a reminder that legislation alone is not enough. As others have mentioned, we already have a statutory duty of candour in parts of our system—particularly the NHS—but too often that duty has become a tick-box exercise, satisfying process rather than securing trust. If the Hillsborough law is to mean anything, it must embed a genuine culture of truth-telling and accountability, as well as changing the law.

It is against that backdrop that the idea of a statutory duty of candour has emerged and persisted. Sir Brian Langstaff, in his recent report into the infected blood scandal, reinforced the same point: too often, institutions have closed ranks, failed to disclose information openly and thereby compounded the suffering of victims and families.

The King's Speech in 2024 committed the Government to bringing forward a Hillsborough law, including a statutory duty of candour and provisions on legal representation. The stated aims were to improve transparency and accountability and reduce the culture of defensiveness, and to ensure that failures such as those on Hillsborough or infected blood are not repeated.

Conservative Members are sympathetic to those aims, and it is worth remembering that some steps have been taken. Part 2 of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 legislated for the creation of an independent public advocate to give victims and families a stronger voice in the aftermath of major incidents. The previous Government also worked with police chiefs, prosecutors and fire leaders to establish the Hillsborough charter, which commits signatories to put the public interest above organisational representation.

Ian Byrne: Does the shadow Minister reflect on the fact, though, that Bishop Jones's report was in 2017? He was asked to deliver it by the then Prime Minister, Theresa May. The Conservatives had a long time in government to implement the Hillsborough law. The shadow Minister mentioned some of the things they did, but it was not enough. I have been here since 2019, and I have continuously asked Minister after Minister to deliver the Hillsborough law, but the fact is, you failed us.

Dr Mullan: I will go on to talk about some of the other steps that we did take. Labour Members might reflect on the many things that, in opposition, they called for, demanded and promised to deliver, but that they are finding considerably more challenging to get done in government. That is our experience of Government in many respects.

As I said, there are other things that we did. On legal representation, the then Government removed the means test for legal help and representation at inquests, particularly in relation to the exceptional case funding scheme, and measures were introduced to promote candour in policing. The offence of police corruption was created in 2017, and in 2020 a new duty to co-operate was written into the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020.

As the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby highlighted, however, more needs to be done. In its 2023 report, the Joint Committee on Human Rights looked closely at equality of arms at inquests. It highlighted that during the first Hillsborough inquests, public authorities and senior police officers had multiple legal teams, all funded from the public purse, while bereaved families received no public funding at all. As I said, changes we have made would mean that that would not happen again in future in the same way. The Committee concluded that this inequality hindered the effective involvement of families, and risked damaging the ability of inquests to get to the truth.

Yet, as recent events have shown, the issue is not straightforward. As detailed in the letter the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby published earlier this year, the Government's draft Bill was rejected by Hillsborough families, who argued that its proposed safeguards against dishonesty by public servants were not strong enough. The Prime Minister has met them on several occasions, both since taking office and previously in his role as Director of Public Prosecutions, and has emphasised that any legislation must command their confidence. As yet, however, no Bill has been introduced to Parliament.

In April, further reports suggested that draft legislation did not include provision for funding parity. Campaigners expressed real concern, and Ministers in the House of Lords offered reassurances, but admitted that there was concern in Government about the overall availability of legal aid funding.

Further reports over the summer suggest that resistance in the Treasury is slowing progress. The Justice Secretary has apparently made it clear that her Department could not fund the costs within existing budgets, and the Ministry of Justice was said to have sought over £1 billion in additional legal aid funding.

In July, the Prime Minister made the point that although he was fully committed to introducing a Hillsborough law, including a duty of candour, he wanted to take the time to get it right before putting it to Parliament. On the same day, the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby brought forward his private Member's Bill on candour and accountability.

The desire for progress is strong, but the practicalities remain contested. We are sympathetic to the principle of a statutory duty of candour. We agree that bereaved families should not face the state's lawyers without adequate support of their own, and we recognise the force of the campaigns that have led us here. However, we also understand the difficulty of translating principle into workable law. How do we ensure fairness for families without creating unmanageable costs and adverse unintended consequences? Those are not small questions, and they deserve careful thought.

In closing, I return to where I began: the families. Families who lost loved ones at Hillsborough, families devastated by Grenfell, families affected by infected blood and families ruined by Horizon—they have all faced unimaginable grief and years of struggle to uncover the truth. We cannot undo their loss, but we can ensure that the state learns, that institutions are held to account and that families in the future are treated with the openness, honesty and fairness they deserve. Families and victims deserve nothing less.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask her to leave a couple of minutes for the Member in charge to respond. I thank everyone because we got everybody in today.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I pay tribute to my fellow Red, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne). His tireless campaigning on behalf of victims and survivors—the 97, the Grenfell families, the MEN arena families and every family failed by the state, of which there are sadly so many more—has been remarkable and inspiring, and he has always ensured that they have had a voice in this place. I also thank colleagues from across the House for coming to this important debate and for all of their engagement, encouragement and support as we seek to make sure that this legislation is truly worthy of being called a Hillsborough law.

I have heard that the time for warm words is over, but I want to reaffirm this Government's ironclad commitment that we will put the Hillsborough law on the statute book. We will deliver on our manifesto commitments to place a legal duty of candour on public servants and authorities, and we will provide legal aid for victims of disasters or state-related deaths. The Hillsborough disaster is one of the greatest stains on British history, and the families, survivors and those who lost loved ones have shown endless determination to get justice. As others have said, they should have been allowed to grieve, love and remember in peace. Instead, they have spent decades searching for truth and justice.

The Government are clear that what happened following the Hillsborough disaster must never happen again. As Members are aware, the Government committed to bringing forward a Bill ahead of the 36th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster, on 15 April this year. We did not meet that deadline, and I regret that. Any further delay simply compounds and prolongs the families' fight to ensure that nothing like Hillsborough can happen again.

The Government worked with campaigners on a draft Bill, and when it became evident that that Bill would not fulfil the aims of the campaign, or meet the expectations of the families, we decided to take more time and get this important piece of legislation right—to deliver a legacy, to deliver a Bill that is truly worthy of being called a Hillsborough law. We committed to working further with them, and we have done that. I pay tribute to everyone who has helped with the process.

We are working in collaboration with stakeholders, campaigners and families as we develop this policy. We are clear that our approach must be families first. Before we bring any legislation to either House on this important issue, or announce precisely how we intend to deliver the manifesto commitments, we must bring this to families first. That is the least they deserve.

Iqbal Mohamed: On timelines, will the Minister elaborate on how long the Government expect to need before they can present something to the House?

Alex Davies-Jones: I am grateful for that question. I have heard the frustration and anger, both in this place and outside it, in relation to the need to introduce this quickly and urgently, but we have also heard directly

from families about the need to get this right. It is our opportunity to do this, once and for all, and we will not rest until we get that right. I therefore refuse to put a timeline on it, but I do know that we need to do this quickly, and I have heard that today. First and foremost, however, it has to be done with the families first, and we will not proceed with anything that does not have their blessing and backing.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): The passion that the Minister is showing today also underlines that the engagement over the summer has been really worthy of this Labour Minister. Inquiries will take place between now and when the Bill is given Royal Assent. Will she confirm that the duty of candour will apply to those inquiries that are live at the time that Royal Assent is provided by the King?

Alex Davies-Jones: I can confirm that. Once the Bill receives Royal Assent, it will apply immediately and cover any inquiry that is taking place. That includes the Government statutory inquiry that we have announced on Orgreave, the Government inquiry on grooming gangs, and any inquiry or inquest that will be taking place.

Andy McDonald: The Minister mentioned getting this right, yet the Government were presented with a fully drafted Bill by a learned counsel. Can she give an indication of where the discrepancies and differentiations are between the Bill that was presented—properly drawn—and the current Government position?

Alex Davies-Jones: I will happily do that for my hon. Friend. I want to put on record our thanks to Pete Weatherby KC, Elkan Abrahamson, all those at Hillsborough Law Now, Andy Burnham and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby for the Bill that was drafted in 2017. That Bill has been our guiding north star as we seek to draft a workable, practical and actually deliverable piece of legislation.

We need to remember that we will be legislating on a duty of candour for more than 1.9 million public servants. We need to get that right, with no unintended consequences, and it needs to be worthy of the families. I will happily meet with anyone, but my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) will be aware that I cannot outline the details at this stage. However, I will in due course.

I want to place on record my thanks to Inquest, as other Members have. In February, it held a family listening day for the Government on this very important issue. We rightly refer to the Hillsborough families in this debate. However, as we have heard, the campaign is much bigger than that. It is for anyone who has ever had to fight for the truth in the face of state denial and institutional cover-ups. It will stop anyone else having to go through what they endured. It is for those affected by the infected blood scandal and for those who fought for the truth and to clear their names in the Post Office Horizon scandal. It is for those affected by the horrific fire in Grenfell Tower, for nuclear test veterans, for those affected by Primodos, the MEN arena victims and, sadly, many, many more.

Inquest brought together representatives from those areas as well as other campaign groups, including those who have had difficult experiences at inquests. The event

[Alex Davies-Jones]

asked the question: what would make a good Hillsborough law? Inquest's report from that day, titled "All or Nothing", which is available online, has been instrumental for the Government in understanding exactly what is needed to rebuild trust and help improve the experiences of those involved in inquests and inquiries.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Too often, bereaved families are left with no legal representation at the inquests of their loved ones. Does the Minister agree, as per our manifesto commitment, that the Government must provide state-funded legal aid to families at inquests and inquiries following state-related deaths and disasters to level the playing field between victims and the establishment?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is right, and I thank her for that important point. Sadly, I have heard time and again that it is David versus Goliath at inquests and inquiries, with predominantly vulnerable, working-class families left without support, having to crowdfund for a barrister—it is the Mini versus Rolls-Royce example of which we heard previously. We are committed to ensuring a parity of arms so that no family will ever have to go through that again. That was in our manifesto, and we will deliver on that promise.

