

**Thursday  
16 October 2025**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 16 October 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 16 October 2025*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

GENERAL CEMETERY BILL [LORDS]

*Bill read the Third time and passed, without amendment.*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Youth Services: Deprived Communities

1. **Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to support the delivery of youth services in deprived communities. [905740]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** This Government are co-producing a national youth strategy—the first in decades—to bring power back to young people, no matter who they are or where they live. I am really proud that we are directly investing over £28 million in youth programmes across the country this year.

**Sam Rushworth:** As a young man who owes as much to youth theatre as to my schooling for giving me the confidence to speak in this place, I know the importance of youth services. I am really pleased that the Government have the better youth spaces fund, which organisations in my constituency have been engaging with, and I hope that the Government will look favourably at what comes from Bishop Auckland. The process has brought to light just how stripped bare our youth services are and how few meet the 50% threshold of youth services provision. Would the Secretary of State or one of her advisers meet me to discuss how we can ensure that we have the youth workers in order to actually bid for the funds in the first place?

**Lisa Nandy:** We had to take the difficult decision to focus the better youth spaces funding on organisations whose main aim is supporting young people. My hon. Friend is right to point to the absolutely dire state of youth services that we inherited. A billion pounds was taken out of youth services under the last Government, and thousands of youth workers and hundreds of youth

clubs were lost up and down the country. Our forthcoming national youth strategy will put youth workers and youth clubs at the heart of those plans, and we will invest.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): Local charities would be better equipped to deliver youth services if they could maximise their income from sources such as the People's Postcode Lottery, but in spring the Government refused to make the reforms that would enable more money to be available for good causes, despite supporting it in opposition. Given that this decision has proved quite controversial, will the Government agree to revisit it?

**Lisa Nandy:** We have heard concerns from across the House on this issue, and the Youth Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), would be happy to meet with the hon. Lady to discuss it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): We all recognise the value of youth services, but the right hon. Lady will be well aware that many youth services, from mental health support to sport provision, are commissioned and then provided by charities, which are under quite severe financial pressures, yet incredibly charities were not exempt from Labour's national insurance increases. Even children's hospices were not. Why not? Is the Department engaging constructively with the Chancellor about the plight of children's and youth charities? There is no point having a youth strategy if the Government are undermining the viability of the providers of the services.

**Lisa Nandy:** First of all, I welcome the shadow Secretary of State to his place and thank him for the very constructive way that he engaged with colleagues from across the House as Sports Minister, including me. I hope that is a model we can replicate.

I really do recognise the centrality of charities to everything we are trying to do as a country. The shadow Secretary of State will know that my background at the Centrepunt charity and then the Children's Society was what led me into this place. On his specific issue, we have protected the smallest charities, which will be better off as a consequence of our reforms. We have also ensured that the majority will pay either the same or less. We do recognise the challenges, however, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Civil Society has been working through those issues with charities as part of our work with the civil society covenant.

### Creative Copyright

2. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Ind): What steps she is taking to help protect creative copyright, in the context of further advances in AI. [905741]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology and I have been working with representatives from the creative industries and major tech companies to ensure that we have a copyright regime that is fit for purpose. But our message is clear, to speak directly to the hon. Member's concern and that

of many other Members of this House: if it does not work for creatives, it will not work for us, and we will not do it.

**Rachael Maskell:** Daisy May Johnson is an exceptionally talented author of children's books in York, but her work has been scraped and reproduced by generative artificial intelligence. She has not given permission and has not received a penny, but she has lost thousands of pounds. The same can be said about artists, musicians, writers and other creatives. When the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 was going through this House, we were given a commitment that the Government would do more, so could the Minister set out what progress has been made and ensure that there is legislation on this in the next Session?

**Lisa Nandy:** I really appreciate the urgency of this issue. The example of Daisy from the hon. Member's constituency is similar to examples from many other Members. As a Labour Government, we obviously believe strongly that people must be fairly paid for their work, which is why we have put transparency and remuneration at the heart of the principles that will govern our approach. Like I said, we have made progress with the expert working group, and we will be able to announce the details shortly. We are also establishing a parliamentary working group, which I very much hope the hon. Member will participate in, to make sure that we hear the views of people from across the country through their MPs. I will be able to deliver a statement to the House by the end of this year on the future of the copyright framework.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The Government continue their haphazard approach to artificial intelligence and copyright. I wish they would get that resolved. One thing that has concerned and upset the sector was the comments of a newly appointed special adviser to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, who said,

"whether or not you philosophically believe the big AI firms should compensate content creators, they in practice will never legally have to".

I am really hoping that the Secretary of State distances herself from those comments and that that is not the intention of her Government.

**Lisa Nandy:** I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance: that is not the Government's intention. He says that there has been a "haphazard approach". Actually, no country in the world has yet managed to resolve this matter. We appreciate the urgency and we are determined to address this and become the gold standard. The creative industries are at the centre of our industrial strategy for a reason: because we know that they lead and light up the world. Whatever AI model develops in future, human, good-quality content will be at the heart of that. We have to and will protect it and I am happy to give him that assurance.

### Grassroots Music Venues

3. **Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): What steps she is taking to support grassroots music venues. [905742]

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** As someone who used to manage a local band called Squeezebox when at university—available at all bad record stores—I understand that grassroots music is the lifeblood of the music industry. The Government have committed to supporting the live music industry's introduction of a voluntary levy on tickets for stadium and arena shows and that money will be ploughed straight into the grassroots music sector. The Government are providing up to £30 million for the music growth package, which will provide further Government support to grassroots venues by fostering domestic growth, talent development and music exports.

**Luke Taylor:** Grassroots music venues across the country, particularly across London, are finding it increasingly difficult to survive as customers are spending less when they come to gigs because of the cost of living crisis. Will the Minister explain the progress on the levy? Will he consider the Lib Dem calls to reverse the national insurance rise on small businesses to give venues such as the Sound Lounge and the CryerArts Centre in Sutton, which are so valued by our local community, the best chance to survive and thrive?

**Ian Murray:** The hon. Gentleman lays out the difficulties, of which there are many, for the live music sector and potentially the venues, many of them in his constituency. We want to see 50% of all ticket sales for stadium and arena shows in 2026 enter that music levy; that is this Government's aspiration and we encourage all ticket providers to do so. In the autumn 2024 Budget, as he suggests, the Chancellor set out plans to transform the business rates system over this Parliament. Those reforms will provide certainty and support to businesses, including music venues. The Government have been engaging with the live music sector on business rates reforms and will set out further policy details in next month's Budget.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrats spokesperson.

**Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I welcome the Minister to his place and I look forward to working with him—I am delighted to hear that he is a keen musician. Since Brexit, British musicians' European tours have dropped by around 9% year on year, as a mountain of bureaucracy blocks those hoping to cut their teeth on the European circuit. In Frome and East Somerset, I am lucky to have musicians who travel in Europe, but who will not have a team of people to do the paperwork for them. Will the Minister update us on what tangible steps have been taken for touring artists since the so-called reset deal, so that our musicians can take centre stage in Europe once more?

**Ian Murray:** Let me correct the record. I did not say that I was a musician; I said that I managed a band. I would not like that to be incorrectly recorded in *Hansard*. In any case, I thank the hon. Lady for the encouragement.

This matter is a priority for this Government to try and resolve. It was mentioned in the UK-EU reset summit agreement. We are working hard with the Paymaster General, who takes forward those negotiations. I am already in touch with the European Commissioner for culture. I can assure the hon. Lady that we will do everything we possibly can to get the agreement and the commitment over the line.

### Motorsport

4. **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): What steps she is taking to support the motorsport industry. [905743]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** This Government are proud to play a part in the continued growth and success of the motorsport industry. We have recently published the advanced manufacturing sector plan, which has automotive at its heart, aiming to nearly double the annual business investment in the sector to £39 billion by 2035, with 84% of advanced manufacturing jobs based outside London.

**Mr Forster:** As well as congratulating McLaren, which is based in my constituency of Woking, for winning the Formula 1 constructors' title for the second season in a row, will the Minister also agree to ask the Chancellor to change the tax on sustainable fuel, so that this country can continue to have a leading place in the motoring industry?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I would of course like to congratulate McLaren on back-to-back Formula 1 constructors' championship victories, and I am sure the support it receives in Woking is no small part of that. Alongside the Secretary of State, I attended the British grand prix in the summer and witnessed McLaren and Britain's own Lando Norris claim victory. My Department will continue to stay in close contact with Formula 1, and I will reflect his comments to the Chancellor.

### Tourism: Major Energy Infrastructure Projects

5. **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of providing additional funding to support tourism in areas affected by major energy infrastructure projects. [905744]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** The Government are committed to supporting the visitor economy in rural and coastal communities, because we recognise the potential the sector has to contribute to economic growth and to the pride in place of an area. Through ongoing dialogue with other Departments and Ministers, we are exploring how best to support communities and businesses, including through our forthcoming visitor economy growth plan.

**Jenny Riddell-Carpenter:** Suffolk Coastal is proud to be the tourism capital of Suffolk, but we also wear the badge of hosting possibly the highest number of nationally significant infrastructure projects within a small, 10-mile radius. Suffolk Coastal is home to Aldeburgh, Southwold, Woodbridge and Saxmundham, and every day I speak to businesses and constituents about the impact of the lack of co-ordination of these NSIPs in a very small geography. Investing in energy infrastructure and tourism do not need to be in conflict. Is the Minister having conversations with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero about how we can better co-ordinate? If she is not, will she?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I recognise how important the tourism and hospitality sectors are to Suffolk, and I know that my hon. Friend is a strong champion for them and for her area. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport works closely with other Departments, including DESNZ and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to ensure that the needs of the visitor economy are considered as part of the planning and delivery of large-scale projects. The Government acknowledge concerns that numerous projects may be consented to in one region, and the cumulative impacts of schemes are considered as they move individually through the NSIP regime. I will reflect her comments to MHCLG, but of course such large infrastructure projects are important for the country.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My constituency has the largest number of wind turbines, either constructed or consented to. Does the Minister share my concern that the Scottish Government continue to override the views of local councils and local communities in consenting to further projects that are to the detriment of the landscape and therefore the local tourist industry?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I have heard the right hon. Gentleman's point. I am sure that the relevant Secretary of State and indeed the Scottish Government have heard it. I would be happy to meet him to discuss it further.

### Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation

6. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): If she will have discussions with the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation on its role in supporting coalmining communities. [905745]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** I know from my own experience, from Members across the House and from my constituents, of the deep unhappiness with CISWO. As Charities Minister, I met representatives of the Charity Commission to discuss CISWO's support for coal mining communities, and I know the commission is in contact with CISWO. I encourage the chief executive officer and trustees to reflect on how they deliver their charitable purposes in the light of the dissatisfaction expressed by hon. Members and local communities, and I strongly encourage CISWO to strengthen its engagement with the local coalfield communities that it was established to support.

**Ian Lavery:** The Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation dates back to the 1920s. Its main function then and its main function now is to support the mining communities, but sadly many mining MPs are witnessing exactly the opposite. The chief executive officer's rigid enforcement of decades-old covenants and dogged intransigence is working against our mining communities. In my patch of Blyth and Ashington, the eviction of the Bedlington Terriers from a ground they have played on for more than 50 years is a prime example. The trustees believe themselves to be untouchable and have treated the coalfield MPs with the utmost contempt. Will the Minister agree to meet me and the chair of the coalfield group to discuss how together we can reverse the current mindset of the CISWO trustees and reflect the real needs of the people in our mining communities?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I understand my hon. Friend's grave concerns, which are reflected across our coalfield communities. I am deeply troubled to hear the example he shares with the House. Charities must stay true to their charitable purposes and act within the law and the terms of their governing document. Where they fail to do so, it is right that we have the Charity Commission as the independent regulator to investigate. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his concerns in more detail. That invitation is open to any Member of the House, as it is clear to me that concerns regarding CISWO are sincerely held. I once again reiterate my encouragement for the CEO and trustees to reflect on how they deliver their charitable purposes for the coalfield communities they are meant to represent.

### Youth Services: Funding

7. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on levels of funding for youth services. [905746]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** We will soon be launching our national youth strategy, created with young people and designed to tackle the problems affecting them. As part of that work, we engage regularly with Cabinet colleagues on ensuring that the problems impacting young people are heard and properly tackled. This financial year, DCMS is investing over £145 million in youth funding.

**Liz Twist:** I welcome the Government's work on the national youth strategy and their investment in youth services so far. How do they expect the move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to benefit young people from different backgrounds in my constituency and in general?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all her work. In our youth strategy, we will set out the next steps to invest in the future of our young people. We want to better co-ordinate youth services and move away from a one-size-fits-all approach from central Government. In short, we want to put power back in the hands of young people and their communities.

**Shokat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): Youth services deliver huge benefits to our community, both socially and economically, reducing knife crime and antisocial behaviour and, in turn, saving the country £500 million a year. Yet the clubs that I meet in my constituency, including Wesley Hall youth club and Eyres Monsell club for young people, tell me that there is a real recruitment and retention crisis in the sector. With over 4,500 workers leaving in the past decade, what measures is the Minister taking to address this issue?

**Stephanie Peacock:** The hon. Member is absolutely right to outline the importance of youth services, particularly in the prevention of knife crime and other issues. Of course, we saw a 73% reduction in real-terms spending over the last 14 years under the Conservative Government. We will not be able to reverse that overnight, but that is why we look forward to our youth strategy, which will be published by the end of the year.

### Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

8. **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with relevant stakeholders on the potential impact of changes to the listed places of worship grant scheme on listed places of worship. [905747]

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** On this issue, the Secretary of State met my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) in her role as the Second Church Estates Commissioner and my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). In March 2025, my noble Friend the Minister for Heritage met the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Bristol, my noble Friend Lord Khan of Burnley, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea and church representatives, as well as visiting Salisbury cathedral and St Michael Le Belfrey in York.

**Greg Smith:** I am grateful for the Minister's answer, but I am not sure the Government have understood the level of uncertainty and panic that has set in following their approach to this grant scheme. Some of the most cherished buildings in our constituencies are waiting on clarity for when the Government will come forward with concrete steps to extend this scheme. What will happen after March 2026? I would be grateful if the Minister could give us that clarity now.

**Ian Murray:** This is an incredibly serious issue, but the Conservatives did not allocate any funding for it at all when they were in government, and therefore we are left with the current situation. I reiterate to those who may wish to use the listed places of worship grant scheme that £13.7 million is left in that scheme. Grants are capped at £25,000, but the analysis from the Department is that 94% of all applications are unaffected by this change because most claims are under £5,000. There is plenty of money left in the pot for this year, and I would encourage them to use it.

### Grassroots Sports Facilities

9. **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): What steps her Department plans to take to help increase access to grassroots sport facilities. [905748]

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** We believe in the power of grassroots sport, which is why we announced investment of £400 million in future grassroots facilities. But we are going further than that and insisting that girls will have equal access to any facility that we fund, because girls belong on the pitch. I take this moment to pay tribute to the Lionesses and the Red Roses on their incredible victories in the women's Euros and the rugby world cup. It was a particular pleasure to join the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) to cheer on the Red Roses. We want all girls to grow up not just with dreams of being able to match those ambitions, but with a real plan.

**Noah Law:** Access to sport is vital for not only our public health, but fostering a sense of community and reducing antisocial behaviour. Yet in St Austell, many

of the astroturf facilities, such as the great one at Penrice school, cannot be used after dark because they lack floodlights. Will the Minister look at how small-scale investments of this kind in vital community facilities could help unlock all-year-round access to physical activity for people of all ages?

**Lisa Nandy:** I thank my hon. Friend for being an outstanding champion for sport in his community. I would encourage Penrice school and others who have similar challenges to approach the Football Foundation, through which we fund floodlights and other small-scale investments. Previous funding allocations have been far too prescriptive. We believe communities know best what they need and through the Football Foundation, we are determined to deliver it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con):** Earlier this week, the Committee heard from Henry Hughes and Nathan Young, two brilliant swimmers who are travelling to Tokyo next month to represent Britain as part of the Deaflympics. The competition has been running for over 100 years—longer than the Paralympics, in fact—but deaf athletes are the only disabled elite sports group who have no access to either Government or UK Sport funding. Will the Secretary of State join me in wishing all our deaf Olympians the very best of luck in Tokyo next month? Will she also agree to meet them on their return with UK Deaf Sport to discuss how this terrible situation can be improved and how they can be supported much better in the future?

**Lisa Nandy:** I thank the hon. Member, as always, for raising an issue that has been raised with both me and the Minister for Sport. We are working with UK Sport to try to resolve it. Of course we will be cheering our athletes on in Tokyo—I am really looking forward to that—but we know that those opportunities are not available to all. I would be happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss this further.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con):** This has been an incredible year for women's sport, with both the Lionesses and the Red Roses inspiring a generation with their fantastic performances and historic successes on the pitch. The previous Conservative Government worked in partnership alongside the national lottery, Sport England and various national bodies to help to support these incredible athletes with investment in grassroots facilities, including the £30 million Lionesses fund, which directly increased opportunities for women's and girls' sports. Beyond the sentiments that the Secretary of State has already expressed today, will she confirm whether her Government will support a new Lionesses and Red Roses fund specifically for women's sports? Will she also confirm that fairness and safety will remain the key pillars of guidance for female sports?

**Lisa Nandy:** It was a real pleasure, with the Prime Minister, to meet the Lionesses before they went off and then on to victory in the Euros. We have been working closely with rugby football and other areas of women's

sport to advance this issue. The £400 million investment that I referenced in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) will double the number of places across the board, which will mean a significant increase in the number of women and girls able to access sports. My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport was pleased to launch the women's sport taskforce, which will really grip this issue. I am happy to work cross-party on that; it is something that the whole House should be able to get behind and support.

**Mr French:** I thank the Secretary of State for her answer; hopefully she can pick up the point about fairness and safety in women's sport in her next answer, because that was also part of the first question.

The Secretary of State will be aware that, alongside investment from Government and national sports bodies, voluntary donations and corporate sponsorship play a key role in funding our grassroots and professional sports clubs and leagues. For example, Flutter's Cash4Clubs programme has invested £7 million in grassroots clubs since 2008. Does the Minister therefore share my concern that the Chancellor's proposed racing tax will not only see thousands of British jobs lost across the country, but damage key sponsorship of a number of UK sports, especially British horseracing? Will she confirm that her Department has made it clear to the Treasury that it opposes this tax raid on our British sport?

**Lisa Nandy:** I absolutely recognise the point about fairness and safety, and I have had representations and conversations with many women athletes and competitors since taking office. Of course we want to be as inclusive as possible in the approach that we take, but we recognise that fairness and safety really matter, and we have been supporting the sporting bodies in dealing with that. It is a matter for them, but we stand ready to support.

In relation to the issues that the hon. Member raised about gambling, we believe that the gambling industry is an important part of the UK economy. We know that it brings joy to millions of people. Of course, future proposals on taxation are matters for the Treasury, but I can reassure him that we regularly engage with the Treasury to ensure not just that the voice of stakeholders is heard, but that we avoid any unintended consequences of tax reform.

### Youth Services: Local Authority Statutory Duties

10. **David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to ensure that local authorities fulfil their statutory duties in the delivery of youth services. [905749]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** Local authorities play a vital role in delivering youth services and have a statutory duty to provide sufficient leisure-time activities and facilities, in line with local needs. This Government inherited local authorities that were on their knees, and in that context some are struggling to meet their duties. That is why, as part of our wider investment in young people, we are investing over £8 million this year to support local authorities.

**David Williams:** I know the Minister will join me in welcoming the recent £600,000 investment to improve the offer for young people in Stoke-on-Trent. With the upcoming review of arm's length bodies such as Sport England and the Arts Council, will the Minister ensure that greater collaboration will mean that our young people always have somewhere to go and something to do on their weekends, their evenings and during their school holidays?

**Stephanie Peacock:** Of course, I welcome this investment through the local youth transformation pilot, which will support pathfinder local authorities to start to rebuild a high-quality offer for young people. We want to see greater co-operation and co-ordination, so I join my hon. Friend in welcoming that investment. It is really important that young people have something positive to do during their evenings and weekends, and I have seen that in my own area of Barnsley, where, for example, the Barnsley youth choir supports hundreds of young people. Having attended their concert on Saturday, I wish them well in competing in Spain this week.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the Minister for her answers. Her enthusiasm is infectious, and we wish her well and thank her for all she does. The local Youth Justice Agency team in my constituency makes important rehabilitative interventions for young people. Has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss what is happening here with the Department of Justice back home, to ensure that the benefits here come back to us in Northern Ireland as well?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I am incredibly grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind comments. I have visited Northern Ireland twice in my capacity as a DCMS Minister. I speak with my counterparts, and I would be delighted to discuss that further with the hon. Gentleman.

### Topical Questions

T1. [905759] **Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** Since we last met, the Football Governance Act 2025 has become law. The Independent Football Regulator now has a chair, a chief executive and a board, and it is wasting no time in putting fans back at the heart of the game, where they belong.

I know the whole House will welcome the news of the ceasefire in the middle east, which we hope will bring an end to the appalling suffering in Palestine and Israel. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the many fearless Palestinian journalists who have reported so bravely from Gaza—248 lives have been lost. They say that truth dies in the darkness. They will not be forgotten.

**Grahame Morris:** I thank the Secretary of State for her comments. Despite previous reassurances from Reach plc, owner of the *Mirror*, *Daily Record*, *Express* and many regional papers, it has announced redundancies that put 600 journalists' jobs under threat. Many Members on both sides of the House are concerned about the continued erosion of our media landscape, and particularly the loss of experienced and professional journalists,

which risks driving people towards fake news and misinformation on social media. Will the Minister meet the National Union of Journalists and concerned MPs from the all-party group to discuss this pressing issue?

**Lisa Nandy:** I thank my hon. Friend for his work in supporting not just local journalism but local journalists. They are an essential part of our democracy, and it was not lost on me that local newspapers helped to counter the misinformation and disinformation that was spreading online like wildfire during the disorder last summer. It is why we are developing a local media strategy, working with many of the organisations that he mentioned, but I would be delighted to meet him, other Members of Parliament and the NUJ to discuss this further.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con):** I welcome the new Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), to his role, and I thank the Secretary of State for her welcoming comments to me earlier. She is right: we have had many conversations in the past about many aspects of DCMS not being overtly party political, and that is a good thing.

However, there are areas of disagreement, including this Government's anti-business attitude and policies. Increasing national insurance and business rates has caused untold damage to swathes of DCMS sectors. Will the Secretary of State therefore support the Conservative policy of 100% business rates relief on the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors? At the very least, can she assure me that she is begging and pleading with the Chancellor not to do any more damage to those sectors in the upcoming Budget?

**Lisa Nandy:** I thank the hon. Member for his warm words. However, it takes some brass neck to represent a political party in this Chamber that in recent memory crashed the economy and left working people across the country paying the price. The demand for charities soared as a direct result of the Conservatives' policies, while the ability of charities to stand up and speak up for the people they represented was attacked and undermined at every turn by his Government. I can confirm that we will not be following Conservative policies. We will be proudly flying the flag for Labour policies, which put people and communities back at the heart of our country again.

T6. [905765] **Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab):** Communities in my constituency have been devastated by the destruction of Shotley Park, a grade II listed building, in a recent fire. I understand that an investigation is going on into the circumstances, but can the Minister say in more general terms what steps we can take to protect our listed buildings and the memories they represent for local people?

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray):** There is no specific duty on owners to keep their buildings in a good state of repair, but local authorities have powers under legislation to take action where a listed building may be at risk, through urgent works notices and repairs notices. The Government also support local authorities by providing funding for

conservation projects, and they are consulting on reforms to make it easier for homeowners to protect their historic properties while preserving their unique character. There is also the buildings at risk register, and I encourage my hon. Friend to speak to her local authority to see what can be done to help,

**T2. [905760] Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): As a committed if rather untalented member of the Lords and Commons tennis team, I am aware that the vagaries of British weather make participation difficult, particularly in autumn and winter. Will the Secretary of State allow any of the £400 million for grassroots sport to be used to create more covered tennis facilities, so that participation can be encouraged and the future of British talent can be nourished?

**Lisa Nandy:** As a former member of a Select Committee that the right hon. Gentleman chaired, I am acutely aware that he is always right. I have been pleased to work with the Lawn Tennis Association and others to consider what we can do to ensure that more of that funding is used for tennis facilities. I have received representations from Members across the House about how restrictive that funding was. We believe that communities know better which facilities they need, and I confirm that we have made changes to the funding allocation, so that it is easier for communities to access whatever they need, including tennis.

**Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): Grassroots boxing clubs do fantastic work with young people and provide a pipeline of future talent for our communities. Crawley has provided such leading lights in the boxing world as Alan Minter. Will the Secretary of State meet me and representatives of the sector to see what more can be done to support grassroots boxing?

**Lisa Nandy:** I thank my hon. Friend for championing grassroots boxing. Our Government believe that too many sports, whether that is boxing or rugby league, have been overlooked by Government for far too long, and we are determined to bring them back into focus. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock) has been working with the all-party group on boxing, and would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. May I also say how thrilled I was that Natasha Jonas received an honour this year? Boxing brings joy to millions of people, and it ought to be celebrated.

**T3. [905761] Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): The town of Bodmin in my constituency is fast becoming the museum capital of Cornwall. It has the excellent Discovering42 science museum, Bodmin Town museum, and the Army museum at Bodmin Keep, which is battling for survival and crowdfunding to stay open. What is the Minister doing to support those brilliant smaller museums that have such huge economic, social and educational value, especially given that the shared prosperity fund is about to end?

**Ian Murray:** This Government applaud and support the role that museums play in educating and inspiring audiences, including in Cornwall and across every part of the country in every Member's constituency. Last week the Government announced that 75 museum groups

around the country will benefit from an additional £20 million of funding as part of the museum renewal fund, delivered by Arts Council England. Together with our new £25 million investment in regional museums via the aptly named museum estate and development fund, which is to be announced in the new year, that represents a considerable show of support for local museums across the country, on top of the £44 million allocated by Arts Council England.

**Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): You may be interested to know, Mr Speaker, that today is the launch of Peterborough tourist board, and our new Discover Peterborough website. That brings together our great attractions, such as our 900-year-old cathedral and our great museum, as well as the great outdoors such as Nene park and Flag Fen. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the formation of Discover Peterborough, and say what more she can do to support the visitor economy and great attractions in places such as mine?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** I am delighted to take on the responsibility of being Minister for Tourism. Over the past month, it has been a pleasure to make a number of visits and to take part in meetings highlighting just how much the sector has to offer. We want the benefits of tourism to be felt across every nation and region, and a key strand of that work will be increasing the number of visitors who are aware of the offer outside London. I welcome the work that my hon. Friend is doing to promote Peterborough and I look forward to a visit with him.

**T4. [905762] Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): In a stunning setting with superb facilities, Garsington Opera in Stokenchurch provides incredible training opportunities for young people who want a career in the arts. Does the Minister agree that this is a vital facility, and what more will she do to ensure that all young people who want a career in the arts have those training opportunities?

**Ian Murray:** I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the DCMS ministerial team and the entire Government are fully committed to ensuring that there is full access to training and skills in the arts. I would be happy to meet him to discuss that project, but if any young person in any part of this land wants to get into the arts, this Government are for them.

**Jon Trickett** (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I understand from a number of people who work at the National Coal Mining Museum for England in Wakefield that unfortunately there is an intractable dispute there. My constituents have asked me to put two questions to the Minister. First, will she say how proud we are as a country that we have a national museum of coalmining to celebrate the history of the mines? Secondly, if necessary, will she seek to secure an agreement between the disagreeing parties at the museum?

**Lisa Nandy:** As the very proud Member of Parliament for Wigan, which is the greatest coalmining community on earth—[*Interruption.*] I can hear that I have lost the good will of the House. I am happy to pay tribute to the work of the National Coal Mining Museum for England

and to the fact that we keep alive our heritage and the history of the contribution that working-class people have made to this country. I am delighted that I will have more to say about that later today. The Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), has visited the museum, and I am keen to work with him to ensure that we get the matter resolved as soon as possible.

**T5. [905763] Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD):** People across the UK are suffering in silence with gambling addictions. The proliferation of online betting has only added to the issue, as people are able to wager more money than they can afford with just a click on their phone screen. Will the Minister speak to her colleague the Chancellor in advance of the upcoming Budget to support the Liberal Democrats' call for a double gambling tax, which would not only raise millions of pounds but disincentivise harmful gambling?

**Lisa Nandy:** This Government have wasted no time in taking action to increase the amount of support available to the minority of people for whom gambling becomes a problem. As I said to the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), gambling brings joy to millions of people and it is an incredibly important part of the UK economy, but we are determined to ensure that support is there for that minority of people. That is why we wasted no time in introducing a levy that is helping to boost such support, particularly for young people. We are happy to continue the conversation with Members from across the House to ensure that we tackle this important issue, but on the specific proposal that the hon. Lady makes, we have no plans to introduce such a measure.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry but I have to pull stumps as we are well over time. DCMS questions are so popular—many hon. Members have not been able to get in—that I believe we really need an hour on the subject, as I am sure the Secretary of State will agree. I know that the Secretary of State wanted to congratulate Hull KR on its treble in rugby league and on beating Wigan Warriors in the final, and I am sure that she will be supporting Great Britain when we play Australia a week on Saturday.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Persecuted Christians

**1. Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD):** What steps the Church of England is taking to help support persecuted Christians in other countries. [905728]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova):** The Church of England supports efforts to defend international religious freedoms for Christians or whichever religious group faces persecution. The Church has created parliamentary caucuses involving religious leaders in east and west Africa, and in south-east Asia to support legislation to protect religious freedoms.

**Brian Mathew:** Next month marks the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, when congregations across the world will pray for those persecuted for their faith. That includes those in Sudan, where many Christians have been abducted and killed and more than 100 churches have been targeted for damage in recent years. I ask the hon. Member to use her good offices to encourage the Church of England to do all it can to protect the rights and security of worshippers across the world.

**Marsha De Cordova:** I am sure that across the House we can all agree that the situation in Sudan is desperate. The Church of England dioceses have given financial support and practical aid and worked through local agencies and international charities to support the local clergy in Sudan. The Bishop of Leeds has visited the country many times, most recently within the past year. He is in regular contact with the archbishop of the province and continues to raise the situation in the other place. That said, I will reiterate the hon. Gentleman's concerns. Sudan will be one of many countries that churches in the UK hold in their prayers as they mark the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church next month, but there is no question but that more needs to be done to uphold the freedom of religion or belief for all.

### Supporting Freedom of Religion or Belief Abroad

**2. Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab):** What assessment the Church of England has made of the effectiveness of the Government's policies on supporting freedom of religion or belief in other countries. [905729]

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief launched the Government's new strategy on 8 July this year, and the Church welcomes that continuing commitment. Obviously it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the strategy, but the Church remains concerned about the global and local trends. The levels across countries are currently either high or very high, and Government restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are at their highest level since 2007.

**Adam Jogee:** Anglicans in Newcastle-under-Lyme will very much welcome the appointment of the new Archbishop of Canterbury and will be praying for her—as the first woman in the role, she has made history. The United Kingdom has long worked to promote pluralist values across the globe, so I welcome the employment of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), but there is more to do. Will the Second Church Estates Commissioner update the House on what conversations she and her colleagues have had with the Government on their efforts to emphasise the importance of supporting freedom of religion in their conversations with countries with which we are pursuing trade deals?

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Church is in regular dialogue with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and welcomes the Government's continued commitment to implementing the findings of the Truro review. As part of its continuing conversations, the Church raises the importance of supporting freedom of

religion with other countries, including those countries that the Government are pursuing trade deals with. I am sure my hon. Friend will recognise that I do not comment on Government policy as such.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner very much for all that she does personally—I know that she is committed to making lives better personally and as the Second Church Estates Commissioner. What discussions has she had with organisations such as Open Doors UK in relation to furthering steps that can be taken to support Christians who are persecuted and have their human rights diminished and reduced every day as a result of their religious beliefs? I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief.

**Marsha De Cordova:** I always welcome the contributions of the hon. Member in Church Commissioners questions, and he raises a really important point. As I said, the Church continues to have dialogue with the many different charities and non-governmental organisations working in this area. I am sure that he, like me, will mark the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church next month. As I have said, more can always be done in this area, but I thank him for his continued commitment.

#### Small Churches in Rural Constituencies

3. **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): What steps the Church Commissioners are taking to support small churches in rural communities. [905730]

**Marsha De Cordova:** Rural churches play an important role in the life and wellbeing of their communities. Funding has been allocated by the National Church Institutions in recognition of that, and it is making a significant difference to missions across the country. Funds have been awarded to the diocese of Hereford to pay for a series of centres to support rural parishes with their outreach to children and young people. In the diocese of Carlisle, there is investment to help train new leaders, as part of a three-year pilot in rural mission communities.

**Josh Newbury:** Back in May, St John the Baptist church in Slitting Mill near Rugeley held its final service. St John's is a huge loss to the community—it was such a welcoming and unique church, having been housed in a semi-detached house with neighbours still living next door. Although the closure was sadly necessary to protect the other four churches in Rugeley and Brereton, Slitting Mill now has no church, as well as no bus route. Could my hon. Friend tell the House what the Church Commissioners are doing to ensure that rural communities are not left without any access at all to places of worship?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I am truly sorry to hear about the closure of St John the Baptist church. As I have highlighted, in recognition of the importance of supporting churches in rural communities, the Church is investing £11 million with partner organisations dedicated to sharing the Christian faith. That funding will be available to nearly half the parishes across the Church of England, and a range of traditions, activities and organisations will be supported through that funding. However, I would

be happy to meet or write to my hon. Friend. It is really important that churches are available and that people have places to worship.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Under the Local Government Act 1972, parochial church councils may serve notice requiring parish or district councils to assume responsibility for the maintenance of closed churchyards. Local government reorganisation and the creation of unitary authorities is requiring parish councils to take on more responsibility as district councils close. Are the Church Commissioners giving any thought to the effect of local government reorganisation on how those closed churchyards might be maintained?

**Marsha De Cordova:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. That overlaps with what is happening at local government level, but also with what the Church Commissioners are doing. I will write to him to set out whether discussions are taking place with the Church Commissioners. I hope he will find that sufficient.

**Lola McEvoy** (Darlington) (Lab): St John's church in Darlington, an iconic church that makes up the skyline of our great town, has recently been put up for sale. Will the Commissioner meet me to discuss exactly what criteria the community needs to meet to ensure that we can repurpose the church as a building of social value?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Can I ask the hon. Lady to encourage the Church Commissioners to share best practice and their experience of sustaining small churches in rural communities with the Church of Scotland? Sadly, in my constituency we have seen almost the wholesale closure of every small church in a rural area.

**Marsha De Cordova:** Again, I am sorry to hear about the right hon. Member's constituency and the number of churches that are no longer in operation. I will certainly ensure that whatever best practice the Church Commissioners have can be shared with the Church of Scotland.

#### Community Relations: Impact of Church Leaders

4. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What assessment the Church of England has made of the potential impact of church leaders on community relations. [905731]

6. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): What assessment the Church of England has made of the potential impact of church leaders on community relations. [905733]

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Church of England has a presence in every community in England, and provides support to its clergy and other faith communities through its presence and engagement initiative. Our churches work with inter-faith networks to stand in solidarity with others, bringing people together, and to deepen understanding, offering both spiritual and practical support to those in need.

**Jessica Toale:** Bournemouth has been made richer by its diversity and the communities that have chosen to make it their home, yet tensions rose over the summer due to protests about asylum seekers. I pay tribute to our local churches, particularly Lansdowne church and Gateway church, for the vital work they do to welcome asylum seekers and build community connection between our many communities. How can we do more to support those churches and the vital work they do?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I recognise and commend the work of all churches that are standing up for minority communities, refugees and those seeking asylum. Our diversity is our strength, and our strength as a Church lies in supporting every member of our communities, including those who face barriers, persecution or prejudice. I also want to recognise my hon. Friend's leadership in the work she is doing to support her local community, as well as her local churches. It is so important that our churches work across faiths with all of our communities to enhance community cohesion.

**Tom Rutland:** Over the recess, we witnessed the horrific antisemitic attack on one of Manchester's synagogues and then, just days later, an Islamophobic attack on one of our Sussex mosques. It is in these difficult and worrying times that religious leaders can continue to play an important role in bringing communities together. What support can the Church provide to its leaders to continue to work across communities and across faiths, and to foster the supportive, inclusive and diverse tolerant communities that we are all proud to represent in this place?

**Marsha De Cordova:** My thoughts and prayers are with those communities affected by the tragic attack at Heaton Park synagogue, as well as that at the mosque in Sussex. The Church of England responded by offering direct support through its Manchester interfaith adviser, who worked closely with the authorities and is known and respected in the local community. The Church Urban Fund, including the near neighbours programme, has played a vital role in strengthening community relations, as does the Church's presence and engagement initiative.

Across the House, we all know the important role that all our faith organisations play, showing leadership in times of desperate need and suffering. I thank all our faith leaders across the country for all they do in fostering good relations, but also in bringing about peace and reassurance.

**Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD):** Will the hon. Lady recognise the awesomeness of the Rev. David Harrigan at St Elisabeth's church in Eastbourne? Working with the food bank, he has pioneered a partnership that has been featured by the Trussell Trust as an example of best practice for a relationship between a church leader and a food bank. Will the hon. Lady meet Rev. David and me to discuss the Church Commissioners' plans for the land next to St Elisabeth's church, to ensure that it is used for community benefit?