The Government are keen to meet that wider group again to thank them for their time and to explain how their experiences have shaped the Bill's development once the policy is finalised. However, I cannot mention the Hillsborough law without mentioning Hillsborough Law Now and the families bereaved by Hillsborough, because without them there would be no Bill; that cannot be forgotten. Their bravery, strength and unwavering love for their loved ones is more than admirable. They have spent decades fighting for the truth while watching the names of their loved ones be tarnished and having had their reputations and actions called into question. Too often, they have felt that everything was stacked against them. Their determination is selfless and inspirational, and it has no doubt inspired others who have sought justice when it seemed all but impossible.

I met Hillsborough Law Now and family members several times over the summer, which was an honour and a privilege. I thank them again for giving up their time. Our engagement has been open and constructive, and their feedback crucial in helping to find solutions that achieve the campaign's intentions without any

unintended consequences for the public sector. We believe that we are close to finalising a Hillsborough law that families and campaigners will be proud of.

Derek Twigg: I welcome much of what the Minister has said. She said in the early part of her speech that there would be a duty of candour and legal aid for people, so can she be clear about why there is a delay? If that is what will be in the Bill, why is there a problem?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that. It has taken some time to get this right, but we are committed to introducing the Hillsborough law with parity of arms and that statutory legal duty of candour, and we hope to bring that forward as soon as possible. We have worked in conjunction with the families and campaigners to make sure that we have got it right, and we feel that we are almost there.

The Bill will help to ensure that what happened following the Hillsborough disaster will never take place again, and it will undoubtedly change the culture in public authorities for the better. Until that moment, it is crucial that we are guided by the families-first principle. Engagement and conversations on this policy must take place with them before any update is given to the House or the media. Hon. Members will therefore appreciate that I am limited in what I can say today. However, I confirm that our Bill will include the pillars that are vital to the families: that legal duty of candour for public servants, with criminal sanctions for those who do not comply, and measures to rebalance the inquest and inquiry processes to tackle the disparity of power that can exist between the state and bereaved families. We will make good on our manifesto commitment to provide legal aid for victims of disasters or state-related deaths.

I hope that I have reassured hon. Members that the Government are absolutely committed to the Bill. Any absence of update has been not an absence of work but because we have had to put the families first. It is vital that we get this landmark legislation right for them, and that when the Bill finally becomes law, it achieves the change expected by those who have campaigned tirelessly for so long. After all, the Bill is for them.

When the legislation comes into force, it will stand as part of the legacy of Hillsborough and change the country for the better. It will be a law for everyone who has suffered when truth and justice has been concealed behind the closed ranks of the state.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered duty of candour for public authorities and legal representation for bereaved families.

Living Standards: East of England

4.17 pm

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I will call Clive Lewis to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. A Liberal Democrat Member has just requested to make a speech. I am happy with that. Minister, are you happy with that as well?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds) *indicated assent.*

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered living standards in the East of England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. As I will be discussing nature, water and the far right, I would like to declare interests that meet the relevant test. The first is my role as vice-chair of the climate and nature crisis caucus. The second is that I have received donations from Compass and Betterworld Ltd, which have supported my work on water. The third is support I have received from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung—try saying that after a few pints—to attend their parliamentary forums on the far right. I have written about issues touched on in this debate—climate, water, the far right and economic growth—for *The Guardian* and *Byline Times*, which I have been paid for.

If we take an honest look at life in the east of England today, and in my city of Norwich, we do not see the prosperity that Governments have often boasted about. We see a region where too many people are running faster and faster just to stand still. In Norwich, wages remain below the national average. One in five workers earns less than the real living wage. One in six is trapped in insecure work—zero hours, agency or short-term scraps dressed up as jobs. Meanwhile, rents have risen by more than 20% since 2021. A quarter of private renters are handing over half or more of their income just to keep a roof over their heads. That is not prosperity; that is daylight robbery with a tenancy agreement.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Ind): I also find in my constituency that the cost of a decent home is far too high for far too many of my constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that the solution to that problem is not, as is believed in some quarters, to give the developers the right to strip away our environment and destroy nature, but rather to get on with building the council housing that delivers the genuinely affordable homes our residents need?

Clive Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for all his work in this area. Council homes are overwhelmingly the solution to this country's housing problems. There is always space for private housing, for affordable housing and for housing associations, but it is council housing, built in a sustainable way, that will solve the housing crisis in this country. I agree with him

that developers—not climate, nature or local democracy—are the block to building more houses here, and I am firm in making that point.

Public transport in my region is patchy at best. Broadband in rural Norfolk is slower than a tractor on a Sunday morning—people who live in Suffolk or Norfolk will know what I mean. Child poverty levels run at one in three in Norwich once housing costs are factored in and, although we are blessed with extraordinary landscapes, too many of our neighbours live in what I can only describe as nature deserts—no green space within walking distance, and no safe place for kids to play.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. He is right to underline the issue of low income; the quality of life for working families on low incomes is the worst that it has ever been. When I spoke to him beforehand, I referred to my constituency, and indeed all Northern Ireland, where I understand that the rates are the same as in his constituency: 16% of working-age adults are in relative poverty. It should never be the case that working people are in poverty. The Government need a strategy to address that issue, but they do not at present. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Clive Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I do not raise this in this speech, but I think that one of the key ways of lifting people out of poverty is by strengthening trade unions and their sectoral pay bargaining ability, which I do not think even this Government—my Government—are going to do. That is key, particularly in the areas of social care and many other low-paid sectors. It would ensure that people get decent pay and attract people into those areas. It would make a massive difference.

We face real and urgent challenges in the east of England. Now, the Government—my own party's Government—tell us not to worry, because living standards are going to rise and we have a plan for growth. But what do we mean by that? In practice, it means looking overwhelmingly at one number: disposable income, or what is left jingling in our pockets at the end of the month. Useful, yes—but adequate? No.

Reducing the richness of life to something we can measure is like trying to paint a rainbow with a single grey crayon: we get the outline, but none of the colour, none of the joy, none of the lived reality. The Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen warned that dignity cannot be reduced to decimal points. Martha Nussbaum, a US philosopher and ethicist, reminds us that the question is not just what we earn, but what we are free to do and to be. Kate Raworth is also right: paper prosperity that trashes the planet leaves our children bankrupt.

When we are told that living standards are up because the averages look rosy, we should remember what Danny Dorling pointed out: an average can hide a multitude of sins. If Jeff Bezos walked into a Norwich pub, the average wealth in the room would shoot through the roof, but not a single person's pint would get cheaper—and I doubt he would get to the bar ahead of anyone else, either.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do how rural and isolated much of Norfolk can be. I represent the oldest constituency

[Steff Aquarone]

in the country, and I have been shocked by the living standards of some of my elderly residents in isolated communities, who simply feel that there is no help out there to give them the quality of life they deserve. They, too, are lost among averages. Does he agree that poverty in rural communities across the east of England is often more hidden than in metropolitan areas, and needs to receive a similar level of attention?

Clive Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is a champion of such issues in his constituency, and I agree: poverty is very often out of sight, out of mind. The dispersal of rural poverty makes it easier to hide, and harder for organisations to point out, but he does a very good job of doing so. His point was well made.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Continuing on the theme of averages, as council areas get bigger, the averages are skewed a little. Within my area, which is already in a large unitary authority, life expectancy can vary by up to eight years. If the Government say, “Hooray! The council area is getting a Best Start family hub!”, I ask, “Where?”, because it could end up in a leafy village or in an area of deprivation. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to redouble our efforts to find pockets of deprivation, and perhaps use artificial intelligence as a new tool to do so?

Clive Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for an interesting contribution. I will take a time-out on the AI component. I think it has a place and could, I am sure, contribute something, but the real way to ensure that resources are going to the right place is to ensure real devolution: empowering communities, local government and local people to decide where the money is spent, because they know best. Ultimately, pushing power down is how we will get better outcomes.

Let us be blunt: living standards as currently measured give us a snapshot, but not the whole picture. They can tell us whether the tills are ringing, but not whether the people are thriving. Look at Norwich: a zero-hours care worker has no work-life balance to speak of; they have work-life whiplash. Mental health referrals in Norfolk are up 40% since 2020—we will not find that in an Office for National Statistics income chart. The poorest wards in my city have five times fewer parks per person than the richest. Try raising kids in a concrete cage in one of the most polluted parts of the city—where, unfortunately, our Government subsidises electric SUVs that, through their brakes and tires, churn out more particulate matter than smaller electric vehicles—and then tell me that their living standards are on the rise.

Let us look at Norwich South. We had more than 500 sewage pollution incidents last year. My constituents are not comforted by fines levied on Anglian Water; their lived standard is filthy rivers, dead fish, cancelled swims and massive bill hikes, while they watch multimillion-pound payouts to shareholders and executives—and that is after the passing of our much vaunted Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. So when the Government cheer that GDP is up, or that the average household is a few pounds better off, I say, “Growth for whom? Growth for what? Growth at what cost?”

I acknowledge that this Labour Government have already taken steps to make a difference. The extended household support fund for councils, soon to be replaced by the crisis and resilience fund, has been a lifeline for many. Our new Best Start hubs, replacing the axed Sure Start programme, will help millions, as will our new universal breakfast clubs and investment in home energy efficiency, which will cut bills for years to come. Those are brilliant and welcome tangible measures, but we cannot stop there.

Too often, we give with one hand and take with the other. We extend support, but keep the two-child cap that pushes hundreds of thousands of children into poverty. We invest in households, but cut disability benefits that provide dignity and security for millions. We offer relief, but leave the structures that drive poverty and insecurity untouched.

As the charity Norfolk Community Law Service told me:

“We’re seeing a growing number of families live in extreme poverty, struggling with benefits that don’t provide enough to live on, unable to feed themselves properly or heat their homes. This is not because they are lazy or unprepared to work hard in their lives, but often because they are caught in the poverty trap, unable to break free.”

The problem is compounded by neglect of prevention. As Age UK in Norwich explained:

“The lack of strategic investment into community, preventative services is not only threatening the voluntary sector—it’s chipping away at the foundation, the NHS and social care so many rely on.”

Here is the challenge: unless we deal with those deeper structures, we will never truly lift standards in the fullest sense of the word. That means overhauling our tax system. Yes, we need higher taxes on wealth, windfalls, capital gains and inheritance, but we must also face a hard truth: without structural reform, much of that revenue simply flows straight back into the pockets of large corporates—companies that now absorb vast amounts of public money in contracts, subsidies and outsourcing while skimming billions in excess pay, dividends and profit.

Tax reform must go hand in hand with a clampdown on corporate capture. I fear that many of my colleagues now in Government understand that after 45 years of privatisation, deregulation and outsourcing, the levers of state are increasingly connected to very little. “Deliver, deliver, deliver,” we are told; but how can we deliver when the accelerator and the gearstick are connected to thin air?

Let us not forget that, when those same interests come under pressure, they rarely look in the mirror. Instead, they reach for the oldest trick in the book and tell us that the problem is not profiteering landlords or privatised monopolies. They tell us that the problem is foreigners; that migrants are the reason wages are low; that Europe is the reason services are stretched; that some other is to blame. That scapegoating is not accidental. It is structural. It protects an economy built on extraction—extraction of wealth, of labour, of nature—and it corrodes our democracy, replacing solidarity with suspicion, and common purpose with division.

Labour, at its best, has always known better. There was a time when our movement understood that redistribution of income, wealth and power was not a footnote to our mission—it was the mission. We understood that we could not simply leave the means of production, distribution and exchange in the hands of those who

use them to extract, rather than to serve; that, if our economy was to work for the majority, if standards of living and wellbeing were to rise, people needed more than just money in their pocket. They needed more say, more power and more ownership over the things that make life bearable and meaningful.

That meant public ownership of essential services, from water and energy to rail and post. It meant universal basic services such as healthcare, transport, housing, education and, in our age, internet access. It meant building new institutions to strengthen the cohesion of our society: co-operatives, trade unions, community media and local assemblies. It meant giving people not only the means to live, but the means to shape the communities in which they live.

These are the specific asks I would like to put to the Minister. I ask the Government to introduce rent caps in high-pressure areas, as seen in Austria and Scotland, so that families are not priced out of their communities; to cap food prices for a basket of essential goods, as France and Hungary have, so that no child goes hungry because the basics are unaffordable; to abolish the two-child cap on benefits and reverse the recent disability payment cuts—policies that undermine dignity and trap children in poverty. I ask them to launch a major programme of public housing construction using public land to build secure council homes for rent; to take our water companies back into public hands, ending the scandal of dividends flowing abroad while sewage pours into our rivers; to mandate universal broadband and affordable transport access as basic services in a modern economy.

I ask the Government to overhaul the tax system, to close the loopholes, tax wealth properly and ensure that revenues are not siphoned off into dividends and corporate profiteering, and to tie corporate subsidies and contracts to strict conditions on pay, investment and environmental responsibility. Finally, I ask them to stop mainstreaming racism. By all means, secure the borders and control migration to what we need, but take out the toxicity. Open secure routes and defend and deepen human rights—do not water them down—for all our sakes.

Those are not revolutionary demands, and they are not even radical demands; they are common-sense measures to ensure the economy serves the public, not the other way around. We need a plan for transformation, rather than tinkering at the edges or hoping that growth alone will deliver fairness by accident; a plan in which the demos, the people, have a greater say on how their life, and the life of their community, is shaped.

The alternative is stark. Failure to do those things will deliver our country into the hands of the authoritarian right. If we get this wrong, it will not mean some marginal difference in some marginal metric of living standards—it will be the difference between civil co-existence and barbarism, between a society held together by solidarity and one held together by scapegoating and fear.

People are crying out not just for a few extra pounds in their wage packet, but for security, dignity and hope. That means we must confront the extractive model, rediscover our roots in redistribution and democracy, stop pandering to racism and rebuild the social compact that once gave Britain both prosperity and purpose. People are not simply consumers to be measured or units of labour to be costed. They are the economy—not

components of it, or cogs in someone else's machine; they are the economy, and we seem to have forgotten that. If we forget it, we will not only fail to raise so-called living standards, but we will fail to rebuild trust, fail to hold our community together and fail to protect our democracy from those who would happily divide and rule. We can do better.

4.34 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse, and I thank the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for letting me speak. As a fellow east of England MP, I thank him for securing this important debate, and I hope he agrees with me that health is central to living standards. As vice-chair of the East of England all-party group, I note that my predecessors published a report on levelling-up in the region in 2022. The report found that women in the region can expect to spend 19 years of their lives in less than good health, compared with 16 years for men. According to an international Global Burden of Disease study, 42% of ill health in the east of England can be linked to preventable factors linked to socioeconomic deprivation and other health inequalities.

I regularly receive casework from constituents experiencing long delays in referrals following GP appointments. That is shown in the data, with gynaecology waiting times a particularly bad example. For example, in June Chelmsford's Mid and South Essex integrated care board had the highest gynaecology treatment waiting list of any ICB in the east of England at 15,768, with almost half of women waiting for longer than 18 weeks for treatment—well below the Government's 92% target. Indeed, one of my constituents wrote to tell me that she would face a 78-week wait for a gynaecology appointment, not 18 weeks. We all recognise that the longer someone needs healthcare, the more complex, financially costly and serious the consequences can be, and we need the Government urgently to bring down referral waiting lists.

As the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists noted, the public health grant must be adequately funded to address the underlying causes of sickness, especially those that acutely affect women. In Chelmsford, my city council has emphasised how important that is, helping to meet one of the statutory duties of ICBs, which is health and wellbeing, especially in the context of reduced staffing, the abolition of NHS England, and ICBs being asked to reduce their costs by 50%. I urge the Government to commit to expanding the number of women's health hubs in the east of England in particular.

4.37 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for securing this debate and the opportunity to have a constructive discussion about living standards in the east of England. I thank other hon. Members who have contributed, including the hon. Members for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he is on form, as ever—and for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), and my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer). I do not have an enormous amount of time, so I will crack on with my speech.

[Emma Reynolds]

This Government are committed to raising living standards for everybody across the UK and, of course, in the east of England, but it is worth pointing out that that is no small task. When we came to power, we took over from a Government who had dropped the ball on living standards—the last Parliament was the weakest on record for living standards. We were elected to turn that around, and through our Plan for Change we are delivering policies to kickstart growth that will boost living standards in every part of the UK. Indeed, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, we can expect living standards, measured by real household disposable income per capita, to rise by 2.6% over the course of this Parliament.

I will focus on a number of measures that we have taken to strengthen household income, particularly for those on low incomes. The first is that we have increased the national living wage, which will benefit around 3 million of the lowest paid workers and make them up to £1,400 better off. We are investing more than £0.5 billion in the Best Start family service over the 2026 to '29 spending review period, making sure that every local authority has a family hub that is open to all, and focusing—this was mentioned by one of my hon. Friends—on areas with higher proportions of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. We are putting early years back at the heart of how we deliver stronger outcomes for our children, as it has ever been with Labour Governments, including this one and the previous Labour Government, with half a million children benefiting from the roll-out of the new 30 hours free childcare entitlement that we brought forward this week.

We will be investing £410 million per year by 2028-29 to expand free school meals in England to all children with a parent receiving universal credit, lifting 100,000 children out of poverty by the end of this Parliament. We are providing £1 billion a year to reform crisis support, including the first ever multi-year settlement to transform the household support fund into a new crisis and resilience fund. We have frozen fuel duty, saving drivers about £3 billion this year, while extending the £3 bus fare cap until March 2027, keeping prices low on some 5,000 routes across England.

We are also protecting the pension triple lock and, in doing so, gave 1.2 million pensioners in the east of England a 4.1% increase to their basic or new state pension in April this year. At the recent spending review, we confirmed funding for our affordable homes programme; my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South spoke passionately about council houses. The 10-year affordable homes programme will involve £39 billion during that period. We have also committed to local transport priorities for some of our larger city regions via the transport for city regions settlements.

For the east of England, we have confirmed £14.2 billion for Sizewell C, which, at peak construction, will create 10,000 jobs, including 1,500 apprenticeships, and wider economic benefits in Suffolk and the wider region. We have also made significant progress in creating the conditions for growth, with reforms to the national planning policy framework, which the Office for Budget Responsibility concluded will permanently increase the

level of real GDP by 0.4% over the next 10 years—the biggest positive growth impact that the OBR has ever forecast for a policy with no fiscal cost.

We are going forward with the introduction of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and, in the east of England, with support for the Oxford to Cambridge corridor, which will bring many benefits to local communities. That approach will drive growth in city regions, towns and communities and make the most of the opportunities in each part of the country to make people better off. We are already seeing the results of our plan working, with the Bank of England having reduced interest rates five times since we came to office, which will put downward pressure on mortgage payments.