**Marsha De Cordova:** I am always happy to meet hon. Members about any issue they wish to raise. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's church, which is working in partnership with the food bank. There are many such examples, including at St Mark's church in my constituency.

We all know the role that our churches play in our communities to provide that social action support. I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### British-made Ceramics

**5. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps the Commission is taking to increase the use of British-made ceramics by the House of Commons. [905732]

**Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney):** The House Administration sources a wide range of crockery from firms in the UK, as well as those based elsewhere. Where possible, Parliament endeavours to purchase British goods to support domestic supply chains. All purchasing is in line with the relevant legislation for public bodies, which prioritises value for money. Some 85% of crockery purchased in the past two years has been from British manufacturers.

**Gareth Snell:** May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your leadership on this? The exquisite Speaker's House collection that you personally commissioned is made proudly in Stoke-on-Trent by Duchess China. I am sure that the House will be pleased to know that it is in stock, reasonably priced and available in time for Christmas. This place is a great showcase for British talent and skills. Although I accept my hon. Friend's answer, there is more that we can do. Through him, I encourage the Commission to ensure that whenever a tender is offered for crockery, giftware or tableware in this place, it looks not just at value for money but at the social value of supporting British manufacturers wherever possible.

**Nick Smith:** It pleases me when I see my hon. Friend turning his plate or mug upside down in the Tea Room, to double-check whether the crockery was made in Stoke. It is good when Westminster shows off the best of our UK ceramics manufacturing. Where possible and appropriate, and in accordance with procurement law, Parliament will endeavour to purchase British goods and support our domestic supply chains.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Archbishop of Canterbury: Appointment Process

**7. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind):** What steps the Church of England is taking to help support the appointment process for the next Archbishop of Canterbury. [905734]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova):** On 3 October, after 11 months, Bishop Sarah Mullally was appointed as the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury. This is an historic appointment, as she is the first woman to be appointed to the position.

**Rosie Duffield:** As my hon. Friend will know, it has been a really difficult year for the Church, and for Canterbury cathedral in particular, with the death of our beloved Dean Emeritus Robert Willis, the horrible circumstances surrounding the resignation of Archbishop Justin, and the current controversy about an art exhibition that seems to have offended the vice-president of America, among other people. Does she agree that the historic choice of Bishop Sarah Mullally as the first ever woman appointed to the role could and should herald a new start for the Church and a righting of the historical wrongs of child abuse, which she speaks about a lot?

**Marsha De Cordova:** My hon. Friend makes some very good points, and I thank her for her words and good wishes. She is a true champion of women's rights, but also of women in leadership.

I want to place on the record my congratulations to Bishop Sarah on making history. She spent over 35 years in the NHS, becoming the youngest ever chief nursing officer for England. She was made a Dame Commander

of the British Empire in 2005 for her contributions to nursing and midwifery. I would add that Bishop Sarah served her curacy at St Saviour's, Battersea Fields, in my constituency.

**Helena Dollimore** (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my congratulations to the new Archbishop of Canterbury? I wrote my thesis on the campaign for women's ordination in the Church of England, so it is brilliant to see a woman go to the highest office for the first time, and I place on the record my thanks to the women and men who campaigned for women's ordination in the first place. Will my hon. Friend join me in celebrating the role that women are playing in the Church of England at all levels across our country?

**Marsha De Cordova:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Across this House, I think we would all congratulate and celebrate all the women in leadership within our Church. Indeed, just last night I was at the installation of the new rector for St Mary's, Battersea—a woman.

## Official Secrets Act Case: Witness Statements

10.31 am

**Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the three witness statements in relation to the alleged breach of the Official Secrets Act on behalf of China.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward)**: I thank the hon. Member for the question and for the opportunity to respond to it today. I appreciate how serious and personal this is for the hon. Member, who, like other Members of this House, is sanctioned by China and/or named in the witness statements.

Following the Security Minister's statement to the House on Monday, the Prime Minister updated Parliament yesterday, following the Crown Prosecution Service's clarification that the Government were able to publish the witness statements of the deputy National Security Adviser. As the Prime Minister said in the House, he carefully considered this matter and, following legal advice, decided to disclose the witness statements unredacted and in full.

I reiterate that, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, under this Government no Minister or special adviser played any role in the provision of evidence. The Prime Minister cannot say whether that was the case under the previous Government, but I once again invite the Conservative party to clarify that.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge) (Con): Stop playing politics! This is about national security, you petty little man!

**Chris Ward**: Having now had the opportunity to read these statements, Members will have been able to confirm for themselves what the Prime Minister and other members of the Government—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. May I just say—[*Interruption.*] No, you are going to hear it, whether you like it or not. Mr Tugendhat, I expect better from you. You will be wanting to catch my eye, and this is not the best way to do it. Can we please show a little bit more respect, which I normally get from you?

**Chris Ward**: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Having now had the opportunity to read the statements, Members will be able to confirm for themselves what the Prime Minister and other members of the Government have stated repeatedly: the DNSA faithfully, and with full integrity, set out the position of the previous UK Government and the various threats posed by the Chinese state to the UK, and did so in order to try to support a successful prosecution.

The first and most substantive witness statement is from December 2023, under the last Government. The second and third, which are both much shorter, are from February and August 2025 respectively. It is clear from these statements that the substantive case and evidence submitted by the DNSA does not change materially throughout, and that all three documents clearly articulate the very serious threats posed by China. The second witness statement, in particular, highlights

the specific details of some of the cyber-threats that we face, and emphasises that China is the “biggest state-based threat” to the UK's national security. The third statement goes on to state that the Chinese intelligence services are

“highly capable and conduct large scale espionage operations against the UK to advance the Chinese state's interests and harm the...security of the UK.”

It is clear from this evidence, which all can now see, that the DNSA took significant strides to articulate the threat from China in support of the prosecution. The decision on whether to proceed, as the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, was taken purely by the CPS. It is also clear that the three statements are constrained by the position of the Conservative Government on China at the time of the alleged offences.

As the Prime Minister said yesterday and the Security Minister said on Monday, this Government's first priority will always be national security and keeping this country safe. We wanted this case to proceed. I am sure all Members of the House did, and I know you did too, Mr Speaker. We are all profoundly disappointed that it did not.

**Neil O'Brien**: I should declare an interest as I am named in the witness statements. As someone sanctioned by China, I was shocked to learn that the Prime Minister knew that this case was about to collapse several days beforehand, but chose to do nothing. We now know that the CPS was not far short of what it needed. The Director of Public Prosecutions told MPs yesterday that it was something like 5% short. However, we do not know exactly what the CPS was asking for—what that 5% was. We do not know why the Government would not go that bit further when they were asked to. That is what we need hear from the Minister today: why did the Government not give the CPS what it was asking for?

Nobody is disputing that there is plenty of evidence. The witness statements are shocking. They tell us that China is conducting “large scale espionage operations”. Cash is said to have told Berry in a message,

“you're in spy territory now”.

Yesterday, Government sources briefed *The Guardian* that the “civil service decided” that decisions

“should be done independently of ministers”.

No, no, no, Mr Speaker. The civil service does not get to decide anything; Ministers decide. The Prime Minister was not some helpless captive, unable to make sure that the CPS had what it needed. He knew, and he decided not to help. Why?

Let us come back to the evidence that was provided. The Prime Minister said yesterday that he was utterly constrained by the position of the previous Government, and every expert had already contradicted the PM on this. However, we can now see that the two witness statements from this year did state the position of the current Labour Government—a direct contradiction of what the Prime Minister said yesterday. The evidence includes lines from Labour's manifesto, and they weaken the case. They make it less clear that China is a threat to our national security. That is one of the things that changed.

*The Sunday Times* reported on a meeting convened by Jonathan Powell with the permanent secretary of the Foreign Office to discuss this case. Until yesterday, the

Government said that that was just made up. Now they admit that it happened, but they still will not come clean about what happened in that meeting, or any other meeting.

In conclusion, this House needs to know what was asked for by the CPS and why it was refused, and we must see all the correspondence and the minutes. If the Government will not publish the China files, people will ask: what have this Government got to hide?

**Chris Ward:** I thank the shadow Minister for that and, as I say, I do recognise how personally important this matter is to him and to many Members of the House.

On transparency, the Security Minister has given two statements to this House. The Prime Minister gave what I think we can all agree was a rather lengthy statement yesterday, and he used the pretty unusual process of publishing the evidence in full yesterday, so transparency is something the Government are trying to provide.

The key point the shadow Minister made was about why the Prime Minister or Ministers did not interfere or try to do so. As the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, this was a matter for the CPS independently, and an important principle of this Government—*[Interruption.]* Evidence was provided independently by the deputy National Security Adviser. The Prime Minister made it clear, and this is the bit I find confusing—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Cartlidge, you are very energetic there and even I can hear you from here, so please can we have a little bit less?

**Chris Ward:** This is the bit that I find slightly confusing about the Opposition's approach. On Monday and today as well, they have accused this Government of political interference, including by the National Security Adviser. The Prime Minister has made it absolutely clear that that is completely untrue. On the other hand, they are saying there should have been political interference, and that the Prime Minister should have directed or tried to help the CPS. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that that is not the case, and that no Prime Minister and no Government would interfere with the CPS on a decision to charge, which is entirely for it to make.

In terms of the evidence in the three statements put forward yesterday, there is clear consistency across them. They all set out the very, very serious threats that China poses. I do not think anyone can think that that is not the case. *[Interruption.]* It was provided independently by the deputy National Security Adviser without interference from anyone else. They are his words. It is his choice what happens, and that is what happened.

We have been through this several times—on Monday, yesterday and today. The Prime Minister has provided the evidence. It is there for Ministers and Members to see. Ultimately, the decision was taken by the CPS not to proceed and we are all disappointed in that.

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

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): It seems to me that the issue is this: given that all the deputy NSA's witness statements refer to China as a threat, I cannot understand why the CPS took the nuclear option of collapsing the case rather than leaving

it to a jury. Twenty years as a criminal barrister has given me absolute faith that the jury would have spent no time on how many angels can dance on the top of a pin, but would simply have looked at whether or not China was an enemy. They would have found it very easy to decide that that is exactly what it was and then moved on to whether or not these men had been spying on behalf of China. It does seem to me that the decision should have been left to a jury. Does my hon. Friend have any idea why on earth the CPS dropped the case?

**Chris Ward:** As I say, this was a decision taken by the CPS independently, with no interference or involvement from the Government. Members may or may not sympathise with that decision. It was a CPS decision. That is why it is important that the evidence is in the public domain now and that everyone can judge from that how things proceeded.

I will just make one final point. Obviously, the CPS decision was not based purely on the evidence put forward by the DNSA. It was based on much wider evidence collected over a much longer period, so the decision on whether to proceed was taken by the CPS on a much broader evidential basis.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): Yesterday, we saw finger pointing and “gotcha” moments from both the Government and the Opposition Benches during Prime Minister's questions, but the release of the witness statements last night provides further questions for both sides, including what pressure was being applied to the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) and the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) from within their own party to dampen down their criticisms of China. This whole thing makes an absolutely mockery of what is a serious collapse of a case and a threat to our national security—a threat that is not going away but will only increase.

Did the CPS tell the Government in advance that the case was at risk of collapsing? Did it ask the Government to be more explicit in their wording, and if so, why were the Government not more explicit? Will the Minister commit today to a statutory independent inquiry, which would provide radical transparency and ensure that the right lessons are learned so that this does not happen again?

**Chris Ward:** I can promise that I will try to avoid all “gotcha” moments and finger pointing. On the question of when the CPS informed the Government, my understanding, and the Prime Minister made this clear yesterday, is that the Prime Minister was informed very shortly before the case collapsed—a matter of days before. That is on the record—it was in the House, if you need to refer to that, from the Prime Minister.

In terms of future inquiries, I should have said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) that this is an issue Select Committees will want to look at as well. There is a normal process for that, but I am unable to go beyond that today.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government published the witnessed statements last night, but clearly there are a lot of questions yet to be asked in terms of how this came about and what evidence there was that may not have been shared, or perhaps was not asked for. The Joint Committee met this morning to discuss the situation. We will hold a formal inquiry into the issue. Just to remind Members, the Committee comprises the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Home Affairs Committee and the Justice Committee, so we are well covered. We will be holding the inquiry as soon as we possibly can. Will the Minister give his commitment that we will have access to Ministers, civil servants and whoever we wish to come before us?

**Chris Ward:** As I say, parliamentary scrutiny and transparency is something that, despite the allegation, we are trying to provide with statements and by publishing evidence. I am sure, going forward, that that is something that will carry on. I will come back to my hon. Friend on the precise mechanism for how we will do that, but I am sure people will be made available to his Committee.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Obviously, this is too important for party politics; it is a matter of national security against an existential threat from China. The Prime Minister was clear yesterday when he said that no Minister would ever apply pressure to the CPS, and I completely believe him. But we would like to have clarity that Ministers had no discussions with civil servants and then subsequently civil servants with the CPS. We want to be absolutely clear that there was no ministerial involvement at all.

**Chris Ward:** That is absolutely my understanding.

**Derek Twigg** (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): Paragraph 8 of the 4 August statement says:

“It is important for me to emphasise...that the UK Government is committed to pursuing a positive relationship with China to strengthen understanding, cooperation and stability.”

Why did the deputy National Security Adviser think it was a good idea to include that in the statement?

**Chris Ward:** The deputy National Security Adviser was reflecting Government policy at the time. That was his choice of words, and it was his decision to include that. But if we look across the statements, we see there is broad consistency and no material difference on the policy relating to China, which has been pretty much shared across the House.

**Sir Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is now clear that the Crown Prosecution Service asked the Government more than once, over more than a year, for some additional evidence on what the CPS considered to be the crucial question of whether China constituted a national security threat during the relevant period. It seems to me, having read those statements, that at least two important questions arise.

The first is the one just asked by the hon. Member for Widnes and Halewood (Derek Twigg). Given that it was clear at the point when the deputy National Security

Adviser made his second and third statements that the question he was being asked to comment on was whether that bar of being a national security threat was met or not, what is the possible relevance of the inclusion of information about China as an economic opportunity? Surely the Minister and the Government can see that that only weakens the substance of the question that that witness was being asked to answer. It would be useful to understand whether the DNSA came to that view on his own or had it suggested to him that that would be a useful thing to include.

The second question is this. The Government have been clear—the Minister has been today, and the Prime Minister was yesterday—about how disappointed they are at the outcome of the trial and how much they wanted the prosecution to proceed. Given the length of time and the number of requests received by the CPS, surely it would be logical to assume that the Government would be straining every sinew to find extra evidence to meet the CPS’s requirement. Whether they thought the CPS was right to ask for it or not, it was clear that, with that extra evidence, the CPS would have proceeded with the case as the Government say they wanted. What evidence can the Government provide to us that every sinew was strained and that they did everything they could to find that evidence? If that evidence is in fact available and others could find it, will the Government not have some explaining to do?

**Chris Ward:** I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for the tone of his question. On the first point—[*Interruption.*] I am so sorry; will he remind me what that was?

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** The first question was about why the deputy National Security Adviser included reference to economic opportunity in his statement when he knew that that was not the question he was being asked, nor the relevant question.

**Chris Ward:** I am so sorry; I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman. That was done to provide broader context of the Government’s position on China at the time, but it was an independent decision—taken freely, without interference from Ministers or advisers—of the DSNA to do so. [*Interruption.*] It is not my position to account for that. That was his decision, and that was the evidence submitted under consecutive Governments. I am afraid that is all I can add on that point.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): May I take the Minister back to the wording of the Act? It says that it is an offence to pass information that would be “directly or indirectly useful to an enemy”.

It does not say that it is an offence to directly or indirectly pass to an enemy information that would be useful. The difference is that in the first, it is the usefulness of the information that constitutes the offence—it might be passed to any unauthorised person. In the second, it is the passing of it to an enemy that constitutes the offence. By using the second interpretation, it is therefore possible to argue that unless the person the information was passed to was an enemy, no offence was committed. That, it would seem to me, is how the two men had the case dropped. In fact, by passing it to a person not authorised to receive it, friend or foe, they had allowed

it to circulate outside of the UK Government's control, where it could then be obtained and used by an enemy—surely that is what the Act sought to criminalise. If the Minister agrees, is he satisfied that the wording of the Act is as it should be, or does he think that the prosecution was dropped erroneously?

**Chris Ward:** Commenting on whether or not it was dropped erroneously is not something that any Minister would do from this Dispatch Box.

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I would like to make a broader point about China's activities in the United Kingdom related to this. The application for the super-embassy is currently on the Government's desk. As the Minister says, and has been acknowledged, China is a threat and is actively working to undermine our national security. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said that the Government

"would never compromise national security".

How can the Government give any consideration to approving the Chinese super-embassy, which would give extraordinary capability to China to continue to expand its espionage activities and to target Hongkongers on British soil with its transnational repression?

**Chris Ward:** As the hon. Gentleman says, the decision on the Chinese embassy will be taken by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in due course. It is completely unrelated to this case and anything in it. That is an important point to reiterate.

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his responses so far on this important matter. I want to draw his attention to sub-paragraph d) of paragraph 21 of the deputy National Security Adviser's initial witness statement, in which he references Newport wafer fab, as it was called in 2023. Does the Minister share my concerns that the wafer fab sale could have been adversely affected by this leak of private information, thus jeopardising the livelihoods of good people in my constituency, and what can he say to reassure me and others that this cannot happen again?

**Chris Ward:** I can understand how seriously my hon. Friend and her constituents will take this. If she will permit me, I will get back to her with a substantive answer on that from the team as soon as I can.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge) (Con): May I apologise for earlier outbursts, Mr Speaker? *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am not in the position of needing any advice or help. I have had enough from the Opposition Benches; I do not want it starting on the Government Benches, too. I think we will take it that there was, in fairness, an apology to those on the Front Bench.

**Tom Tugendhat:** May I start by saying briefly quite how this feels, Mr Speaker? My home has been broken into, my files have been ransacked, somebody was put into my office by a hostile state, and the two parties are playing politics with it. This is the national security of the United Kingdom. The people of Tonbridge elected

me; they may have chosen wrong, but they did. The people of other parts of the United Kingdom chose everybody else in this House—it is up to them to choose who represents them. Yet here we have two individuals seeking to extract information from us, and the Government's response is not as mine was: do everything you can to make sure the prosecution works. No, no, it was "process, process". Well, who the hell's side are you on? This is not about bureaucracy; this is about leadership. We are not sent here to be civil servants. We are sent here to lead the country and to make decisions.

I feel nothing but fondness for the Minister in his place, and I am very sorry that he has been sent out on what is not quite his first outing, but pretty close—*[Interruption.]* Oh, it is his first outing! He has been sent out on his first outing to defend the indefensible. He now has the position in which he effectively has to say that he is not a politician, but a bureaucrat, that there is nothing he can do, and that frankly he should not even be here in the first place, because that seems to be the Prime Minister's line. Former Attorneys General have got up and prosecuted on the state's behalf. This Attorney General and this Prime Minister have said, "Not on my watch—not worth the effort."

**Chris Ward:** Just to say, I have huge respect for the right hon. Member, even if that evidently is not mutual at the moment—let us see if we can get to that place.

The Prime Minister answered this question yesterday. I fully appreciate how personally this affects the right hon. Member, his constituency and his office. I do understand that, and I am genuinely not trying to play politics. I see his eyebrows raised at that, but I am genuinely not. I am trying to tell the story of how this situation has progressed and to reiterate from the Dispatch Box the point that the Prime Minister made yesterday and the Security Minister made on Monday, which is that the Government's position—as it has been under successive Governments, but particularly under this Prime Minister—is that there will be no interference with the CPS in the process of this, and that every effort was made to try to deliver evidence to support its case when it was asked for.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): As the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) emphasises so emphatically, across the whole House we are appalled by the actions of the Chinese state. I want to go back to the precise law under which the charges were brought. The Act was first introduced in 1911 and the Conservatives set out to review it when they were in Government in 2015, but they did not successfully replace with a law that was fit for purpose until 2023, eight years later. Had the Conservatives got on with the job and replaced the law more quickly, would we be in a different position now?

**Chris Ward:** My hon. Friend invites me to play party politics, and I have promised several times that I am not going to do that. Factually, it is true that if the espionage Act had been updated more quickly and the current Act had been in place at the time, the case would have been able to proceed. That is the case. Decisions were taken not to do that, and I think that is greatly regrettable.

**Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place on his first outing—I have to say, I think the Prime Minister owes him a

[Stephen Gethins]

favour. The Minister will understand the need for absolutely clarity, and I know he says that, but given the serious threat that he has said China poses to us, can he be absolutely clear on two issues: first, that there was no ministerial involvement whatsoever in pulling this case, and, secondly, that the Government provided all evidence that they were asked for? I am afraid that just saying “It is my understanding” is not good enough. We need some assurances.

**Chris Ward:** The answer is yes to both.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Given that the deputy National Security Adviser is a civil servant and therefore accountable, who was holding him to account for the job that he was doing? May I just emphasise that I am sure he was doing his level and honourable best in the circumstances in which he found himself, but it is really beyond belief that—as became apparent from the third inquiry, where the Director of Public Prosecutions was asking for a clear statement that China was a national security threat—nobody was capable of telling him, “Well, actually, you’d better say that”? The idea that he was somehow beyond any influence from anybody is laughable. One can only conclude that this conspiracy of omission was something that the Government wanted because they did not want this trial to go ahead.

**Chris Ward:** No, that is really not the case. First, people who have worked with the DNSA will know that he is of the highest calibre and integrity on this matter. He presented evidence under successive Governments on this, devoid of any influence from advisers or Government on this side—I cannot say if that was the case under the previous Government, but I am sure it was. He presented that evidence freely and to the best of his ability under successive Governments.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Leaders should delegate responsibility but not accountability. The argument at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday revolved around whether a Minister or a special adviser had influenced the collapse of the case, and it was established that neither Ministers nor special advisers had involvement in the provision of evidence, but does the Minister think it would have been worth Ministers reflecting on the Intelligence and Security Committee’s 2023 China report and requesting sight of the witness statements provided by the senior civil servant before they were submitted? In essence, have the Government sought to delegate to a civil servant responsibility and accountability?

**Chris Ward:** No. It is not the position of the Government, or of successive Governments, to vet witness statements made in such cases. The hon. Gentleman will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that is what he is asking. Across the three witness statements, the deputy National Security Adviser sets out—15 or 20 times; I cannot remember the exact number—clearly and consistently the very serious threats that China poses. On the basis of that, the decision not to prosecute is taken by the CPS.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): I am slightly baffled by the answer that it is not the job of Ministers to vet witness statements when they are made on behalf of the Government. That is exactly the point; they are accountable. The Prime Minister said that the evidence that was relevant to the case was the previous Government’s China policy, but the statements published last night showed that they were changed to reflect this Government’s China policy. That is not the only way in which the Prime Minister’s story has fallen apart, but on that specific point, what he told the House was not correct, was it?

**Chris Ward:** It was. There was no political interference from the Government in any of the statements made. [Interruption.] It does not matter how many times hon. Members allege it; it was not the case.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Among all the noise of this China spy scandal, my constituents in Boston and Skegness—and the whole British people—want some clarity from the Government. Do they view China as a national security threat—yes or no?

**Chris Ward:** Throughout the evidence, the threats that China poses are set out multiple times. There is complete consistency between the two. Obviously there are very serious threats—I have read them out in my statements.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The deputy National Security Adviser is clear in his evidence that China is the greatest state economic threat to the UK. Does the Minister agree with that? Is he seriously trying to suggest that the deputy National Security Adviser, given what he has said in his evidence, did not clear what he was doing with the CPS with his superiors, Jonathan Powell or Ministers?

**Chris Ward:** Yes, that is exactly what I am saying, the Prime Minister said yesterday, and the Security Minister said on Monday.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Notwithstanding the decision to drop this case, it is clear that China is trying to undermine our democracy. Will the Government include all Chinese officials, Hong Kong special administrative region officials and Chinese Communist party-linked organisations on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme?

**Chris Ward:** I am afraid that I am not across the specific of that in my brief, so I will get back to the hon. Lady.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister knows the Prime Minister well, having been one of his close advisers as well as his Parliamentary Private Secretary. Why, when he learnt that a major trial concerning spying on Members was going to collapse, did the Prime Minister do nothing? Why did he not ask if anything could be done to stop the trial collapsing? Is that what he wanted to happen, and if not, why did he not act?

**Chris Ward:** As I have said many times, the Government wanted the prosecution to proceed and allowed every opportunity for evidence to be provided for it and for the CPS to gather that. The Prime Minister has already

stated when he was informed that the trial was in that process. He also made it clear yesterday, in response to the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), that it is not his position to interfere. The case was then dropped by the CPS independently.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The CPS has independence from Ministers; civil servants do not. The whole point of our constitution is that civil servants can never be thrown under the bus because Ministers are responsible. They own everything the civil servants do. There is no carve-out because someone has this high title of being a National Security Adviser. They are a civil servant. It was not once; it happened repeatedly in an iterative process by which the CPS asked for and said there is a gap. What is it? Will the Minister please stop trying to make out that we have a different constitution from the one we have, in which he suggests that somehow Ministers are not responsible for the behaviour of their civil servants when that is the foundation of accountability within our parliamentary system?

**Chris Ward:** I will refer back to what I have said already: it is not the place of Ministers, under this or previous Governments, to be vetting or interfering in evidence on that matter.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The battle with China is not just an economic one; it is also a battle of ideas about how the state should operate, and the fact that this case has collapsed is making a complete mockery of our arguments about how the state should operate compared with how China does things. I suggest to the Minister that, along with the Prime Minister, he is in danger of inadvertently misleading the House. He has been asked a number of times about the content of the statement in relation to the Conservative party position at the time, and he has insisted that the statements made only reflected the position of the Conservative Government at the time. Will the Minister explain, then, why the exact wording in the Labour party manifesto in relation to China and its role, ended up in that statement?

**Chris Ward:** The wording in that statement was put in there to provide wider context of the situation, but as I have said many times, and I will keep saying it, that wording is provided independently by the DNSA without any involvement from Ministers or political advisers.

**Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab) *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Were you in at the beginning?

**Tony Vaughan:** No.

**Mr Speaker:** Don't bother wasting my time then.

**Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Can the Minister tell us whether the Attorney General shares the concern of the CPS that there is not enough evidence to prosecute?

**Chris Ward:** I think every Member of the House shares the concern that the case did not proceed, and that there was not enough evidence, but that decision was taken by the CPS.

**Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Earlier this week, the Security Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), came to this House and said that the National Security Adviser did not have any links to the 48 Group, a group that promotes economic links between the UK and China. Why did the Minister say that when the National Security Adviser was listed as a fellow of the 48 Group on its website until very recently?

**Chris Ward:** I cannot reply on specifics of the 48 Group; I do not know that. But the National Security Adviser was not involved in any part of this, as the Prime Minister made clear yesterday.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): The CPS decision not to prosecute leaves our nation less secure. What assurance can the Minister give the House that the Government did everything in their power to ensure that the CPS had the necessary evidence to prosecute?

**Chris Ward:** As I have said several times, this Government did everything they could to support the CPS in that process and to allow evidence to be submitted, but I gently point out again that one of the reasons that this did not proceed was Conservative policy at the time—not materially different from this policy—and the reliance on the 1911 Act.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Minister, what a baptism of fire. As an MP, I understand the beautiful picture that words can paint, but I also understand the damage of ugly words, and unfortunately, I see here the problems that playing with words is leading to. With great respect to the Minister, does he acknowledge that the play on words by the Government and the CPS further erodes trust in Government and that the witness statements may be construed to underline the views of my constituents in Strangford and elsewhere that China is a threat to those in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Will the Minister meet his Cabinet colleagues to find an open and transparent path to justice, not simply for this but to send a message to the Chinese Government to ensure they accept the sovereignty of this country and this nation and the protections that should and do exist for all those who live here, my constituents and everybody's constituents?

**Chris Ward:** The hon. Gentleman raises a good point, and I thank him for his kind words in welcoming me. If I can speak as many times in this place as he does, I will be very grateful—[*Interruption.*] I am not sure anyone really wants that. He makes a very serious point about the threats posed by China and the threats posed to his constituents and all our constituents by that. That is the central message we should be trying to get back to: how the Government can work across the parties and how, with the CPS and others, we can all work to ensure that this kind of thing can never happen again.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Until the statement was published last night, some of us had no idea about the details of this case, but the Government appear to be unwilling to answer three questions that have been asked repeatedly in this Chamber, so can you, Mr Speaker, kindly help me to ascertain how we get answers to them? The first concerns proof that, for the 14 months

[Alicia Kearns]

the CPS asked about, the DNSA at no point spoke to any Ministers or the National Security Adviser. Why, when the Prime Minister was informed that the case would collapse, did he not do everything in his power, and is there any evidence that he took any action at all? And why, if the Government are so disappointed that the case collapsed, have there been to this day no repercussions for the Chinese Communist party, despite the Government in power having every tool in the box to make it clear that we will protect this House, this democracy and this country?

**Mr Speaker:** I cannot prolong the UQ. I know the hon. Lady well, and I know she will not leave it at that point of order. She will go and use all the options that are open to her, and I am sure that she will be coming back in not too distant a time.

**Tom Tugendhat** *rose—*

**Mr Speaker:** I call Tom Tugendhat, who will not keep this debate going.

**Tom Tugendhat:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I will not; I am going to raise a different argument, if I may. Given that the Government's position is that the bureaucrats run the Government and are in charge of everything, may we dissolve this House and save the taxpayer the money, because clearly this is not a democracy any more?

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure the right hon. Member would not want to give up his seat quite so quickly.

**Graham Stuart:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have taken a close interest in this issue, Mr Speaker—the fact that it goes to the heart of this Parliament on the protection of Members of Parliament and the secrets that we sometimes hold. I am sure that you will share my concern that someone on their very first outing has been sent out on this issue and that the Prime Minister used yesterday's Prime Minister's questions and has not faced proper scrutiny in this House in a statement. May I gently ask whether you would seek to have him make a statement to the House?

**Mr Speaker:** It is not even a point of order, and you know that—we are keeping the debate going. I do congratulate the Minister and feel sorry that this is his first outing, but I have to say, if you take the pay check, you also take the pain that goes with it.

## Speaker's Statement

11.11 am

**Mr Speaker:** Before we move to business questions, I would like to pay tribute to BBC Radio 4's "Today in Parliament" programme, which last week celebrated its 80th anniversary. Barring the occasional power cut, "Today in Parliament" has been broadcasting every night that Parliament has been sitting since it was first aired on 9 October 1945. My predecessor and great friend the late Baroness Betty Boothroyd thought the programme was "champion" and once commented that she would even put her book down to listen to it in bed. On behalf of the House, I would like to say congratulations to "Today in Parliament" and its many presenters for covering our proceedings in an incredible 13,000 episodes over 80 wonderful years.

## Business of the House

11.12 am

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell):** With permission, I shall give the business for the week commencing 20 October, which includes:

**MONDAY 20 OCTOBER**—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill.

**TUESDAY 21 OCTOBER**—Committee of the whole House of the Sentencing Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 22 OCTOBER**—Consideration of a Lords message to the Renters' Rights Bill, followed by a debate on a motion related to financial assistance to industry, followed by a motion to approve the draft National Health Service (Procurement, Slavery and Human Trafficking) Regulations 2025, followed by a general debate on devolution in Scotland. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**THURSDAY 23 OCTOBER**—General debate on Black History Month.

**FRIDAY 24 OCTOBER**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 27 October includes:

**MONDAY 27 OCTOBER**—Remaining stages of the Victims and Courts Bill.

**John Lamont:** I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I want to start by paying tribute to Lord Ming Campbell, a former Member of this place and former leader of the Liberal Democrats. He was a hugely respected parliamentarian, and I know he will be much missed. I would also like to express my deepest sympathies to those killed, injured and affected in the horrific terrorist attack at the Heaton Park Hebrew Congregation synagogue in Manchester.

I am substituting today for the shadow Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), who is in Poland with the Defence Committee. What an interesting conference recess it has been. I was in Manchester for a fantastic Conservative party conference, but also out and about at home in my beautiful constituency in the Scottish Borders. From spending time with the Scouts in Hawick to fighting LNER's plans to cut the number of train services in the Borders, it has been a busy few weeks. We have seen six party conferences during recess. The SNP maintains its age-old obsession with independence rather than sorting out Scotland's struggling NHS, schools and transport system. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) continued auditioning to become a circus act, and the Labour party continued its own internal chaos, drama and division. We had a direct challenge to the leadership of the Prime Minister, with the Mayor of Greater Manchester no less, Andy Burnham, parading himself around as the next leader, an act he managed to keep up for just a few days, before he scuttled out the back door of the conference centre. How embarrassing for the—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Snell, I thought you were the man who had sent me a letter about going on the Chairmen's Panel. This is not the way to get a good interview.

**John Lamont:** How embarrassing for the Labour party. I am sure the Leader of the House is relieved to no longer be the Government Chief Whip, although perhaps he thinks he could have done a better job than his successor at attempting to manage the increasingly rowdy mob lurking behind him.

The Labour party conference was also deeply disrespectful to this House, with Government policy announcements galore. It was like a King's Speech scattered over four days, with major policy announcements, all made to the party members and trade union barons in Liverpool, not to this House, where Members have had to wait for over two weeks to hold Ministers to account. That is simply not acceptable. What will the Leader of the House do to ensure that this Government show MPs and this Parliament the respect we deserve? The most controversial announcement was the plan to introduce digital ID. Can the Leader of the House confirm when that legislation will come before Parliament, so that MPs can finally scrutinise what is being planned?

I visited many local businesses in the Scottish Borders during recess, and they are quite frankly terrified of what the Chancellor plans to do to them in her Budget; and yesterday, the Chancellor admitted what we all knew. She is going to raise taxes in the Budget once again, because this Labour Government have destroyed our economy. Unemployment is up by over 17% since Labour came to power, with another rise this week, fuelled so sadly by rising joblessness among young people. The International Monetary Fund says we will have the highest rate of inflation of any country in the G7. That is the reality—more people's jobs and livelihoods on the line, people's household bills getting bigger and bigger, and a cost of living crisis. The Chancellor should listen to the challenges facing households and businesses across the nation. Will the Leader of the House say whether the Government will set out a plan for how they will help households across the UK with the increasing cost of living?

In contrast, the Conservative party conference in Manchester could not have been more different from Labour's—costed, bold plans for a stronger economy and stronger borders; reducing the cost of buying a home; cutting the cost of people's energy bills; reducing the size of the welfare state; leaving the European convention on human rights to take back control of our borders; cracking down on crime; and much, much more. While we have been doing the hard, detailed work to decide which taxes we will cut, the Chancellor was deciding which ones she wants to put up.

Finally, I know that Members are deeply concerned at the collapse of the China spying trial. Earlier this week, the Government claimed they could not publish the evidence relating to the collapse of the trial because the Crown Prosecution Service would not allow it, a claim that the CPS said was completely incorrect. There are key questions for the Government. What additional evidence did the CPS request from the Government? Did the Prime Minister authorise the withholding of that information? Was evidence withheld by the Government to win favour with the Chinese Government? This House deserves to know the truth. We need to see the China

[John Lamont]

files. Yesterday, a number of Chairs of House of Commons Committees met the Director of Public Prosecutions, and there will now be a formal inquiry. Will the Leader of the House ensure that all parts of the Government fully co-operate with that inquiry? China remains a real and present threat. Unless the Government act, all of our security is at risk.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** First, I welcome the shadow Deputy Leader of the House to his place for his inaugural address. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) also makes his debut today, so I find myself in the unusual position of being somewhat of a veteran of business questions on only my second outing.

As ever, due diligence led me to Wikipedia to find out a bit more about the shadow Deputy Leader of the House. I discovered that he was the fastest MP to take part in the 2018 London marathon, with what I am told is a commendable time of three hours, 38 minutes and three seconds. Genuinely, that is not only an impressive achievement, but the fact that then and since then he has raised a great deal of money for charities is to his credit. I also note that in 2014, he became the first UK politician to complete an Ironman triathlon. It seems fitting that in Margaret Thatcher's centenary year, I find myself up against the Conservative party's new iron gentleman.

I want to associate myself completely with the hon. Gentleman's words about the terrible Manchester attack, which has rightly been condemned on both sides of the House, and with his words of tribute to the late Ming Campbell, who was, as he said, hugely respected as a dedicated public servant and a tireless champion for his constituents. As the late Denis Healey would say, he was a politician who had hinterland.

Yesterday was the fourth anniversary of the murder of Sir David Amess. He dedicated almost four decades to this House and to his constituents. We remember him fondly and with respect, as we do our friend Jo Cox, and we recommit ourselves on these occasions to the values that brought them and us to public service. We also need to remind ourselves of the importance of the language and tone of our debates and deliberations.

Let me turn to the questions posed by the hon. Gentleman. As an athlete of some renown and a marathon runner, his description of the Manchester conference reminded me of one of my favourite films, "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner". I stand second to none in respect for Parliament. We will be bringing forward digital ID legislation in due course, but we did bring it to the Floor of the House in a statement at the earliest opportunity, on Monday this week.