However, we recognise, of course, that challenges remain. We must support those in immediate need while making the structural changes necessary to give our cities, towns and rural and coastal communities the resources and powers that they need to succeed. Through our plan for neighbourhoods, we are providing long-term funding directly to communities, delivering visible improvements on people's doorsteps, championing local leadership and fostering stronger communities. Of the 75 places already announced in the plan for neighbourhoods, seven are in the east of England; each will receive up to £20 million over the next 10 years.

We are also driving forward devolution, pushing power down, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South discussed, giving local leaders the powers and resources to shape their own futures. The devolution priority programme will see two new mayoral strategic authorities established in the east of England, both in Greater Essex and in Norfolk and Suffolk, with inaugural mayoral elections in May next year. We have established the Cambridge Growth Company, which will work with local partners to unlock key developments and deliver an "infrastructure first" strategy for sustainable growth in the area.

The Government are providing certainty and stability through our commitment to in-flight local growth projects, including freeports and investment zones. Those programmes can and should be key tools for driving growth across the UK, including the east of England. We are committed to bringing them together as part of our modern industrial strategy.

I do not have very much time left, Mrs Hobhouse. The Government are committed to sustainable and secure economic growth, and we are bringing that about in three major ways: restoring stability, as we did in the Budget last year by introducing non-negotiable fiscal rules, to put the public finances back on a stable path; secondly, investment in renewal, within the fiscal rules made in the autumn, supporting the step change needed, as confirmed in our plans in the spending review period; and changing the economy to prioritise long-term growth through key reforms.

Every investment, reform and partnership is focused on one goal: raising living standards in the east of England and across the country, creating opportunities in every community. I know that we are all passionate about that. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South again for bringing this important debate to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Pavement Parking

4.45 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of pavement parking.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue that is long overdue for a solution.

Every day people are forced into the road, into moving traffic, because the pavement is blocked by a vehicle. Parents with prams, wheelchair users and people with sight loss must choose between risking the road or turning back. These are not minor inconveniences but moments of danger, frustration and exclusion. Pavements are meant to be for the safe, independent movement of older people, disabled people, families with young children and everyone who simply wants to walk without obstruction. When pavements are blocked people are not just delayed; they are put in harm's way, their dignity diminished and their right to use public space denied.

The law is clear in London and Scotland: parking on the pavement is prohibited unless the council has judged that it is safe and necessary on that street. But in England, outside London, there is no such national prohibition and the result is a patchwork of inconsistent rules, limited enforcement and pavements increasingly blocked by vehicles. The Government have already consulted on the issue. The consultation entitled "Pavement parking: options for change" closed on 22 November 2020, nearly five years ago. It set out three options: first, improving the current process under which local authorities can ban pavement parking; secondly, giving local authorities civil enforcement powers to act against unnecessary obstruction of the pavement; and thirdly, banning pavement parking throughout England.

My position and that of many of my residents and campaign organisations is that a default national prohibition with local exceptions, where needed, is the right choice. That would bring the rest of England into line with London, provide clarity for drivers and restore our pavements to the people they are meant for.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a powerful argument. I hear all the time from constituents concerned about pavement parking on their streets. I also hear from constituents who live in areas of Bracknell where there is no choice but to park on the pavement because of the nature of the estates. For me the right approach is to give local authorities the power to make decisions on a street by street basis. Does she agree?

Helen Maguire: Yes, I absolutely agree that councils should have the power to decide where cars can be parked on pavements.

Despite cross-party agreement in the Transport Committee's 2019 report, clear public support and the examples already in place across the UK, the Government have still not published their response. Each time the question is raised we are told only that the Department is considering all the views expressed. After five years, that is simply not good enough. Inaction is leaving our most vulnerable residents at risk every single day.

The impact is undeniable. Living Streets found that 62% of over-65s in England are worried about obstructions on the pavement. According to research from Guide Dogs, four out of five blind or partially sighted people say pavement parking makes it difficult to walk on the pavement at least once a week, and 95% have been forced into the road because of it. Among wheelchair and mobility scooters, that figure rises to a staggering 99%. Vehicles blocking pavements creates both a physical and psychological barrier, discouraging those with disabilities from leaving their homes. At a time when the Government are claiming to support more disabled people into work, it is essential that they tackle the issue.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a strong case that pavement parking is dangerous. I hear regularly from constituents who are forced to walk their young children into busy roads or from those in wheelchairs who must go back home because they cannot get past the obstruction of cars. Does the hon. Member agree that pavement parking decreases active travel and prevents the most vulnerable in our society from safely accessing their own community?

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree. We need to be encouraging active walking and encouraging people to use local businesses, and they cannot do that if they cannot access them by walking or being in a wheelchair on a pavement.

Parents also face the same challenges, with 87% of parents saying that they have had to walk in the road because of pavement parking. They would be more likely to walk their child to school if there was not pavement parking. They are not simply statistics; I have heard directly from residents about delivery motorcycles on Epsom High Street riding up on to the pavement in front of pedestrians, blocking footways outside fast food outlets and creating a hazardous obstacle course. On one evening earlier this year, a constituent reported 23 mopeds and motorbikes clustered on the pavement, forcing pedestrians into the road and creating congestion as they pulled in and out without warning.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. A lot of my constituents have written to me to say that we should have one system that does not confuse people, and that applies whether someone is living in London or outside London. More needs to be done to give the councils the power to take tougher action in respect of those that cause the nuisance, obstructions and safety hazards for many vulnerable people.

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree. My constituency is just outside London, so for my constituents, it is even more confusing because many of them will drive in and out of London on a regular basis.

One visually impaired constituent, Russell, told me that when food delivery riders choose to park their vehicles, such as motorbikes, on the pavement it makes the simple task of walking down the street difficult and hazardous.

We also cannot ignore the damage that pavement parking does to the pavements themselves. Driving on to and parking on them cracks and breaks paving slabs,

[Helen Maguire]

leaving trip hazards long after the vehicle has gone. In England, nearly a million older adults suffer outdoor falls each year, and Living Streets' "Pedestrian Slips, Trips and Falls" report estimates that the resulting healthcare and personal injury costs could reach £500 million annually. Just the other day, I did a walkabout on Epsom High Street with Russell and Tracey from Swail House, a property in Epsom that is run by the Royal National Institute of Blind People. As we walked, they pointed out many potential hazards on the pavement, including many broken and uneven paving slabs that could easily cause an accident. Poorly maintained pavements also deter walking: 48% of adults over 65 say that they would walk more if pavements were in better condition.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Whether it is wheelchair users in Wheldrake, children walking to school in Skelton or Mrs Charters pushing baby Louis, does the hon. Lady agree that pavement parking pushes vulnerable road users on to the roads? Does she also agree that we need to look at local councils fining those persistent pavement parking polluters?

Helen Maguire: I welcome the intervention. It is an absolute hazard that pedestrians or individuals pushing wheelchairs are continually pushed into the road, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we also need to talk to the troublemakers. In my case in Epsom, those are the many companies running fast food delivery services and so on. We need to talk to them.

The poor condition of the pavement is fuelling physical inactivity and social isolation. Because the pavements are not in great condition, individuals cannot walk on them and they are not getting out as much. Making our high streets more walkable also boosts local businesses, and Living Streets' research shows that people who walk or wheel to the shops spend more overall. They bring increased footfall, spend more time at the shops and spend more money, which is what we want for our local businesses on our local high streets.

The current legal framework is fragmented and confusing. Driving on to the pavement is in fact already illegal under section 72 of the Highways Act 1835, but enforcement is inconsistent and largely reliant on police resources. In some cases, parking on a pavement can be treated as obstruction, but that too is a criminal offence enforced by the police, not a civil contravention enforced by local authorities. Local councils struggle to tackle pavement parking, although they can use their existing powers to make traffic regulation orders. Those are largely restricted to specific streets, and due to the requirements for advertising consultation and signage they are a costly and impractical way to tackle this problem.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important debate, which has clearly raised concerns across the country. It is clear that pavements should be for pedestrians to walk on safely. That benefits businesses and local authorities. However, many streets were designed in an era when we did not have two or three-car families. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to ensure that, as well as consistent regulation, we have good public transport so that we have better use of that and less dependency on cars?

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree. We need to invest in better public transport for our constituents. According to the 2023 YouGov polling, 74% of councillors in England supported a national law. As it stands, just 5% of drivers know all aspects of the laws that put them at risk of a fine. A national default prohibition would give the power and clarity to act to remove the ambiguity for drivers. That system would also allow for local exemptions so that streets where pavement parking is genuinely unavoidable could be identified and signed accordingly.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): We are having an absolutely important debate today. It is important to make sure that we have accessible pavements for all, for all the reasons that the hon. Lady has outlined. In Fife, we have seen the implementation of the pavement parking ban just this week. Although it has been broadly welcomed, there are some challenges with implementation. Starting with a blanket ban and then allowing exemptions has been challenging for local authorities, which are under a lot of pressure with resources both for management and implementation. Does the hon. Lady agree that to make sure we have an effective parking ban, resources must be in place to make sure that exemptions in rural areas and other parts are effective, and that enforcement is done correctly? Otherwise, we will lose the support of drivers and the effect we are hoping to achieve.

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree that councils need the support to implement this if the Government should wish to introduce it, which is what I am pressing for today. We are not asking for something radical; we are simply asking for safe and accessible streets. MPs have raised this issue repeatedly, and charities such as Living Streets, Guide Dogs, RNIB and Transport for All support a new law with clear guidance.

It is time for the Government to listen. The steps are clear. Today I am asking this Government to put the safety of pedestrians first. I ask them to, first of all, publish the long overdue response to the pavement parking consultation before the fifth anniversary of its closing, which is this November; secondly, commit to a default national prohibition on pavement parking in England, with exemptions decided locally; and thirdly, back this up with a public awareness campaign so drivers understand both the law and the reasons for it.

Every day that we delay, more pedestrians are put at risk, more pavements are damaged and more people are excluded from moving safely and independently in their communities. If we cannot guarantee that the simple act of walking down the street is safe, we are failing at one of the most basic duties of public life. Today I am asking the Minister to end the wait, end the excuses and end pavement parking once and for all.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. There are many more people than I have on my list. We are trying to accommodate for that, but the first people on my list get priority. I will try to get everybody in, but now, looking at the numbers, the time limit is one minute and a half.

4.58 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship with a 90-second speech limit, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate. In 2023, I met Elaine and her guide dog Tessy and she was able to show me first hand the impact that pavement parking was having on her life. I could see how she was terrified to pass parked cars on the pavement, and where she had to go on the road. She said she was absolutely terrified. I have to say that watching her, I felt absolutely ashamed. I think all of us are here to create a fairer and more equal country, no matter which party we are in. A pavement parking ban is an easy and simple way to make progress.

In Edinburgh, I was proud to be part of a group of councillors who introduced a ban. Of 5,000 streets in Edinburgh, an estimated 500 were going to be problematic, but within a few weeks of the ban being introduced, we were down to just 20 streets where there were outstanding issues. A year later, there are only around 20 streets where actual parking restrictions will have to be introduced to ensure that traffic can move freely. That has been completely transformative, particularly for people who have visual impairments, for people who are disabled, and for parents and grandparents pushing buggies. It has helped to create a more equal city.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that when constituents are concerned about going out, that increases their social isolation? There is a real risk that anxiety about going out and using pavements has a knock-on effect, and that is one of the things that we can resolve.

Dr Arthur: I do not speak for RNIB Scotland or Guide Dogs Scotland but people with visual impairments leading isolated lives are a real concern for them. They want those people to be out working, meeting their friends, shopping and so on. Cars parked on the pavement are a barrier to that happening, so this issue is absolutely core to our wellbeing and to creating a more inclusive society.

As the ban came into force in Edinburgh, we got quite a few emails from people who were concerned. The most common question was: "Well, where should I park my car?" I always say, "Look, just don't park it on the pavement." I think most people who parked on the pavement knew that it was the wrong thing to do. The ban was actually forcing them in the right direction, and creating a more equal community.

Each time I debate this issue, I fill myself with hope that we will get a positive announcement from the Secretary of State or the Minister. I hope that we get that in this debate.

5.1 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate, and for putting another 10p in the meter—that has aged me—to allow the debate to continue. In the interests of time I will limit my comments to two topics. The first is school drop-off and pick-up.

In my community of Surrey Heath we have a major issue with roads and schools that were not designed or built to provide adequate drop-off and pick-up. I am a

parent of two children who went to one such school for seven years. I and almost every other parent had to park on the pavement in order to get our kids in and out. That was not because we wanted to be inconsiderate parkers, but because we wanted to keep the carriageway clear to allow vital access routes and roads to remain open.

Dr Arthur: Often we are faced with a dilemma between driver convenience and the safety of pedestrians. I think the safety of pedestrians always has to come first. Parking on the pavement is not an alternative to blocking the road to emergency vehicles. You should not be blocking the road to emergency vehicles and you should not be parking on the pavement. Apologies.

Dr Pinkerton: I would like to engage with the hon. Gentleman's point more, but I want to try to finish in my original time allocation.

The second key point I will raise is about planning. I recently had a meeting with representatives of a very large house developer that plans to build 1,000 houses in my constituency. They told me that, in the interests of being green, they were only going to supply one parking space per three, four and five-bedroom house, in the hope of encouraging public transport use. I think we all know that will not encourage public transport use; it will hard-bake pavement parking into the future, and with it all the issues that the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) has raised.

I encourage the Government to pick up this issue, to think about making planning regulations much tighter, and to give local authorities the ability to enforce measures against antisocial parking.

5.3 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. The issue of pavement parking has been raised with me in my constituency of Wolverhampton West. Measures have already been introduced in Scotland and Wales, where legislative action has been taken to deal with pavement parking. Pavement parking is also banned in much of Greater London.

We must improve our road safety and protect the most vulnerable in our society. The fines raised from illegal parking could be ringfenced for future road safety improvements. More than half of those aged over 65 report that they are worried about obstructions on the pavement. Over 80% of people living with sight loss say that pavement obstacles impact their quality of life, and nearly 90% of parents have had to step on to the road with their children due to vehicles blocking the pavement.

Encouraging walking is part of the Government's ambition under their cycling and walking investment strategy. I repeat the assertion of the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) about publishing the Department for Transport report that was prepared in 2020.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that this is almost a circular problem? The more people park on the pavements, the harder it is to walk, so the more they have to drive and the more they park on the pavements. By getting rid of it and

[*Martin Wrigley*]

having consistency, as my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) is asking for, we will start to solve this problem, which is so difficult for my constituents as well as the hon. Gentleman's.

Warinder Juss: I totally agree. When I walk around and see cars and other vehicles parked on pavements, I sometimes wonder why people could not just have parked them on the road. There never seems to be any valid reason why they are parked on the pavement.

The ability for people to walk on pavements is crucial. Walking improves physical and mental health, gives greater independence to older people and takes away the risk of isolation. It means we will have fewer cars on our roads, healthier children, and more children and parents walking to school, which does not happen now because of the dangers people face when having to manoeuvre around vehicles on pavements.

I urge the Government to publish the Department for Transport report that was prepared five years ago and to ensure that we get vehicles off pavements so that we can encourage more people to use the pavements. That is what they are there for.

5.6 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. Over the past year, I have had the pleasure of meeting many people with disabilities, including those with sight loss or mobility aids, in my surgeries. For them, another person's choice to park on the pavement means either risking moving into the road to avoid the obstruction or taking long detours, if it is possible to do so. People with disabilities already face unenviable access barriers, and pavement parking only adds to their struggle.

Pavement parking also impacts parents with pushchairs, prams and buggies. It prevents children on scooters and balance bikes from riding next to their parents. It can also force dog walkers—especially those who have nasty dogs like mine—into the road to avoid facing another dog. In short, it is an all-round nuisance.

The Government have so far ignored the issue. In a recent written question, my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) asked the Government what steps they are taking to reduce street obstacles. Their response was that things should be placed “in a way that does not create obstructions for disabled people.” That is not enlightening, is it?

The Government are trying to pass the blame to local authorities, which are poorly equipped to deal with pavement parking. My local authority, Oxfordshire county council, has raised this with me. I fully support the council and my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) in pressing the Government to provide further powers to tackle pavement parking.

5.7 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I represent a semi-rural constituency, and one of its gorgeous little market towns, Melbourne, famously—or so it seems to me—has a high street where cars have to park a bit on the pavement, which is super-skinny

because the road is super-skinny. If they did not do so, cars would speed down the road. It is a never-ending circle of challenge.

I would welcome councils and local authorities having the power to fine. We all know that pavement parking gets on everybody's nerves. We see it on online community groups, where people share photos of people parking selfishly. This is not just about parking on skinny little pavements, but about selfishly parking where there is plenty of space to park on the road. Will the Government consider an awareness campaign to ask people to be a bit more considerate?

5.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I commend the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing the debate.

Pavement parking is a nationwide issue that impacts constituencies across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Every week I receive numerous complaints regarding people parking irresponsibly. To give a quick local perspective, people are often permitted to park on the pavement unless specific restrictions apply or unless doing so causes an obstruction—that is how it is done back home. If people do the wrong thing, they get an £80 ticket; if they pay it within three days, it is £45.

I quickly want to make the case for those who have guide dogs. I did a walk with one of the guide dog people some time ago, with a mask across my eyes, and it was very difficult to understand what was happening.

In Northern Ireland, we have had a “think before you park” campaign to raise awareness of the risks of pavement parking and the impact it can have on people with disabilities, those with mobility issues and parents with prams. That is why road markings and signage are important. Perhaps the Minister could do more to encourage local councils to ensure they are displayed clearly so that people can understand them.

There is much to be done on this issue. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister can do to persuade other regional and devolved Administrations—including my own—to ensure that pavement parking is addressed for everyone across the United Kingdom.

5.10 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): Thank you for chairing the debate, Mrs Hobhouse. I also thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing it.

Having campaigned to reclaim our streets for pedestrians for many years, I have cleared the A-boards and the clutter, but I cannot shift the cars. That is why I welcome today's debate, as well as action at last from a Labour Government.

In York, 9.1 million visitors a year come to our city—I am sure all hon. Members do—but the streets are narrow, and we need to ensure that pedestrians can pass. That includes blind and partially sighted people, as we have heard, as well as parents and elderly people. Cyclists also get pushed further into the road as well. We need to make sure that we have our space on the road.

The problem is often worse outside schools as parents push their kids out of the car, or draw them in at the end of the day. We need to ensure that those incredibly hazardous places have provision. I would say that we should not have cars near schools. We need to clear that environment so that children can navigate the space well.

What happens? The pavements crack—of course, we pay for that—and our constituents experience accidents. The logistics companies that park their vans and lorries on pavements need to be called to account.

When we talk about parking on pavements, we should also talk about cycle lanes, which are often blocked. Even last night, the cycle lane from Westminster was occluded. We need to make sure that we include them in the discussion, too.