As for the hon. Gentleman's comments on the economy, I genuinely believe that anyone on the Conservative Benches who stands up and says anything about the economy should begin with an apology, because theirs was the only Government in recent times where living standards were lower at the end of the Parliament than they were at the beginning. As for the detail of the Budget and whether there is a plan, of course there is a plan for growth. He knows that he will have to wait until 26 November for any details of that.

In terms of the evolving situation regarding the matter of China, I am the fourth Minister this week to stand at the Dispatch Box to potentially face questions about

that. The hon. Gentleman rightly pointed to a key meeting that took place yesterday between the DPP and Committee Chairs. I am a firm believer in strong, independent Select Committees, and I am quite sure they will do a fantastic job, should they put their mind to that—it is not for me to tell them how to do it. Of course, I expect that Committees will get the full co-operation for everything they seek from the Government.

**Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab):** On Monday, Members spoke movingly in the Backbench Business debate marking Baby Loss Awareness Week, highlighting the vital, multifaceted role of midwifery in supporting bereaved families, and yet this week, the chief executive of the Royal College of Midwives announced that it has decided not to contribute to NHS England's professional strategy for nursing and midwifery because it had become clear that midwifery was being treated as an "afterthought". Will the Leader of the House allocate time to debate the need for a distinct midwifery strategy—one that reflects its unique contribution and creates a positive, proactive plan and funding model for maternity care overall, giving midwifery the priority it deserves, with its pivotal role in all our lives?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend that midwives provide vital and diverse services, particularly when they are supporting bereaved families. The independent national investigation into maternity and neonatal care will report in spring next year, and we are committed to recruiting more midwives and making sure we retain those with experience. She raises a really important point. There are avenues for her to raise this matter in debates—either Backbench Business or Adjournment debates, which I am sure would be popular. I will also ensure that the Health Secretary is made aware of her comments.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Bobby Dean.

**Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** I thank the Leader of the House for his warm welcome—it is a warmer welcome than I received online, where somebody compared me to a failed contestant on "The Apprentice", which is a good start. I share the right hon. Member's sympathies expressed about the synagogue attack in Manchester, as well as his tribute to Ming Campbell, which is greatly appreciated by Liberal Democrat Members. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for her service in this role, and I wish her well in her new job.

This past week we have been digesting news of the ceasefire in the middle east which, despite reporting, has nothing to do with President Trump's candidacy for the Nobel peace prize and is all about the welfare of the people living in that region. There is indescribable relief that the hostages are now heading home and the bloodshed can come to an end. The immediate concern is that the ceasefire holds, and the hope is that there will be a just and sustainable peace in the region, including a two-state solution. As we look to the future, it is also important that we do not forget what happened before. A few weeks ago there was a UN report that a genocide had taken place in Gaza, and it is the international community's obligation to establish the truth and hold those responsible to account. Will the Government, at the appropriate

time, make a statement about how Britain will contribute to such an international process, so that justice and accountability for what happened in Gaza can be served?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new role. I genuinely look forward to our exchanges, and to working with him on the Committees that we will both be on. He comes from a very good constituency pedigree, because Tom Brake, who served his constituency between 1997 and 2019, did the same job as he is now doing, including as Deputy Leader of the House in government. He will be a hard act to follow, but I genuinely wish the hon. Gentleman well. I also join him in thanking his predecessor, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), for her work, particularly on the Modernisation Committee. I did not get to know her particularly well, although we will continue to work on some Committees together.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, first I join him in welcoming the landmark first step of a ceasefire being achieved, and seeing the hostages released after so long and aid returning to Gaza. The Government are committed to playing a leading role in Gaza's reconstruction, and the next stage of talks on the implementation of the peace plan. He is right to say that accountability and justice for everyone who has committed atrocities, including those involved on 7 October, is crucial. The Government's long-standing position is that it is up to the courts to determine whether a genocide has occurred, and we will continue to support international law and its essential role in achieving justice in the region as we go forward.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please grant a debate on tenants paying their landlord a reasonable rent? In Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, Vodafone is in dispute with one of my community organisations, Aberbargoed rifle and pistol club, over the hosting of a telecoms mast. Vodafone's rent helps to fund the club's Christmas dinner, and visits to places of interest such as the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds, and Bisley. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is important for large telecoms corporations to work wherever possible hand in hand with our local community organisations?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I agree absolutely, because I think we all have examples of where the opposite is the case and telecoms corporations do not do that. That is not only painful for communities, but ultimately it is also painful for some of those companies. I remind my hon. Friend that the Renters' Rights Bill is proceeding through the House, and he may wish to raise some of those points in that debate. He may also wish to ask for a debate, and again, because of their experiences, I have no doubt that many other Members will wish to join in.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for allowing protected time on Monday for the debate on baby loss. It was a three-hour debate and a three-minute limit was imposed on contributions from Back Benchers so that everyone had the opportunity to speak. I trust that we can look at doing that again in future, in particular next Wednesday,

when we will have a debate on devolution in Scotland, which had to be pushed from its original date. I know that there will be important Government business before the debate, so will he allow protected time for the Back-Bench business?

I am always keen to offer support to the Leader of the House. If we are granted the date, there will be a debate on property service charges on Thursday 30 October, followed by a debate on ageing communities and end of life care.

Next week in Westminster Hall, on Tuesday there will be a debate on progress in ending homelessness, and on Thursday there will be a debate on the performance of the Building Safety Regulator, followed by a debate on the impact of NHS workforce levels on cancer patients. On 28 October in Westminster Hall, there will be a debate on obesity and fatty liver disease, and on Thursday 30 October there will be debate on histological testing of all excised moles, followed by a debate organised by the Liaison Committee about the work of the Education Committee, the subject of which, I believe, will be special educational needs and disabilities.

Next week, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists will be celebrating Diwali, followed by Hindu new year. That will be a happy occasion, and everyone will be celebrating, but unfortunately that will not be the case in Bangladesh. On Tuesday, at the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus, we received a report from Insight UK about the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh. They are being persecuted, oppressed and killed, their temples are being destroyed, and their properties are being burned down, with household members in them. I have raised the issue before, but can we have a statement from a Government Minister about what action we are going to take to safeguard minorities in Bangladesh who are suffering from severe oppression?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for updating the House on the work of the Backbench Business Committee, and I thank him for his diligent work as the Chair of that Committee.

It is the case that we protected time for the debate on Monday and it was good that hon. Members were able to speak for a limited time, but let me go further. I was distressed, to some extent, by the fact that the debate did not start until 9 pm and, as a result, did not finish until midnight. It is true that the protected time meant that the debate went ahead and people were able to have their say, but I know from past experience how difficult it is for colleagues to stand up and tell their personal stories. I do not think it is the place of this House, if we can manage it, to get to a situation where those stories are not told until 11 pm or 11.30 pm. There is a wider point—I am drifting somewhat—about how we use Mondays. At the beginning of the day, there were three big statements that took a lot of time—undoubtedly, they were important statements that had to be made—but we need to address not just the timing but the content of the debates that follow, so that we treat those topics with the respect that they deserve.

I thank the hon. Gentleman not just for his work on the Backbench Business Committee but as Chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus. We strongly condemn all instances of hate or violence directed towards minority religious communities. We have been and we are actively engaged in addressing the

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

humanitarian situation in Bangladesh and supporting the interim Government to support a peaceful democratic transition. We are deeply committed to the protection of freedom of religion. If there is a point at which a statement is appropriate, the Government will bring one forward or there will be opportunities for debate, and I am sure colleagues will want to take part in that.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): It has now been over a year since the tragic murders in my constituency of Juliana Falcon and her children Kyle and Giselle, by their brother. Our town is understandably still shaken by this horrific incident. It came to light that the murderer was able to obtain a gun with a forged shotgun licence. The previous Home Secretary promised the tightening of private arms sales following this tragedy. Can we please have a debate or a statement on this issue, and on the need for a national database of gun licences?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. It was a truly tragic and shocking case, and the Government are committed to doing everything that we can to prevent similar incidents. We have introduced tighter controls on firearms licensing to keep people safe and help the police to apply the law consistently, and we will consult later this year on measures to strengthen controls on shotguns and to improve controls on the private sale of firearms. I am sure my hon. Friend will be keen to have a debate should it help that process.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This is the first time I have seen the Leader of the House at the Dispatch Box in his new role, and I welcome him. He mentioned religious freedom. That freedom must not be allowed to conceal the malevolence of Sharia courts, which operate in places across our constituencies—there are around 85. Indeed, we are described as the western capital of Sharia law. Although they have no legitimate lawful authority, those courts are reinforcing all kinds of horrors, including discrimination against women and non-believers, polygamy and other such things. It is time that there is a debate on this issue in the House, for we need to shine a light on that malevolence. There can be only one law in this country: the law that applies to each of us and all of us.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The Government and I agree absolutely with the point on which the right hon. Gentleman finished his question, because the rule of law is sovereign in this country. No other law takes precedence over that, and he is absolutely right in saying what should take precedence. Again, I am sure that many colleagues will at least share some of his concerns, and I am sure he will have support should he seek a debate.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): As a current member of the Panel of Chairs, may I say what a wonderful job you do in this Chamber, Mr Speaker? [*Laughter.*]

Will the Government set aside some time to debate an issue of concern to me—why National Highways has declined to replace a bridge on virtually the busiest road in Merseyside, leading down to the Liverpool port? The A5036 Park Lane has 40,000 vehicles a day going down it, which is considerable at peak time. I am concerned

that we need to tease out why National Highways felt it inappropriate to replace a bridge when there is a school, a church, a day centre, a hotel and a shopping centre all nearby. That is a concern, and we need to debate it.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I will ensure that Transport Ministers have heard what my hon. Friend says, but I am confident that National Highways will also have heard what he says. Should that not produce the action that he demands, there are ways to raise that issue in this House, particularly in an Adjournment debate.

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of meeting the Sheffield Young Carers action group and some of the wonderful people who it supports. I was a young carer myself and know the deep impact that that can have on a young life. During our meeting, the children told me about their mental health struggles as a result of their responsibilities, but they have limited access to counselling. Even when they have been able to get mental health support, they have felt that the service did not understand the specific challenges they face. Will the Leader of the House confirm that mental health must be a key component of the 10-year health plan, and allow time in Parliament to debate the challenges faced by young carers?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I take this opportunity to pay tribute to young carers, who do a fantastic and at times very difficult job; some of us wonder how we would cope in those circumstances. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has worked tirelessly on not just this issue but other issues for her constituents. I can confirm that mental health is a key component of our 10-year health plan. It sets out how we will work with schools and colleges, which is really important, to identify and meet the mental health need of all children and young people, including young carers. That would make an excellent topic for a debate, and I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for one.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): The Havant Thicket reservoir, which is just outside my constituency, is the first reservoir to be built in 30 years. It is a welcome investment in the south-east, which is designated as water-stressed, but it is also the proposed site of an effluent recycling scheme; it is the first time that that has been used to supplement drinking water in the UK. With confidence in Southern Water at an all-time low, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on water recycling schemes and reservoirs?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** It may be the first reservoir in 30 years, but we are committed to making sure that it is not the last. Putting right the crumbling infrastructure that we were left with is an important part of growth, which is the priority of this Government. I cannot comment specifically on what the hon. Lady has said, but I will draw it to the attention of Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. She may seek to raise the issue at questions or at a meeting with Ministers, or indeed call for a debate on it.

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that 2027 will mark the 1,100th anniversary of the unification of England under King Athelstan, and the Royal Society of St George is proposing

that we have a bank holiday on 12 July 2027. Will he make time for a debate on such a great, momentous occasion for our country, and will he also join me in celebrating Essex Day on 26 October? I thank you, Mr Speaker, for ensuring that the flag of Essex will be flown from the Palace of Westminster for the first time ever. I hope the Leader of the House will ensure that under the new local government reorganisation, historic and ceremonial counties will be put together, so that we can celebrate our true county identity.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I was aware of that anniversary, because I think the hon. Gentleman has raised it before. *[Interruption.]* Rather cruelly, my colleague sitting next to me says that I was there for the event, but that simply is not true. I am sure that when the time arises, it will be an appropriate opportunity to have a debate in this House, because we should be very proud of our national identity and celebrate it. When an anniversary such as that comes along, we should seize it with both hands.

I wish Essex Day all the very best. It is not just about being proud of our nation; it is about being proud of our regions and our towns, too. Devolution and where we will end up with it is a matter for another day as the devolution Bill progresses through this House. At this moment, I am not going to speculate about the future of counties, either historic or not as historic.

**Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming this week's record investment in flooded communities, and ensure that our local community volunteers—such as the Shrewsbury Quarry, Minsterley and Coleham flood action groups—are supported as per the recommendation in the Environmental Audit Committee's flood resilience report, published this week?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is doing a fantastic job on behalf of her constituents, and join her in playing tribute to flood action groups such as the ones in her constituency. We talk—as I will in a moment—about the investment that goes into flood schemes and the importance of that investment, but flood action groups play a crucial role in our communities.

I also join my hon. Friend in celebrating the investment that the Government are making. We inherited flood assets that were in the poorest condition on record, but we are investing a record £10.5 billion through to 2036, benefiting almost 1 million properties. However, we should also celebrate community groups, which are very important to the success of any plan.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): First, I associate myself with the comments about Ming Campbell. Ming was a friend and mentor to me for 42 years, and I wanted to take part in the tributes, but I was with the Select Committee in Brussels. Knowing his commitment to the European ideal, I was pretty sure that that was where he wanted me to stay.

Might we have a statement from the telecommunications Minister, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), about the resilience of links to island communities? For the second time this year, hundreds of my constituents in Shetland are being left without service as a consequence of a breach of the Shefa cable.

This time, it is going to last for four weeks. That is a colossal failure of customer service and a failure of regulation. I am now inviting all the parties to come to Shetland for a resilience forum next month; will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to ensure we get Government co-operation to hold everybody's feet to the fire on this issue?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** It is hard to overestimate the importance of such transport links to communities like the right hon. Gentleman's. As ever, he is an assiduous supporter of his communities. I will draw the matter to the attention of the appropriate Department. I wish him well in bringing together the bodies necessary to make these decisions, not just now but in future, and get some certainty.

**Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): After months of campaigning, public meetings, presenting a petition, sending letters, meeting Ministers, holding a day of action outside Ladies Walk and scrutinising Dudley council, I am delighted that the Ladies Walk Centre in Sedgley, a vital community hub providing NHS and library services, will remain open. This is a victory for local residents, who rightly oppose Dudley council's near-closure of the site despite its chance to renegotiate the lease five years ago. Will the Leader of the House welcome this news and grant a debate on local government transparency?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am pleased to hear about my hon. Friend's constituents' successful campaign for a much-loved community asset. I know, and they will recognise, that she is a true champion of their interests and of their local community. References have already been made today—dare I say it, I anticipate more—to the importance of community and of community assets. I encourage hon. Members to join together and look into getting a Backbench Business debate so that they can raise pertinent issues.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Nineteen thousand: that is the number of homes that this Labour Government want to impose on the Walsall borough. In Aldridge-Brownhills, not only are we fighting to protect our precious green spaces and our green belt, but we now find ourselves threatened by this term, and new regulation, “grey belt”. May we have a debate in Government time on the urgent need to protect our precious green spaces, our communities, our countryside and our food security?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am informed that the changes that we are proposing to the planning framework actually do that, but I point out to the right hon. Lady that it is a matter of balance. I am a firm defender of matters environmental. However, housing is so important, on all sorts of levels. People need somewhere to live. We have been left with a situation in which there is just not enough housing, particularly affordable housing. Difficult decisions have to be made because, quite frankly, some previous Governments failed to make those decisions. Furthermore, housing is not just important in providing places to live; it is crucial to growth in the economy. Without growth in the economy, we will not be able to rescue the public services that were left in a terrible state at the end of the last Conservative Government.

[Sir Alan Campbell]

I am sure that there will be a great deal of concern, and I genuinely understand why people are concerned—a number of houses are being built in my constituency almost as I speak. I do understand that, but there needs to be a sense of balance. Politicians have a responsibility not just to join the protest, but to make the case for why we need more houses.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): It is great news that QTS is investing £10 billion in a state-of-the-art data centre in Cambois in my constituency, because artificial intelligence will undoubtedly shape the economy, society and workplaces for decades to come. It is also very exciting that the Government have announced that my constituency will be part of an AI growth zone. I will be holding an AI national conference in Northumberland early next year to share our views and unite our voices, hoping to shape a fair future for all, and I have invited the Secretary of State to attend. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is necessary to bring along businesses, involve trade unions and involve leaders of the community and residents themselves? With that in mind, will he agree to a debate in which we can discuss what AI actually means for the future of constituencies like Blyth and Ashington, and how working people will not be left behind?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I wish my hon. Friend's AI national conference well. I hope that Ministers have listened to his request for attendance and support; I am sure that they will look to see whether that is possible. He is absolutely right when he says that business is crucial to making this a success, as are organisations across the community.

Typically, my hon. Friend has hit the nail right on the head: AI is the way forward and there is no doubt that it is crucial to the economy that we seek to build, but it has to be a fair economy. It has to work not just for some people, but for everyone. I share his concern, not about the new jobs coming in—that is understandably good news—but about the communities that he represents. I know his constituency pretty well, and we need to ensure that those communities are beneficiaries of AI as well. I am sure that there will be a lot of interest in any Backbench Business debate, whether he wants to call one soon or to come back and report on the success of his conference.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Three weeks ago today, I met the Governor of the Bank of England to discuss the important decisions around quantitative easing and quantitative tightening, and the Governor agreed with me that this is actually a fiscal matter. It is triggering losses of tens of billions of pounds for the taxpayer every year, and therefore the Governor would welcome more input from the Houses of Parliament on this important matter. I wrote to the Chancellor—copying in the Leader of the House—to request a debate before the Budget, because if this House had a debate and voted on a different decision to guide the Governor and the Monetary Policy Committee, it would actually help the Chancellor in her difficult decisions around the Budget.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is trying to be helpful, so I will take him at his word. On having a debate on these matters, he raises important

points. I suggest that he should be the one calling for a debate. If there is to be a discussion about economic policy in the run-up to the Budget, there are various avenues by which he can call for that and make his points. It is not unusual in this situation—we are a number of weeks away from the Budget—but the Chancellor is working extraordinarily hard to come up with a Budget that not only repairs the damage to our economy that we inherited, but puts forward a plan for the future. To some extent, the ball is in the hon. Gentleman's court, should he seek a debate.

**Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House agree that access to high-quality residential care close to home is essential for the dignity and wellbeing of our elderly constituents? In Clayton-le-Moors, the Reform-led Lancashire county council is consulting on the future of Woodlands care home, causing deep concern to residents, their families and the incredible staff. The council is providing no information about what it might do if it were to close the home. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging the council to keep Woodlands care home open?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We know, either from constituency cases or, indeed, from our own family circumstances, that the closure of a care home can be extremely distressing for residents and families, who need as much notice as possible should such a situation become a possibility. Unfortunately, I am afraid the circumstances that she describes are not untypical when it comes to Reform in government—the party has over-offered and is generally underachieving. This is a matter for local authorities, but she may wish to raise it at Health and Social Care questions next Tuesday.

**Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): On 14 March, my constituents Sue and Dave Evans lost their 18-year-old son, who was the passenger in a car being driven by a newly qualified driver. Yesterday, Sue and Dave were in Parliament with the RoadPeace charity to call for graduated driver licensing, to save other families from the devastation of losing loved ones in a preventable accident. When can we expect the Government to bring forward a road safety Bill, so that this House can consider proposals to reduce deaths caused by newly qualified drivers?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The hon. Gentleman raises this matter with the tone and respect that have come to be associated with him, and I thank him for that. I pay my respects to the family concerned. It is an unbelievable tragedy when this happens. It happens far too often, which is why the Government are focused on this issue. Work is under way to deliver an updated strategic framework for road safety—it will be the first one in over a decade. Quite simply, the aim will be to reduce road deaths and injuries, and I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman receives an update on that work.

**Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): Last Friday, I attended a graduation for STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—students at Forth Valley College. This college is a crucial educational asset and it is vital to plans to re-industrialise our area. However, due to a 20% cut in

funding for the college sector since the SNP began its fourth term in 2021, Forth Valley College recently proposed closing its Alloa campus. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that, instead of causing colleges to consider closure, the Scottish Government should be backing all routes for young people to train, learn and succeed?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I want to send my congratulations to all those graduating from Forth Valley College, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. He is a great advocate for his constituency. This Government have delivered the biggest Budget settlement for the Scottish Government in the history of devolution, and he will know that education and skills policy is devolved. However, I hope that Ministers in the Scottish Government have heard his concern, and I hope they give as much attention and priority to the matter of colleges in their work as the Government here are determined to do.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Last week, I visited Christ the King school in Thornbury for the great school lunch, which raises awareness of the benefits of healthy and nutritious school meals. There is real concern that the funding for both school lunches and breakfast clubs is not enough to cover the cost of providing them, putting pressure on school budgets, particularly in constituencies such as mine where schools are among the lowest funded in the country. Will the Leader of the House agree to raise this issue with the Chancellor ahead of the autumn Budget, to ensure that underfunded schools are not left behind?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. Before the Leader of the House responds, let me say that many Members wish to contribute, so can I ask that questions are short and that the Leader of the House is on point as well?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** So far, 750 schools are offering free breakfast clubs, which puts, on average, £450 a year back into parents' pockets, and we intend to extend free school meals too. I understand that areas believe this may not be enough, or that other areas are better off. I will draw that to the attention of the Chancellor, but so can the hon. Lady at Treasury questions.

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and Bawtry in my constituency is once again painting the town pink to help raise awareness. This year, it has launched its own "Legally Blonde" inspired bend and check campaign to remind everyone to take charge of checking their own breast health. To support the cause, will the Leader of the House join me in wishing the team at Visit Bawtry the very best of luck in raising money for Breast Cancer Now?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I join my hon. Friend in wishing the Visit Bawtry team success in raising money for such an important cause. We know that early diagnosis is vital, which is why we are upgrading 30 testing centres across the country with the latest digital AI to catch cancer early, and I support local initiatives such as the one that he mentioned.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his post, and my athletic constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), to his.

Today at 2 pm there will be a protest in Moffat by campaigners who are making a last-ditch attempt to save the local Bank of Scotland branch, and I commend them for their efforts. It is one of five branches to be closed in my constituency this year. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that, if banks cannot be persuaded not to abandon the high street, they should at the very least ensure that their premises are provided for community use? Therefore, in the case of the Peebles branch, does he also agree that the bank should look favourably on the offer from the Peebles Community Trust for that branch?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I do agree with the right hon. Member, because in-person banking is important to our local communities. In fact, I have a hub opening in Whitley Bay in my constituency in about 10 days' time. I understand that is cold comfort for the people of Moffat, but we are seeing banking hubs rolled out across the country. I think banks have such a responsibility, and the best banks actually look at their responsibility to continue to have a branch presence. Should they not, I think they have an obligation to work with others to ensure that there is access to banking. I would also say that the Scottish Government have their own community right to buy policy, which he may wish to look at as part of any campaign for the purchase of a community hub. Next week in Westminster Hall there is a debate on financial inclusion in which he may wish to amplify his point.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): After two years of bombardment and siege, Gaza's healthcare system has been decimated. I am sure the whole House welcomes the ceasefire, fragile as it is, the release of hostages, and that aid is beginning to increase somewhat. Will my right hon. Friend consider the case for a debate on the steps that Britain could take to support the rebuilding of Gaza's hospitals, so that the most innocent in this awful conflict—children—can at least begin to get the healthcare support they so desperately need?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend raises an important question and makes a really important point. As the Foreign Secretary said, the ceasefire does give an opportunity not just to scale up aid, but to look at the future of Gaza's recovery. An important part of that is healthcare for children, because they deserve a better future than what they currently have. We are actively supporting the rebuilding of Gaza's healthcare system and we will update the House on the measures we are taking. We have brought forward debates and statements on these matters, and we will continue to do so.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): A couple of weeks ago, I spent a fabulous day at the races at Bath racecourse. For centuries, horseracing has been part of our national sporting history, and it is part of our DNA, yet across the industry people are deeply concerned about the threat that harmonising tax rates will have on the sustainability of the sport. May we have a debate before the Budget on the impact the proposed measures would have on British horseracing?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I read stories, as the hon. Lady does, about what might or might not happen. As she would expect me to say, she will have to wait until the Budget to see whether those stories are accurate. She could secure a debate before the Budget, because I know this is a concern for a number of Members across the House.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Ind): York is a kind and welcoming city. Following the recent wave of intimidation, racism and violence perpetrated by a few which has rocked our city, I have launched the York Unity campaign with the hashtag, #ourthreewords, to ask people across York to provide three values that define our city. Mine are inclusion, community and caring. What support can the Leader of the House bring to our campaign, and may we have a debate on inclusion in our cities and communities?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is a great advocate for that fine historic city, but also for the cause she speaks of today. She is often a voice of calm in these matters, and I thank her for that and for raising the matter today. I know that there are concerns across the House, so perhaps she could look to secure an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate to see if there are shared views and experiences across the House.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): In Woolavington village in my constituency, three separate planning applications, totalling over 400 homes, have been submitted, with the prospect of a fourth, even larger proposal to follow. The cumulative impact of those developments on local services will not be fully assessed, because each application is treated separately. To make matters worse, Somerset council's temporary emergency planning measures have led to the cancellation of many planning committees, leaving local councillors cut out of decision-making processes. May I therefore ask the Leader of the House for a debate on how cumulative housing impacts are assessed and how we ensure that local democratic oversight is not undermined?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Notwithstanding the comments I made to the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) about the importance of housing, I understand from a constituency perspective, but also from the experience of colleagues across the House, that there is concern, particularly in rural areas that are seeing their communities transformed—albeit in a necessary way, in many cases. I think the hon. Gentleman would be able to make an excellent case for a Backbench Business debate, so that he can expand on the views he has expressed today.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): As I have said before, the fact that the railway stations at Burntisland, Cowdenbeath and Kinghorn are not fully accessible causes many of my constituents a great deal of trouble. In June, Network Rail told me that it would have the first stage of a feasibility study into how to make Burntisland station accessible complete by the end of the summer. Despite repeated requests, it still has not given me a date by which that will happen. Does the Leader of the House agree that Network Rail needs to make this a priority, and will he make time for a debate on accessible transport?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** We are committed to improving the accessibility of Britain's railway and I know that my hon. Friend has raised this issue with the Transport Secretary. We will make announcements in due course, but I agree with her that Network Rail has a responsibility, as well as Government. It is a matter that needs to be addressed and we are going to get on with it.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): In my constituency, there is a fantastic organisation called the Filo Project, a community interest company that provides innovative and award-winning dementia care. When people come to the Filo Project, however, their care is subject to VAT of 20% simply because it is not commissioned by a local authority, which can claim back VAT. Will the Leader of the House find time in Government business for a debate on the VAT status of community interest companies that are providing this level of dementia or other disability-related daycare, so we do not stay with a system where there is VAT on life-altering social care?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Community groups are the golden thread that run through our communities and hold them together, so the hon. Member should be credited with raising these matters, which are important because community groups often struggle. She should perhaps—I might not be forgiven for saying this—draw this issue to the attention of the Chancellor as we approach the Budget. She also has an opportunity to raise it as a matter for debate, because others may share her concern.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): At my Whitchurch meet and greet, residents raised serious concerns about dangerous and disruptive heavy goods vehicle traffic on Oving Road. One warned me that soon there will be a nasty accident, yet the route remains unrestricted for HGVs. Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on the impact of HGV traffic on our villages? Does he agree that local authorities such as Buckinghamshire council should make full use of their powers to restrict or prohibit HGVs where that is possible?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** HGVs can have a negative effect on communities—both on safety and through their environmental impact—particularly in villages, where roads and pavements are often narrow. As my hon. Friend said, local traffic authorities have powers to restrict or prohibit the use of HGVs on any road. If they have the power and there is demand for it in a local area, they should use that power. I think that is a good topic for a Westminster Hall debate.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): We know that at times it is hard to see a GP, and the Teenage Cancer Trust has highlighted that 16 to 24-year-olds have to see a GP more often than any other age group—often three times—before getting a referral for cancer diagnosis. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on increasing access to GPs as part of the wider national cancer plan, particularly for young people?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** We were acutely aware of the state of access to GPs when we came into government, and we are doing something about it. We have delivered over 5 million more NHS appointments since July, and we are continuing to push on that; in fact, we have delivered

on our manifesto pledge seven months early. We have set out our 10-year plan, backed by extra investment. It is important not just to ensure that there are extra slots for people to be seen, but to think about where they are and where people can get access to information. I know from talking to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that he is acutely aware of that. If he has not heard what the hon. Member said, I will draw it to his attention.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): Last Saturday, I attended the 60th anniversary celebrations of the Dowlais male voice choir, which is one of at least six choirs in my constituency. They do a great job of representing the town locally, nationally and internationally. I took particular pleasure in congratulating Meurig Price, the only original member of the choir left from the early days—from 1965. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the choir on this milestone anniversary? May we have a debate in Government time on the benefits of choirs and choral societies to community life and to individual health and wellbeing?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I congratulate the choir. When we think about the Welsh valleys, we associate them with male voice choirs, which are an important part of the fabric of those communities. The Government are acutely aware of that, so I would welcome the opportunity to raise these issues through a debate. Where the Government are able to support music and other community activities, they are keen to do so to ensure that support does not go just to certain areas and to certain types of music, but that everyone and every area—particularly community things like male voice choirs—gets its share.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Rural families across North Yorkshire, including those in villages such as Killinghall and Hampsthwaite in my constituency, have been left stranded by changes to home-to-school transport rules, with children living in the same villages now set to go to different schools and parents facing having to give up work to get them there. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on reforming school transport laws so that school transport properly serves areas like North Yorkshire? Will he perhaps pass that on to colleagues in the Department for Education?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I think it is important that the hon. Gentleman seeks a debate on that matter so that he can put together the evidence and bring it to the attention of Ministers, who are acutely aware of the cost of public and school transport. I think that an opportunity to share experiences of that across the House would inform debate.

**Jon Trickett** (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): When a landfill operator fails to follow the rules that have been laid down to protect the environment and the community, it takes far too long for the Environment Agency to take enforcement action. In one case in my constituency, the company then declared liquidation in order, presumably, to avoid the costs of clean-up. That is not acceptable. It happens elsewhere in the country, so could we have a debate on this matter in Government time?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend could seek a debate to raise this matter, but I will take his concerns to the relevant Department, and perhaps he could seek a meeting with Ministers to explain what the problem is.

**Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): My constituent Mark Houghton MBE served his country in the British Army for more than 20 years. In February, while working abroad, he was seriously injured in an accident that has left him unable to walk. Mark is now back in the UK and receiving treatment, but he is not currently entitled to any further support because he had been working abroad for two out of the last three years. Does the Leader of the House agree that our veterans deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and will he allow for a debate in Government time on support for disabled veterans?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Yes, it is important to recognise the contribution that veterans make. These are somewhat unusual circumstances, but they are harrowing and concerning. Should the hon. Lady seek an Adjournment debate, she may be able to draw her concerns to the attention of the relevant Minister, because we are looking at the whole question of how we can treat our veterans better, with the dignity and respect that they deserve, and she may get the answers she seeks.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The streets around Birches Head and Sneyd Green have become an impenetrable labyrinth of road closures, diversions and blockades while Severn Trent Water digs up the roads to replace important infrastructure, causing great disruption to local people. The New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 and the Traffic Management Act 2004 should give local authorities the ability to co-ordinate some of those works, but in this case it simply is not happening, and those Acts now seem deficient in doing what they are meant to do. Could the Leader of the House arrange for either a statement or a debate in Government time on how we can ensure the co-ordination of those works to reduce the impact on local people?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Again, this issue is not unique to my hon. Friend's constituency, and though he is a great advocate for his constituency, I am sure others have similar stories. He may seek a Backbench Business debate to raise these matters, because as far as I can remember, we have been discussing these things for quite a long time and we therefore do need to work out what further things can be done.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Apparently, we have a short question from Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Once again, I welcome the Leader of the House to his new role, which he is clearly enjoying very much. I wish him well.

On Wednesday past, I met a deputation from Chin state in Burma. I am deeply concerned about increased reports of junta military attacks on the majority Christian community in Chin state, including last week's airstrike, which struck a church in Matupi township. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning this appalling attack and urge the Foreign Secretary to outline what

[*Jim Shannon*]

action the Government will take in response to the escalating attacks against religious communities in Chin state in Myanmar?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** In terms of my demeanour, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will just say gently to the hon. Gentleman that appearances can be deceptive. He is, as ever, a fierce champion of freedom of religion or belief, and he raises a very serious matter. The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all. I will make sure that the Foreign Secretary hears his concerns and that he gets a reply, but I also encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise his question at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office oral questions on 28 October. He is no stranger to questions, I am sure.

**Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab):** Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Teresa Mulholland, who earlier this week was named Cumbrian woman of the year? Teresa is director of Carlisle United's community sports trust and was recognised for her leadership, empathy, courage and determination to help others. In congratulating Teresa, will the Leader of the House take the opportunity to put on the record our thanks to all community sports trusts across the UK, which do so much for our local communities?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I absolutely join my hon. Friend not only in congratulating Teresa on her well-deserved award, but in acknowledging the importance of Carlisle United football club and other football clubs for the work they do across communities. Those qualities of leadership and selflessness are ones that I am sure MPs across the House will recognise in volunteers in their own constituencies. One of the aspects of business questions, I am already aware, is to share our appreciation and admiration every week for volunteers and their dedication to their communities.

**Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab):** The long-awaited report by the Joint Intelligence Committee on the link between biodiversity, sustainability and national security is still not with us. Lord Dannatt and other senior military figures have increasingly expressed concerns about the threat the collapse of global biodiversity poses to our food security and the security risks arising from climate change. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that, contrary to recent press stories, the JIC report has not been blocked, and can he tell the House when it will be published?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend raises important matters. I will take that away and find an answer to the questions he poses, because they are such important matters. If something is stuck in the system, we need to get it out so that he can see what the Government intend to do.

**Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab):** I pay tribute to Redditch policing team, who do a fantastic job of keeping our community safe. However, residents are frustrated that our newly redeveloped police and fire station has no front counter; instead, residents must travel 20 miles to speak to an officer face to face, which simply is not

good enough. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on how we can ensure that all communities have visible and accessible policing support?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Decisions on local resourcing of police stations are made by chief constables and elected police and crime commissioners. However, I have a huge amount of sympathy with what my hon. Friend is saying, because in my constituency—and, I am sure, in others—the importance of face-to-face contact with the police is crucial, not just for reporting incidents, but so that residents can feel safe and reassured. I urge him to call a debate on this important matter, both to highlight his own constituency concerns and to let others do the same.

**Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op):** Earlier this year, I had the absolute pleasure of visiting the Needles pub in Alvaston, where Mel and Trevor have created a great atmosphere and a welcoming space for the local community, whether through pulling pints or raising vital funds for local charities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we do not want to see pubs calling last orders for good, because it is pubs like the Needles that create such great atmospheres? Instead, we want to see them thrive in our communities.

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Pubs are at the heart of our communities and often serve as vital community assets, and we certainly do not want them to close. We are working with the sector, including through the Hospitality Sector Council, to address the clear challenges faced. I urge my hon. Friend to raise his concerns at Business and Trade questions on 30 October.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. In order for me to get everybody in, the questions will have to be shorter. I call Warinder Juss to show us how it is done.

**Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab):** Penn cricket club in my constituency has been under an Environment Agency stop notice since July 2022, after soil was wrongly imported on to its grounds, and nothing much has happened since. Will the Leader of the House support my attempt to encourage the Environment Agency to complete its investigations so that my constituents can get their cricket club back?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am sorry to hear of my hon. Friend's concern. I understand that the Environment Agency area director for the west midlands, Mr Ian Jones, would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and his constituents to take this forward, but I will also ensure that Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are made aware of the situation.

**Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op):** Whitburn Community Development Trust is at the heart of the town, providing many vital services for local residents including a community fridge and garden. Last Saturday, Charlotte, David and the team hosted their first charity ball, raising more than £7,000 for local projects. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on the benefits of community projects and join me in congratulating the Whitburn team and thanking

Ben Murphy and John Devlin, two founding directors who recently stood down after many years of service to the town?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am happy to send my congratulations not just to Ben and John for their many years of service, but to everyone associated with the trust. Community development trusts are really important for local communities; they are, as I have said before, the thread that holds communities together, so I am happy to send my congratulations and wish them well.

**Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): Nepal has seen so much change in recent weeks. Widespread protests over corruption very sadly led to 72 people losing their lives, with many more injured. On a more positive note, a new interim Government has been peacefully formed, including the historic appointment of the country's first woman Prime Minister, Sushila Karki. As chair of the Nepal all-party parliamentary group, I know the depth of feeling across our Nepalese community in the UK and in our sister nation. Will the Leader of the House join me in offering condolences to those who have lost loved ones, welcome the new interim Government, and find time for a debate on how the UK can best support Nepal in delivering on its aspirations for accountability and inclusive government?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I thank my hon. Friend for her work on this matter. I certainly condemn the appalling recent loss of life and the violence in Nepal. The Government support fundamental freedoms and respect for human rights, including the right to protest and peaceful assembly. I am sure the Foreign Office will have heard her remarks.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist communities, Councillors Ish Mistry and Senthil Karadiar, Rugby First, Rugby borough council, Keya Joshi, the marshals, volunteers and participants on stage on their very successful Diwali celebration held on Saturday and enjoyed by all Rugbians? Diwali symbolises light over darkness and reflects the wider need for understanding in our community. Could the Leader of the House consider granting time for a debate on all we can do to boost community cohesion and counter the forces that seek to divide us?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am pleased to hear of the Diwali celebrations in Rugby. I am not going to repeat the list of all involved, but I am sure it was a fantastic event, and I wish everyone celebrating a happy Diwali. Community cohesion will become even more important as we go forward. I recommend that my hon. Friend seeks a debate so that we can start to build our way to better social cohesion.

**Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): The Arthur Terry Learning Partnership is an academy trust with 24 schools across the west midlands, including five primary schools with alternative provision and my old secondary school in Lichfield. Last year the trust was bailed out by the Department for Education, and last Friday it wrote to all its staff inviting applications for voluntary redundancies and suggesting that there may be compulsory redundancies to follow. This is a huge worry, not only for the hard-working staff but for parents, pupils and the community.

I have reached out to other Members affected—the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) and my hon. Friends the Members for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards), for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton), for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) and for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi)—as they share my concerns. Can the Leader of the House arrange for me and those Members to meet the relevant Minister to discuss how we can ensure that the trust is supported to continue to deliver the best possible education?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** These are always distressing situations. I will draw this case to the attention of the Department, and hopefully my hon. Friend will get the meeting that he seeks.

**Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency is lucky to have good school libraries such as the one at King Charles school, run by talented librarians like Emma Seager, who can get anyone reading. They also provide calm, supervised spaces for students. I was delighted to hear the Chancellor's commitment at our conference to having a library in every primary school. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the benefits of school libraries or a statement to confirm the steps in the process that can enable primary schools, like mine in Flushing, that want to create a school library to do so?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Reading is transformative, and every child should have access to a library space. That is why we have committed to providing £10 million to guarantee a library in all primary schools by the end of this Parliament. I invite my hon. Friend to seek a debate on how that investment can best be used.

**Pam Cox** (Colchester) (Lab): Last week, the Care Quality Commission published a shocking report on Colchester hospital that found the safety of aspects of medical and emergency care there to be inadequate. Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate on ensuring that the record levels of investment in our NHS is reaching frontline staff and patients?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** We are investing record money, but unfortunately stories like this do emerge and are extraordinarily distressing. I understand that my hon. Friend is meeting a number of stakeholders regarding this report. I invite her to make this point at Health questions next Tuesday, and to perhaps also apply for an Adjournment debate, which I am sure would be well attended.

**James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My constituent Rebecca Dowdeswell has a small business called nkd, which has incurred over £30,000 plus VAT in legal fees fighting L'Oréal in a dispute over a mark she has been using for over 15 years—longer than L'Oréal has been using its Naked brand in the UK. This dispute is an example of David versus Goliath situations, where small businesses absorb huge time, cost and stresses to protect their intellectual property. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is important that small businesses are supported to protect their intellectual property, and will he ensure time for Members to influence the Government's small business plan, which was announced over the summer?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** It is important that we support small businesses; they are so vital to the success of our economy. The Government's "Backing your business" plan commits the Intellectual Property Office to strengthening intellectual property support for small businesses. I will write to the relevant Department and ensure that my hon. Friend gets a response.

**Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am sure the whole House would join me in expressing my deepest condolences following the sad passing of the people's champion, Ricky Hatton—a man who inspired millions with his courage in the ring and his honesty outside it. My thoughts are with Ricky's family at this time. In his memory, those closest to him have launched the Ricky Hatton Foundation, dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of current and former sportspeople. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Ricky's remarkable career and contribution to British sport, and in wishing the new foundation every success in building a lasting legacy for Ricky?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I do join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Ricky Hatton, who was a remarkable character and sportsman. I wish the foundation every success, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to give it the attention it deserves.

**Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): I recently attended the Pennine Domestic Abuse Partnership's 50th anniversary event "Magnificent Menopause". The event celebrated the resilience of menopausal women. While marking World Menopause Month, will the Leader of the House congratulate PDAP's outstanding work, and can we have a Government statement on what steps are being taken to advance menopause research?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I do congratulate the partnership's fantastic achievement. Women who have experienced symptoms of menopause have been failed for far too long. The National Institute for Health and Care Research has invested an extra £5 million in menopause care. If my hon. Friend wants to hear a Government response in quick time, there is a Westminster Hall debate later today on World Menopause Day. He may wish to contribute, as well as to hear what the Minister has to say.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): A constituent of mine—an elderly gentleman in his 90s—recently tried to change his energy tariff to one that was cheaper. Unfortunately, when he applied it transpired that he could only do so if he was online, which was not possible for him. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is an unacceptable form of digital exclusion, and can he suggest how we might try to address it?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Digital inclusion is a priority for the Government. It is important that everyone has access so that they can engage in a modern digital society, whatever their circumstances happen to be. We have published the digital inclusion action plan to tackle digital exclusion and ensure that everyone is able to access the services they need.

**Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): During the recent Fairtrade Fortnight, many constituents contacted me with concerns about the need for good business

practices. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government time on mandatory due diligence to protect against corporate harms and ensure that UK companies are held accountable for abuses in their global supply chains?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Businesses must conduct proper due diligence. We understand the concern of my hon. Friend's constituents, because they are widely felt across the country. He may know that we have launched a review on responsible business conduct as part of our trade strategy, and he may wish to seek a Backbench Business or Adjournment debate to highlight these matters.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): On Saturday morning, I met residents concerned about persistent antisocial behaviour, drug dealing and under-age vaping. I am trying to get the solutions they need by arranging a community meeting with the police. How can I use the Government's new powers to limit vape shops and barbers in particular areas so that the residents of Warwick Place, Wickham Road, Hannington Road and York Place, and the surrounding streets, can finally feel safe?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Unfortunately, this is an all too familiar story. We are committed to cracking down on antisocial behaviour in our communities. As the Minister for Devolution, Faith and Communities set out yesterday, the pride in place programme will give communities the power to block unwanted shops, including vape stores and fake barbers. We are also bringing in new laws to crack down on dodgy vape shops through the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which is currently going through the Lords.

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of meeting the SBA Unity racing team from Scarborough University Technical College, which came third at the STEM Racing world finals in Singapore. The Scarborough team raised a whopping £30,000 to compete, while the teams from Germany and Australia that beat them had financial support from their Governments. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating students Jack, Mandy, Ryan, Billy and Joey on their outstanding achievement, flying the flag not just for Scarborough but for the UK?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I thank Scarborough's SBA Unity racing team for its fantastic success and send my congratulations to the whole team. We know about the importance of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, so I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Education learns about the team's success and reemphasise why this is a fantastic opportunity for young people.

**Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): During recess, I became the first interviewee of my constituent Brendan Woodbridge, an inspiring disabled 19-year-old who aspires to be a freelance journalist in order to spotlight accessible places and services so that people like him do not feel trapped at home. Brendan and his mom Natalie told me that when leaving the nurturing school environment, there is often nothing for young people like him to go on to. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on educational and job opportunities for disabled adults?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I wish the hon. Gentleman's constituent all the best in his journalistic ambitions. As a Government, we are committed to breaking down barriers and supporting every young person in their education as they move into adult life. Wherever they are and whatever their background, they all deserve that support. I am sure that would be a popular Backbench Business debate should my hon. Friend wish to apply for it.

**Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab):** Thameside theatre in Grays is the only public purpose-built theatre in Thurrock. It is a vital cultural asset and has provided the first experience of the performing arts for a number of people, including myself, who trod the boards there for five years as a member of Thurrock's local scout and guide gang show. My colleagues on Thurrock council are desperately searching for a way to secure the long-term future of the theatre and the wider complex, recognising that once it is gone, it is gone. Will the Leader allow a debate in Government time to talk about how vital cultural assets such as community theatres are and how we can work together to ensure their sustainability?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Local and community theatres are so important to communities in all sorts of ways, not least in giving confidence to young people who come forward and take part in events and shows. My hon. Friend may seek a debate on those matters because I am sure they are shared across the House. I will also raise her concerns with the relevant Minister.

**Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab):** My constituent Chris is a local police officer who has had to take on vast amounts of overtime to afford his Child Maintenance Service payments. He is one of many constituents who have raised with me the issues in the CMS, so will the Leader of the House secure some time for us to debate this issue to ensure that parents and their children are properly supported?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** I am sorry to hear about Chris's situation. I understand that my hon. Friend may be in correspondence with the Department of Work and Pensions and either awaiting or have just received a reply. Oral questions for that Department are next week, but depending on those things, I suggest that he either follows up by meeting Ministers in the Department or by seeking a debate on the matter because there will be a shared concern across the House.

**Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab):** Many will have been engrossed by the programme "The Summer I Turned Pretty". Personally, I am team Conrad. He has shown a new audience that therapy is accessible to young men in a world that still shames our emotions. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on improving access to therapy and mental health support for men?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter and to champion mental health for men and young boys, who often find it difficult to open up about their emotions. Our forthcoming men's health strategy will set out how we can find ways to promote healthy behaviour and improve outcomes for conditions that hit men and boys. Should my hon. Friend seek a debate, he may hear about our plans from the Minister.

**Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab):** Eleven-year-old Jake from my constituency, who has special educational needs and disabilities including Down's syndrome, has been left without appropriate schooling provision for this year because of the failings of Nottinghamshire county council. Does the Leader of the House agree that children such as Jake should not be left behind? Will the Government find time to hold a debate on how we can deliver the provision that is needed for young people with SEND like my constituent?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important matter. The Government believe that the SEND system is broken; it does not work for children and their carers. As part of our plan for change, we are committed to creating a new system that truly supports every child and we will set out our approach in the forthcoming schools White Paper. I understand from my own constituency how people at the forefront of this find it hard to know why they have to wait. We have announced £1 billion in extra funding to help schools with the additional costs they face, including for SEND provision, and I encourage whichever authority has the power to spend that money to do so wisely and quickly.

**Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab):** Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the great town of Paisley in my constituency on being shortlisted for the Scotland Loves Local town of the year award? Will he go further and throw his full support behind Paisley's nomination as the best local town in Scotland?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** There is a certain risk to that, but I will do it. I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating Paisley, and wish it the best of luck. She raises the important point about pride in communities and I am sure that her constituents are proud. I hope that that is recognised, and that she is a proud champion for Paisley.

**Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab):** I have recently hosted a series of meetings on the SEND system with parents and teachers. One moment was most striking: when I asked a roomful of parents how many of them knew or suspected that their child had additional needs before the age of five, every single hand went up. Will the Leader of the House consider giving time to a debate dedicated to the importance of early intervention in the SEND system so that we identify problems and support parents and children as early as we possibly can?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** Early intervention is crucial, which is why the Government are giving such attention to improving the SEND system, which I have just said we believe is broken and is not working. Oral questions to the Department for Education are on Monday, so I invite my hon. Friend to raise that then. I also invite him to think about a debate on the issue, because it will not go away and the Government are determined to do something about it.

**Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab):** Throughout the year I have been working with residents in Astley in my constituency. Four large warehouses, each measuring up to 60 feet high, are being built close to hundreds of

[Michael Wheeler]

houses and a primary school. Although they have planning consent from the local authority, residents are rightly concerned that the consultation process was not adequate. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate on the consultation requirements for large developments to ensure that the voices of residents, such as my constituents in Astley, are heard?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** The Government expect local authorities to engage meaningfully with residents on planning. Planning law requires local planning authorities to notify neighbours regarding planning applications, either by site notice or letter, and to publish information about the application on a website. My hon. Friend may wish to seek a debate on those matters, not just to highlight the concerns of his constituents, for whom he is a great champion, but to see what the Minister's response will be.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** For the final question, I call Brian Leishman.

**Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): As an enthusiastic but error-prone goalkeeper, and having been a golf professional for 23 years, many will say that I have still to find a sport that I am any good at and they will be absolutely correct. Someone from my constituency who is excellent at sport is Ruby Henderson from Sauchie. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Ruby for winning a silver and bronze medal at last week's taekwondo youth world championships in Croatia?

**Sir Alan Campbell:** As my hon. Friend can see, I never found a sport I was very good at either. Success in sport is fantastic, particularly for young people. It is such an important part of growing confidence and giving pride. I am sure that Ruby's family and friends and the whole community are extraordinarily proud of that achievement.

## Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill

### Second Reading

[*Relevant documents: Second Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Governing the marine environment, HC 551, and the Government response, HC 1272; Fourth Report of the International Development Committee of Session 2023–24, The UK Small Island Developing States Strategy, HC 476, and the Government response, Session 2024–25, HC 567; Correspondence between the International Development Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee, and the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, on the Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, reported to the House on 19 June and 6 June.*]

12.39 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill is a landmark piece of legislation that will implement obligations in the United Nations BBNJ agreement in UK law and enable us to move towards ratification of this historic agreement. I am sure the Bill will be welcomed by Members in all parts of the House. I recognise the contribution of Members, particularly those on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the Environmental Audit Committee and the all-party parliamentary group for the ocean, who have kept oceans high on the parliamentary agenda. In all fairness, I pay tribute to the previous Government, who did a lot of work on the Bill.

I am personally proud that we are turning words into action. In April 2024, I was the shadow Minister on a debate on this topic, and I made the commitment that if Labour were lucky enough to win the election, we would ratify this treaty, so I am very pleased to be able to say that we are going to. People in civil society, academia and industry will be delighted to see the introduction of the Bill. Organisations such as the National Oceanography Centre and the Natural History Museum have provided invaluable support to the UK delegation. I also thank the High Seas Alliance and the World Wide Fund for Nature, as well as many other environmental non-governmental organisations, for their unwavering commitment.

The BBNJ agreement is the result of years of dialogue and negotiation involving stakeholders from all around the world. In fact, I heard just this morning that negotiations started in 2012, so it has taken quite a while to get to this point. The UK's role in these negotiations was informed by the expertise and passion of marine scientists, legal scholars and environmental advocates, and I thank them all for their contributions.

The BBNJ agreement has achieved the 60 ratifications required for its entry into force, which will happen on 17 January 2026. We expect the first meeting of the conference of the parties to take place later in 2026, and the UK can attend that meeting as a party only if it has ratified the agreement at least 30 days previously.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right to say that there is support across the House for this really important Bill. She is right also to

pay tribute to the previous Government for some of the work they have done, but it is true to say that, despite the fact that in the last Parliament there were many times when this Parliament did not have a great deal to debate, we never actually got this on the statute book. Just over one year into this Government, when there is a tremendous amount of legislation, we have managed to find the time to get this through. I pay tribute to the Minister. I think it is worth taking that bit of credit because we are doing something that has not previously been done.

**Emma Hardy:** I cannot disagree with my hon. Friend on that, can I? I thank him for his comments. As I said, it means a lot to me to be able to stand here today and say that I have fulfilled in government the commitment that I made in opposition.

We need to pass the Bill and the associated secondary legislation before we can take the next steps to ratification, so it is about not just the passage of this Bill but the statutory instruments that will follow it. I know that all sides of the House will want to see the UK playing a leading role in future discussions at the conference of the parties, and that is why we must maintain momentum.

The Bill marks a significant step in the UK's commitment to protecting the two thirds of the world's ocean that lie beyond the jurisdiction of a single nation. From one of the heaviest fish, the sunfish, to the delicate sea butterfly, this vast expanse of ocean is home to extraordinary biodiversity and ecosystems that are vital to the health of our planet. It sustains fisheries that feed billions, and it underpins weather patterns, coastal protections and the livelihoods of people across the globe, but these areas of the ocean are vulnerable to exploitation, degradation and irreversible harm.

**Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I agree with the Minister that her engagement with various stakeholders—environmental NGOs, academics and universities—is crucial. I also acknowledge the parts of the Bill that underline the role of devolved Administrations and the important work that has to be done. Will her officials work closely with the devolved Administrations on the international impact of the Bill and that that will continue throughout this legislation?

**Emma Hardy:** I can offer the hon. Gentleman that reassurance. That is an important point well made.

The BBNJ marks an historic breakthrough. It is a multilateral treaty adopted under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea that is designed to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The agreement delivers on four critical fronts. First, it established new obligations to share the benefits arising from research into and the use of marine genetic resources from these ocean areas. Secondly, it created a mechanism to establish area-based management tools, including marine protected areas, which was an essential step to safeguard fragile ecosystems.

**Carla Denyer** (Bristol Central) (Green): It is great that the UK is finally ratifying the treaty, and it is also great to hear the Minister talk about the benefits of marine protected areas, but if the Bill is to signify a new and invigorated Government focus on protecting our

precious marine environment, does she not agree that the terrible, destructive fishing practice of bottom trawling obliterates vital habitats on our seabed? It makes a mockery of the entire term “marine protected area” that the UK Government have ignored the Environmental Audit Committee's advice to ban bottom trawling from our own marine protected areas.

**Emma Hardy:** Of course, domestic marine protected areas are not within the remit of the Bill because we are talking about areas beyond national jurisdiction. What I can say is that the UK Government have introduced a consultation looking at banning bottom trawling in 41 of our marine protected areas. That consultation is out now. We are showing our commitment to oceans on not only an international scale but a national scale.

Thirdly, the agreement strengthens the framework for environmental impact assessments by building on the provisions of the UN convention on the law of the sea to ensure that new activities in these areas are sustainable and responsible.

Fourthly, it reinforces capacity building for developing states and promotes broader technological transfer. The journey to the agreement started with an ad hoc informal working group in 2006, before it progressed to a preparatory commission that worked through 2016 and 2017 and culminated in a formal inter-Government conference that negotiated the text between 2018 and 2023.

The UK has already played a leading role in shaping the agreement over the course of more than a decade of negotiations. In September 2023, we were one of the first countries to sign the agreement when it opened for signature at the UN, and today, through the Bill, the UK takes a major step towards ratification.

I will now outline the structure of the Bill, which is divided into five parts. Parts 2, 3 and 4 are designed to correspond and give effect to the three core sections of the BBNJ agreement relating to marine genetic resources, area-based management tools and environmental impact assessments.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for introducing the Bill and for her deep interest in this subject. We are all very impressed by what the Minister does and we thank her for it. Further to intervention of the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins)—he and I both represent coastal communities—I would like to say that marine biodiversity is the lifeblood of the fishing industry and that, as we have often said, fishermen are the greatest natural caretakers of the sea. Does the Minister agree that the input and the generational knowledge of the fishing sector is essential as we move forward?

**Emma Hardy:** I pay tribute to all the fishermen throughout the United Kingdom who play such a vital role in helping to feed our nation.

The Bill also ensures that the UK has the necessary powers to implement decisions adopted at future meetings of the BBNJ conference of the parties, beginning with the marine genetic resource provision. Part 2 of the Bill sets out the requirements related to the collection and use of marine genetic resources from areas beyond national jurisdiction and digital sequence information generated on those marine genetic resources.

[Emma Hardy]

These measures mean that UK researchers conducting collection activities from UK craft or equipment, such as royal research ships or autonomous systems, will need to notify a national focal point within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office before and after the collection of these resources. Additionally, any users of marine genetic resources or digital sequence information will need to notify the national focal point once results of utilisation are available and make those results available in publicly accessible repositories or databases. The results of utilisation, including publications such as journal articles and patents granted, should detail the outcome of research and development on these resources. These notifications will provide valuable data on material collected and on the results of research in areas beyond national jurisdiction. These notifications will be passed on to a clearing-house mechanism—a core part of the future architecture of the BBNJ agreement.

The clearing-house mechanism will act as a global online notification hub, where parties to the agreement will submit their notifications, allowing researchers from the UK and elsewhere to see what is being collected from where and how it is being used. That function is key to the benefit-sharing mechanisms under the agreement, enabling researchers from developing countries to work from the same scientific data as a researcher in the UK. That will also facilitate the development of cross-national research groups crucial to supporting breakthrough scientific discoveries.

The measures in the Bill also require repositories and institutions holding marine genetic resources to provide access to samples under reasonable conditions. That will apply to bodies like the Natural History Museum, the National Oceanography Centre and UK universities. Similarly, UK databases containing digital sequence information from marine genetic resources will need to ensure public access. Marine genetic resources may hold the key to future medicines, enzymes and sustainable technologies. This is a fast-growing global sector, and our universities and biotech firms are world leaders. Taken together, the measures will allow our researchers and companies to remain at the cutting edge of marine genetic discovery, benefiting from and contributing to global research in this space.

Part 3 of the Bill provides powers to allow the UK to implement internationally agreed measures in relation to marine protected areas and other area-based management tools established in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Any such measures will be agreed in meetings of the conference of the parties and will aim to manage activities in geographically defined areas of the ocean to achieve conservation and sustainable use objectives. Part 3 also ensures that the UK can implement any emergency measures adopted by the conference of the parties to respond to any natural or man-made disasters in areas beyond national jurisdiction that may require, for example, restrictions on navigation of UK ships or discharges from UK crafts.

Part 4 updates domestic marine licensing legislation to meet the environmental impact assessment requirements set out in the agreement. These changes apply to licensable marine activities that take place in areas beyond national jurisdiction. It provides the power needed to adapt the UK's domestic marine licensing and related environmental

assessment system as new international standards and guidelines are agreed by the BBNJ conference of the parties. For example, that may include applying the latest standards for environmental assessments or for the ongoing monitoring of impacts. In short, it will future-proof the UK's marine licensing legislation, ensuring that we can keep pace with emerging technologies and activities in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

In addition to the Bill, secondary legislation is required before the UK can formally ratify the BBNJ agreement. We will need to make changes to domestic legislation to implement the BBNJ agreement provisions relating to environmental impact assessments and to define digital sequence information. Those issues require engagement with stakeholders, and statutory instruments will be laid before Parliament after the Bill receives Royal Assent. Once the secondary legislation is in force, a standard six-week process will allow us to finalise the instrument of ratification, which includes signature and formal submission to the United Nations.

The provisions in the Bill may appear to be narrow and technical, but once implemented, they will enable the UK to participate fully in global efforts to conserve and sustainably use the ocean beyond national jurisdiction. Working with our international partners, the BBNJ agreement will allow us to safeguard fragile ecosystems, protect endangered species and ensure that scientific benefits are shared fairly and responsibly.

The Bill is rooted in this Government's broader environmental and international goals. We are protecting and improving the marine environment at home and internationally to meet the global commitment to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030, and this Bill is a key instrument in delivering that goal. The Bill supports our efforts to maintain multilateral agreements and international governance as the bedrock of our global community, and to address collectively the biggest issues of our generation: climate change, food insecurity and harm to marine environments—issues that affect not just the UK, but every nation on Earth. I hope that Members will recognise the urgency and importance of this moment. The ocean cannot wait, and the consequences of inaction are profound. This Bill is an opportunity to act, to protect marine life, to support sustainable development and to ensure that the benefits of the ocean are shared fairly and responsibly. I commend this Bill to the House.

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

12.54 pm

**Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con):** I thank the Minister for her explanation of the Bill. It is an important piece of legislation, and I thank her for acknowledging that it started under the previous Government. I hope there will be a consensus, but there are many questions to be answered, and we need to go into this legislation in a lot of detail to ensure that there are not unintended consequences.

Nobody in this House doubts the importance of protecting our oceans. The high seas belong to us all, to every nation on this planet, and the United Kingdom, as a proud seafaring nation and a world leader in natural sciences with no less than 16 overseas territories spanning—for now at least—all five of the world's

major oceans, has always led the world in safeguarding them. The protection of our oceans is one of the defining challenges of our age. Two thirds of the world's oceans lie beyond the jurisdiction of any single nation, and those waters are home to a vast array of life that sustains the planet's ecosystems.

Britain depends on the seas for our trade. They have been a moat for our national security and are our bridge to the wider world. We therefore have not only a moral duty to protect them but a strategic one. One of the core values of the small c conservatism that I believe in, as the name suggests, is to conserve things that truly matter. That applies not only to our institutions and our way of life here in these islands, but to the preservation of our green and pleasant land and, in this case, that of the marine biodiversity, so that we can hand on to our descendants the natural beauty that I know we all cherish. That principle is certainly not in question today by anyone in this House of any party.

Nowhere is our record clearer than in the crown jewel of our leadership on the environment that is the blue belt programme. Through it, the United Kingdom and our overseas territories have created over 4.4 million sq km of marine protected areas from the South Atlantic and the Pacific to the Indian ocean. These waters safeguard king penguins on the Falkland Islands, green turtles on Ascension Island, grey reef sharks on the Pitcairn Islands and countless other species across the globe. I have had the privilege to visit the Falkland Islands and Ascension Island and see the amazing biodiversity that we are responsible for, and the oceans around those territories are vital to protect. The blue belt is one of the largest networks of protected ocean on Earth, and it exists because of British leadership alongside the Governments of the British overseas territories. We granted those creatures and their habitats protection from exploitation by others, from industrial fishing fleets and from countries that would plunder our resources without a second thought. That is something this nation should be immensely proud of.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am listening carefully to what the hon. Member is saying, and he is absolutely right on the blue belt. Does he therefore regret that in all the debates we have had about the Chagos Islands, the Conservatives have not raised the importance of the conservation of the fish stocks and the biodiversity around those islands?

**Andrew Rosindell:** The chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee is, I am afraid, incorrect. We have raised those issues on many occasions, and I have personally raised them on countless occasions over the years. Before too long, the right hon. Member will hear a bit more about the Chagos Islands and the importance of protecting marine stocks and biodiversity in that part of the world.

Despite what has been said today, I fear that at this stage the Government are riding roughshod over that record and undermining those very principles through their abject surrender of a marine protected area. The British Indian Ocean Territory might look like a scattering of remote atolls in a far-flung region of the planet, but they are home to 640,000 sq km of ocean—one of the most pristine marine ecosystems on the earth, an area of ocean the size of France. Within it live more than 1,000 species of fish and over 200 species of coral.

I had the opportunity to see it for myself in 2019 when I visited the Chagos islands, in particular the atoll of Peros Banhos, where I was greeted by the wonderful Chagossian coconut crabs, as I jumped out of the dinghy and walked on to the beach and into the uninhabited island—where we shamefully forced the people to leave their homes all those years ago and refused to allow them to return. Its waters shelter seabirds, turtles and dolphins. It is an environmental treasure that the world envies and that Britain has rightly protected over so many years.

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that Mauritius was one of the early signatories to the UN global ocean treaty? If so, I am not sure what his point is.

**Andrew Rosindell:** The hon. Member should examine how Mauritius behaves in reality, which I will come to later. If we want a nation that will actually take these issues seriously, it is the United Kingdom. It is easy to sign a treaty, it is not so easy to follow it through in practice.

In what I believe to be an act of historic folly, this Government are to hand that amazing territory over to Mauritius. That nation does not have the record, the capability or the will to protect such a fragile environment. Its own waters have suffered from overfishing and poor enforcement. Its close alignment with China, and indeed India, should concern anyone who cares about the Indian ocean's future. Indeed, the evidence speaks for itself. In the 2024 Environmental Performance Index, Mauritius ranked 109th for marine key biodiversity area protection, with a score of just 0.8 out of 100; 83rd for marine habitat protection; and 131st for marine protection stringency, down nearly 78%. Are these the credentials of a nation ready to steward one of the world's most delicate ecosystems? The Government appear to think so. I disagree.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I am just wondering whether the hon. Member finds himself in the wrong debate?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I am overseeing the debate. If the hon. Member had been in the wrong debate, I would have pointed it out.

**Andrew Rosindell:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Some of us do care about our British overseas territories and the marine environment. Some of us have made these arguments for many, many years, as have many on the Government Benches. If we are to take this issue seriously, we need to take our responsibilities seriously. Otherwise, future generations, not just in this country but across the world, will look back at this debate and what we are doing today, and think, "What on earth were they doing, giving away such a vital part of the planet that we are responsible for?"

Either the Government truly believe that Mauritius will reverse course and persuade China to respect this marine protected area, or, as I am afraid the Chagos surrender treaty implies, we shall end up doing the heavy lifting while paying for the privilege. Forgive me for not being entirely convinced, but I do not believe

[*Andrew Rosindell*]

that the statistics I have cited are those of a nation ready to take on responsibility for one of the world's most delicate marine ecosystems.

Scientific assessments show that live coral cover in Mauritian waters fell by up to 70% in the late 1990s, while coastal erosion and reef degradation continue unchecked. A United Nations review in 2022 found that, while on paper Mauritius has environmental laws, enforcement is inconsistent, community involvement is limited and responses to emerging threats such as ocean acidification remain inadequate. Unbelievably, seagrass beds, which are vital for carbon storage and marine biodiversity, are still cleared to make way for tourism development. Is this really the environmental guardian that Ministers are entrusting with 640,000 sq km of some of the most pristine ocean on earth? It beggars belief.

We need to look around the world to see what happens when Chinese fishing interests move in. In Ecuador, thousands of octopuses and sharks have been left dead on the shore because of illegal fishing by Chinese vessels. We need to guard against that in future. Off the coast of Ghana, fishermen's catches have fallen by 40% due to Chinese bottom trawlers decimating local fish stocks. Around the Korean peninsula, squid populations have collapsed by 70%. I hope that this legislation and this agreement will help to protect the oceans around the world and countries where there are no protections at the moment. If the Chagos islands are handed over, the same fleets will soon appear in some of those waters, and Chagos will be at the mercy of exploitation.

That is the context in which the House is considering the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill. It runs to 26 clauses, as the Minister has said. It is impossible to run through them all today, but no doubt we will look at them in greater detail in Committee. There are, however, several points that must be addressed in today's debate.

When will ratification happen? Clause 25 provides for the commencement of regulation, but without any statutory deadline or parliamentary trigger, leaving ratification entirely at the discretion of the Secretary of State. To add to that, clauses 9 and 11 grant far-reaching powers to the Secretary of State to make regulations to amend existing Acts of Parliament by secondary legislation. Where is Parliament's role in that? How will the House scrutinise decisions taken by the conference of the parties under the agreement? Will we be consulted before international rules are imposed on British institutions and industries? Will British waters or those of our overseas territories ever fall under the jurisdiction of a foreign or supranational regulator? We surely cannot allow global bureaucracy to override British parliamentary sovereignty.

Beyond the question of control lies the spectre of bureaucracy. Clauses 2 and 3 impose heavy reporting duties on marine research and genetic sampling. Clause 16 allows still more procedures by regulation. Has the Department assessed what that will cost in time and money for our scientists and shipping operators and for legitimate researchers? How will small British enterprises compete if they face mountains of paperwork, while less scrupulous nations exploit the same waters freely?

We all support high standards, but in the world we currently live in, we cannot afford to lose innovation or competitiveness.

Then there is the matter of expense. The impact assessment admits that compliance, licensing and enforcement will not be cheap, yet provides little detail on who pays. At a time of fiscal restraint, when every Department must justify every pound spent, can the Minister explain whether this legislation will truly be the best use of taxpayers' money? How much will it cost to implement the BBNJ regime in full? Will the task of monitoring fall to the Royal Navy or the Marine Management Organisation, and what extra resources will they receive to do the job? What is the cost-benefit ratio, and have the Government assessed whether there could be indirect impacts on the taxpayer?

What of the impact on British industries, fishermen, offshore energy and biotechnology? Can the Minister assure us that British fishermen will not face restrictions, that our energy sector will not be burdened by impractical licensing demands, and that our biotech pioneers will not find their discoveries trapped in international bureaucracy?

**Emma Hardy:** I wonder if I could offer some helpful clarity. This debate is on BBNJ—biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction, with the word “beyond” giving a clue to the fact that it does not relate to British waters. The points the hon. Gentleman is raising, about what impact the high seas will have on offshore wind development here, might therefore not be entirely valid, and his points about the impact on British fishermen fishing in UK waters might not be covered by the global ocean treaty. I wonder if it might be helpful for him to read the explanatory notes alongside the Bill.

**Andrew Rosindell:** The Minister will have plenty of time to explain all these matters in detail in Committee. This is Second Reading, when we raise issues of concern. I look forward to Committee, and to all my questions being answered at that stage, if not today. I thank her for her intervention.

What safeguards will protect British intellectual property in marine genetic research? Will the benefit-sharing provisions prevent our scientists from developing the fruits of their own work? Will other nations shoulder equal obligations, or will Britain be left carrying the cost because we are doing the right thing and others are not? Our research institutions are some of the most prestigious global leaders in the marine sector, whether it is the Natural History Museum, the National Oceanography Centre or our magnificent universities. First and foremost, there must be a guarantee from the Government that this Bill will not drown them in red tape.

Clause 20 rightly extends the Bill's provisions to the British overseas territories, which are central to our environmental success story. From the Pitcairn islands, with their 35 residents, to Tristan da Cunha, home to barely 240 residents, these far-flung Britons have shown what small communities can achieve for global conservation when they have British support. But how can they have confidence in the Government's assurances when they witness what is happening in Chagos? If Ministers are willing to trade away one British territory without consultation or consent, what message does that send to

the rest? I remind the House that conservation with the loss of sovereignty and without credible means of enforcement is a hollow virtue. The United Kingdom has a record to be proud of, from Captain Cook to David Attenborough. We must build on that record and not undermine it with rushed ratification.

If Ministers will answer the questions that I have laid out, and if they will commit in statute to parliamentary oversight, a fully costed implementation plan, explicit safeguards for British science and intellectual property, and legally enforceable protections for the overseas territories, many on the Conservative Benches will consider how to support measures that genuinely conserve our seas. If they will not, I and others—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. Mr Rosindell, can I check that you are nearing your conclusion?

**Andrew Rosindell:** I am.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Marvellous.

**Andrew Rosindell:** I was literally about to get there, Madam Deputy Speaker.

If Ministers will not do so, I and others will oppose any step that weakens Britain's hand. I end where I began. As Conservatives, our principle is that we want to conserve, to keep safe, to steward and to defend what we are responsible for. We must be true to that principle. We must continue to act as custodians of the seas in a way that respects our sovereignty, honours our obligations to our descendants and protects the livelihoods and ecosystems that depend on the United Kingdom.

1.14 pm

**Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab):** I am really proud to be standing here today, because it is an historic day for ocean conservation. Let us make no mistake: the world's oceans are under significant threat. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that if global warming reaches 1.5°, 70% of coral reefs will die. If temperatures rise by 2°, as now sadly looks likely, 99% of the Earth's coral reefs will die. Coral reefs are not just a pretty thing that we go diving on; they are incredibly complex and important ecosystems. They are fish nurseries, but they also provide significant protection for islanders from both adverse weather and sea level rises.

Other threats include illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, which is decimating fish populations across the globe, and deep-sea mining, which threatens to cause damage from which ecosystems will take decades to recover. Currently, two thirds of the ocean lie outside the jurisdiction of national states, and that is what the Bill focuses on. For the health of oceans and the planet as a whole, it is crucial that the international community develops ways of ensuring that these areas are not subject to lawless exploitation, as is currently happening.

**James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab):** In January this year, as Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend wrote to the Government to push them to ratify the global oceans treaty. As a member of her Committee, I thank her for her efforts on this front. If I recall correctly, our Committee's work highlighted that

the UK had to work globally because there are 3 billion people who depend on the oceans for work, especially in poorer, smaller developing nations. Does she agree that this is a vital step forward for the future, especially of small island developing states, and that the Government must push others who have signed up to this treaty to ratify it?

**Sarah Champion:** I thank my hon. Friend and colleague. He is absolutely right, and that is why today is so historic: this is the UK taking that leadership role and hopefully corralling some of the other countries that are more reticent to do the right thing.

The International Development Committee and the all-party parliamentary group for the ocean, both of which I chair, have long been calling on both the previous Government and this Government to put in place the necessary legislation to ratify this agreement. To have finally reached this point is a credit to the Ministers—particularly the Minister for Water and Flooding, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), but also the Minister responsible for the Indo-Pacific, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), and the Minister of State for International Development and Africa, my noble Friend Baroness Chapman.

In an era of international fragmentation, I am relieved that 145 states have come together to forge this agreement and safeguard a global public good. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) alluded to, 75 countries have already taken the next step of ratification. I am very proud that the Minister for Water and Flooding was championing this in opposition and has delivered on her word, leading this ratification in government. I thank her for that.

As a seafaring nation and a centre of expertise in maritime law, the UK is perfectly placed to lead the charge to protect the world's oceans. Sadly, we are lagging behind many countries, including the Seychelles, St Lucia and Barbados, which ratified the agreement last year. It is not surprising that the small island developing states, or SIDs—or large ocean states, as they prefer to be called—were quick to ratify, because they recognise the existential threat that ocean ecosystem degradation poses to human societies and their economies.

As the International Development Committee argued in our report last year, SIDs need reliable partners. The UK talks a good game when it comes to responsible global leadership, but activists and policymakers from SIDs told the Committee they were concerned about the consistency of Britain's commitment. I hope we will see that change at this moment, under this Government, and that we will stand up for small island developing states, particularly our overseas territories, which the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) mentioned.

The health of the world's oceans is not an issue confined to low-income countries; it is an existential issue for all of us. As the Government's impact assessment acknowledged, the impact of reduced fish stocks and decreased capacity will be borne by all of us, including future generations. The UK must seize this moment to match its international conservation ambitions with tangible action to protect our domestic waters. Bottom trawl fishing, a highly destructive practice, is still permitted across almost all of the UK's seas, including in more than 90% of our marine protected areas. I welcome the

[Sarah Champion]

Government's consultation on that, and hope that they will take the necessary step to ban that practice wherever they can.