5.11 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Some see pavement parking as merely a nuisance, but in some parts of my constituency it is far more serious, affecting businesses and residents every day. Due to the time restriction, I will talk about just one community—the town of Polegate—where the crisis has become particularly acute.

People tell me every day that cars are parked on pavements in the town, forcing parents with prams into the road, leaving wheelchair users stuck and making the high street harder to use for everyone. Some businesses are even struggling to keep going due to parking. What makes it even worse is patchy enforcement. In Polegate and other communities in the Wealden district part of my constituency, parking has never been decriminalised. That means responsibility still sits with the police, who understandably have other priorities, so offences simply go unchecked. It is a bizarre situation that leaves residents with no effective recourse. I am pressing for urgent action so that parking can finally be enforced and my constituents are not left abandoned.

Meanwhile, there has been action in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I believe there are preparations for action in Wales, too. Yet in England—outside London, at least—we are still stuck in limbo. Local councils want to tackle it and residents demand change, but the Government have left them with a clunky, expensive process that can take months or years to achieve little. We must give councils the powers and clarity they need and back communities like Polegate that are demanding safer streets because, every week it drags on, more families are pushed into the road, more vulnerable people are shut out, and more of our pavements are broken up. It is now time to act.

5.13 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this critical debate, on an issue that is such a headache for so many of our constituents. As a mother to two little ones, I know only too well that getting out and about with two young children is hard enough as it is. Being hit with trying to get a pram down the pavement where it cannot get through increases the social isolation that many have talked about.

Access to pavements is a lifeline to many, especially those with disabilities or the elderly. A constituent of mine in Ribble Valley who is repeatedly affected by pavement parking recently got in touch to share his

confusion about who to report his concerns to—the police or the council. We must ensure that local authorities and the police work together and are empowered to use their powers clearly not only to tackle but to visibly enforce this issue so that residents see responsible pavement parking management in action.

However, nothing is more contentious and divisive on my local Facebook groups than pavement parking because, as other hon. Members have said, in many areas insufficient parking spaces are provided. We need to ensure that national policy on pavement parking and planning is designed with the unique challenges facing rural areas like mine in mind, where public transport is sparse and car ownership rates are much higher, and recommends realistic parking provision so that all areas are safe and walkable.

On planning, I recently heard a comment that turning circles in schools are not part of planning policy because we want to increase green parking, and we all know the chaos they create.

5.14 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate.

Whether it is on Seaside, Melbourne Road, Linden Close, Sydney Road, Heather Close or outside Oakwood, St Thomas a Becket or West Rise schools, it is unacceptable that pedestrians, especially those with disabilities, are all too often blocked from using our pavements and pushed on to the road, and residents with wheelchairs, scooters or prams are blocked from using drop kerbs. On behalf of them and the Eastbourne access group, when will the Government share with us their national plan to empower local authorities to crack down on this problem once and for all?

While we wait for that action, I invite the Minister to join me in congratulating Langney primary academy in my patch, led by the amazing Mr Ben Bowles—an awesome local headteacher—on being part of the school streets scheme that has taken measures to safeguard schoolchildren from dangerous pavement parking at pick-up and drop-off time. I hope the Minister will congratulate them on the great work they are doing.

5.16 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). Pavement parking was regularly raised with me during my five years as a councillor before coming to this place, but its real impact was brought home to me by one doorstep conversation with a couple in Chads Moor. Both are in their 80s, and the gentleman is a carer for his wife who has mobility issues as well as dementia. Luckily, they have a good social care package and access to respite care, but often they cannot get out of the house because accessible taxis cannot pull up to their home due to cars parked right up to their driveway. They cannot move her wheelchair further down the street due to people routinely parking on the pavement. Sadly and ironically, often those cars belong to care workers visiting other properties.

A blocked pavement is not just an inconvenience; it can trap people with disabilities. Councils can use traffic regulation orders, but often they are slow and expensive

[Josh Newbury]

to put in place. People in Cannock Chase often tell me how much better it was when Staffordshire's police community support officers could issue fines for pavement obstruction, but since those powers have been removed, any meaningful deterrent has all but gone. As has been said, drivers often worry about blocking traffic or emergency vehicles on narrow roads, and housing in many areas just was not built with cars in mind.

Looking ahead, let us consider national action, complemented by local solutions such as community parking hubs and resident permits. That should sit alongside better public transport and active travel, on which the Government are acting. This may not be the top issue for many of our constituents, but it absolutely can be for those affected. I hope that, by planning for the future, we can keep our pavements safe and accessible for all.

5.17 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this important debate on something that is a problem across the country.

Indeed, a Chelmsford resident recently wrote to me about taking her nan for a walk, when they were forced to walk in the road due to cars obstructing the pavement. That is entirely unacceptable for anyone, let alone an elderly resident. Parking on a pavement and blocking it is already an offence under the Road Traffic Act 1988, but only the police have the power to issue tickets, and they are rightly prioritising more serious crime.

Organisations such as the South Essex Parking Partnership have the resources to issue fixed penalty notices, but they do not currently have the power to do so, as they can issue FPNs only where there is a specific parking restriction, such as double yellow lines or residents-only parking. The use of traffic regulation orders to bring in restrictions in specific areas is slow, cumbersome and costly—something I know at first hand having previously been an Essex county councillor, as it took two years to bring in junction protection or double yellow lines to prevent parents from parking on corners when picking up their children from school.

As has already been referenced, in 2019 the Transport Committee published a report in which it made a clear recommendation that a new civil offence of obstructive pavement parking, enforced by local authorities, should be created. Given that the House yesterday debated a Bill to give more powers to local authorities, I hope the Minister will introduce that power as well.

5.19 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate. She and many other hon. Members have described the reasons for this debate and for a change in the law.

As Chair of the Transport Committee, it gives me great pleasure to speak in this debate, but I am not sure how many times in the 10 years since I have been in Parliament I have spoken on the issue of bringing in a default ban on pavement parking. As a London MP,

and before that a London councillor and a London resident for 40 years, I know that a default ban—with specific exemptions where needed—would work. I have never understood the apparent reluctance among some to allow that nationwide.

I was an active member of the Select Committee inquiry, along with the Minister, who was then the Committee Chair; the rural affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner); and the then Conservative Member for Bexhill and Battle, who took us to his constituency to show us the problems there. We recommended Government legislation for a nationwide ban on pavement parking across England outside London to give the Secretary of State for Transport the power to bring in secondary legislation. We also recommended a ban enforced by local authorities, not the police; a nationwide awareness campaign showing the problems of pavement parking for those affected; and revisions of the traffic regulation order process. The Secretary of State has shown that she and the Minister are passionate—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order.

5.20 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), for securing this debate. I recently met the Walton-on-Thames macular degeneration support group in Esher and Walton to discuss some of the challenges faced by my constituents with sight loss, including pavement parking. I urge the Minister to finally take the step of banning pavement parking. I recognise, however, that poor parking is often due to carelessness more than malice, so I suggest to the Minister that a public education campaign about how to park more considerately is in order—perhaps some Tory MPs would like to attend, since they do not seem to think it is a problem.

A number of my constituents have written to me specifically about the prevalence of pavement parking around schools in pick-up and drop-off hours, which is dangerous for children. Part of tackling this issue is proper enforcement of the rules. What steps is the Department taking to support local authorities in dealing with improper pavement parking?

I want to flag another issue: placing street furniture such as A-boards on streets in Surrey does not require a licence, yet it presents huge obstructions to visually impaired constituents. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on dealing with it—maybe she could share what happened there with Surrey county council.

Finally, on many social housing estates, which were often built in the 1950s and '60s when cars were small and there was probably only one, if that, many cars are now parked on pavements and on green spaces meant for children. What can the Government do to encourage social housing providers to knock down the derelict garages that are not being used to provide proper parking?

5.22 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire)

for securing this important debate. The plight of pavement parking affects all our constituencies and, as we have heard, causes particular distress for pedestrians with young children, disabilities or sight loss. The statistics we have heard today are, frankly, shocking: that 65% of residents, and 73% of disabled residents, want councils to take on these powers, and that 80% of parents would be more likely to walk to school if there was no pavement parking. I have also heard that 93% of local councils have had complaints from members of the public on this issue.

In my constituency of Shrewsbury, the issue crops up time and again. We have some beautiful historic streets that can be narrow to navigate. We are blessed with a mature population that wants to stay fit and healthy and walk into our beautiful town centre, but it has become increasingly dangerous and the pavements are not safe. I have been contacted by severely affected residents on Bell Lane, Torrin Drive and New Park Road. I would like Members to hear directly from residents on Whitemere Road. They say:

“We live a few doors down from Mount Pleasant primary school, it’s becoming an absolute nightmare and is so dangerous. They park on footpaths anywhere they can, blocking drives, and access to other larger vehicles trying to get through. The state of the footpaths is terrible due to the weight of some of the cars. I have tried the Council but they say it’s up to the police. And the police tell me it’s up to the Council. Who is responsible?”

Until we get clarity from our Government, that is the question we all have.

5.24 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for organising the debate. It is wholly unacceptable that the Conservative Government dragged their heels on this important issue. They dithered and delayed because they could not make up their mind what they needed to do. As a result, pedestrians are put at risk every day by inconsiderate parking and local councils incur significant costs repairing kerbs and verges damaged by drivers.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): On exactly that issue, I represent the city of Wells, which has wonderful, beautiful streets, but when delivery vehicles park on the pavements, they break the paving slabs. That makes it an absolute peril for people who have accessibility problems and are less mobile. Does my hon. Friend agree that that has to be dealt with soon, otherwise groups such as Accessible Wells, which I am meant to meet tomorrow, will not have—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. I must now call the Front Benchers.