The Government must consider introducing additional legislation to ensure that the UK's marine protected areas are actually protected, because sadly, even though they have the title, many of them are not. The Bill also offers plentiful opportunities for the UK's blue economy as a world leader in marine science and technologies. To support quick progress, the UK needs a definition of the use of "marine genetic resources", and "digital sequence information", by the time the agreement is ratified. That is to support all those who will implement it.

The UK's next steps are vital to ensure that we fulfil our leadership role in ocean protection. The 120-day countdown has started. The first conference of the parties, Ocean COP1, will be held within just 12 months. With the clock ticking, will the Minister set out a timetable for the passage of the Bill through both Houses? We need it to pass quickly to allow the UK to play its full part in the first conference. Will the Minister also confirm whether the Bill legally extends the UK's existing domestic duties to have regard to the precautionary and polluter pays principles to the high seas? If not, will she say whether something to that effect should or could be inserted into the Bill? Will the Minister consider producing an ocean strategy? Ocean issues currently fall between a number of different Departments, which unfortunately means they are under the ownership of none. The Bill is to be commended and must attain Royal Assent without delay. I strongly urge all Members to support it.

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

1.21 pm

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a privilege to speak in support of this Bill. This is a hugely important step that, as the Minister laid out, will finally allow the United Kingdom to ratify the high seas treaty and play its full part in protecting our shared global ocean. That is something that I hope Members across the Chamber will support. I share in congratulations to the Minister on keeping her word that she gave as shadow Minister. That is really good to see.

The Bill comes at a crucial time. After more than a decade of negotiation, this treaty is one of the greatest biodiversity conservation victories in history. It is a landmark moment for global ocean governance, setting out for the first time a clear legal framework for establishing ocean sanctuaries and area-based management tools on the high seas, two-thirds of which lie beyond national borders and are therefore currently lawless. We refer to our rainforests as our planet's lungs, but our oceans are just as important for biodiversity, regulating our climate, absorbing almost a third of human-made carbon dioxide, and sustaining billions of people around the world. As we have heard, they are also under extraordinary pressure from overfishing, plastic pollution and the growing threat of deep-sea mining. The treaty is currently the only viable pathway to meeting the global 30 by 30 biodiversity goal of protecting at least 30% of the world's ocean

before 2030. Currently, less than 1% of the high seas is fully protected, so time is running out to meet that goal by the end of the decade.

I welcome the Bill, which provides the legal framework for the UK to deliver on the high seas treaty's three central pillars: first, the fair sharing of benefits from marine genetic resources, the DNA and data of ocean life; secondly, the creation of marine protected areas and area-based management tools on the high seas; and thirdly, stronger environmental impact assessments to prevent harmful activities before they happen. This has to be fair for developing nations, and capacity building and technology transfer is central to that.

This is personal to me. Before entering Parliament, I spent over a decade working professionally on the creation of marine protected areas in east Africa and South America. I helped to create the first ever multiple-use marine reserve, together with fishermen and Government in Zanzibar on Misali island. I then spent several years mediating conflict and reaching consensus between fishermen, tour operators, the Galapagos national park, and the Government, to help create the Galapagos marine reserve, which at that time was one of the largest MPAs created. Since then I have been involved in work towards international marine governance beyond national jurisdiction, the high seas treaty, as well as the UK's Blue Belt programme, and I worked with communities and officials on all those overseas territories. I have seen at first hand what is at stake, from working with fishermen to prevent the destruction of coral reefs by dynamite fishing, to the terrifying news that we have reached the first climate tipping point, with our precious and beautiful warm-water coral reefs now in irreversible decline, putting at threat the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people.

I have also mediated negotiations with the fishing sector on deep-water fishing to find sustainable fishing quotas and standards for tuna fishing, while protecting vital marine corridors for our endangered marine mammals and birds. I have dived along those, tagging whale sharks to understand the routes that they take across the high seas, beyond national jurisdictions. That is often the wild west, where we are facing the "tragedy of the commons", and there are no agreed rules or governance to stop everyone in the race from taking as much as possible before someone else does.

That is why it is so important to highlight that the global ocean treaty could provide a legal mechanism to address the "blue hole" in the south Atlantic—a region requiring agreements about what is sustainable fishing practice, and ways effectively to deter terribly unsustainable activity. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for a coherent ocean policy, and an ocean strategy that links the global commitments we make through the Bill to stronger domestic action on marine protection, sustainable fishing and pollution at home.

The UK was instrumental in securing an ambitious treaty text at the UN, and we should take pride in that. However, as other Members have said, we must be honest: the UK was not among the first 60 nations to ratify that treaty, and that matters because where Britain leads, others follow. The commitments being made today must be matched with commitments to sustainable fisheries management and marine conservation back in our own waters. Our credibility and moral authority on the world stage is under threat when Ministers seem to say

that we might not implement an outright ban on bottom trawling, despite pledging earlier this year to extend the ban on bottom-towed fishing gear to offshore protected areas.

I was a member of the Environmental Audit Committee's inquiry into marine governance, which recommended the ban on bottom trawling ahead of the UN ocean conference, and we commended the Government on their announcement at that time. I fully support the Committee Chair's response, which repeats the Committee's call to completely ban bottom trawling within offshore MPAs, and pleads with the Minister and the Government to take the right decision on the back of the consultation that is happening now, and not to undermine the integrity of our protected waters.

In conclusion, the Liberal Democrats are clear: we support the Bill, and we urge the Government to bring forward ratification swiftly—I hope Members across the Chamber will support that—so that the UK has a seat at the table when Ocean COP1 takes place, and going forward.

1.28 pm

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Like others, I very much welcome the Bill, and I hope it swiftly passes into law so that we can play a full role at Ocean COP1 next year. If we look back beyond recent years, we had people such as John Kerry, and David Miliband as co-chair of the Global Ocean Commission, spearheading efforts on this front, but it then felt as if the issue dropped off the agenda. Next year will be important for ensuring that it becomes a priority again.

I will start by saying why the oceans matter, why they are under threat and why protecting them is so important. As we have heard, oceans are a massive carbon sink. They absorb over 90% of excess heat trapped by greenhouse gases, as well as around 25% to 30% of global carbon dioxide emissions. They host around 80% of all life forms, many of which are still waiting to be discovered. They are under threat from plastic pollution, ocean acidification and the bleaching of coral reefs, and from overfishing on an unsustainable industrial scale. The largest factory trawlers have net mouths of up to 1,200 metres wide and 200 to 300 metres deep that sweep up hundreds of tonnes of fish and seafood in one trip, much of which is bycatch, not for human consumption, that is then discarded. Oceana has called this

“marine deforestation—akin to clear felling an entire rainforest when you're only looking to harvest one type of tree”.

The Environmental Justice Foundation has done some brilliant reports in the past into slavery and labour exploitation as part of this industrial-scale fishing, particularly in the Thai seafood sector. The fish stocks in territorial waters are depleted, but the further afield those ships go, the higher the risk to the workers that are kept at sea for years at a time.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, between 35% and 37% of assessed fish stocks are being fished beyond biologically sustainable levels. That figure is much higher in the high seas and in straddling fish stocks, with two thirds classified as over-exploited or depleted. That includes iconic species, such as sharks, that are a crucial part of the ocean ecosystem. It is estimated that there has been a 71% decline in the ocean population of sharks and rays since 1970. Some 77% of oceanic shark and ray species are threatened

with extinction. Roughly 100 million sharks a year are killed by humans through targeted fishing, shark finning and bycatch.

Many of us will have seen “The Blue Planet” series that did such a brilliant job at highlighting, among other things, the threat of plastic pollution and at spurring calls to action. I want to give a shout out to BBC Bristol's natural history unit, which has been hugely influential, as well as giving great enjoyment to all the people who have seen its programmes. It is a great shame that agreement still has not been reached on a global plastics treaty, and we must keep up the efforts on that front.

I hope that Sir David Attenborough's latest production, “Ocean”, will have a similar impact when it comes to bottom trawling. As Sir David says:

“What we have done to the deep ocean floor is just unspeakably awful.”

He says that the trawlers tear the seabed with such force that

“the trails of destruction can be seen from space”.

It was reported that some of the material filmed for the programme was deemed too shocking to be shown.

Due to climate change, more than half the world's straddling fish stocks will shift across maritime borders between economic exclusion zones and the high seas by 2050. In the high seas, fisheries management is much more challenging and stocks are much more likely to be over-exploited, as I said earlier. That makes the need for marine protected areas in the high seas even more important. As we have heard, as well as being an island nation ourselves, because of our overseas territories the UK is the custodian of a fifth of the world's territorial waters. That means that we are the neighbour, which is the next best thing as a custodian, of much of the high seas, including the Sargasso sea.

Greenpeace is calling on the UK to take a lead in working with our overseas territory, Bermuda, on developing an ocean sanctuary proposal for the Sargasso sea, ready to present it at the first Ocean COP next year. The Sargasso sea is a uniquely biodiverse and important ecosystem. The floating sargassum mats are known as the “golden floating rainforest”, and they are a haven for juvenile fish and turtles, a spawning ground for a rich range of species and an important migratory pathway for humpback whales. As a generator of massive carbon sequestration and oxygen production, the Sargasso sea is vital in tackling climate change and planetary health, but it is at risk of overfishing, pollution and shipping traffic. There is much support in Bermuda for the proposal, and I hope that we will be able to take that forward next year.

Given our strength as a global financial centre, the UK is uniquely well placed to play a role in developing innovative financial instruments that will help finance marine protection, building on what countries like Seychelles and Belize have done with their blue bonds and their debt restructuring. At COP29 last year, we launched our six principles for high integrity carbon and nature markets, and they have been out for consultation this year.

In a world where public sector resources and donations are dwindling, the world is looking to make progress on leveraging private sector finance in a meaningful and sustainable way. That could be of huge benefit to climate-vulnerable coastal countries and small island states, but

[Kerry McCarthy]

could also be applicable to funding marine protected areas in the high seas, making it economically viable to protect our seas rather than to plunder them. I have heard that the Treasury may be less enthused about the nature side of these voluntary markets than the carbon side, but I hope that is not the case. I will certainly keep up the pressure on the Treasury to take this forward.

I want to speak briefly about deep-sea mining, to which I am totally opposed. Deep-sea mining could cause irreversible damage to deep ecosystems and a loss of undiscovered biodiversity. I understand that the current UK position, as confirmed by an FCDO ministerial answer last month, is that we back the suspension of deep-sea mining and support a moratorium on the granting of deep-sea mining contracts by the International Seabed Authority. The Minister said that we will not grant licences for exploitation unless

“there is sufficient scientific evidence about the potential impact on deep sea ecosystems, and strong enforceable environmental Regulations, Standards and Guidelines”.

However, it is not clear what powers we will have through this international collaboration to stop other countries issuing such licences, so I hope that the Minister will clarify that in her summing up. I am a little concerned that the measures in the Bill about marine genetic resources will open the door to deep-sea mining. I accept that there is a case for exploring the potential of such resources, if carried out under strong safeguards, but I would resist any attempt to allow deep-sea mining to occur.

Finally, while I welcome international initiatives and, as has been made clear, the Bill addresses areas beyond national jurisdiction, we need to lead by example with stronger protection for our own territorial waters. As has been said, there has been some progress, notably around our overseas territories, but perhaps it is easier to act when those areas are thousands of miles away and do not have the same economic interests. There has been great work around Ascension, Pitcairn and South Georgia, but there is more of a mixed picture around the UK coast.

Dogger Bank in the North sea is one of the largest marine protected areas. Since it was established in 2022, it has benefited from a 98% reduction in bottom trawling, supporting the recovery of marine species like halibut, cod, angel shark and eels. As it says in the UK’s national biodiversity strategy and action plan, all marine protected areas must be well managed, enforced and effective, not paper parks. We could start by moving faster to end all bottom trawling in our marine protected areas.

The recent excellent report “Blue Carbon”, published by the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, set out a blue carbon mapping project carried out with the help of the Scottish Association for Marine Science. We are the first country to undertake such mapping. We know about the importance of kelp forests, seagrass meadows and mangroves, but it is the less glamorous sediment on our seabed that is the true hero in carbon sequestration. The report found that 224 million tonnes of organic carbon was stored in just the top 10 cm of seabed sediments and vegetated habitats, and 98% of that was in the sediment, such as the mud.

In my role as Minister for climate, it frustrated me that we talked so much about the role of trees and forests in carbon sequestration, but we did not talk about the oceans at all. I was told that that was because it was difficult to quantify, so this project is a great example. If this is the amount of carbon work that is being done by the seabed around the UK coast, just think about the amount that the seabed of our high seas is doing. We must have action on that at Ocean COP. I hope that the Bill will be enacted very soon, and I look forward to next year’s discussions.

1.38 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Less than 1% of the high seas are fully protected; there could not be a more important time for this treaty. It is the world’s only viable pathway to meet the global biodiversity goal of protecting at least 30% of the world’s ocean before 2030. Along with my Liberal Democrat colleagues, I welcome the fact that the Government are finally bringing forward this legislation. It is disappointing that the UK was not among the first 60 countries to reach the threshold to get the treaty ratified, especially given the long cross-party support for the subject in this House, but I hope ratification will be swift to allow the UK a seat at the table at Ocean COP. We Liberal Democrats have long been pushing for the strongest possible marine environmental targets, both internationally and domestically, including through the ratification of the global oceans treaty.

The Bill is welcome, but we must not be complacent. Global plastic production and waste have doubled in the last 20 years, and more than 12 million tonnes of plastic are dumped into the ocean every single year, putting countless species at risk of extinction. In 2023, the BBC reported that there were more than 170 trillion pieces of plastic floating in the world’s oceans. That is simply shocking and totally unacceptable.

Biodiversity relies on healthy oceans, but plastic pollution, climate change and unsustainable fishing practices are destroying our marine biodiversity. With 10% of marine species at risk, we must act now. Communities across the world rely on the oceans for their livelihoods, jobs and food security—indeed, we all rely on the oceans for our livelihoods—but we are taking more from the ocean than can be replenished, with 90% of big fish populations depleted and 50% of coral reefs already destroyed.

The first Ocean COP is on the horizon for next year, which will give the UK an important seat at the table if we ratify the treaty in time. While there, the UK should champion further measures to protect our oceans, including a ban on bottom trawling in marine protected areas. Bottom trawling is a most terrifying practice that damages the seabed, kills animals and plants indiscriminately, and releases carbon from the sea floor in very large proportions, which drives climate change.

If Members have not watched the documentary “Ocean with David Attenborough”, please do—it is terrifying. Once I watched it, I made a pledge that I would not eat fish until we had at least signed the ocean treaty, so there is a personal reason why I push the Government for early ratification. I love fish, and this should not be a call not to eat fish; this is about protecting the oceans. If Members watch the David Attenborough film, they will see that a good and positive thing is that the oceans can recover very quickly if we give them the option to recover. That is why today is such an important day.

The British public are with us; some 81% of British adults say that they would like to see bottom trawling banned in MPAs, according to polling from Oceana. The Environmental Audit Committee backs the call to ban bottom trawling. In September, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs told the Environmental Audit Committee that it would not roll out an outright ban. I implore the Government to reconsider.

We must manage our territorial waters effectively, and we could start by implementing the Fisheries Act 2020 in full. Through that, we could reform the fishing quota distribution to phase out the fixed quota allocation system, which largely rewards those with the deepest pockets. It could be replaced with a system that rewards and incentivises lower impacts from fishing that deliver environmental, social and economic benefits to communities around our coast.

We must also look more closely at illegal and unregulated fishing. Hidden overfishing—when illegal discards are unaccounted for in fishing quotas—is driving stocks into severe decline. Marine groups are urging the Government to introduce a strategy to tackle overfishing by the end of 2026, including catch limits and a fair deal for fishers adjusting to lower catch limits.

The transparency around enforcement and monitoring of fishing activities in UK seas is not adequate. The Marine Management Organisation is not even required to publish data on the enforcement of fishing regulations. We were told that post Brexit, the UK would establish best-in-class fisheries management as an independent coastal state, but we have not taken advantage of that freedom to strengthen our regulations.

I welcome the Bill as an important starting point, but if we are serious about protecting the blue heart of our planet, this must be just the beginning of real action to restore the health of oceans across the world and here at home. I repeat the Liberal Democrats' call for a coherent oceans policy.

1.43 pm

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am delighted to rise to support the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill. The introduction of this legislation marks the beginning of a process for the UK to ratify and implement the global ocean treaty. This vital agreement enables the protection of international marine life. No protection currently exists for wildlife such as fish, turtles and dolphins that inhabit the high seas, over which no one country has jurisdiction.

The ocean, which covers more than 70% of the surface of our planet, is a vital shared resource. It provides us with sustenance, oxygen and genetic resources for food, medicines and research. It is also our greatest ally in the fight against climate change, as the largest carbon sink on the planet. However, it is an ecosystem under perilous threat. Increased ocean temperatures are symptomatic of the warming climate, and endanger us on land through a decreased capacity to absorb carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, rising sea levels and the loss of vital marine life and resources.

The introduction of this legislation reaffirms this Government's dedication to protecting global marine life as well as mitigating climate change and improving our natural environment. In the current moment, when the environmental consensus is at risk and there are those who would retreat from the world, pretend that

we can draw up a metaphorical drawbridge and keep safe behind the safety of political castle walls, this Bill is a significant marker of this Government's commitment to multilateral processes, which are in fact the only way to address some of the great challenges of our time.

This debate is one of many on the environment and nature that I have attended in recent weeks and months to which not a single Conservative Backbench MP has bothered to turn up. I do not say that to thumb my nose at them; I say it because it is profoundly depressing. I oppose the Tory party with every fibre of my being, but it is one of the great political parties of western Europe over the last 100, 200 and more years, and it has just given up.

His Majesty's official Opposition is just not interested. That is not just today; it is in debate after debate that I attend. Some hard-working Opposition Front Bencher turns up, but not a single person sits behind them. I say to them, in the most earnest sincerity, that election defeats are disappointing, but the Tory party has to man up. It must turn up and start taking this seriously, because these are matters of the most supreme importance, and we cannot have the official Opposition just refusing to engage.

I have to say that the comments from the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) were pretty lukewarm. I understand that the previous Government looked at this issue for quite some time, but they never got as far as legislating. In listening to what he said, I was left uncertain of how supportive the Opposition actually are of the proposed measures; we will find out more in Committee. I hope that, having committed to this issue in government but never actually legislating on it, they will get behind this important legislation.

As we have heard, this Bill fulfils the commitment made by the Labour Government at the UN ocean conference and in opposition. The oceans need UK leadership and action. The evidence that the EAC received during our recent inquiry, "Governing the marine environment", painted a worrying picture of the state of the marine environment. It is under threat globally from global warming, pollution and overexploitation, leading to a 49% decline in populations of marine mammals, birds, reptiles and fish species according to the Living Planet Index. UK seas are also in poor condition, failing on most of the indicators of good environmental status in the most recent assessment by the Government.

However, there is some good news: marine conservation efforts are effective. When we do them, they work. While only 9% of the ocean is currently protected in a marine protected area, remarkably half of all catalogued marine species have been reported in those areas. Some 72% of species facing extinction have found refuge in marine protected areas.

The Government are taking important action to better protect the 38% of UK seas already designated as marine protected areas. I repeat what has been said by other colleagues: we want to see the Government going further. Damaging activities can still take place in those areas, but the consultation referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy) is vital. Nearly two thirds of the ocean is considered high seas or international waters, which poses a governance and logistical challenge: how is it possible to protect areas that are beyond the jurisdiction of any one nation? That is why the global oceans treaty of 2023 was so significant—a landmark

[Mr Toby Perkins]

moment in providing the legal foundation for establishing MPAs in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The creation of protected areas in the high seas is essential to making 30 by 30 a reality.

This Bill, which establishes the legal framework necessary for the UK to meet its obligations, is vital. Its Royal Assent will lay the groundwork for the UK to ratify that agreement. As we have heard, 60 countries have already ratified the treaty, so it will come into force next January, and the first UN ocean conference will be held within the year. As such, it is vital that the UK gets on with ratifying that treaty so that it can be party to discussions and can shape agreements. Setting out a timeline for the UK's ratification of the global oceans treaty was one of the key recommendations of the Environmental Audit Committee, so we welcome the Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice having kept their word on that.

This is a narrow Bill that allows the UK to fulfil our global commitment. I caution well-meaning allies against extending the process or undermining the commitment that the Government have made by attempting to attach to the Bill other commitments that are not relevant to it and create division—in this incredibly important area, what we need is unity. However, the ratification of this treaty is just the start. We have much more to do to protect 30% of the oceans by 2030 and establish marine sanctuaries where marine life can thrive.

To conclude, I strongly support the Bill. I look forward to its passage through Parliament, and I thank the Government for prioritising this issue despite a heavy legislative workload. It is a welcome development that provides the powers and regulations needed for the UK to ratify the treaty, working with other nations.

1.51 pm

**Dr Roz Savage** (South Cotswolds) (LD): The oceans have long struggled to get the attention they deserve—there are no voters out there on the ocean. Thanks are owed to Sir David Attenborough and the many filmmakers and photographers who, over the years, have brought the oceans into our living rooms and helped us to get to know them and care about them. Most of us only get to experience oceans from a beach, or from 30,000 feet—looking down from an aeroplane window at a vast, endless blue expanse—but I have spent months and months alone on the ocean, a long way beyond national jurisdictions, rowing across oceans to raise awareness of the environmental crisis facing our world, particularly the parts of it that are blue. I was trying to bring a human face to the plight of our oceans.

Out there in the middle of an ocean, when you have not seen dry land for several months, thousands of miles separate you from the closest land mass and the nearest human beings are on the International Space Station, it feels like you are well beyond jurisdictions, and often beyond justice. It was out there in that lawless place that I came to understand both the power and the fragility of the ocean—you see its beauty and its bounty, but also its vulnerability to what we humans choose to do. The ocean has no voice in this place, so today, we are being its voice.

The ocean may seem boundless, but it is not indestructible. We have polluted it, overfished it, and warmed it. The deep sea is home to some of the most

extraordinary forms of life on Earth—I was particularly pleased to hear the Minister refer to sunfish, which are surely the weirdest creatures I have ever seen—but it is increasingly targeted for exploitation. We know the surface of the moon better than we know the bottom of the ocean. There is a real danger that we could destroy species before we even know they exist.

More than 60% of the world's surface and nearly three quarters of its ocean volume lie out there in the places beyond any country's control. For centuries, the high seas have been treated as no one's responsibility—beyond the environment, a lawless expanse—and still today, only 1% is properly protected. Meanwhile, overfishing, pollution and deep-sea mining are degrading ecosystems that we barely understand. The ocean is becoming more acidic, threatening the existence of plankton—the base of the entire marine food chain—and weakening its capacity to absorb carbon and regulate our climate. That is what is at stake. The health of the ocean is the health of our planet.

That is why the biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction treaty matters so profoundly. It is the first global treaty to bring order, fairness and protection to the high seas. It offers a framework for managing those shared waters responsibly and ensuring that the benefits of ocean science are shared globally, not hoarded by the few. Earlier this year, when I brought the Climate and Nature Bill before this House, I further pressed the Government to commit to ratifying the BBNJ, and I am pleased and thankful that they are now delivering on that promise. I particularly thank the Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), for her long-term persistence and commitment to this cause. It shows that when we work together across the House, we can turn ambition into action.

However, ratification is only the beginning; turning this treaty into a practical reality will demand co-ordination, funding and focus. As such, I would like to ask the Minister a few practical questions about implementation from the FCDO perspective, questions that I have sent to her office. First, on institutional co-ordination, how will Departments such as the FCDO, DEFRA and the Department for Transport work together to manage marine genetic resources, environmental assessments and new conservation tools under a single, coherent system? Secondly, on enforcement, what mechanisms will ensure compliance by UK vessels and research institutions operating beyond national jurisdiction, given the real challenges—of which I am keenly aware—of surveillance and jurisdiction at sea?

Thirdly, turning to resourcing and capacity, have the Government assessed the staffing, budget and technical resources needed to set up the new repositories, databases and administrative systems required by the BBNJ? Fourthly, on transparency and fairness, what plans are in place to ensure that the data held by repositories such as the Natural History Museum and the National Oceanography Centre are accessible and interoperable—especially for developing countries, including small island states—in line with the BBNJ's principle of equitable benefit sharing? Finally, on international engagement, with the first oceans COP expected in 2026, how will the UK prepare to shape the operational details of the agreement at the international level, and who will represent us at that table?

These questions matter because they will determine whether the Bill delivers real protection, rather than just good intentions. Our scientists are ready to lead. The

National Oceanography Centre, with its cutting-edge research and fleet of autonomous submersible vessels—including one known as Boaty McBoatface—is already mapping deep sea currents and gathering the knowledge we need to understand and protect the ocean. Under the BBNJ, that vital work will become part of a global effort to heal the seas.

The ocean is the blue heart of our planet. It gives us half the oxygen we breathe, shapes our weather, and sustains life on a scale that defies our humble human imaginations. If that heart falters, everything we depend on will be at risk. We often think of oceans as dividing nations, but actually, they connect and unite us; we are, so to speak, all in the same boat. As the great American oceanographer Dr Sylvia Earle said,

“We need to respect the oceans and take care of them as if our lives depended on it. Because they do.”

By ratifying and implementing the BBNJ, we can help turn the tide—sorry, I just cannot help it. Let this be the Parliament that gave the ocean a voice and a future.

1.59 pm

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): It has been almost 19 years since I first met Professor Alex Rogers at a two-day conference at Somerville College, Oxford, convened by the Global Legislators Organisation for a Balanced Environment. The subject was international law on the high seas. The young postdoctoral fellow inspired us about the amazing biodiversity of our global ocean—I use the singular deliberately—but he also frustrated us by explaining that the international community lacked any legal framework to protect it.

The ocean accounts for 99% of our planet by volume and nearly two thirds by surface area. Every second breath we take is supplied to us by the ocean. Some 90% of the excess heat in the climate system has been absorbed by the ocean. The ocean is our greatest nature-based solution to climate change, and it is only by restoring the health of our marine ecosystems that we can deliver on our promise to meet the 30 by 30 target in the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework. The BBNJ treaty is the missing part of the jigsaw. That is why today's debate is so important, and why the Bill is so important.

The Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill is welcome and necessary, but we must recognise what the treaty is and what it is not. We must do so not in order to understand what the Bill does, but to understand clearly what action we must take following its passage. We will need secondary legislation to implement the treaty, and—dare I say this before the Budget statement?—it will require adequate funding. The treaty creates a framework for the establishment of protected areas on the high seas, but it does not, in and of itself, create those protected areas. It is therefore important that the Government start to develop proposals for high seas MPAs, especially in regions of the world where the UK is a party to the relevant regional fisheries management organisations.

I commend DEFRA for the work that it has already done in its stocktake of area-based management tools in areas beyond national jurisdiction. This is a really important baseline. I ask the Minister to set out in her response to the debate what further work is planned to identify, support and deliver specific MPAs. I am particularly keen to hear how she might develop the supplementary report that has already been prepared on the Sargasso

sea. Will she confirm that this internationally significant ecosystem is a priority for the development of an MPA? It has now been 13 years since the Sargasso sea was recognised as an ecologically or biologically significant area, having met all seven EBSA criteria.

Our country's history has left a legacy. That legacy is our exclusive economic zone, which is the fifth largest in the world, largely due to our remaining overseas territories, but that legacy brings responsibilities with it. I pay tribute to the work of the previous Conservative Administration, who expanded the blue belt programme to nominally protect more than 4 million sq km of ocean, from Anguilla in the Caribbean to Pitcairn in the Pacific ocean. In the last year, the programme took satellite imagery of more than 100 million sq km of UK overseas territory waters, providing crucial monitoring and surveillance to crack down on illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing activities. It is this very tangible knowledge and expertise that the UK should be at the forefront of delivering through the first BBNJ COP, which will take place within a year of the treaty taking force, from 17 January 2026.

I welcome the announcement, following the spending review, that the blue belt programme will receive increased funding for 2025-26. However, given that £2 million of this £8.6 million comes from official development assistance, which itself is being cut, I hope it will not seem churlish if I ask that the programme be ringfenced for the future.

For much of human history, we did not need the BBNJ treaty. The high seas were protected from the worst impacts of human activity by the simple reality that they were so far from land and too difficult to access. The dawn of the industrial age and motorised ocean-going vessels changed all that. Even species that lived their whole life hundreds or thousands of miles from land were no longer safe from human exploitation.

Nothing epitomises that sad reality more than the slaughter of the great whales. Industrialised whaling caused the deaths of nearly 3 million whales. Even the blue whale, the largest animal that has ever lived, had its numbers reduced by more than 90%. Whales' size and the fact of spending most of their lives in inhospitable and hard-to-reach parts of the open ocean had kept them safe for millennia, but the introduction of new and more powerful technologies meant that even they became the victims of massive over-exploitation. Today, there are fewer than 400 North Atlantic right whales left in our ocean. And why was it called the right whale? Ironically, it acquired its name because it was rich in blubber and baleen, it moved slowly and it floated after being killed, so it was easily towed in to be butchered—so it was deemed the “right” whale to hunt.

The history of these great mammals shows just why we now need the BBNJ. Biodiversity is no longer protected by its remoteness from land. Human greed will destroy it wherever it is found on our planet, unless we act decisively to regulate our most destructive activities. Today, although the international whaling ban is still ignored by a few countries, whales are no longer threatened by hunters, on the whole, but they are killed by ship strikes and they are entangled in fishing gear.

I emphasise the importance of the international ban not just because I believe that it is one of the most important conservation achievements of the 20th century, but because it was a great achievement of multilateralism—something that is not much in vogue at the moment.

[Barry Gardiner]

It shows how, by acting in concert with other nations, we can mobilise popular support around environmental objectives with both a clear ecological and a clear moral purpose, and we can achieve results. I regard it as an inspiration and a template for what we are now doing in the BBNJ.

The huge factory ships that once slaughtered whales have largely gone, but in their place, equally large factory ships now plunder the ocean as if it were a bottomless pit of profit. There are longliners setting fishing lines tens of kilometres long, each with up to 15,000 hooks, and huge purse seiners using nets that are 2 km long and 200 metres deep. Imagine a net that is twice as deep as Big Ben—the Elizabeth Tower—is tall, and which stretches out so far from this House of Commons that it takes in the whole of Buckingham Palace and most of its gardens. These fishing enterprises devastate the very populations that they are targeting. That is why we need this Bill.

Earlier this year, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science—the Government's own marine experts—found that more than half of the UK's key fishing quotas were set above the levels recommended by scientists. Overfishing has led to a 98% collapse in Celtic sea cod populations since 2012, with an 84% collapse in haddock, an 85% collapse in whiting and an 80% collapse in herring. Just two weeks ago, the scientific assessment of mackerel showed that the species has declined by 78% in the past 10 years. Despite continued advice from scientists to reduce catch quotas, that reduction has not happened.

While the UK has been a world leader with the blue belt programme, at home we continue to practise the opposite of what we preach, most notably through disastrous sustainable catch limits and quotas. Worse, we have driven out small fishing fleets, leaving our seas vulnerable to the monstrous mega-ships whose bottom-trawling scrapes away the existence of all life in their path. The inequitable quota allocation that was formalised in 1999 has resulted in more than 90% of the quota for mackerel, herring and blue whiting being held by just 20 companies, most of them not even British. Half of the English quota is held by Dutch, Icelandic and Spanish interests, more than half of Northern Ireland's quota is held by just one trawler company, and 85% of Wales's quota is held by Spanish companies.

The system has been rigged against the UK's inshore fleet and its independent fishers. All of this was done by UK companies selling their quota abroad, but it is the awful consequence of the privatisation of a public good—our fisheries—and the UK taxpayer has received not a penny in benefit as a result. If the UK is truly to be a leader in the implementation of the BBNJ and to demand of other nations that they curb their rapacious plundering of the high seas, we must at the very least begin to stop the over-exploitation of our stocks at home. Our ability to make our voice heard internationally will sound hollow if we continue to ignore the science and set politically led quota allocations at home.

High seas fisheries often have unimaginably high levels of bycatch. This is particularly true of tuna fisheries, because tuna often school with other pelagic species, such as dolphins, manta rays and billfish. Indeed, many tuna species inhabit the same surface mixed layer of the ocean that is inhabited by vulnerable species such

as silky sharks or turtles. It is estimated that 100 million sharks are caught every year—most as bycatch in high seas fisheries—so it is no wonder that the number of large open ocean sharks has declined by at least 70% in the past 50 years, almost entirely due to high seas fishing, where they are either targeted or caught as bycatch beyond the reach of national jurisdictions.

The leatherback turtle, the largest turtle in the world, is threatened with extinction because it is so often caught as bycatch by purse seine fleets of fishing vessels on the high seas. In the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list of endangered species, published just last week, only one of the 22 species of albatross is not threatened with extinction through being caught as bycatch on hooks on longline fishing fleets in the open ocean.

Distance from land once provided protection for many species in the pre-industrial era, and the same can be said of the deep seas. Until recently, the deep ocean was out of reach for human activity. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. Industrialised fishing fleets are now able to fish deeper and deeper, but many deep sea species are slow-growing. An orange roughy reaches sexual maturity only between the age of 20 and 30—much older than shallower water fish. These factors make deep sea species uniquely vulnerable to overfishing, and as many of the deepest waters are on the high seas, we need to ensure that the BBNJ agreement protects them and their habitat better.

Deep sea fishing, especially on seamounts, poses an existential risk to many deep-sea ecosystems, and bottom trawling, which is devastating in coastal and shallow seas, is arguably even more so on the high seas. Bottom trawlers tend to focus on seamounts, as these underwater mountains act as biodiversity hotspots in the open ocean. I seek the Minister's assurance that, in considering the next steps after ratification, establishing protections around seamounts on the high seas will be one of the Government's priorities. I ask for the same assurance in relation to the issue of deep seabed mining—I trust that the Government will continue to oppose any developments of this on the high seas.

The Bill before us is excellent. It will delight the now Professor Alex Rogers, who I suspect is not at his desk either in Oxford or at the National Oceanography Centre, where he is now the science director. Most probably, he is out somewhere in the Antarctic ocean in a submersible exploring the deep ocean, as he has been doing for more than 30 years. If he were to take a break from his mission to discover 100,000 new marine species in the deep ocean in this decade and send us a message, I suspect that it would emphasise the importance of getting this Bill enacted quickly. If we do not ratify the treaty at least 40 days before the first COP, the UK will not have a seat at the table; we will merely be a spectator as others set the ambition, or the lack of it, as they roll out the implementation of the treaty.

I congratulate the Minister on bringing the Bill to the House for its Second Reading, and trust that we are able to see the whole ratification process completed in time for the UK to make strong proposals at COP1 next year.

2.14 pm

**Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): The Venerable Bede first wrote of the "Isle of Eels" back in the 8th century. He explained that the Isle of

Ely is known as such because it was surrounded by water, with an abundance of eels, but these eels do not spend their whole life in Ely or, indeed, in the UK.

The biological story behind eels is a quite remarkable one. They breed in the Sargasso sea, which, as we have heard, is so important to many other species as well, and they drift across the ocean for two or three years as tiny and fragile eels. They adapt to freshwater and mature in rivers—sometimes growing up to 1 metre in length—before swimming all the way back to the Sargasso sea to reproduce once more before dying. These eels face many dangers in their life cycle, including the impact of climate change on ocean currents, pollution and poaching.

European eels are considered a critically endangered species, so it is imperative that we take action to protect them now. At a local level, the creation of eel passes—not, as it might sound, a passport, but ladders or passages—has been welcome action to allow them to get from the sea into freshwater habitats and back again. However, much more needs to be done to protect them and other endangered species on a global scale, so it is really good that the Government have proposed this Bill.

Ely holds an annual eel festival, which not only recognises our history but celebrates biodiversity and nature. The festival celebrates our heritage and is always tinged with concern about the decline in the eel population, but also with a determination to see eels return to our rivers in abundance. They are not anywhere near as common in the River Great Ouse as they once were, owing to all the factors I mentioned, but the good news is that in 2022, over 74,000 eels were recorded as making the 3,000-mile journey from the Sargasso sea to Cambridgeshire.

Measures like banning bottom trawling in marine protected areas would be a good way to protect endangered species like eels and others, as would the provision of greater resources for international environmental co-operation. I hope the Government will take on board calls for a ban on bottom trawling in marine protected areas. We cannot possibly have the moral authority to call for such a ban on the global stage when we have not done it in our own waters.

Like our eels, all wildlife depends on our oceans, as indeed do we as the human race. The speech from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) was shocking and depressing. For a party that once hugged a husky to now be questioning its support for our oceans is shameful.

Twenty-five centuries ago, Aristotle questioned where eels came from, but if we do not take urgent action to protect them and other marine wildlife, we will not be asking where they came from; we will be asking where they have all gone. I therefore welcome this Bill and the international co-operation of which it is a part. Let us get it through the House as quickly as possible, so that we can sign the treaty and make sure that it delivers what we all hope it will deliver.

2.18 pm

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for her remarks and for the attention that the FCDO has paid to the importance of marine conservation. The biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction treaty represents a transformation in the way that we protect nature in

the high seas. I commend the Government for being an early proponent of the agreement, and I am so pleased—in fact, I am thrilled—to see that we are finally going to ratify it.

I feel that I have been witnessing the Chamber at its best this afternoon. To hear such passion and such well-informed expertise on both sides has been a real honour. It reminds one what an honour we all have in being Members of this place and sitting in a room to listen to such speeches, which has been wonderful. Let me confess that I am one of those people—I remember that when I came back from seeing sperm whales I was still weeping, and I apologised to the organiser of the trip that I seemed to just not be able to stop weeping, but she said, “Don’t worry, dear. We see lots of people like you on these trips.” I feel as though I have found my people, given the passion that has been expressed today for the high seas and for biodiversity.

Today, I want my speech to have a particular focus—please forgive me for this—because I believe that our commitment to this treaty can be tested by how we treat our current responsibilities. I join the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), in using the Chagos islands as a test. I apologise for not recognising that the Opposition have been talking about the biodiversity of the Chagos islands. Perhaps I was only focused on the considerable amount of time they have spent on the sovereignty of the Chagos islands. I have since spent the time available looking up their references to biodiversity, and there have been three of them, so I apologise for saying that there had not been any.

I have had a number of exchanges in this House with the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who has responsibility for Europe, North America and the overseas territories, about the vital importance of safeguarding marine protected areas around the Chagos islands. I am grateful for the assurances he has given me that the Government are committed to the continued protection of the unique and unparalleled environment of the Chagos archipelago.

However, the FCDO’s assurances, although welcome, really do not go far enough, but before I say why, I want to explain why these waters matter so much—not least because of their role in replenishing the high seas—and the extraordinary obligation that the UK owes the world to ensure that they remain protected. As has been said, these 640,000 sq km of near pristine ocean are among the most pristine in the world. They are home to the largest living coral atoll and to 58 islands. They are the breeding site for more than a quarter of a million pairs of seabirds, as well as the vital and unexplored deep-sea ecosystems that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) talked about with such passion.

The vast no-take zone that the UK established in 2010 provides a vital sanctuary for numerous endangered species. If this marine environment were damaged, it would do huge damage to the seas generally and to species already on the brink of extinction, such as the endangered hawksbill turtle, which forages in the waters of the Chagos islands and nests on their beaches, or the unique population of reef manta rays, which use the protected waters as a refuge and which would soon

[Emily Thornberry]

disappear if those waters became unprotected. This is exactly the kind of marine life that the BBNJ agreement seeks to protect through the establishment, among other measures, of marine protected areas in the high seas.

The vast marine protected area around the Chagos islands provides a safe corridor and foraging ground for vital migratory species and apex predators such as tuna, sharks and whales, and without it we would see their numbers crash much more widely across the world. In a warming world in which coral is dying at a terrifying rate, the coral in the Chagos archipelago is relatively healthy and acts as a reseeded bank for other reefs in the Indian ocean through larval dispersal. The reefs and marine life of the Chagos archipelago help to replenish degraded reefs and depleted fish stocks from east Africa to Indonesia. The coral in the Chagos archipelago has shown an extraordinary degree of resilience and an ability to recover even from bleaching events, and it is not known why. This resilience and the undisturbed nature of the Chagos ocean make it a really important site for scientific study. It could give us an important insight into what we can do next to save our coral reefs, and a proper insight into how healthy marine ecosystems function and the impact of climate change.

For the last 15 years, the UK has protected those waters and taken seriously its duties as the steward of those ecosystems, just as the BBNJ agreement invites the entire international community to do as stewards of the high seas. As the UK now hands them over to Mauritius, we have an equally serious duty to ensure that they remain protected. That brings me to the terms of the Chagos deal and the Minister of State's evidence to my Foreign Affairs Committee, for which I am grateful to him.

The Minister noted that the UK and Mauritian Governments are committed to promoting the conservation of the environment of the archipelago. I obviously welcome that, and I pay tribute to the Government of Mauritius for their clear determination to protect nature. Nothing I am about to say is intended to cast any doubt on that commitment. The problem, however, is that Mauritius is a democracy—a vibrant democracy—in which Governments have historically had different attitudes to protecting the ocean. It is therefore not good enough for the Minister just to point to the commitment of the current Mauritian Government to marine protection; we need a basis for lasting confidence and mechanisms to ensure that these ecosystems remain protected for future generations. My principal concern is that there is no funding mechanism in place to ensure that Mauritius will properly resource marine protection in the Chagos archipelago and to incentivise it to do so. That stands in contrast to the treaty we are discussing.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I thank the right hon. Member for giving me an opportunity to say sorry to the shadow Minister for misunderstanding, when I intervened earlier, why he thought it was so important to mention the Chagos islands. I hope he will accept my apology.

**Emily Thornberry:** I must say that we are all behaving so well this afternoon.

I was saying that there is no incentive or funding mechanism in the Chagos archipelago deal, yet the treaty we are talking about—the subject of the Bill we

are giving a Second Reading today—does have that very funding mechanism. Why does it? Because we know that that is needed for it to work. Without a dedicated funding mechanism for Chagos marine protection, in which a transfer of funds is contingent on the continuing protection of the marine environment, there is nothing to ensure that this protection will continue. The Mauritian Government want to allocate resources for doing so, but they operate in a resource-constrained environment. It is therefore deeply regrettable that both parties did not reach an agreement on future arrangements for environmental protection across the Chagos archipelago before signing the treaty. They should have allocated dedicated funds to it, or agreed a funding mechanism that would have been a proper basis for confidence. In short, the Chagos agreement should have followed the lead of the BBNJ agreement.

I remain concerned that there is a lack of concrete action on the future conservation of the Chagos archipelago's unique marine environment and biodiversity. I appreciate the commitments that the Minister has given to the House and my Committee, but now actions need to be taken, drawing on the example presented by the BBNJ agreement. The ratification of the high seas treaty is testament to Britain's renewed global leadership on climate and nature. That reputation risks being undermined by a failure to invest in the protection of the unique and extraordinary marine environment that is the Chagos islands.

2.28 pm

**Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab):** I welcome the Government and the Minister's leadership on this issue in bringing the Bill to the House to enact the UN high seas treaty. I, too, am a member of the APPG for the ocean.

I know that people in Exeter care very deeply about our natural environment, particularly the seas and oceans, and rightly so. The world's oceans are vital to the health of our planet and to our people. They produce over half of the world's oxygen and absorb a quarter of all carbon dioxide emissions, helping to regulate our climate. They support an immense diversity of life, providing food for billions of people and supporting enormous ecosystems, which contain knowledge that we have only just begun to tap.

After decades of industrial damage, this landmark legislation and the treaty will go some way to protecting two thirds of the world's oceans, and it represents a massive step forward by nations across the world to protect marine life and ecosystems beyond our national borders. By providing the legal framework necessary to implement the BBNJ agreement domestically, the Bill includes provisions for marine protected areas, environmental impact assessments and the sharing of benefits from the collection and use of marine genetic resources, and will help us to meet the target to effectively conserve and manage at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. I also welcome the Bill as a core part of re-establishing the UK's role in providing global leadership on climate and nature, both at home and around the world.

Just as the UK is a leader in marine and climate science, so is Exeter. I was delighted this week to host in Parliament the Met Office, which is based in Exeter, to showcase the range and depth of its expertise. The Met Office is not just a specialist in our weather. It is also a specialist in space weather, our oceans, and the connection

between climate change and forecasting. Its work on ocean biogeochemistry—studying how carbon and other gases are absorbed, transported and exchanged by the oceans, the mechanisms involved and the impact changes have—is pioneering. It researches the risks of rapid loss of sea ice, and is studying the rise of sea levels and the impacts on communities, the environment and the economy.

The Met Office also provides a vital service in generating risk assessments of rapid changes to the meridional overturning circulation, which I am told—I am literature graduate, Madam Deputy Speaker, not a science graduate—plays an important role in regional climates. It is also part of the National Partnership for Ocean Prediction, bringing together world-class expertise and research, as well as developing beneficial marine products and services.

In addition, the University of Exeter has a wide-ranging research community working on projects related to our oceans. These come together under the Exeter Marine research network, and their ocean research runs from pollution and conservation to governance and human health. In June this year, Exeter University's Professor Callum Roberts was the lead author of a report in *Nature* supporting the UN high seas treaty. His paper highlighted that the high seas are the Earth's largest and most secure carbon sink. Protecting them is critical to preserving the biological and nutrient cycles that draw down and keep atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> in check. They welcome the UN high seas treaty, saying it offers a pathway to greater protection, but they are concerned about the length of time for implementation. The report's authors also argue that a full and permanent ban on extractive use of the oceans is both feasible and necessary, modelled on the successful precedent set for Antarctica in the 1950s. Will the Minister comment on what more can be done, beyond the treaty as we bring it in, to protect our oceans above and beyond this legislation?

Finally, I want to pay tribute to my constituents Mary Attewell, Debbie Thomas, Sue Down and Lizzie Waler of Exeter's Greenpeace group, who have been doggedly campaigning for the UK's ratification of the treaty. I thank them for all their work and for keeping this issue at the top of the political agenda. I hope they will be celebrating this evening, if the Bill passes its Second Reading. They have asked to question how the treaty will be enforced. I would welcome comments from the Minister on that, too.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) that we want there to be cross-party and cross-House agreement on this issue. While it is disappointing that the Conservatives are not here, it is also disappointing that Green party MPs, other than one small intervention at the beginning, are not here to participate substantially in the debate.

I commend the Bill. I am extraordinarily thrilled and pleased to support it. I know that the ratification of the agreement as soon as possible supports the UK's broader climate and nature agenda, and will mean that we can take our seat at the top table at the first COP. That will ensure we remain at the forefront of global efforts to tackle biodiversity loss and climate change through multilateral co-operation. This will strengthen the role of international law—so important in these times—and multilateral institutions as the foundation for ocean governance.

2.33 pm

**Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): I welcome the Bill for what it seeks to put into law, but also for what it signals about the approach of the Government, and hopefully this House, to national and international obligations and interests. It is a testament to the continued survival and delivery of multilateralism in global affairs. In an age of continued and heightened global strife, conflict and antagonism, the Bill is proof that there still remains hope for global co-operation and that joint endeavours with shared purpose can deliver common goods. Institutions such as the United Nations can still be practical and effective forums to facilitate states coming together to work out collective solutions to collective problems. There are those who seek to withdraw from international agreements, seeing multilateral institutions and processes as threats. We must eschew such an approach, because it ultimately does not serve our national or global interests. Such an approach of withdrawal and isolation will not further our interests effectively.

In this case, the United Nations biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction agreement, which the Bill will bring into the framework of UK law, will be one of the most important strides forward for biodiversity and the marine environment. For the first time, the United Kingdom will have a legal framework to help us to protect large expanses of the seas that are beyond our national waters. The establishment of such protections will help to ensure that regions of the high seas are safeguarded from harmful extractive and destructive practices. The protections will help to restore biodiversity to these regions and help maintain the ocean's capacity to absorb CO<sub>2</sub> produced by human activity, thus helping to mitigate the impacts of global warming.

As has been mentioned, the oceans absorb about 30% of man-made CO<sub>2</sub>, and this treaty will help to ensure that they are fit to continue doing so. The ratification of the treaty must not be the be all and end all for protecting the biodiversity of the world's oceans. It must be a means through which the UK and allies globally can continue to advocate for greater protection of our shared marine environment. One means of doing that through the treaty will be the first conference of the parties—or Ocean COP1. This will be the first forum for the treaty's signatories to discuss and action its implementation, such as agreeing proposals for the first generation of high seas sanctuaries. The treaty is welcome and the Bill is welcome, but implementation is necessary to deliver what we need.

As the Minister said in her opening comments, the COP will take place within a year of 17 January 2026, which is when the treaty comes into force. As has been said, if the UK has failed to ratify at least 40 days before that date, we will not have a seat at the first COP. That is why I urge the House to pass this legislation at pace. Already, there are reports that the first Ocean COP could be as soon as August next year. The Government have rightly spoken at length about the importance of the UK bringing its soft power to bear. With this being the first COP of its kind, it is essential that we bring UK expertise and influence to the event while the treaty is in its infancy. We have seen the importance of conferences of the parties as a means of promoting collective action on climate change and nature. We cannot miss this chance to be a part of the first Ocean COP to do the

[*Martin Rhodes*]

same for our world's oceans. Multilateral agreements implemented by collective action are the way forward on this issue. I am therefore more than content to support the Bill enthusiastically today.

2.37 pm

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Two thirds of our planet is ocean. Our oceans, which sustain life on Earth, cannot be left unguarded any longer. After years of international negotiation, the world finally agreed to the high seas treaty. With the Bill, we will turn that treaty into action and show that Britain is serious about delivering on its promises.

There is no response to the climate crisis that does not also respond to the nature crisis. That is why it is important to protect biodiversity in this country, beyond our border and beyond the seas. Two thirds of the world's oceans lie beyond national borders, and until now they have had almost no real protection. The Bill gives us the power to protect international waters by establishing marine protected areas, by demanding proper environmental assessments before deep-sea mining or destructive fishing can go ahead, and by making sure that the benefits of marine science are shared fairly. The Bill underpins the global goal of protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030—a goal that Labour put in its manifesto and one that we should be proud to be delivering on. The high seas absorb carbon, regulate weather and produce half the oxygen that we breathe. If we do not get biodiversity right, we will not get climate change right either.

We have all heard the tedious lines often repeated by Members on the Conservative Benches—where no one is currently sat—that we cannot act because other countries are not acting, but to lead in addressing climate change we have to do precisely that: take action, do something meaningful and lead other countries in making a difference. Hon. Members may wonder why I, from the most landlocked constituency of Calder Valley, am speaking on the Bill, but in Calder Valley we know the cost of climate change as floods devastate our towns. We also know that protecting nature is our first line of defence, and whether that is restoring our moorland at home, insisting on biodiversity net gain in developments or safeguarding oceans abroad, the principle is the same.

I commend the Government for introducing the Bill, which is a vital step in turning the international commitments into real action. The next challenge is to ensure that the Bill not only passes but is properly enforced and resourced, as many colleagues have said. I look forward to hearing more detail on that from the Minister. Let us see this as the first day of Britain's leadership on our seas.

2.40 pm

**Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Ind): On land and at sea, our natural environment has suffered a soul-crushing collapse over many decades, putting the future of iconic species and entire ecosystems at risk, as was so eloquently described by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) in a tour de force of a speech. The Government were elected on a clear promise to end that catastrophic decline, the long-term consequences of which, if we do not reverse that trend,

will be profound. Our food security depends on healthy ecosystems, the bedrock of our economy is our natural capital, and the public—our voters—cherish our seas, rivers, coastlines, ancient woodlands and national parks. They will not be forgiving of a political system that fails to protect and restore our shared natural inheritance.

The Bill is a particularly vital step towards the renewed protection of our natural environment. It recognises that biodiversity does not obey national borders or jurisdiction, so neither can our duty to safeguard it. As obvious as that truth may seem to the public, let alone conservationists, successive Governments have failed to give the high seas the attention they need. The Bill begins to put that right by at last creating a legal framework for the UK to ratify the UN BBNJ agreement and meet our international obligations in full.

As has been noted, just 1% of the high seas have full protection, and there is still much research to be done on deep sea ecosystems, but they are increasingly recognised as a key global reservoir of biodiversity, so the crucial task is to move the legislation forward quickly and end the crisis engulfing our oceans. Industrial fishing practices such as bottom trawling—the underseas equivalent of ploughing a bulldozer through a wild flower meadow—are tearing apart fragile seabed habitats while trawl nets indiscriminately catch and discard countless non-target, endangered species. Once those species are gone, they will be gone forever, and their entire intricate web of connections will go with them, unravelling irreplaceable ecosystems with profound knock-on effects that we can neither predict nor prevent.

As has been mentioned, if we fail to pass the Bill urgently, the UK will not have a seat at the table for the treaty's first COP. That would not only represent a dereliction of our international obligations—we have as great a responsibility as any nation to protect global biodiversity—but silence our voice in safeguarding our own national interests, such as the protection of the UK's 8 million seabirds, over half of which are already in decline. Species such as the albatross and the petrel spend more than 80% of their lives foraging on the high seas. We cannot protect them with action on our own coastlines alone, yet Britain stripped of her seabirds would hardly be Britain at all. Other countries will have their own priorities and national interests to pursue, so our Government must be at the table playing its part in securing the long-term future of the many species that play such an important part in our culture and identity.

I welcome the Bill and the opportunity it creates to discuss nature and biodiversity in this place: a topic of serious debate right now for the public and for the Government. I close by saying again that decisions driven by an ideology that prioritises profit over people and the environment did not just undermine our economy; they wrecked our natural world and our social cohesion. National renewal must mean economic revival, but also once more cherishing those things that make life beautiful, and that means protecting nature. I thank Ministers today for doing just that.

2.45 pm

**Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Cannock Chase may be one of the most landlocked constituencies in the country, but that has not stopped my constituents from writing to me in support of the Bill, and rightly so. If anyone does come across a marine genetic resource in

Staffordshire, I would be impressed and also slightly concerned, but the point is this: what happens in the world's oceans matters just as much to the people of my constituency as it does to those living on the coast. As the wise Franklin D. Roosevelt once said,

“The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.”

I would like to extend that to say that the world that destroys its oceans destroys itself. The UK has long positioned itself as a global leader on marine protection, and with the BBNJ agreement about to enter force—on 17 January—we must not give up our status on marine conservation. That is why I speak in support of the Bill: legislation that gives the Government the ability to ratify that vital United Nations agreement and take part in the world's first ocean COP next year.

As the new chair of the all-party parliamentary group on UK food security, I want to emphasise how vital the Bill is in protecting the long-term health of our global food systems. The high seas—those vast areas of ocean beyond any single country's jurisdiction—are essential to our food security. They are home to rich marine ecosystems, and globally over 3 billion people rely on fish for at least 20% of their animal protein intake—for many coastal and island nations, that figure is much higher—yet the vast majority of these waters have long been unregulated and are vulnerable to a multitude of threats including overfishing, unrestricted oil drilling, pollution and deep sea mining, which directly threaten not just ocean health but global food security. I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) that, to ensure the agreement has real impact, the Government must rapidly push for new marine protected areas in international waters.

The Bill will enable the UK to play an active role in addressing all those threats. It will extend marine licensing requirements to British activities beyond our waters and mandate environmental outcome reports for potentially harmful activity. It will also ensure greater transparency in the collection and use of marine genetic resources, the biological material from marine organisms that holds immense promise for medicine, biotechnology and food innovation. It is often said that the world's rainforests hold countless discoveries to come that could cure many illnesses and enable advancements that will enrich our human existence—as well as, I certainly hope, our stewardship of the natural world. However, although they are often overlooked, the same is very much true of our oceans. These scientific and ecological discoveries must benefit all nations and not simply be the preserve of the already wealthy. I therefore very much welcome the emphasis on open access repositories and databases that is so prominent in the BBNJ agreement. The agreement also embeds vital safeguards like the “polluter pays” principle and the precautionary principle. I hope it will pave the way for international action that will finally turn the tide—pun absolutely intended—on the reckless destructive practices that nations across the world have perpetrated.

I could not let the opportunity to speak on the high seas go by without mentioning the global plastics treaty, on which I hope we can find international agreement soon. I pay strong tribute to the Minister and the British delegation to the Geneva talks. We know from her recent appearance at the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that she deeply regrets the collapse of those talks without an agreement, and I know

that she is already redoubling efforts to find a way forward so that we can start to halt and reverse environmental catastrophes such as the great Pacific garbage patch. I urge the Government to do whatever they can alongside fellow members of the High Ambition Coalition to end plastic pollution and advance international action on this urgent issue.

As we have heard, the Government have committed to protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030. The Bill makes good on that commitment on an international level, not just as an environmental ambition, but as a foundation for international co-operation, sustainable development and global food resilience. I commend the Government for their leadership in bringing this legislation forward, particularly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) said, in a packed legislative programme as we seek to get our country back on its feet. It demonstrates this Government's commitment to and prioritising of the health and sustainability of our oceans beyond national jurisdiction, and I urge colleagues across the House to support it.

Whether we live by the sea or in Cannock Chase in the heart of England, a healthy ocean is essential to a secure and sustainable future for us all. The oceans cannot wait, and nor should the United Kingdom.

2.50 pm

**John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Our oceans are teeming with complex life, but today they are also in a state of crisis. Climate change, pollution, overfishing, habitat destruction and plastics are all placing our oceans under strain like never before. Our oceans are paying the price, with more than a third of UK fish stocks currently overfished and more than a third of marine mammals at risk of extinction.

The high seas treaty, which the Bill will ratify into UK law, represents a significant and much-needed step forward. For the first time, the treaty creates a legal mechanism to establish marine protected areas in international waters—a crucial tool to ensure that by 2030, and in accordance with the global biodiversity framework, 30% of the world's land and sea will be protected. However, the success of the treaty will depend on whether it is enforced, so I urge the Government to ensure that adequate funding is provided to help to protect these newly created marine protected areas.

We must also do our bit at home to protect marine life here in the UK. Some 38% of UK waters are now designated as marine protected areas. However, during our inquiry into the marine environment, the Environmental Audit Committee heard that these sites lacked sufficient protection to contribute towards our targets of protecting 30% of land and sea. While Government proposals to nearly triple the amount of seabed protection from bottom trawling are welcome, I therefore urge the Government to enact the recommendation from the Environmental Audit Committee and ban bottom trawling in all marine protected areas; without a ban, it is hard to see how we can claim that these areas are protected at all. Bottom trawling is a highly destructive practice that tears up the seabed, destroys habitats and releases carbon stored in the ocean floor. As David Attenborough said in his film “Ocean”, the idea of bulldozing a rainforest causes outrage, but we do the same underwater every day.

[John Whitby]

We also cannot protect our oceans without addressing the climate crisis. The oceans have absorbed 90% of all excess heat caused by climate change, and this excess heat is resulting in widespread marine heatwaves that are killing marine ecosystems and causing our oceans to acidify. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has been clear that if we allow warming to reach 1.5°C, the vast majority of coral reefs will be lost forever. The willingness of some of our opponents to abandon climate commitments means that it is on us to go further and faster and to do all that we can to protect nature and stop the climate crisis. This Bill represents a welcome move in that direction.

2.52 pm

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): “It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement, the greatest source of visual beauty, the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living”—wise words by David Attenborough. They are words that everyone can relate to, whether that is a university professor in Oxford, a 12-year-old watching “Blue Planet” on the BBC or, indeed, the specialist in ocean conservation I met yesterday as part of my role as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the ocean. Everyone in this room, in this country and on this planet has an interest in ensuring that our oceans are protected.

When we stare down from space at our blue jewel of a world, it is simply unfathomable that 230 million square kilometres of it are at present effectively unmanaged. It is a free-for-all. It has been allowed to become so because of history, but we now have the obligation to create a system of management, both in this room and across multilateral agreements with other countries. It is the wonder of our democracy in this country and other countries around the world that we can finally introduce a piece of legislation where we can manage many of these locations.

I stand as a proud MP for Medway, in particular Chatham, which has an historic dockyard that served much of our maritime trade and provided support to the Royal Navy. Many in my community have a proud history and legacy of serving on the oceans, from working on fleets supplying freight to participating in our royal naval tradition.

Our country has a proud history of conservation through the National Trust and other terrestrial organisations. We also have a number of third-party sector organisations that are committed to delivering on ocean conservation, not just through this treaty but through the many there have been in the past. Such organisations include Oceana and the Marine Conservation Society.

There is also excellent work being done by Plymouth University and Southampton’s National Oceanography Centre, which my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) and I had the pleasure of visiting earlier this year. Our Natural History Museum, with its work in London and across the country, the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace have all advocated for this in many ways and continue to do so. In many cases their work is not high profile; they do their work quietly and behind the scenes, such as by engaging with DEFRA—I am sure the civil servants can attest to this—and ensuring that they are safeguarding our fisheries and world.

This Bill is extremely welcome and timely. The high seas treaty reached its required 60 ratifications on 19 September, and the 60th ratification triggered a 120-day countdown, after which the treaty comes into force. If we want to be at that multilateral table to deliver for our residents in our communities and our country, we need to deliver this legislation. I welcome the Bill being placed before the House, and I welcome the debate with Members across this Chamber—from those who are fascinated by the sperm whale or the right whale to those who have rowed across oceans and seas.

The contents of the Bill are critical. Genetic heritage has not been mentioned much today, but it is a critical element as it can lead to cures for cancer and heart disease. Genetic heritage is a marker for our future on this planet. If there are cures that come as a result of this legislation, it is today that we give security and licence to it. The designation of marine protection areas has been much debated across this Chamber with regard to UK controls, and I agree with many of my colleagues that we need to do more domestically to protect our MPAs, make them fit for purpose and allow them live up to their designation.

This legislation creates the licence for marine protection areas in international waters, which will support our heritage and legacy for future generations. It is a pathway to the goal of protecting 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030. The Bill also gives scientific protections around licensing. We know that there are significant challenges for both our biotic and abiotic resources. Much time has been spent this afternoon discussing the damage caused by international industrial fisheries, with new technologies and industrial-sized trawlers coming from many nations of the world. The damage caused by these monsters, as I refer to them, is decimating not only our biological resources directly in that location but sea birds, species and any food chains associated with it.

There is also a debate about mining and drilling to be had in the next 10 to 20 years as we begin to get access to our deep-sea resources. Whether it is hydrates or base metals that we need, we need to have that conversation, so I implore the Government to look very closely at any moratorium. Then there is climate change, which is not to be denied by many across the world. It is happening. Species are under threat, and the destruction of habitats as a result of the warming and acidification of the ocean is impacting both coral reefs and seaweed beds.

To conclude, I still have a number of questions around the use of the Marine Management Organisation in this country and regional fisheries management organisations. How much extra resource will they need, because I certainly have questions at present around the MMO and its oversight? How do we know that this is going to be enforced? The UN has calculated that to make this effective we might need to look at figures of around \$170 billion annually. Where is that money going to come from?

There are serious questions about who will enforce overfishing protection and marine protection areas when we have fishing piracy going on around the world. What are the measures for dispute resolution? We know that there are United Nations convention on the law of the sea disputes around the South China sea with China, and disputes are also ongoing over the Arctic, so what measures and mediation will this treaty introduce? This

treaty tells everyone watching about our values, whether they be a 12-year-old “Blue Planet” watcher or a professor in a submersible in the Arctic. It sets the tone for the next hundred years. It is necessary that we do this and I implore colleagues to support it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.59 pm

**Pippa Heylings:** With the leave of the House, it only remains to say that we have heard, across the Chamber, impassioned and professional expertise. We have also heard about the importance of working together, not only in terms of multilateralism—[*Interruption.*] I hope that Members on the Conservative Front Bench are listening. We have also heard about the importance of working across the Chamber, on something that is so vital to all our constituents, our allies across the world and those in our overseas territories to finally fill the gap of the lawless part of the oceans through a global ocean governance that we can all agree on collectively.

That will be hard. As hon. Members have heard, I have worked with artisanal and industrial fishermen and with researchers, scientists and conservationists. It is not, and it will not be, easy to come to an agreement about area-based management plans and the ocean sanctuaries and MPAs that we are looking to create, but we can do it if we all work together. I implore hon. Members, across all parties and Benches, that we get to ratification in a timely fashion so that we can be part of the new global ocean movement, sit at the table at the first global ocean COP and take a leading position going forward. We owe it to ourselves, to the children of everyone we know and to the future of the planet.

3.2 pm

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con):** This has been a wide-ranging and important debate on a vital Bill. There have been many valuable and informed contributions, not least from the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes), for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne). The hon. Member for Exeter (Steve Race) is rightly proud of the great academic institutions in his constituency, highlighting the important role that UK research plays in the world.

It was a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) making one of the first Back-Bench contributions. She reinforced the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) made about the destruction of the marine environment. I know that she speaks from a position not just of expertise but of passion, and she has shown that over so many years, with a commitment to our oceans and with the work that she has led on.

May I say to the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings), that she shows why it is so important that we have people in this House with such wide-ranging experience, who have had lives outside this place? She has brought expertise to the debate and I am sure that many of us

envy her in what she has been able to do, the intellect that she has applied to the argument and the fact that we can all listen carefully to what she has said.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said something important when she talked about marine deforestation and some of the mainstream media shows that had footage that she had heard had been too shocking to show. That represents a real problem in this debate. Are we wrapping this up in cotton wool for some people, to not show exactly what we are trying to deal with? She made the important point that we should not hide from what is going on in the world.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman to an extent. It was reported in *The Guardian* that some of the footage was deemed too shocking to be shown. I do not know whether he has seen it, but what remains in the film is incredibly powerful. I have read about bottom trawling in the newspapers for a long time, so I knew about it from a factual perspective, but it was only when I saw those images that it was brought home to me how terrible it is.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that important intervention.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) raised the importance of mainstream media. We are grateful for her apology to my hon. Friend the Member for Romford for misinterpreting his drive about the importance of the Chagos islands.

It is disappointing that the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who is no longer in his place, felt that not enough of my colleagues were in attendance, but those of us who were here have stayed here—Mr Speaker has commented on many an occasion that I can often be more than enough. The hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) pointed out how little we know about the oceans. That is an important point. It has often been said that space exploration gets lots of coverage and we talk about it very much—indeed, we are talking about manning the moon again, and maybe using it as a launch pad to go to Mars—yet so much of our own planet is completely unknown and unexplored.

That brings me to the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), who has a genuine interest and expertise. He gave a wide ranging and important speech and made an important point about the ocean being one of the biggest solutions to climate change. He is indeed right that the European economic zones are a legacy from the days when we owned half the world. One of the great achievements of the last Conservative Government is the work we did on the blue belt and on ensuring that we protected important marine environments. I do not know whether he will expand on this in later debates, but I noticed that he did not appear to be fully supportive of giving up on the fisheries from the EU with the EU reset. I wonder whether he may have things to add to that debate at another time, but perhaps now is not the time and place. However, he does make an important point that we can only do what we have to do as a country if we have the ability to do it in those waters.

The way that the hon. Member for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane) approached the subject of the Conservative party's record in this area was a real pity. I am proud of some of the work we did on the blue

[*Sir Alec Shelbrooke*]

belt, including working on this Bill, and as we have seen during the debate, there is wide support for it across the House.

The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) pointed out her genuine delight in the fact that this House has so many experts to speak on such an important issue. She echoed the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford on what will happen with the Chagos Bill. I do not want to go into great detail on that, because we are going to be here a long time on Monday evening debating that Bill, but I think she was driving at the fact that the assurances in the Chagos Bill do not go far enough in protecting the blue belt. I welcome her clarification that my party has raised the issue of the blue belt. She comes with expertise and deserves to be listened to when she is raising these important points.

The Minister opened the debate by talking about the urgency and importance of this moment. That is true. When my hon. Friend the Member for Romford spoke, he made some very serious points, not least about how we can ensure that the responsibilities that the United Kingdom has always taken towards marine fisheries do not get overridden if we cannot control our work entirely. He made the point that, in the scheme of things, we must ensure that we do not hand over the ability to other countries to stop us doing that work.

The reality is that—again, I will touch briefly on this because it is not part of the debate—the UN Security Council, set up for a reason, finds it hard to react to what is happening in Ukraine because Russia can override anything with its veto. We must ensure that we have the ability, as a Government and a country, to employ the laws and protections that we need to put in place. We will raise these areas in Committee, even if that is through probing amendments, because we want to ensure that the Bill can do exactly what it intends to do.

The reality of the Bill also comes into some of these situations that we see on the horizon. We know about the opening up of the Arctic, the melting of the sea ice and the opening of the north-east passage, which for many months—certainly weeks—of the year is fully navigable; the ice has gone away by that much. At the same time, we know that President Putin and the Russians have said that there are hydrocarbon resources in that ocean that they want to mine. That would be devastating for the fragile ecosystems that exist in that unique area of the world, which is almost completely untouched.

I had the pleasure back in May of being part of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly visit to Svalbard. The University Centre in Svalbard has dozens of countries, universities, academic institutions and hundreds of nationalities studying that region, climate change and the effect it has on the Arctic, and the effects on ecosystems. It is absolutely vital, as we see the geopolitical tensions forming in areas where they have not been before, that we have those strong protections in place.

**Barry Gardiner:** Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** I was about to finish, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Barry Gardiner:** The right hon. Member is absolutely right to talk about the opening up of the Arctic and the geo-strategic threats that we face there. In that respect,

would he support my earlier call that the Government should release the Joint Intelligence Committee's report on the link between biodiversity, sustainability and national security?

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** I will not be drawn quite into that trap about releasing Joint Intelligence reports. However, the hon. Gentleman makes an important point, because there is no doubt that we are talking about sovereign security if we do not get this right, and that applies to all countries around the world. If we allow climate change and not the protection of valuable ecosystems, as has been described by many hon. and right hon. Members across the House, it is all of us who will suffer.

We have our concerns about some areas of the Bill. We will be tabling some amendments in Committee and probing those areas, but on the whole we hope that we can support the Bill, and it is important to carry on the work that our Government started.

3.12 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra):** I thank the shadow Ministers and hon. and right hon. Members across the House for their thoughtful and constructive contributions to the debate. It has been encouraging to hear the broad support for this important piece of legislation, and to hear the expertise, both from Members' life experience prior to coming to this House and from the extensive work of our Committees over a long period of time.

I want to recognise the work of a number of the key stakeholders involved in informing the debate, some of whom I was able to speak to in the course of preparing for today, including the Marine Conservation Society, Greenpeace, Oceana, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Blue Marine Foundation. I want to make a cheeky remark towards the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), for whom I have a lot of respect, in that he suggested he could make up for the fact that there were no Conservative Back Benchers here during the debate, but indeed he made a useful contribution. That is important, because this should be a whole-of-House debate. It is important to recognise that we are continuing work that was started under the previous Government and that we supported all the way through. It is important that Members from all parties are present as the Bill starts its passage through the House, because as I will set out, it is important to inform the implementation and the ongoing debate.

I will draw on and respond to the contributions that have been made during my remarks. In particular, I know that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings)—whose comments, based on her extensive experience, were very much respected by the House—will make a great contribution during the passage of the legislation. She also talked about the importance of multilateralism and how we play our part with others around the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has experience of chairing a number of APPGs and has made a long-standing contribution. I will come back to some of the points she raised, but it was helpful to hear from her early in the debate.

We also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—I will come back to some of the points she raised—my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), who chairs the Environmental Audit Committee, for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), for Exeter (Steve Race), for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes), for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), and the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane) and for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff). That goes to show that we have had a whole-of-nation debate.

Before I turn to my more detailed remarks, I want to make a point about young people and the next generation. The important point was made that the oceans do not have voters, but when I think about the issues that are most important to young people, including in primary schools in my constituency, the health of our oceans and how we protect our environment are very high on the agenda. The oceans have their supporters across all generations, and that is important.

Let me start by reminding the House why this Bill and the BBNJ agreement matter. The BBNJ agreement is a huge step towards protecting our shared ocean. It will enable greater conservation of the two-thirds of the ocean that lies beyond national jurisdictions and will support the delivery of the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework, which includes the target to effectively conserve and manage at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. Environmental degradation could lead to huge economic costs globally, making ocean conservation a long-term economic imperative, too. The agreement supports the UK's wider climate and nature agenda, ensuring that we remain at the forefront of global efforts to tackle biodiversity loss and climate change through multilateral co-operation. It also strengthens the role of international law and multilateral institutions, and reinforces the UN convention on the law of the sea as the foundation for global governance.

There are also clear opportunities for the UK, which has one of the world's leading marine scientific research communities. World-renowned institutions in the UK, such as the National Oceanography Centre, the Marine Biological Association and our leading university marine science departments, are at the forefront of ocean research and will greatly benefit from provisions in the agreement that promote transparency and data sharing around marine genetic resources. The Bill, along with the secondary legislation that will follow, will deliver on our commitment to ratify this historic agreement.

Let me turn to some of the points raised in the debate, and I will aim to answer as many questions as possible. In relation to the Chagos islands, this deal will help to protect the unique environment of the Chagos archipelago. Both the UK and Mauritius have committed to protect what is one of the world's most important marine environments, and that commitment will be supported by an enhanced partnership between both countries, under which the UK will support Mauritius's ambitions to establish a marine protected area that protects the globally significant ecosystems in the Chagos archipelago. The UK's support for this will be agreed in a separate written instrument as part of the implementation

of the agreement, and Government officials have already begun discussing with their Mauritian counterparts what it will involve. This has been welcomed by leading conservation NGOs, including the Zoological Society of London, and both the UK and Mauritius attach great importance to the need to protect marine biodiversity, including the fight against illegal fishing.

It is worth mentioning that under the treaty, the UK will continue to manage environmental protection on Diego Garcia and the surrounding 12 nautical miles. That shall be undertaken in accordance with applicable international law and with due regard to applicable Mauritian environmental laws. The Minister for Europe, North America and the overseas territories, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), is at the heart of these discussions and has been leading on maritime protection in the overseas territories through expansion and confirmation of funding for the blue belt programme and our work in the polar regions. He has met scientists in the Cayman Islands and Bermuda last month and on board the royal research ship Sir David Attenborough to discuss their crucial work in the Antarctic and Arctic. We are doing crucial work on the convention for the conservation of Antarctic marine living resources, which I am sure will be the subject of further debate in the House.