5.25 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this important debate, which builds on some themes that were discussed in a Westminster Hall debate a few months ago on the subject of walking and cycling safely to school. I hope hon. Members will forgive me for not referencing all

their contributions, given how many spoke, in the interests of speaking concisely so that we have plenty of time to hear from the Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell was right to highlight the patchwork of inconsistent rules across the country. She and my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) recognised that we need some flexibility in places where current street layouts are not compatible with the number and size of cars. If there is to be change, it is right that local authorities play a key role, and there needs to be dialogue to come up with the right solutions for those locations.

It was great to hear from the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) about the benefits of the recent Scottish pavement parking ban. Many hon. Members talked of the major impact on people who use mobility aids, who are blocked on the pavement and unable to walk into the road—which is unsafe anyway—because dropped kerbs are blocked by parked cars.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) rightly highlighted that this issue is not just about pavements; it is also about cycle paths. I know that she, like me, is very keen on cycling, and will also have experienced many times the impact of supposed cycle lanes actually being car parking spaces. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis) was right to highlight that the solutions to this issue need to take account of the differences in rural areas. We must recognise the different character of places in our country.

As hon. Members have said, cars parked on the pavement can stop people from being able to walk or wheel down the street. If we have to enter the road, that is a risk to our safety. Change requires legislation, and the English devolution Bill should be amended to provide powers that enable pavement parking to be tackled. As the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) referred to, with her frustration very clear, we are now approaching the five-year anniversary of the closure of the Government consultation on pavement parking in England.

The Local Government Association has been calling for similar powers to those that exist in London for a long time. Local government should be given those powers, and we should recognise that councils and the people elected to serve on them know their areas best. More than 80% of local authorities have reported that pavement parking is a widespread problem in their area, but it is very important that we do not view this as a pedestrians or cyclists versus cars issue, because even that well-known anti-car organisation, the RAC, found that four in five drivers want the Government to take action. There are, however, differing views on how it should be done, with 42% of motorists supportive of an outright ban and 41% wanting to see councils given powers to ban the practice on specific roads.

In my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, there are many examples of similar challenges. Oxfordshire county council is proposing a school street in the area of south Didcot, in recognition of pavement parking issues in places such as Ridgeway Road, the Croft and Mereland Road. It was good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) about the success of the school streets scheme in his constituency. We have Enterprise car and van rental, which, alas, still sometimes uses pavements as a repository for its vehicles between rentals.

[Olly Glover]

On Didcot Great Western Park, there are persistent problems with people parking on pavements, despite the prevalence of car parking spaces available. An example of a place where there needs to be nuance and dialogue is Charlton Road in Wantage, where the design of the road is such that pavement parking is customary. It is important to recognise that some places will need it. As many hon. Members have said, tackling it will be very important for encouraging more people to walk and cycle, including to and from school.

Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to make it easier for local authorities to use the traffic regulation order process, and to simplify that process so they can take action more quickly and robustly, and at lower cost. Clearly, more work is needed from the Government on that.

It is also incumbent on us to use the roads with consideration for others, so it is regrettable that there is a need for legislation, rather than people just thinking hard about where they park their car. That also applies to people walking who are too busy on their phones and just step into the road and nearly get hit by a cyclist—and of course, there are many examples of cyclists not cycling considerately. We should all think of other people when we are using our roads and our streets, and need for the Government to support that is perhaps just a regrettable output of the fact that we are not doing it ourselves.

From what I have heard from the Minister in a number of contexts, I genuinely believe that she would like to make progress on this issue. That is why I hope that she will give us an update today on what meaningful response will be given to the consultation, with specific timescales, so that our local authorities receive much-needed clarity about what is going to happen. We urge the Government to publish that outstanding summary of responses to the consultation, with a clear plan for how we are going to take the issue forward. I will end my remarks there, so that there is plenty of time for the Minister to respond.

5.30 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing this debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate on pavement parking, an issue that may seem mundane at first glance, but that, in reality, touches on safety, accessibility and dignity in every one of our communities.

Pavement parking is not just unsightly; it is downright dangerous. When cars mount pavements, they force pedestrians off the footway and into the road, directly into the flow of traffic. For many, that is inconvenient; for many others, it can be life-changing. For someone in a wheelchair, a single car blocking the pavement can mean a 10-minute diversion, or the frightening prospect of rolling into a busy road. For someone with a visual impairment, it can mean walking straight into the bonnet of a car—an obstruction they cannot anticipate. Carers supporting people with hidden disabilities—perhaps guiding an autistic child who finds traffic overwhelming, or pushing a specialist buggy—find themselves in exactly

the same position: what ought to be a simple walk to the shops or to school can suddenly become an obstacle course.

Guide Dogs research tells us that 85% of people know that this issue is a danger for those with sight loss, and nearly three quarters say that it is common in their area. Local councillors, including my own in Buckinghamshire, hear directly from residents and overwhelmingly report that pavement parking creates a safety risk, with many saying that it is one of the issues raised with them most often.

Of course, as the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), has already said, London has had a ban on pavement parking for many years, but the rules are far less clear outside our capital. Local councils can bring in restrictions through traffic regulation orders, and they have had permission to use standard signage without asking Whitehall for approval since 2011, but that system is patchwork, complex and slow.

That is why, in 2020, the last Conservative Government consulted on how to go further. More than 15,000 people responded. The consultation looked at a nationwide ban with sensible exemptions—recognising, for example, the realities of narrow rural lanes or terraced streets, where pavement parking has been part of the layout for decades. Yet here we are, nearly five years later, and there is still no formal response from the Department for Transport. Public opinion, though, could not be clearer: eight in 10 drivers want action. Two thirds see pavement parking in their neighbourhoods on a regular basis, and a third see it every single day.

Rachael Maskell: I am slightly baffled; I have been campaigning on this issue throughout my 10 years in this place, and the hon. Member's Government were in power for almost the entirety of that time. Can he explain why the Tory Government did not make any improvements to pavement parking? Why is he pointing the finger at a Labour Government who clearly want to make a difference for all pedestrians?

Greg Smith: I have a lot of respect for the hon. Lady. The Government have had a year to take action, and they have not. I have not been in the House as long as she has, but I was here in the last Parliament and I was a member of the Transport Committee for the entirety of it. I, too, sat around the horseshoe with the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth, and indeed the Minister for some of that time. I certainly recognised the challenges of pavement parking and pushed for solutions in the last Parliament as well. I fully acknowledge that we are five years on, and that some of those years were under a Conservative Government, but action is required now. If we are to have a serious debate, the onus is on the present Government to come forward with the necessary actions.

One of the issues that I notice in my constituency is the challenge of pavement parking in a lot of our new build areas and estates, where the planning system has quite deliberately tried to restrict parking. Guess what? That has created chaos on the streets in its own right, because people still require the same number of cars to get about, particularly in rural communities. Someone cannot do the family shop for a family of five on the back of a bike.

We all recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all answer. A blanket national ban is not going to be practical everywhere, but we cannot accept inertia. We cannot ask people with disabilities, carers or families to keep waiting while this problem goes unaddressed. I call on the Minister to come forward with practical steps and a realistic timeline, and then to commit to that and solve the problem.

5.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing this important debate and continuing to shine a light on the persistent and widespread issue of pavement parking. She and many other hon. Members—26 in total, I believe—have made a clear and compelling case for change.

Pavement parking affects communities across the country, from busy urban centres to quiet residential streets, and the issue is particularly close to my heart. No one knows that better than the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who spoke about the work that we did together on the Committee back in 2019.

I have heard countless accounts from constituents and stakeholders of the challenges posed by vehicles parked on pavements. Those challenges are not just inconvenient but exclusionary. They disproportionately affect disabled people, those with visual impairments, older adults, parents with pushchairs, children walking or wheeling to school, and many others who rely on safe, unobstructed pavements to move around independently. I will use this opportunity to congratulate the schoolchildren and school that the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) highlighted.

I thank all the hon. Members who contributed to today's debate. The breadth of contributions once again demonstrates the scale of this issue and the urgency with which it must be addressed. Pavement parking is clearly not a niche concern; it affects all of us. Members made an enormous number of important points in sharing the experiences of their constituents, illustrating the impact on safety and independence, highlighting the damaging effect on the quality of our pavements, and also recognising that no two places are the same. A new town will likely face different challenges from a medieval city, and there are competing priorities that need to be addressed.

As Members will be aware, after five years of inaction despite promises to the contrary, in 2020 the previous Administration finally held a public consultation on managing pavement parking. The responses to that consultation were robust, thoughtful and deeply informative. They provided clear evidence that pavement parking is a problem that affects people's daily lives, their safety and their ability to participate fully in society. I am grateful to everyone who took the time to respond. I am acutely aware of the frustration caused by the lack of a formal response to that consultation. It is a frustration that I share, and, frankly, it seems that the previous Government were not focusing on the issue, so we have had to pick the work up from scratch. I want to reassure Members that I am straining every sinew to publish the response as soon as possible.

In the five years since the previous Government held the consultation, a lot has changed in the political landscape of the UK. Much more of England is covered by mayoral combined authorities and, because this Government believe in true devolution, we are moving to strategic authorities across England. Those changes have to be factored into our thinking on pavement parking.