**Andrew Rosindell:** I thank the Minister for speaking about the points made about the British Indian Ocean Territory by myself and others, including the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). The marine protected area was established by the Government of Gordon Brown at the tail end of the last Labour Government. It is a vital area that we need to protect. What guarantees can she honestly say we are getting that, if we are to hand over the sovereignty of the Chagos archipelago to Mauritius, Mauritius will protect it in the same way we have done under both Labour and Conservative Governments?

**Seema Malhotra:** I reiterate what I said: both the UK and Mauritius attach great importance to the need to protect marine biodiversity. Indeed, the UK will still have responsibility for managing environmental protection on Diego Garcia and the surrounding 12 nautical miles, and discussions are ongoing in relation to the establishment of the marine protected area, which will be the subject of a separate written agreement. I cannot speak further on that, because I want to go through other points, but I am sure the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth will be happy to discuss this matter further in the House.

The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) raised the issue of protecting intellectual property rights. The Secretary of State will not transmit information to the clearing-house mechanism that would be protected under intellectual property or trade secrets law. I am sure the hon. Member will be aware of that from his reading of the Bill.

A number of Members spoke about the process and implementation. This is a very significant step, as we move to ratify the agreement at the United Nations, which will happen following the passage of the Bill and associated secondary legislation. Indeed, it is a huge

[Seema Malhotra]

step towards protecting our shared ocean. It will provide the legal framework necessary to implement the BBNJ agreement domestically, ensuring the UK is able to comply fully with its international obligations under the agreement. The Bill and subsequent statutory instruments will ensure that we can implement and enforce future decisions of the conference of the parties.

At international level, a preparatory commission has been established to prepare for the convening of the first conference of the parties. The UK has been fully engaged in the work of the preparatory commission, including co-chairing a working group on the design of the clearing-house mechanism with Barbados. That will lay the groundwork for a successful first conference of the parties, which will enable parties and stakeholders to progress work on the ambitious implementation of the agreement.

In her opening remarks, my the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), referred to the consultation that we have had on bottom trawling, as well as to the work we are doing on proposals to restrict bottom trawling in more vulnerable marine habitats. The Government have outlined plans to restrict damaging fishing activity in marine protected areas, where that is needed to protect designated species and habitats. A number of Members mentioned plastic pollution, and the Government participated in the UN Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution to develop an international legally binding instrument. It is disappointing that an agreement was not reached at the resumed fifth session in Geneva in August, but we continue to work on it. Indeed, we are a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution.

The hon. Member for South Cotswolds raised the matter of institutional co-ordination, and I confirm that the FCDO ocean policy unit will be the national focal point, working closely with DEFRA and the Department for Transport.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East asked about deep-sea mining. The UK supports a moratorium on the granting of exploration contracts for deep-sea mining projects by the International Seabed Authority. That means that we will not sponsor or support the issuing of such contracts until sufficient scientific guidance is available.

On the polluter pays and the precautionary principles, parties to the BBNJ agreement are guided by such principles and approaches. It is therefore our view that there is no specific need to include those principles in the Bill.

**Pippa Heylings:** Will the Minister give way?

**Seema Malhotra:** I am running out of time, but I will be happy to pick this up with the hon. Member afterwards. Ministers will have to abide by the principles that I mentioned, and the Environment Act 2021 places a

duty on Ministers to have due regard to the environmental principles policy statement when making policy; we need always to abide by those principles.

I thank Members from across the House for their thoughtful and constructive contributions. I have sought to address as many of the points raised as possible, but I am happy to speak to colleagues about those that I did not reach. I am encouraged by the strong cross-party support for this important Bill. This landmark piece of legislation ensures that the UK can play its full part in the international movement to ratify the treaty. The measures it contains will not only strengthen and safeguard our marine ecosystems, but will strengthen our environmental security and deliver real benefits for the UK's research and innovation community. The Bill represents the UK taking decisive action, protecting the ocean that sustains us all, while empowering scientists, innovators and institutions in shaping its future. I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

### BIODIVERSITY BEYOND NATIONAL JURISDICTION BILL (PROGRAMME)

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill:

#### *Committal*

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

#### *Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading*

(2) Proceedings in Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

#### *Other proceedings*

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—  
(*Stephen Morgan.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### BIODIVERSITY BEYOND NATIONAL JURISDICTION BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill, it is expedient to authorise the imposition of charges or fees under or by virtue of the Act.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Children's Hospices: South-east England

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

3.29 pm

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's announcement this morning, in anticipation of this afternoon's debate, of £80 million of support for children's hospices over three years. I thank the Minister for listening to the calls of the children's hospice sector and the Liberal Democrats.

The three-year settlement will enable hospices to plan and deliver services over a longer period. Above all, it will ensure that seriously ill children and their families can continue to access hospice care. However, providers tell me that this level of funding does not solve the children's hospice funding crisis, nor does it put children's hospices on a genuinely long-term, sustainable financial footing. Bluntly, this funding will only slow the rate at which children's hospice services are being cut.

Across the south-east—indeed, across the whole of England—children's hospices support thousands of seriously ill babies, children and young people, and the families who love and care for them. One such organisation is Shooting Star Children's Hospices. A parent recent said:

“Without the support of the team at Shooting Star I believe our family would be under enormous strain and feel unable to know where to turn.”

They are places of compassion, expert medical care and human dignity. They provide everything from end-of-life care to vital symptom management and psychological support, but our children's hospices are in crisis. Unless urgent action is taken, many may disappear.

Since 2019, the number of children and young people needing end-of-life care has doubled. The demand for symptom management has surged by 108%. Hospices are having to provide more care and support than ever before, yet they are struggling to keep their doors open. At the same time, inflation and rising costs, particularly in recruiting and retaining highly skilled staff, has driven hospice expenditure up by an average of 15% in the past year alone.

The Government's disastrous national insurance hike has only exacerbated the existing pressures. For example, Southern Hospice Group is a local charity made up of three Sussex hospices: Chestnut Tree House children's hospice near Arundel, Martlets in Hove and St Barnabas House in Worthing. The national insurance rise has collectively cost them £500,000. Yes, the Government have increased funding in cash terms, but it is simply not enough. Local NHS funding from integrated care boards remains 18% lower than it was three years ago, even as hospices stretch to meet rising demand. Children's hospices are now dipping into their reserves to stay open. In 2024-25, 59% of them ended the year in deficit. In 2025-26, that figure is expected to rise to a staggering 91%. This is clearly not sustainable.

Meanwhile, a postcode lottery in funding continues. Recent freedom of information requests conducted by the charity Together for Short Lives showed that some integrated care boards in London spent over £400 per child needing palliative care, while others spent less than £25. We see that too in the south-east: one ICB

spent over £260 per child, while another spent just over £100. Only 32% of ICBs could even say how many children accessed hospice care in their region. This gap in data must be filled.

The announcement this morning suggested that funding being distributed via ICBs would tackle the postcode lottery issue, but the results of these FOI requests suggest that there is an awfully long way to go. How will the Minister ensure that ICBs commission children's hospice services equitably? What guidance will they be given to ensure that these vast variations in support are eliminated?

If I can emphasise one thing, it is that people are the beating heart of the hospice movement. Highly qualified specialists, passionate volunteers and generous donors all make the seemingly impossible happen, but the workforce is in crisis. Incredibly, there are only 24 full-time equivalent paediatric palliative medicine specialists serving the entire UK, when we know the need is for at least 40 to 60. If we followed the guidelines of the Royal College of Nursing, we would have nearly 5,000 community children's nurses; right now, we have under 1,000. The professionals who care for our sickest children are being stretched to breaking point.

I urge the Minister and the Government to build on today's announcement by first fixing the broken commissioning system. We must instruct NHS England and the Department to model what each local NHS body should be spending on palliative care and to hold them accountable. We must commission services at regional and national levels, where appropriate, to create economies of scale, and we must use the new pan-ICB commissioning offices to ensure consistent and equitable access to care across England.

Secondly, we must tackle workforce shortages and invest an additional £2.4 million per year in GRID and SPIN training for paediatric palliative medicine. We must fund and implement safe staffing ratios for nurses and aim to employ the 4,960 community nurses that England truly needs.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. An amazing children's hospice that serves constituents in my patch is Demelza, which has an amazing array of staff, volunteers and the rest, including Queen's nurses such as Donna Mole. Will my hon. Friend congratulate Donna on being a recipient of that award? Will she also congratulate the fabulous Fia, one of the children served by the hospice, on a book that she has written, and will she encourage the Minister to order a copy?

**Alison Bennett:** I thank my hon. Friend for celebrating the work of Queen's nurses and fabulous Fia for what she has done in writing a book—I am not sure that I could do that. It is truly impressive, and I am happy to encourage the Minister to buy the book; it sounds like I had better buy it too.

This is about real children like fabulous Fia. It is about real families and real suffering that could be eased. Children's hospices provide £3.32 of care for every £1 invested by the state, which is extraordinary value, so they deserve more support. These children deserve dignity, comfort and skilled care, and their families deserve the support that only children's hospices can offer.

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): My hon. Friend has brought forward a critical debate on children's hospices. While we are looking at children's hospices, let me say that this issue is also critical for adult hospices. In South Cambridgeshire, we have the fabulous Arthur Rank hospice, which at the moment is looking toward the cutting of its adult hospice beds. The outcry from constituents and members is huge. Does my hon. Friend agree that the ICBs could look at strategic commissioning of that care across both adult and children's hospice beds?

**Alison Bennett:** I thank my hon. Friend for the campaigning she is doing with her colleagues on Arthur Rank hospice in Cambridgeshire, and she is right. When I went to visit Chestnut Tree House in Sussex last week, I saw that it is talking to adult hospices in the area about where that more strategic view can happen.

These children deserve dignity, comfort and skilled care, and their families deserve the support that only children's hospices can offer. Will this Government truly support the vision laid out in the NHS 10-year plan in which neighbourhood health centres, hospitals and hospices work together to deliver high-quality end-of-life care in the community, or will we continue to let these vital services be ignored, underfunded and unconnected? There is an opportunity for more action than that in this morning's announcement and for a longer-term commitment. I urge the Minister to do what is necessary and right and ensure that no child is left without the care and dignity that they deserve.

3.39 pm

**The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnoch):** I thank the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) for securing this vital debate. I also thank all those who work or volunteer in the palliative care and end-of-life care sector for their care and support—the compassion that they provide to patients, families and loved ones when they need it most.

This Government want a society in which every child receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to the end of life, irrespective of condition or geographical location. In England, integrated care boards are responsible for the commissioning of palliative care and end-of-life care services to meet the needs of their local populations. To support ICBs in that duty, NHS England has published statutory guidance and service specifications. It has also developed a palliative care and end-of-life care dashboard, which brings together all relevant local data in one place. That dashboard helps commissioners to understand the palliative care and end-of-life care needs of their local population.

While the majority of palliative care and end-of-life care is provided by NHS staff and services, we recognise the vital part that voluntary sector organisations, including hospices, also play in providing support to people at the end of life and their loved ones. In recognition of this, we are supporting the hospice sector with a £100 million capital funding boost for eligible adult and children and young people's hospices in England, to ensure they have the best physical environment for care. I am pleased that the first £25 million tranche of that funding, which Hospice UK kindly allocated and distributed to hospices throughout England, was fully spent by hospices on capital projects. An additional £75 million has been

transferred to Hospice UK for onward allocation to individual hospices for use in the 2025-26 financial year, and I know that many hospices are already spending that funding this year.

Hospices in London and the south-east are receiving over £28 million of that £100 million capital funding. That includes over £4 million for children and young people's hospices in London and the south-east. We are also providing £26 million in revenue funding to support children and young people's hospices for 2025-26. This is a continuation of the funding that, until recently, was known as the children and young people's hospice grant. Children and young people's hospices in London and the south-east are receiving almost £8.5 million of that £26 million of revenue funding.

As confirmed in my written ministerial statement laid earlier today, I am delighted and proud to be in a position to announce that we will continue that centrally administered funding for the next three years of this spending review period. That includes the 2026-27 to 2028-29 financial years, as well as 2025-26. Each year, children and young people's hospices in England will receive at least £26 million—adjusted for inflation—from NHS England via their local ICBs. This amounts to at least £78 million over the next three years to support hospice care for children and young people, mirroring current and previous years' transaction arrangements. By doing this, we are promoting a more consistent national approach and supporting commissioners to prioritise the palliative care and end-of-life care needs of their local population. Further details on the delivery of this funding will follow in due course.

This Government's commitment to provide that much-needed funding until the end of the spending review period recognises that the ability to plan for the long term is vital to our children and young people's hospices. I am proud that this Government have removed the cliff edge of annual funding cycles, so that our children and young people's hospices will now be able to operate on the basis of far greater certainty and stability.

**Alison Bennett:** I agree that increasing the time period covered by this grant to children's hospices to three years will really help. Can the Minister comment on whether there are plans to do the same for the adult hospice sector?

**Stephen Kinnoch:** The hon. Lady will know that children's hospices are in a different situation from adult hospices: there has always been a centralised grant for children's hospices, whereas the funding for adult hospices goes through ICBs and is part of the broader budgeting and commissioning process. Clearly, we will need to set an overall financial framework for adult hospices. We are currently going through the final stages of negotiations, both with the Treasury and within the Department of Health and Social Care, to finalise the financial envelopes and allocations for each part of my portfolio and the portfolios of my ministerial colleagues.

Although the investment is important, there are big opportunities around reform. A lot more needs to be done around the early identification of people in need of palliative care and people reaching the end of life. The interface between hospitals, hospices and primary care is nowhere near where it needs to be. A big part of

our neighbourhood health strategy will therefore be about how we ensure that hospices have a strong voice at the table in the holistic integrated planning that is such an important part of the journey. The hon. Lady made some powerful points about that in her speech, and we are looking at the issue as we speak. I am meeting officials to determine how to reform the system. It is not just about the money, but about how the system works. We think that there is huge room for improvement.

I was truly inspired to visit Noah's Ark children's hospice in Barnet yesterday to understand the key issues that it is facing and see how our three-year funding commitment will support it to continue delivering essential palliative care and end-of-life care services to children and young people in its community. When I chatted to the chief executive yesterday, it was very clear how pleased she is to have some stability and certainty in planning the staffing and the services provided at Noah's Ark. It is a wonderful place; I pay tribute to everybody who works there, and to the families.

We recognise the challenges facing the palliative care and end-of-life care sector, particularly hospices. The Department and NHS England are looking at how to improve the access, quality and sustainability of all-age palliative care and end-of-life care, in line with our 10-year health plan. The Government and the NHS will closely monitor the shift towards strategic commissioning of palliative care and end-of-life care services to ensure that services reduce variation in access and quality, although some variation may be appropriate to reflect both innovation and the needs of local populations. Officials will present further proposals to me over the

coming months, outlining the drivers and incentives that are required in palliative care and end-of-life care to enable the shift from hospital to community, including as part of neighbourhood health teams.

Furthermore, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Department is investing £3 million in a policy research unit in palliative and end-of-life care. The unit launched in January 2024 and is building the evidence base on palliative care and end-of-life care, with a specific focus on inequalities and on ironing out the regional variations to which the hon. Lady rightly pointed.

I hope that those measures and our plans reassure hon. Members of this Government's rock-solid commitment to building a sustainable palliative care and end-of-life care sector for the long term. Alongside key partners, NHS England and others will continue to engage proactively with our stakeholders, including the voluntary sector and independent hospices, to understand the issues that they face. We will continue working with NHS England in supporting ICBs to effectively commission the palliative care and end-of-life care needed by their local populations. I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for Mid Sussex for bringing this vital issue to the House, as well as to all hon. Members who have intervened in the debate and are passionately committed to it on behalf of their constituents.

*Question put and agreed to.*

3.49 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 October 2025

[CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

## Black Maternal Health

### HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE

*Select Committee statement*

1.30 pm

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** We start this afternoon's sitting with a Select Committee statement. Paulette Hamilton will speak on the publication of the third report of the Health and Social Care Committee, "Black Maternal Health", for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions can be taken. At the conclusion of Paulette's statement, I will ask Members who want to put questions on the subject to do so, and then call on Paulette to respond to each of those questions in turn. Questions and responses should be brief, please, as we have only 10 minutes, and that will help everyone to get in.

**Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Betts. It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship.

I wish to make a statement on the recent publication of the Health and Social Care Committee's report on black maternal health. I speak on behalf of the Committee, which I formally thank for all its hard work and dedication to this inquiry. I also wish to speak for the black mothers whose lives have been forever changed by failings in maternity healthcare, although I note that many of the issues raised with the Committee affect all women who use maternity services.

I thank all those who gave evidence, written or oral, to this inquiry, and I extend my deepest sympathies to anyone affected by maternal health failings. The voices of black women are at the heart of this report, and I thank them in particular for their powerful and often painful testimonies.

Despite repeated policy commitments and public concerns from multiple Governments, black patients still receive poorer-quality maternity care and support. The support they receive often fails to meet their emotional and cultural needs, which has led to black mothers in England being more than twice as likely to die during childbirth than white mothers. The figure for 2014 to 2016 was almost five times higher, which appears to show that there has been progress in this area, but I stress that the reduction is partly due to worsening outcomes for other groups, not improvements for black women.

Our report follows a comprehensive inquiry that identified three key areas where action is urgently needed: culture, leadership and racism. Racism is one of the core drivers of poor maternal healthcare for black women, and it must therefore be tackled urgently and effectively. Black women suffer stereotyping, bias and

racist assumptions during childbirth, as was made explicitly clear to us throughout our inquiry. The testimonies we heard were harrowing.

Let me share some examples. First, women suffer due to the "strong black woman" trope. During active labour, one woman was denied pain relief and given only paracetamol—her baby was born 10 minutes later. Another woman was told that she could handle the pain despite losing a concerning amount of blood.

We also heard of a midwife who chose to blame an African pelvis for slow labour, rather than check for complications. Another mother was told that she was making noise when she pleaded for help during childbirth, having been ignored by staff. Another experienced racism in its purest form, being told, "This isn't Africa, you know," when she had family members visiting. We also heard of a black woman receiving no breastfeeding help or support from white midwives, which changed only when a black student midwife came on shift. A report from Five X More described similar experiences.

Racism in the NHS not only harms patients; it affects healthcare professionals from minority ethnic backgrounds who encounter and experience the same discrimination and structural barriers, just in a different context. That, alongside the host of other evidence that we received, led us to call for mandatory cultural competency and anti-racism training in the NHS. Currently, where it does exist, it is optional or limited in scope.

We also call for leadership to be held accountable for creating inclusive and anti-racist environments, as we have heard that NHS trusts can refuse even to acknowledge that racism exists in their services. When we spoke to the Minister, Baroness Merron, she agreed that greater accountability is needed. That is welcome, and we will continue to hold her and the wider Government to account on this issue.

The second key area for improvement is the workforce. The NHS currently faces a shortfall of 2,500 midwives. On top of that, 74% of midwives cite unrealistic workloads, and 87% report unsafe staffing levels. Those shortages directly impact the quality and continuity of care that all mothers receive. It is essential that there are firm commitments in the upcoming workforce plan to deliver safe staffing levels for maternity services. We also know the importance of continuity of care to both midwives and mothers in building trust, tailoring support and spotting warning signs early. That used to be a national target, but it was abandoned three years ago due to workforce pressures. We call for that target to be reinstated in the upcoming plan.

Workforce diversity is also paramount. We have heard that, despite almost a third of the workforce coming from minority ethnic backgrounds, that is true of only 12.7% of senior NHS managers, and 95% of midwife educators are white. The plan must therefore include specific targets to diversify maternity leadership and education, backed by robust monitoring.

The third area is data. Without complete data, disparities in maternal outcomes cannot be accurately identified, let alone improved. That is particularly relevant in two areas. First, the current frameworks for monitoring maternal morbidity do not have the same scope or rigour as those for baby deaths or maternal mortality. Successive Governments have discussed implementing a maternal morbidity indicator to track and measure

[Paulette Hamilton]

non-fatal complications such as sepsis, eclampsia and postpartum haemorrhage, but progress has been shockingly slow. Developments must be accelerated on that measure, and there must be a clear timetable for implementation.

Secondly, too many ethnicity entries in the maternity services dataset are recorded as “unknown” or “not stated”. In a 2022 example from the Shrewsbury and Telford hospital, more than 9,000 missing ethnicity background details were identified. Better data is crucial to improving results for those with the lowest outcomes in maternity health: black women. The upcoming workforce plan must also include support and training for effective data collection.

The final area I would like to discuss is funding. All the issues relating to maternity care that I have spoken about today simply cannot be fixed without adequate funding, yet the maternity service development fund has recently been cut from £95 million to £2 million, which is deeply concerning. Although the NHS said that the money is still available and has just been moved elsewhere in the budget, we are concerned that, without ringfenced funding, maternity services will be deprioritised and will continue to cause harm to all mothers. We therefore call on the Government to restore the dedicated, ringfenced funding for the maternity service development fund to its previous amount.

Since 2019, the NHS has faced a £27.7 billion bill for maternity negligence. That exceeds the total maternity budget for the same period by almost £10 billion. I know there are funding pressures across the NHS, but that clearly shows that greater investment here would have the potential to more than pay for itself. Since we launched the inquiry, the Government have announced a rapid national investigation into maternity and neonatal services, which is welcome. Addressing the racial disparities in maternal outcomes must be one of the core aims of the investigation, and I hope to see it as a prominent feature in the investigation’s work.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** Order. I am sorry, but we need to move on to the questions. Time is very short, so can we please have questions, rather than reviews of the report?

**Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab):** I very much welcome the report and the leadership that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) has shown throughout its production. I have the honour of serving on the Health and Social Care Committee, and this is one of the standout pieces of work that we carried out while she was interim Chair.

One of the things that stood out to me as we undertook this investigation was the huge need for cultural change in maternal care, which struck me as very impactful. How can a woman at the most vulnerable point in her life feel safe receiving healthcare from a trust that has been called racist? The need for that cultural change was the key takeaway for me. Does my hon. Friend agree that, on a widespread basis across maternal services in the NHS, this change is desperately needed?

**Paulette Hamilton:** I thank my hon. Friend, who is a brilliant member of the Committee, including during the inquiry. She is absolutely right. The issue of cultural change applies to everybody. We need to look at cultural

change within maternity services, not just for black women but for all women. If we are to get the improvements in maternity care that we need, we need to look at how we can develop both the cultural awareness training and, more so, people’s mindsets, because of how they think within that system.

**Andrew George (St Ives) (LD):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton), my fellow member of the Health and Social Care Committee, not only on the manner in which she handled this inquiry but on the manner in which she stepped in, very appropriately, during our work on maternity care. This is a particularly exciting day, because this morning my niece produced a wonderful, healthy daughter, Aria Diana, weighing 9 lb 7 oz, for heaven’s sake—a very healthy baby. They are in hospital but will, I understand, be discharged this afternoon.

In relation to the report, the hon. Member highlights the importance of workforce and workforce planning. Does she agree that it is a pity that the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists’ workforce toolkit has not been adopted? And does she agree that we should encourage the Minister, who it is great to see here, and the Department to adopt that as quickly as possible so that we can improve the quality of maternity services for all?

**Paulette Hamilton:** I thank the hon. Member, who is a member of the Committee—I love him to bits. He has been absolutely brilliant throughout, and I absolutely agree with him. I press the Government to look a little more carefully at some of the things that have been put forward regarding workforce, because some of them are simple things that would make a massive difference for maternity services.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** I remind Members of the need for brevity in questions.

**Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab):** The statistics in this report and everything they reflect are completely shocking. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for bringing it forward on behalf of the Committee. Records at Leighton, my local hospital, show that work has been done on improving experiences and outcomes for Asian and black women, but unfortunately, given the quality of data collection, it is quite difficult to be sure whether that is translating into better clinical outcomes for everyone—particularly black and Asian women. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to urgently push that work forward?

**Paulette Hamilton:** To be brief, we do need to look at data. It is crucial that the rapid review takes on board the data and improves the way that it is collected and used.

**Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD):** I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for bringing this statement forward. I am sure that all Members are shocked by the statistics showing that black and Asian women have much worse outcomes than white women in maternity services, but we must recognise that improvement in maternity services has stalled overall as well. Does the hon. Member agree that protecting the ringfenced funding is critical to ensuring safe staffing in the future? I hope the Committee will continue to push for that.

**Paulette Hamilton:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. The ringfenced funding was removed. The Committee was told through its inquiry that the funding can still be used—it is just in other parts of the budget. But if we do not have that funding ringfenced, it will not be prioritised. That means that women will continue to suffer in maternity services. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab):** I welcome the work of the Committee and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for her personal leadership on this critical issue. Black women are twice as likely as white women to be hospitalised with mental illness during the perinatal period. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a shocking statistic, and that as we look at the way forward to improve maternity outcomes, we must ensure that mental and physical health are given equal weighting?

**Paulette Hamilton:** Mental health is something that I have been interested in for years. During the inquiry we did not specifically focus on mental health, but it came up through some of the personal statements a number of times. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that mental health should have parity of esteem with physical health. Without good mental health, there is no health.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) and the Committee for what they have brought forward. We live in a society that is multicultural; every part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is multicultural. In my constituency we have people from Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. They are very welcome. What has come out of this report refers to England and Wales. Would the hon. Lady and the Committee share the information with the relevant health organisations back home to ensure that we can all benefit from what this report tells us?

**Paulette Hamilton:** We will of course share this report far and wide. I am hoping that every parliamentarian has had a copy. We will ensure that it gets anywhere that it needs to go. If Members share where it needs to go, we will ensure that it gets there.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab):** As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on black maternal health, I extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) and all the members on the Health and Social Care Committee for this vital report. Was my hon. Friend disappointed, as I was, not to see any specific mention in the NHS 10-year plan of black maternal health? We have long awaited a target and a plan for ending this disparity. Does she agree that that is something we should look towards?

**Paulette Hamilton:** That is a really important question, and the answer is yes. We were absolutely disappointed not to see it. Several members of the Committee highlighted that it was not there.

**Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind):** I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for presenting this report. Does she agree

that we need to have a wider conversation about healthcare for black and ethnic minority individuals, especially as there is a chasm in the provision of healthcare? For example, body mass index, ratios and thresholds, and respiratory meters are not measured for black individuals. We are therefore missing out on detecting health conditions, simply because we are using archaic equipment.

**Paulette Hamilton:** I thank the hon. Member for his question—he knows what I am going to say. Yes, I do agree with him. I became chair of the APPG on black health because I feel passionately that there needs to be more equality in this area.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** I call Tom Hayes and then Ben Coleman: two questions and one response.

**Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab):** I welcome the statement and the important work of the Select Committee. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) for her leadership. It is striking that in England black mums are twice as likely to die as white mums. In Dorset our NHS is really eager to get this right. We have a new maternity, neonatal, early pregnancy and emergency gynaecology unit at the Royal Bournemouth hospital in the new BEACH building, and there is a plan to make records available in accessible languages and formats. Can my hon. Friend speak a little about what Dorset could do more of to make its healthcare more accessible?

**Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab):** As a member of the Health and Social Care Committee I have had the pleasure of working under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) on this report. I have also been a member under her leadership as the vice chair of the APPG on black health. I thank her hugely for all that she has done. I also congratulate the honourable great-uncle for St Ives and Cornwall, the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George). My question is: does my hon. Friend agree that, although powerful, the recommendations in the report are neither new nor radical? They are well known. What would be new and radical, and what would make a change, is if we took advantage of the fact that we have a new Labour Government prepared to do what has not happened to date, which is to listen to black women, implement the recommendations and get women the care and support that they need and deserve.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** Paulette Hamilton has two seconds to respond.

**Paulette Hamilton:** I would like to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) and for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman). I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham says. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East, we do not have long enough to go through what needs to be done, but I think the recommendations in the report would be a good start.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** Order. That is the end of that session. I apologise to the Minister: many Back Benchers wanted to speak and I thought it was right to allow them to. We will move on to the next debate now.

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### World Menopause Day

1.52 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Menopause Day.

I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this important and timely debate during World Menopause Month. We did not have a debate on menopause last year, so this is the first under the current Government. Back in 2023, I asked the last Government for a commitment to show 51% of the population that they matter by prioritising menopause support in healthcare, in the workplace and across society. I might now be sitting on the Government Benches, but I can assure everyone that I still want that commitment, and possibly more.

It feels like I live and breathe menopause—I certainly have for the last seven years since the first World Menopause Day debate in 2018. In that time, two issues that have come up time and again when women have contacted me are the need for better understanding and treatment in primary care and better support in the workplace. Those are the two areas that have been targeted in this year's Menopause Mandate mega-survey. As a proud patron I was delighted to join the team in Oxford Street on Monday at the launch of the results. As has now become custom, the launch was followed by our third annual walk and talk. I am not sure whether there is a collective noun for it, but for want of a better term, a flush of menopausal women, some of whom are here today, walked to the Department for Work and Pensions. I was very grateful to the Minister for accepting the survey results from us on Monday—a survey that reflects the thinking of women from right across the country.

A staggering 15,000 people responded to the survey, and the results offer some truly powerful insights into the menopause experience. There is a lot to unpack, but for me the takeaway statistic, which cannot be ignored, is that 96% of the 15,000 women said that menopause had negatively impacted their quality of life. That is truly heartbreaking.

That is particularly evident in the workplace. More than three quarters of those surveyed said that their symptoms had affected them in the workplace, with one in 10 changing their role and one in 20 quitting their job. These are women with years and years of experience and loyal service, who will have irreplaceable job knowledge. They are women at the prime of their careers, who should be seeking promotion, but without the support they need they are seeking an exit strategy instead. On the plus side, more than a third of the women are now working for an organisation with a menopause policy.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for making such a fantastic contribution on this important topic. I am sure that she will recall the shared visit we had to Tesco in Abertillery, in my constituency, where staff talked about the extensive package of support that their employer gave them. Will she join me in commending employers such as Tesco for leading the way in terms of workplace support for their staff?

**Carolyn Harris:** As with any occasion when I spend time with my hon. Friend, that occasion is etched in my memory forever. Like other organisations, Tesco is doing some wonderful work for women. It is also important to recognise the work of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the GMB, which play a huge part in promoting workplace policies for menopausal women.

When next year we implement the plans for employers with more than 250 employees to have a menopause policy or framework in the workplace, a key measure of success will be the Department ensuring that we are monitoring those plans, so that they do not just get left in a cupboard to gather dust. This will be mandatory only for employers with more than 250 staff, and I welcome the changes, but from the correspondence I have received it is clear that thousands of women working for smaller companies want to know whether they will be supported. We are not talking about big changes: flexible working hours, breathable uniforms and comfortable working environments are small adjustments, but they make a huge difference.

Employers in every sector rely on occupational health specialists to support the physical, mental and social wellbeing of their staff. They need to be given specialist menopause training. Imagine the number of women in their 40s, 50s and 60s that that would have helped. They might not have left work. They may return to work, or even stay and thrive in work.

**Nick Smith:** My hon. Friend's point about these issues affecting older women is, of course, fair and understood, but is it not also true that younger women can be affected and need support?

**Carolyn Harris:** Certainly. There is no age on menopause. Maggie's centre has a fantastic programme to support women experiencing crash menopause, in which a cancer treatment causes them to go into early menopause. Unfortunately, the woman will walk away from surgery or treatment without being given information. Maggie's is doing some wonderful work, and I am delighted to be able to promote it today.

I do not want to be standing here in another seven years, still asking for the same things. Without support, women suffer, but so do businesses and the wider economy. Reduced hours, career breaks and early retirement all lead to women reaching pension age without enough resource to claim their full state pension, which they may be relying on. We should not have to make this an economic argument, but anybody who knows me knows that I will use any argument to get what I want, and I want women to have fair play.

While we seek to make progress in the workplace, we must not overlook the fundamental issue that many women still face in accessing menopause care. A quarter of the women who responded to the Menopause Mandate survey said that seeking medical advice from their GP or another medical professional was not a positive experience. Reassuringly, two thirds of women were offered hormone replacement therapy—hallelujah!—or at least it was discussed with them, but too many women are still being offered antidepressants. They should be outlining their symptoms to a GP who will understand what is wrong with them.

Those symptoms, as we now know, are wide-ranging and differ for every woman. The survey found that although it might be the physical symptoms, such as hot flushes and changes to periods, that trigger women to think about menopause, it is the psychological symptoms that women struggle with most: anxiety, brain fog, low mood and low self-esteem. Those are the main complaints from women. For many women—indeed, for over half of those surveyed—the lack of knowledge that their symptoms were signs of perimenopause caused a delay in their seeking support and accessing treatment.

Women feel that better education and earlier advice would have benefited them, and a staggering 99% of the 15,000 women surveyed said that they believe menopause should be discussed at the NHS 40-plus health check. That is something that I have long campaigned for, as has Menopause Mandate, and I have raised it with colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care, arguing that it is a vital component of the women's health strategy.

Employers can also step up by providing menopause training, organising events and encouraging discussion within a safe environment, which will give women the information they need as well as confidence in the workplace. That would show women that their workplace cares for them.

We should ensure that healthcare providers incorporate measures within the standard packages, including menopause advice. Support should be signposted on staff bulletins, on noticeboards, in bathrooms and wherever any kind of information can be put. It is the simple things that will help people to tackle the problems, because, as with any other area of healthcare, being aware of the symptoms allows people to take control, to understand their own bodies and to seek the best treatment options available to them.

We know that for some women, HRT can be life-changing—I am a devout believer in HRT. Other women think that the symptoms of menopause are manageable without HRT, and some women cannot take HRT because of medical conditions, but we know that a significant number of women still avoid HRT because of its perceived risks, which is an issue that urgently needs to be addressed. In the US, the Food and Drug Administration recently announced that it is commissioning a review of the risks and benefits of HRT for women experiencing menopause. That follows an expert panel on menopause and hormone replacement therapy that was held earlier this year.

We know that historical data has been proven inaccurate, but it is responsible for a fear of HRT among a whole generation of women and medical practitioners alike. I wonder how many women have walked away from their career because they felt unable to cope without HRT but were too frightened by the false allegations and media frenzy to take it. Campaigners and industry experts, many of whom are here in Westminster Hall today, have worked tirelessly to dispel these myths. I know that they support my calls for an independent UK review to ensure that information about the risks and benefits of HRT reflects the most up-to-date global evidence.

The all-party parliamentary group on menopause, which I chair, has been championing such a review since it was first set up five years ago. Just last year, shortly before the general election, we undertook a national

study that looked at access to treatment and services. The results show that both those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those from black and Asian communities experienced severe disadvantages.

The results of that study prompted us to look more deeply into such disparities. Later this month, we will launch the report and recommendations from a nine-month inquiry into the menopause experiences of those from historically marginalised communities. We have taken evidence from women from ethnic minority backgrounds; those who are disabled or neurodiverse; those living in poverty; those who are survivors of domestic abuse; people from LGBTQIA+ communities; and women who have experienced menopause in prison. From hearing and reading so many personal stories, I know that we still have much to do to improve menopause services so that everyone can get the support they need in the way they need it, wherever they need it—be it in healthcare, the workplace or society in general.

The last Government made some tentative steps in the right direction. The HRT annual prepayment certificate was introduced following my 2021 private Member's Bill. That has helped thousands of women who were struggling to cover the cost of HRT prescriptions. I was absolutely delighted to see that almost 90% of those responding to the Menopause Mandate survey were aware of the prescription prepayment certificate—that is fantastic news, but it is not enough on its own. We need to build on that and show women that this Labour Government listen and care.

The evidence of what women want and need has already been presented, and none of it is difficult or costly to implement. That includes a review of the risks and benefits of HRT to help dispel the dangerous inaccuracies that have caused unnecessary fear for more than two decades, and the inclusion of menopause and its symptoms in the NHS 40-plus health check—if 99% of women think it is a good idea, then it is.

We need a guarantee that Ministers will work with business leaders to ensure that the menopause workplace action plans set out in the Employment Rights Bill are genuine, real, credible and operational, and that they work. We also need a promise to women working for smaller businesses who employ fewer than 200 people that they will not miss out on workplace support; and menopause training for occupational health specialists so that the simple adjustments that women need are implemented. The number of one in 20 loyal and experienced women leaving the workforce is too many, and one in 10 changing their role and reducing hours to avoid promotion is terrifying.

We have an opportunity to change the narrative. We cannot stop women experiencing menopause. We cannot magic away the symptoms or ignore the changes that happen, but we can make sure that those experiences have a positive impact. We can help to provide the right treatment for the symptoms, and we can ensure that adequate support is available wherever it is needed, so that women can embrace the changes with confidence and purpose.

I can honestly say that since I embraced my menopause and took control of it, I am a better person and—God help anybody who thinks I was not confident before—I am really confident now. Taking control of our own health and wellbeing is life-changing. I stand here today as proof of that, and I will continue to do everything in

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my power to ensure that all women have the same advantage: to access the treatment they need, to flourish and succeed at work, and to be the very best version of themselves in perimenopause, menopause and beyond.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** Order. I remind Members that they need to indicate if they wish to speak.

2.8 pm

**Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am proud that not one but two of my constituents are leading figures in the Menopause Mandate campaign, and they are here today. I would like to pay tribute to that organisation and all the work it is doing on this issue, ably supported by the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), whose passion and energy about this subject are so wonderful to see. I pay tribute to her for convening this debate.