More broadly, we have carefully considered the potential impacts of pavement parking to ensure that our approach aligns with the Government's wider missions, which are focused on growth, health, safer streets and breaking down barriers to opportunity. Tackling pavement parking can contribute to safer streets by reducing risks for pedestrians who would be forced into the road. It can enable more people to walk—the perfect antidote to inactivity. By ensuring that disabled people and families can move freely and safely, it can break down barriers to opportunity, which, alongside high levels of active travel, can potentially drive growth benefits. Our work is helping us shape a policy that is not only effective but equitable. As a result of all that work, I expect to make an announcement very soon.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for wheelchair users, and in my conversations with Bexley Mencap, I have had many discussions about the impact of pavement parking on disabled people. Crayford is in the London borough of Bexley, but some of its roads are partly in London and partly in the area of Kent county council. Will the Minister look at how the policy will be implemented for roads that are partly in London and partly in a different area?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a really important point that I am sure we will consider in our response. As I said, I will make an announcement very soon. I am also pleased to share that I have commissioned new research to update and strengthen our evidence base on the extent and impact of pavement parking. To be clear, that research is not a prerequisite for the consultation response—it will not delay progress—but it is part of our broader commitment to evidence-based policy and future evaluation to better understand the problem and ensure that the solutions we implement are working.

Rachael Maskell rose—

Lilian Greenwood: I apologise, but I will not take any more interventions, because we are so short of time.

The research will begin imminently and will involve a representative sample of local traffic authorities. It will seek to include both a physical measure of the extent of pavement parking and questionnaires to gather qualitative insights into its impact. That dual approach will allow us to understand not only where and how pavement parking occurs but how it affects people's lives, and particularly the lives of vulnerable road users. It will also allow us to evaluate the impact of the pavement parking policies that we intend to implement.

I had a very positive meeting co-ordinated by Guide Dogs, and I will continue to engage with stakeholders across the transport, accessibility and local government sectors, whose insights are invaluable. I am also mindful of the need to balance competing priorities, such as the

[Lilian Greenwood]

availability of parking, the needs of delivery drivers and the importance of maintaining access for emergency services.

However, let me be absolutely clear: the status quo is not acceptable. Pavement parking is a blight on our towns, cities and villages. It undermines inclusivity and equitable access. It sends a message, however unintentionally, that some people's mobility matters less than others'. That is not a message that any of us should be comfortable with. We must recognise that pavement parking is not just a transport issue but a social justice issue. I am determined to ensure that the steps we take are meaningful and effective. That means considering lived experiences, closing evidence gaps and adopting policy that reflects the realities of modern Britain.

Britain has changed significantly since the consultation in 2020. Technological developments such as new mobility solutions—the dockless e-scooters referenced earlier in

the debate, e-bikes and even delivery robots—have changed the landscape. Our devolution agenda is putting power and decision making closer to those affected, where it should be. Our streets and our local authorities are evolving, and so must our policies.

I thank all those who have campaigned tirelessly on this issue—Members of Parliament, local councillors, advocacy groups and members of the public—and assure them that their voices have been heard and will continue to shape the work ahead. Together, we can and will build streets that are safer, more accessible and more welcoming for everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of pavement parking.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 3 September 2025

TREASURY

Government's Economic Strategy

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves):

Today I can inform the House that I have asked the Office for Budget Responsibility to prepare an economic and fiscal forecast for publication on 26 November 2025, which will be accompanied by the annual Budget.

This is in line with my commitment to deliver one major fiscal event a year, to give families and businesses the stability and certainty they need and, in turn, to support the Government's growth mission.

[HCWS902]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by H2 Teesside Ltd for the construction and operation of a blue hydrogen production facility situated in Teesside.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report, unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

The statutory deadline for the decision on the H2 Teesside application was 28 August 2025.

The Secretary of State has decided to allow an extension and to set a new deadline of 30 October 2025. This is to allow time to request further information.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS905]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

High-caffeine Energy Drinks

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): The Government committed in the King's Speech to banning the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children in England. This action will help raise the healthiest generation of children ever, providing them with a better and more prosperous future. It is a key part of the Government plan for change to break down barriers to opportunity and shift the NHS from sickness to prevention.

I am pleased to update the House that today, the Department of Health and Social Care published a consultation on proposals to ban the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children under the age of 16 years.

Public health research has found that these drinks have little to no nutritional benefit. There is clear and increasing evidence that consuming high-caffeine energy drinks is associated with a range of negative outcomes for children's physical and mental health. These include reduced sleep quality, increased headaches and emotional difficulties such as stress, anxiety and depression. Research also suggests possible impacts on children's educational outcomes and increased likelihood of engagement with other harmful behaviours, such as smoking and vaping, and alcohol and other substance abuse.

In addition to being high in caffeine, these drinks can contain high levels of sugar, which is known to be linked with obesity and dental decay. Based on our estimates, detailed in our impact assessment published alongside the consultation, the proposed ban could reduce childhood obesity rates by the equivalent of about 40,000 children, and, over future years, deliver health benefits worth £7.7 billion through improved health outcomes, as well as NHS savings and increased economic productivity.

We estimate that around 100,000 children consume high-caffeine energy drinks at least daily in England. Of particular concern is the fact that research highlights that children living in more deprived areas and households are more likely to consume these drinks. This means the possible negative outcomes on health and education are likely to be felt unequally across society.

The consultation has been published on gov.uk and asks the public, professionals and organisations for their views on our proposals, including:

- the minimum age of sale
- the products and businesses in scope of the ban
- how the ban will apply to vending machines
- the length of time that businesses and local authorities need to implement the ban.

In addition, we ask local enforcement authorities and retailers for their views on our proposals for enforcing the ban.

The consultation will be open for 12 weeks. We encourage all interested stakeholders and members of the public to respond. An impact assessment has been published alongside the consultation, with further detail.

Following the consultation, we will review the next steps required to protect children in England from the reported harms of high-caffeine energy drinks.

I will update Parliament following the consultation.

[HCWS906]

HOME DEPARTMENT

National Crime Agency: National Data Exploitation Capability

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The National Crime Agency is an intelligence-led crime fighting agency that leads and co-ordinates the UK law enforcement operational response to serious and organised crime and protects the public by targeting the highest harm groups and networks. In 2018, the NCA introduced its

national data exploitation capability as a five-year programme, to assist the agency's response to SOC by analysing or "exploiting" bulk datasets.

His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services has finalised its 13th inspection of the NCA. The inspectorate assessed the value of the NDEC's contribution to the NCA and the agency's utilisation of it, whether the NDEC effectively uses the data it has access to, whether the NDEC has the technological capabilities and other resources to fulfil its role, and how efficiently and effectively NCA co-ordinates and prioritises the NDEC's work.

It is crucial that law enforcement's use of data and data capabilities is effective, lawful and ethical. I welcome the findings of the inspection. I have asked HMICFRS to publish the report. It will be published today and will be available online at <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/>. I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inspectorate reported that the NDEC had a consistent approach to ethics and standards in data management. It also found that NDEC personnel were well trained and knowledgeable about the legislation that governs their work. Inspectors identified examples of good practice in safeguarding data and commended the agency for voluntarily undergoing an audit of the NDEC's data handling process by the Information Commissioner's Office in 2020.

However, the inspectorate found that more could still be done to strengthen NDEC's role in the system. It highlighted the need for closer connectivity and engagement with partners. It also identified scope for improvement in establishing formal accreditation for the technical roles within NDEC. The inspectorate recommended that the agency should adopt the Government digital and data professional capacity framework in its entirety, which would align NDEC with other Government Departments and ensure there is a clear development model for staff.

Overall, the inspectorate has made nine recommendations and identified one area for improvement. These recommendations will help the NCA to improve how it stores data, undertakes bulk analysis and engages in partnership with relevant bodies. In turn, the recommendations should allow the NDEC to fulfil its potential and enhance the use of its capabilities to tackle SOC. The agency accepts the findings and steps are already being taken to address the challenges identified during the inspection. I wish to thank HMICFRS for this vital inspection. I have asked my officials to work closely with the NCA and HMICFRS to deliver the necessary changes.

[HCWS904]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Road Map to Trusted Third-party AI Assurance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): I wish to inform the House of the publication of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology's road map to trusted third-party AI assurance. The road map builds on the AI opportunities action plan, which included commitments to support the UK's AI assurance ecosystem. By creating a world-leading AI assurance market, we can increase trust and confidence in AI, drive economic growth and make the UK the most attractive home for businesses seeking to adopt AI.

AI capabilities are advancing at an extraordinary pace and will play an increasingly important role in driving forward the Government's ambition to boost economic growth, provide jobs for the future and improve people's everyday lives. Ensuring that businesses have the confidence to develop and deploy these technologies responsibly will be critical to seize the opportunities that AI presents.

This road map is intended as the next step to set us on this path and ensure the widespread adoption of secure and trusted AI across the UK. It sets out our ambitions for the third-party assurance market and the immediate actions that the Government will take to support this emerging sector. The road map commits to:

Convening a multi-stakeholder UK consortium to work towards a future AI assurance profession to ensure market quality;

Developing a skills and competencies framework for AI assurance to support these efforts and create clear learning pathways for future professional development; and

Establishing an AI assurance innovation fund, focused on the eight industrial strategy sectors, to develop novel assurance solutions to future-proof the market.

Establishing a world-leading AI assurance market will build confidence in and drive the adoption of AI, ensuring that the UK can fully capitalise on the opportunities that AI presents. If present barriers to widespread adoption are overcome, the UK's assurance market could be worth as much as £18.8 billion gross value added by 2035. The initiatives in the road map, such as the AI assurance innovation fund, will ensure that the UK's assurance market is ready to respond to rapid developments in AI capabilities, while efforts such as the consortium will establish the building blocks for a future AI assurance profession.

[HCWS903]

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