As someone who does not personally have direct experience of menopause yet, and whose mum is not around to advise her, most of what I know about menopause comes from following the social media accounts of organisations such as Menopause Mandate. That is a sad indictment of the lack of information that women in their 40s have about a health issue that will affect them. I am sure that Menopause Mandate and everyone else here agrees that it is time to stop tiptoeing around the topic of menopause and the perimenopause.

Brain fog, hot flushes, night sweats, panic out of nowhere—they are not just inconveniences; they are symptoms that can knock women off their feet. Often, however, as with so many other health issues, women's concerns are too readily dismissed. Women deserve serious, joined-up education, action and policy. They deserve to be heard, believed and supported, not left to suffer in silence. As has been mentioned, according to Menopause Mandate's recent survey, only 12% of menopausal women were actually diagnosed by a healthcare professional, while around 60% had to figure it out for themselves. We are leaving women to google their way to an answer after years of avoidable misery, without guidance and often without treatment. That is not good enough.

The Menopause Mandate team has a simple, sensible ask: education for all. If our health professionals are not adequately trained, and women are not given routine consultations about the subject, we are setting them up to face menopause and perimenopause ill-prepared and uninformed about the lifestyle changes, treatment options and support that could make all the difference. This is not a niche issue; it should be a mainstream health policy. It could be seamlessly integrated into standard mid-life check-ups. When I had mine a few years ago, menopause was not mentioned. There are specialist clinics doing great work in this area, but frustratingly many of the best have huge waiting lists unless women can afford to be seen privately. I know that is true of my local hospital.

Most women have to speak to their GP or practice nurse, so we need to equip primary care properly to recognise symptoms, treat confidently and refer swiftly.

Menopause is also not just a health issue, but an employment one. One of the most shocking findings in the Menopause Mandate survey was that—as has been mentioned—one in 20 women has left their job because of menopause symptoms. Those may be women doing brilliant work, often at the peak of their careers: teachers, nurses and business leaders—the kind of people this country cannot afford to lose. We need to keep that experience in our NHS, schools, offices and everywhere that this country relies on it. We should not be losing it because we fail to support half the population in a health issue that every one of them is going to face at some point.

Here is the to-do list: let us make menopause education mandatory in healthcare training with regular refreshers; include perimenopause and menopause in routine health checks—so that I am not relying on Instagram to find out what is going to happen; work with employers to provide basic workplace support for flexible working, manager training, cool spaces and clear policies; and, above all, make sure women can manage this stage of life with dignity, confidence and proper support. This is not a women's issue; it is a fairness, workforce and public health issue. It is time we gave it the serious attention it deserves.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** There is a four-minute guideline for speeches. Please try not to go over it so that we can get everyone in.

2.12 pm

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing this incredibly important debate and speaking with the passion and verve that we have come to expect of her.

Menopause, as I am sure we will hear time and again this afternoon, affects millions of women, but is still too often overlooked in the workplace. My menopause workplace story is sadly similar to that experienced by far too many women. While working a stressful job and juggling family and the care needs of elderly relatives, I failed to recognise that my burnout was not a sudden inability to do my job, but my body going through a profound and overwhelming change. The response from a senior director not only was brutal, but showed a complete lack of awareness, let alone understanding:

"I used to think you were really good at your job, but you have changed."

I had changed—but I did not realise the change that my body was going through.

Menopause is a natural phase of our lives, yet for many it comes with symptoms that can be physically and emotionally challenging: hot flushes, fatigue, brain fog, anxiety and more. Those are not just personal health issues; they can, as I found, impact performance, confidence and wellbeing at work.

**Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in acknowledging the impact of menopause-related urinary tract infections on women's quality of life and ability to work? Does she agree that we must do more to acknowledge that aspect of menopause and educate GPs and the workforce?

**Ms Minns:** I agree entirely. Menopause remains an area where many employers are still failing to support their staff in the way that they need. As my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East said, one in 10 women who works during the menopause will leave their job due to their symptoms, and nearly a quarter more will have considered quitting because of its impact on their working lives. That is hundreds of thousands of experienced professionals walking away not because they want to, but because they have not been properly supported or have been made to feel that the workplace is no longer somewhere that they can function.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that this issue not only has an impact on a woman's feeling of self-worth and value, and on her career progression, but can have a severe economic impact on her family?

**Ms Minns:** Absolutely. I am a single parent, and the impact of my menopause was quite severe for my family, and for my financial situation at the time, because it forced me to make some unfortunate decisions about my work.

We are lucky in Carlisle to have excellent community groups such as Cumbria Radical Birds, where women can come together to support each other. However, not every community is so lucky. It is my profound belief that women should be able to find some of that support in their workplace, not just in their community. Supporting employees through menopause is not just the right thing to do; it makes business sense. When we create environments where people feel safe, respected and supported, we unlock their potential. That means flexible working, access to information, open conversations and policies that reflect real-life experiences.

Those are not idealistic goals; for decades they have been the standard for women going through pregnancy. I therefore invite the Minister to consider how we can protect women experiencing menopause in the workplace in the same way that our colleagues who are pregnant are supported by not only the Equality Act 2010 but health and safety regulation. We can and must normalise talking about menopause. That is why debates such as today's are so important. Let us listen, learn and lead with empathy. When we support women through every stage of life, we build stronger, more resilient workplaces for everyone.

2.16 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I commend the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on setting the scene so well, as she always does. I have always been pleased to help and support her. She is dedicated to her causes—that is the way I would put it—and she always leads by example and with passion. It is really hard to say no to her, to tell the truth. I say that genuinely: it is, because I support her in what she does.

When someone says the word “menopause”, reactions will differ. There will perhaps be a sense of embarrassment. For others, there is an immediate sense of understanding. For some, there is a sense of sympathy. For others, there is a distance. The fact is that conversations have taken place, and led us to a place where we acknowledge the

effect that menopause has on families, and how we can work together to give support and love during a different phase of the family journey.

I have seen change from the days in my parents' household, when these things could never be mentioned, to the family home where my children were raised, where my wife Sandra is the heart of the home. I have an understanding of the changes in her life, which brought about changes in the home. That gave me a slightly better understanding. I am thankful for that progress, and although I am by no means saying that we are all understanding and enlightened, I know that conversation has brought about changes, and an awareness in me that I hope has enabled me to provide greater support to those who need it in my office.

I always say that I am blessed with women of many generations in my office. They give me an understanding of so many issues. I have women in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. I am blessed to have their hard work and wisdom. It is my job as an employer to facilitate their carrying out that hard work. There are obligations on employers. They can be easier to meet for office staff than for others, but it is important to help staff to work well at every stage of their lives.

We need to step up information and guidance for small businesses on providing help to enable all staff to feel valued at every stage of their journey. We need to ensure that medical support is more readily available. For most women, their GP does the blood test, tells them that their hormones are still present, and sometimes will say just to grin and bear it, yet we know that the perimenopause can affect women for years. Even the acknowledgement that they are in that stage can be useful for strong, independent women, who have difficulty understanding the physical and emotional changes that they are going through. With that in mind, I am pleased to add my support to the campaign of the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place. This is a new role for her, but in all the roles that she has held, she has done exceptionally well, and I have no doubt that she will do the same in this one.

I conclude with this: menopause is much more than the change of life. Life is ever changing, but menopause is a major milestone on life's journey, and it must be acknowledged as real and worthy of attention. Perhaps I cannot totally understand that section of the journey—there is no road map, for instance—but I am prepared to help and support as needed. Let us work in every area of Government to provide guidance and help to those who need a bit of support along this part of the journey, and ensure that employers have the tools that they need to meet the requirements of their staff.

2.20 pm

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate marking World Menopause Day. My mum taught me well; she taught me lots of things, but in particular, normalised the menopause. It is as simple as that.

I used to run services that employed in the majority women, and having open conversations and flexible working, as we have just heard, is critical. I want to be a conduit for the women in Bournemouth East who have shared their experiences of the perimenopause and

[Tom Hayes]

menopause. It is a privilege to speak in a debate called by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for many reasons but especially because she visited Bournemouth a short while ago to meet me and Viv Galpin at BH Live at the Littledown centre.

Viv runs a brilliant local initiative called Beat the Pause—a programme supporting women through community-based exercise and wellbeing sessions that help to manage menopause symptoms, build confidence and strengthen social connections. I think Viv will be pleased to know that I have just had a conversation with Mariella Frostrup, the chair of Menopause Mandate, who is here today at the invitation of my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East, in which I spoke about Beat the Pause and Viv's work. Beat the Pause sessions are running locally in Bournemouth, and the women who attend describe them as a lifeline—a place where they can find community, consistency and compassion. As Viv puts it:

“When you hit peri-menopause, you can feel completely lost. Your mind and body feel like they belong to someone else. You lose all reason and have no idea where to start. We trust our doctors and the NHS—but this is where the biggest amount of work needs to be done.”

That experience of confusion, frustration and being left to navigate symptoms alone is far too common. That is why the women of Bournemouth East have been clear about what needs to change. They have developed a community wish list that is both practical and achievable. First, every GP practice should have at least one member of staff trained in perimenopause and menopause care—someone responsible for upskilling colleagues and ensuring consistent advice across the surgery. Secondly, monthly menopause health talks should be held in GP surgeries, including evening sessions for working women, to improve access to accurate, trusted information. Thirdly, GPs and pharmacists should routinely promote the HRT prepayment certificate to help to ease the financial burden of ongoing prescriptions.

Fourthly, there should be greater consistency across GP practices and primary care networks, so that support does not depend on where a woman happens to live. Fifthly, GPs could partner with local wellbeing providers, such as Beat the Pause, to signpost trusted services and build a joined-up approach between medical and community support. Finally, local councils such as Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council could do more to support exercise and wellbeing sessions in public spaces, using our beautiful beaches, parks and leisure centres to host accessible activities tailored to menopausal women.

Although Beat the Pause began with Sport England funding, which was to last for only a short time, it has kept going because of the commitment of people like Viv and the women who support one another. It is a shining example of how local wellbeing initiatives can complement clinical care, but also of the changes that we know need to happen in employment, combining exercise, education and peer connection into a holistic model that truly works.

I will close by giving a few further shout-outs: to Join the Meno-Make, a creative group for women who experience the menopause and perimenopause, who

meet together, share stories and make art about their experiences at Re-imagine on Belle Vue Road, and to the Southface dermatology clinic, which, in addition to further events, will host the Kickass Menopause event today—it sold out twice and had to move to a larger venue at the Village Hotel. Lastly, I thank Arts University Bournemouth, which has just completed an important research project looking at creativity in the menopause, organised by Pauline Ferrick-Squibb.

In this World Menopause Day debate, I pay tribute to every woman in Bournemouth East and here in Parliament who has spoken up about her experience. Together, they are breaking down stigma, building community and showing us what menopause support looks like in practice. I want women in Bournemouth East to know that I, as their MP, have their back, and agree with them that women deserve consistent, informed and compassionate menopause care in every GP surgery, every community and every part of our town.

2.25 pm

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing this important debate.

I wish to start my remarks on World Menopause Day with a tribute to a simple yet powerful initiative: the menopause APPG, diligently chaired by my hon. Friend, has designed easily distributable bookmarks. They are so easily distributable that I searched high and low for one to bring along with me today and found that I have given them all away. These bookmarks list an A to Z of menopause symptoms, which I am sure that some of us in the room will recognise. They do more than mark a page; they give visibility to a natural stage in a woman's life. With half the population facing this transition, you would think that it would be better understood, but from doctors' surgeries through to prisons, women face confusion and dismissal when they try to explain their symptoms. I commend my hon. Friend on her tireless efforts to extend awareness and education into spaces where women's voices are rarely heard.

Menopause is not just a single symptom. It is not just hot flushes or mood swings; it is a pattern of physical, emotional and cognitive changes that can impact every aspect of a woman's life. Yet all too often, in many medical settings, symptoms are treated in isolation. A woman may be prescribed or offered antidepressants for low mood. I have been there myself. “No—I just want to be able to sleep at night.” Painkillers are given for joint aches or sleeping pills for insomnia, but nobody actually joins the dots. Medical professionals need the tools, the training and the time to recognise menopause as a whole-body experience. We have to start treating menopause holistically.

If we improve the health outcomes, we will restore dignity, agency and quality of life, because all too often women feel as if their power is being taken away from them. That really has to change. This debate is critical to give the message that we, as parliamentarians, and in wider society, recognise that every woman deserves to be seen, heard and supported through this transition. Let us use those bookmarks to continue to guide us through this next chapter of change.

2.28 pm

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing the debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

There is an argument that World Menopause Day should not need to exist, as the support that is needed should not be in the “too difficult” box. Much of it is basic common-sense support that should be built into the norm. World Menopause Day is, however, an ideal opportunity to remind ourselves of what has been done, and more importantly, what still needs to be done.

I pay tribute to all the work that my hon. Friend has done to promote the cause, and the work that she and others have done on Menopause Mandate. She is a great champion. I remember with pleasure attending a menopause bingo evening on the fringe of the Labour party conference in Brighton. I am not sure whether I volunteered to go, but, as with most things with my hon. Friend, it is easier to say yes at first than at last. None the less, it was an enjoyable and informative evening, with a very important message of awareness.

I was delighted that my hon. Friend spoke at the menopause in the workplace event that I held at Merthyr football club in 2023, which was attended by local organisations and key employers across the constituency. That event highlighted to me some of the local issues, which are very similar—indeed, identical—to the picture across the country, and it reinforced the message that much more needs to be done.

In the limited time that I have remaining, I want to focus on menopause workplace support. The fact that 15,000 people responded to the survey is a significant result, as surveys go, and it provides a snapshot of the issues faced across the country. Eight in 10 women highlighted that they were affected by symptoms at work, which is why increased awareness among employers is hugely important. They should put in place support. Some small adjustments would make a big difference and help employers retain staff who may otherwise feel that they are not able to continue in their roles.

It is often easier for larger employers to make positive changes to enhance the experience of women dealing with the menopause in the workplace. We must all work harder to raise awareness among smaller employers and bring them on board, because they face many issues and employ a large number of women. More awareness and action would make a big difference. My hon. Friend highlighted that we are not talking about big changes; she rightly told us that small adjustments will make a big difference.

The British Standards Institution has the role of developing standards for use in society, including on wellbeing. BS 30416, the standard on the menopause in the workplace, has been adopted by lots of public bodies in Wales. It is a valuable tool for employers—particularly small and medium-sized enterprises—and could help them to provide important support to retain women in the workplace.

Too many women are forced out of the workplace because they do not have the support they need to continue in their roles. We need to do more to change

that, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister what more the Government can do to support and encourage employers—large and, in particular, small—to do more to support women in the workplace.

2.32 pm

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing the debate. It is fantastic to see her continuing to call for better support for and awareness of menopause, which too often is treated as a private inconvenience. It is the reality for many, and we should make it the reality of the workplace.

Millions of women balance emotional, physical and professional demands with symptoms that can be debilitating. As we have heard today, menopause affects not just women in their mid-life, but younger women, who may experience early onset for a number of reasons, including medical ones.

I am sincerely grateful to the women in Wolverhampton North East who shared their stories with me. They include a lady whose story will not be unfamiliar to many here today, including those in the Public Gallery, who I thank for coming to support this important debate. She is a senior leader who has always been regarded as unflappable. Others turn to her in a crisis; she is always confident and capable. But when her hot flushes started to persist, they disrupted meetings, and brain fog made her doubt her judgment. When her sleep became patchy and exhaustion crept in, she did not feel that she could say a word, because in her workplace there was no policy and therefore, she felt, no flexibility. Her punctuality was hit after sleepless nights. She used annual leave to cope, but that was not enough. She avoided opportunities that she once would have gladly embraced. Eventually, she decided to step back from a promotion that she knew she had earned.

It does not have to be this way, and it should not be, but we note the scale of the issue. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reports that more than half of women experiencing menopause have missed work because of their symptoms, and one in 10 leave the workforce entirely. That has an estimated economic cost of £1.5 billion each year.

I welcome the measures in the Employment Rights Bill that will require larger employers to publish menopause action plans, but I must echo my hon. Friend and ask for monitoring of their impact and efficiency. The commitment to provide guidance for smaller employers on uniforms, temperature, flexible working and managing menopause-related leave is equally important, and the appointment of a menopause employment ambassador, supported by an expert advisory group, gives the agenda real momentum to forge progress and the provision of better support.

However, legislation and leadership must be matched by cultural change. Employers need to understand that by supporting women through menopause, they will retain dedicated and experienced staff, so it makes good economic sense. If we want experienced women to stay in the workplace and thrive at work, we must foster environments in which speaking up is seen not as a weakness, but as part of a modern, responsible and inclusive workplace, and as the norm.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** I thank all Members for their co-operation in keeping to time. We will now move on to the Front Benchers, who I hope will leave a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to wind up the debate.

2.36 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this debate in recognition of World Menopause Day, on opening it with such an inspirational speech, and on her tireless campaigning in recent years.

As a 50-year-old woman, I will avoid the danger of oversharing; however, becoming menopausal has not been the most fun thing that has ever happened to me. The common symptoms of menopause have been described, but there is a vast array of other symptoms that can not only affect self-esteem, but have a detrimental impact on mental health and the ability to function well day to day. It is no wonder that as many as one in 10 women leave their job as a result of menopause.

My own experience of menopause has included its impact on my sleep pattern. Night sweats, itchy skin, pins and needles, random joint pain, muscle aches and heightened anxiety do not make for peaceful slumber, and lack of sleep, night after night, impacts the rest of the day.

More worryingly for many women, the symptoms of the menopause are broad and varied, and easily dismissed as “just the menopause”. Women run the risk of ignoring the early signs of something extremely serious because they are expected to feel pretty rubbish for a high proportion of the time. That is why a women’s health strategy is so important, so it was disappointing to see it relegated in importance by the new Government.

The Conservative Government brought the NHS to its knees and patients right across the country, not least in North Shropshire, have paid a heavy price. We all recognise that the new Government face a huge challenge in turning the NHS around, but the women’s health strategy was one of the few areas in which the Conservatives made progress. The abandonment of the target of a women’s health hub in every area is extremely disappointing. Failure to ringfence funding incentivises the scaling back of existing hubs in order to ensure that funding is focused on areas where there are performance targets, the meeting of which will be crucial to the local integrated care board and its associated trusts.

Women’s health should not be seen as some niche and distracting target. We make up 51% of the population and have worse health outcomes than men; we live longer, but in much worse health. Women’s health hubs could be one way to ensure that women’s ill health can be quickly diagnosed, appropriate treatment found faster, and the menopause support that they need is available. They are absolutely in line with the Government’s desire to shift care into the community and to prevent, rather than treat, disease.

I would be grateful if the Minister could speak to her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, commit to the original plan for women’s health hubs, and roll them out in every area, not least Shropshire, where lack of transport and a high level of rurality means that ensuring access to healthcare for everyone can be a significant challenge. The level of service

provided at a hub should not be just another postcode lottery, whereby some people who have paid taxes all their lives have to settle for a second-class service, as is so often the case in my area and in other rural parts of Britain.

I welcome measures in the Government’s Employment Rights Bill that will require large employers to publish menopause action plans each year, as part of wider equality plans to improve the retention of women experiencing the menopause. The plans will outline workplace support, such as flexible working and simple adjustments for menopause symptoms. I certainly cannot speak for all women, but I think that alongside those simple changes, wider awareness and understanding of menopause, and a reduction of the taboo around it—and, if the people who manage Portcullis House are listening to the debate, air-conditioning—would play a big part in helping women to remain supported at work.

I want to touch on the shortages of HRT medication, which can be very effective in reducing the symptoms of menopause—I have certainly experienced that. In July 2025, the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy published the report of its inquiry into medicine shortages in England, in which it says that shortages have shifted from isolated incidents to a chronic structural challenge. Access to HRT has been a postcode lottery in recent years. How do the Government plan to tackle geographical inequality in the availability of these drugs?

Finally, I thank all the trailblazing, amazing, campaigning women who have talked about their own experience—many of them are here today listening—reduced the taboo associated with the menopause and brought us to the stage of debating a meaningful, working strategy to improve women’s health as they go through this natural and important stage of their life.

2.40 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing this important debate on an issue about which we know she is extremely passionate and has campaigned for a long time.

In recent years, our country has made good progress in female empowerment. Today, women occupy 43% of company board roles and 35% of leadership positions at FTSE 350 firms. More women than ever before are partners in law firms, consultants in hospitals, entrepreneurs and executives managing successful businesses in every part of the country. None the less, there is a serious fault line running through that progress. Most women reach the professional apex of their careers in their late 40s to early 50s, after accruing many years of experience. For thousands of women across the country every single year, that moment of career maturity tragically coincides with the onset of the menopause.

An abrupt change to the menstrual cycle can happen; sometimes there are sudden floods of menstrual blood, hot flushes at inopportune moments throughout the working day, problems with concentration, low self-esteem, migraines, aches and itches—all things that make it more difficult to fulfil the employer’s expectations, let alone, as we have heard, fully rest in the precious hours of the night. Symptoms can be truly debilitating, running from months to years and fluctuating unpredictably

over time. They leave some women with an impossible choice: their health or their career. I have heard from professionals in my constituency who love their job but felt there was no option other than to step back. I have seen it while working as a consultant in the NHS, too; some colleagues, amid the worst of their symptoms, go from thriving to just about surviving.

When that becomes commonplace, our economy pays a price. Every year, the UK loses 14 million working days to menopause-related absence. Graver still, we are losing many thousands of women from the workforce every year because of overwhelming symptoms and lack of support. The NHS Confederation tallies up the damage to a staggering £1.5 billion.

I am proud that the previous Government recognised the scale of the challenge and took concrete action. In 2022, aware that not enough focus was being given to women-specific issues like the menopause, they published a women's health strategy for England. That set out 10-year ambitions, including for people to be informed of the menopause at an early age and provided with access to the full range of treatment options, improved understanding among healthcare professionals, and increased research of alternatives to HRT.

I am proud that the previous Government made good on those ambitions. They also launched the national menopause pathway programme, providing optimal care pathways to ensure more women get the right care the first time around. Recognising that almost nine in 10 adults were never educated about menopause in school, the previous Government changed the curriculum to add menopause to relationships and sex education for secondary school students. They also reduced the cost of HRT in England by making prescriptions available on an annual basis; 500,000 women saw their costs decrease by up to £200 as a result.

That is what real progress looks like, but the current Government have undermined those achievements. Many women I speak to are incandescent at the Government's callous decision to disregard the women's health strategy and replace it, seemingly, with nothing. It does not stop there: this Government have also compromised women's healthcare provision by scaling back targets in NHS guidance and binning the commitment to roll out health hubs across all ICBs.

Can the Minister explain what impact these changes are going to have on support for menopausal women? What do the Government plan to replace the women's health strategy with? I commend the Government for appointing a menopause employment ambassador—having a champion focused solely on the menopause in conversation directly with employers gives the issue exactly the attention it deserves—but women are best served by good execution and delivery, not just good intentions. That is where my concerns with the Government's strategy lie.

The Employment Rights Bill will impose a new duty on firms with more than 250 people to publish menopause action plans. We know the menopause affects women in different ways, so I question the value of uniform plans, which will give some human resources managers cover stories for doing little of actual substance. How will the increased administrative burden translate into better support for menopausal women in the workplace, rather than simply becoming a cost for business? What metrics will the Government use to ensure that women are materially helped by menopause action plans? We know

that many businesses with more than 250 employees are just as stretched as those with 25 employees—and no less so due to tax increases by this Government. What are the Government doing to prevent a two-tier system emerging, whereby the quality of workplace support hinges on not need but the size of an employer?

There is much the Government can do to help menopausal women that does not necessitate wielding the regulatory sledgehammer—for instance, improving public awareness, as the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East talked about. Most adults were not taught about the menopause in school. Thousands of women are enduring excruciating symptoms without always recognising what is happening to their bodies, or realising that there is NHS support readily available for their symptoms in the form of HRT. This is a problem that can be solved.

The Menopause Charity ran a highly successful national campaign last year under the banner “educate yourself”. This year, as we have already heard, we have witnessed Asda and Tesco, among several other retailers, partnering with GenM to develop menopause aisles in their stores, replete with information to improve awareness and help women easily identify products that are capable of alleviating symptoms. Can the Minister explain what the Government are doing to encourage and amplify such voluntary initiatives by national charities and businesses?

The Government can also learn lessons from abroad. Ireland launched a nationwide campaign in 2022, deploying advertising across public displays, newspapers, magazines, radio and social media—a highly effective way to raise the awareness that British menopause advocates have long called for. Can the Minister say whether the Government have considered rolling out a national menopause awareness scheme?

I recognise that the Minister and the Government want to help menopausal women, but goodwill must translate into effective delivery. The previous Government made good progress on managing the menopause, which is why women want that progress to be built on, rather than dismantled. I look forward to the Minister's response. I appreciate that some of these points are not in her brief, but within the scope of the Department of Health and Social Care. If she is not able to answer my questions herself, I would be grateful if she would commit to sending a letter in reply.

2.47 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson):** Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing this important debate from the Backbench Business Committee, and on her passionate and exceptional speech. I thank her for her tireless work in raising awareness of this issue over many years, and, in particular, her leadership of the APPG on menopause, which has been instrumental in making some of the changes we have seen in support for women going through menopause over the last few years.

[GILL FURNISS *in the Chair*]

My hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East gave an interview a few years back in which she described being sent out of the room as her mother and

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

her aunties discussed “the change”. We can all reflect on that and think, “Well yes, a small child being sent out of the room,” but what I found interesting was that my hon. Friend was actually 36 years of age!

It is fair to say that this House has not been much better in dealing with the menopause. The term menopause was coined in 1821, but a quick scan of *Hansard* shows that it was 1964 before it was first mentioned in the House of Commons. We had literally sent a man to space before we had started to talk about the menopause in this, the mother of Parliaments. On that occasion, the hon. Member for Willesden West argued that women could not bear the extra mental strain of giving up smoking

“with all the other changes going on”.—[*Official Report*, 12 February 1964; Vol. 689, c. 513.]

That was the level of the debate back in 1964. Thankfully, things have changed considerably since then, and that is due in no small part to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East.

We have heard many passionate speeches in this debate. I will follow my hon. Friend’s use of the word flush by saying that a flush of MPs have made speeches this afternoon. In particular, the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine) talked about the role of good information and not having to rely on Google. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) talked about an awful, painful experience at work but also referred to Cumbria Radical Birds, which I would love to hear more about.

As ever, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a very thoughtful contribution. I was pleased to hear about Sandra, his wife—I had not heard about her before—as well as about his role as an employer and the support he gives to the women who work in his office.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) said at the outset that his mum had taught him well, and from what he said today, she absolutely did. He gave a shout-out to Viv Galpin and Beat the Pause. I was also interested in the Kickass Menopause Event that is going to be held.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) spoke about the need to join the dots—that is vital—and said that every woman deserves to be seen, heard and supported through this transition in their lives. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare (Gerald Jones) talked interestingly about the menopause bingo event that he went along to, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) talked about early medical menopause in particular.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), made a very personal speech, with which many of us can identify. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), has a medical background and spoke with her usual thoroughness, but I have to say that some of her comments about the role of the previous Government and what they achieved were rather rose-tinted.

I am pleased that my first debate in Parliament as the new Minister for employment is about menopause. Women make up 51% of the workplace, and every woman will go through menopause.<sup>1</sup> This Saturday’s World Menopause

Day throws a spotlight on the challenges faced by women and the support they need and deserve. It reminds us of the need to keep raising awareness among women and men, and challenging taboos about this very natural stage of a woman’s life, so that everyone can access the help they need.

Let me underline some facts. Each year, around 400,000 women in the United Kingdom will enter menopause, and around three quarters of them will experience symptoms—that is more than the population of my home city of Hull, each and every year. Symptoms can last for years, with one in three women’s symptoms lasting for more than seven years. For one in four women, the impact can be severe, touching on every area of life, both at home and at work.

This is an issue for every one of us. When women have their symptoms minimised or cannot get the treatment they need, it is a fairness issue. It is also an economic issue: the cost to the UK economy from menopause—from sick days, lost productivity or women leaving work entirely—is estimated at £1.7 billion each year. The loss of women and their knowledge, skills and experience from the workplace is certainly not something that I am willing to tolerate.

We have heard much about the new mega-survey from Menopause Mandate, which I had the pleasure of meeting earlier this week. It reveals that more than three quarters of women going through menopause say that they have been impacted by symptoms at work, and that four in 10 even considered quitting or changing their jobs as a result, yet only one in three women—35%—say that their workplace has a menopause policy.

We need to build understanding across women and men so that everyone has the knowledge to provide the support that is required. When workplaces fail to support women, and when they lose out on women’s unique skills and experience, our whole economy suffers. I want to move on to what we are going to do to change that.

**Anna Sabine:** It seems to me that an awful lot of what we have talked about today—the impact on women, particularly in the workplace—would also apply to periods, so I wonder whether the Department of Health and Social Care might think about employers considering periods as well.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I am not a Health Minister, but a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions. I take the point, however, and I will raise it with my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care. I will also raise the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East highlighted about looking at the health of women throughout their whole career in employment, including when women have children and when they are pregnant, and how we can best fit that together. That is a very important point that I will take forward.

I want to go through a few of the things that I think it is important to refer to today. Our Employment Rights Bill marks the biggest update in employment rights for a generation. For the first time, employers with more than 250 staff will have to produce menopause action plans setting out exactly how they will support women going through the menopause. The action plans will be published, so that employers can be held to account for the actions that they take. Our experience with gender

1.[*Official Report*, 22 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 3WC.](Correction)

pay gap reporting shows that such things are not just treated as formalities. They have the power to drive businesses' behaviour and bring about real change. Menopause Friendly UK has said that the provisions mark "real progress" and are a

"sign that menopause in the workplace is finally being recognised as the serious issue it is."

It is really good to hear about the work that employers such as Tesco and trade unions such as USDAW and the GMB are already doing.

Smaller employers, which some Members are concerned about, will be given guidance on how to help women experiencing the menopause, from changing the office temperature—Westminster Hall today has certainly had the thermostat set at menopause temperature—to providing fans, making changes to uniforms, allowing regular breaks and flexible working. I also take the point about the need to evaluate the policy.

Secondly, on the last World Menopause Day almost a year ago, the Government appointed Mariella Frostrup, the broadcaster, women's rights campaigner and menopause champion, as the Government menopause employment ambassador. Her role is to work with employers nationwide to raise awareness of menopause in the workplace and improve workplace support. She has been hard at work and has already engaged with over 300 employers to raise awareness. In April, she chaired the first meeting of the independent menopause advisory group, bringing together some amazing expertise from leaders across a range of sectors, including business, media, energy, education and the law. They will draw on their real and vast experience to create practical advice on supporting women going through menopause in the workplace. As Mariella said at the time, midlife is a time when women are often balancing many other responsibilities. It is only right that they are supported themselves when they are in work. I very much look forward to working with Mariella and to meeting her soon.

Thirdly, I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East said about the need for support for women in the workplace, which will be key to helping them stay in work and thrive, or return to work and thrive. Good occupational health can be a route to achieving that. However, we need to improve the scope, coverage and quality of the support offered for all in the workplace. That is why the Government commissioned the Keep Britain Working review, led by Sir Charlie Mayfield, which is exploring the employer's role in creating healthy and inclusive workplaces, and the support that can help them achieve this. We look forward to receiving his recommendations from the review shortly. I am pleased to note that Sir Charlie spoke to Mariella and received input on the importance of considering women's health during the engagement for that review.

Many hon. Members raised issues relating to healthcare and support, so I want to refer to some of the work going on across Government, both in health and in

education. We are updating the 2022 women's health strategy to assess the progress that has been made and to continue delivering for women. Where shortages in vital hormone replacement therapy products have occurred, we have worked extensively with suppliers to expedite deliveries and resolve supply issues, and we have issued management guidance for healthcare professionals and serious shortage protocols to make sure that patients can get alternatives quickly and easily without needing to get a new prescription.

In November last year, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published updated guidelines on the menopause. NHS England has created a menopause self-care fact sheet, and the General Medical Council has introduced the medical licensing assessment for all doctors starting work in the UK, which includes knowledge of the menopause and building better understanding in new doctors and the profession at large.

In education, we know that taboos and stigma will end only with greater understanding. That is why the Department for Education's revised statutory guidance, released on 15 July, on relationships, sex and health education emphasises the need for all primary and secondary pupils to have a full understanding of women's health, including menopause.

I see that you are giving me a look, Ms Furniss. Do you want me to conclude?

**Gill Furniss (in the Chair):** Yes, please.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay. Although the action that the Government are taking, and the work of so many—not least my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East—show our commitment to this issue, we are also making huge strides in society in our understanding and acceptance of the menopause. That, in turn, will make a real difference to the lives of many women. But we cannot stop here while so many women still need support.

I want to finish with Mary Wollstonecraft's famous words:

"The beginning is always today."

There is more to do, and we will continue to work to make sure women have that support.

3 pm

**Carolyn Harris:** I thank all hon. Members for attending today. Your participation really gives me, my fellow menowarriors and all women faith that women's health and welfare is a priority that cannot and will not be ignored.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered World Menopause Day.

3.1 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Ada Lovelace Day

3.10 pm

**Lizzi Collinge** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Ada Lovelace Day and Government support for women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. Today, many hon. Members will talk about modern women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics—or STEM—but I confess that I am mostly interested in the fascinating woman Ada Lovelace.

Ada was born into the nobility in 1815, the child of two very talented parents. Her most famous parent was Lord Byron, while her mother—Lady Annabella—was a gifted mathematician. Lord Byron called his wife the “Princess of Parallelograms” and later, when they fell out, his “mathematical Medea”.

Ada never knew her father, and her education was organised by her mother. She inherited both the mathematical genius of her mother and the creativity of her father. In her early teens, she was distracted from her proper studies by designing a flying machine in the form of a horse with a steam engine inside. She is now best known for working alongside Charles Babbage on his hypothetical computer—the analytical engine.

Ada was a pioneer in computer science. She saw the possibilities of computing when no one else could. She understood technology as not just a set of calculations but a way to unlock creativity and serve humanity. For years, Ada was denied the recognition and credit that she deserved for her insight into the potential of computing. She displayed a grasp of mathematical imagination far beyond that of most of her contemporaries.

However, we know that talent alone is not enough. Innovation needs opportunity, guidance, and room to fail and try again. Too often, women and girls are denied that chance, and with them ideas that could transform our world are lost. How many Ada Lovelaces have we lost because they did not have access to that support? Although she was brilliant, Ada’s achievements did not happen solely as a product of her talent. They were made possible by her position in society and through the efforts of the women around her: by a mother determined to see her educated, by tutors she could access only through her social status, and by the circles she moved in, which led her to her collaborator, Charles Babbage. Even with those advantages, it took remarkable persistence for Ada to be part of that work, and her insight would go unrecognised for generations.

I take a moment to thank Suw Charman-Anderson, who is in the Public Gallery. She is the founder of Ada Lovelace Day and has given me much of her expertise on Ada. This speech would not be possible without her contribution, and in some cases I have used her words directly. I also put on record my thanks for all the work that she has done over many years to promote women in STEM.

**Maureen Burke** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in recognising the essential work of student-led groups such as the Women+ in Engineering group at the University of Strathclyde in my constituency? Its members champion and support each other in overcoming the considerable barriers to entry that still remain in the science, technology and engineering industries.

**Lizzi Collinge:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Groups such as the Women+ in Engineering group at the University of Strathclyde can do so much to support other women in STEM. I must also put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for inspiring this debate.

Now, back to Ada—it was her mother, Lady Annabella, who allowed and encouraged Ada to pursue her intellectual passions. Annabella hoped that mathematics would temper whatever dangerous poetical tendencies young Ada might have inherited from her father. Ada was a curious child. At 13 she was designing flying machines. By 15, she had already impressed a man called Augustus De Morgan, a mathematician at the forefront of symbolic logic. He tutored her in maths and logic, exchanging dozens of letters. He even wrote that, had she been a man, she would have had the potential to become

“an original mathematical investigator, perhaps of first rate eminence.”

But Ada was a woman and as such, De Morgan believed, like many at the time, that mathematics might simply be too strenuous for her.

Ada had been plagued with health problems—first headaches, then a bout of measles at 13 that left her paralysed. Confined to her bed, she had to relearn to walk at 15, and De Morgan believed that tackling mathematical problems would only exacerbate her frailty. He wrote that

“the very great tension of mind”

that maths problems require is

“beyond the strength of a woman’s physical power of application.”

Ada, of course, ignored him. At a time when women were not allowed to go to university, her academic development relied on a cobbled together series of tutors and mentors. She burned through one tutor’s entire mathematical knowledge in just a few weeks.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate on a matter close to my own heart. My first job out of university was supporting women into science, technology, engineering and maths. Today, I would like to pay tribute to Georgina Barnard from my constituency. Last month, we opened the institute of technology in Stafford—the best in the country—and she led that project from start to finish. I called to ask her about this debate and what she thinks is most important to help young women get into STEM and face those challenges. From her perspective, it is about supporting young women, from as early an age as possible, to see themselves in those careers. Does my hon. Friend agree with me and Georgina that making sure we have those visible role models is so important?

**Lizzi Collinge:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and with Georgina that having role models and mentors is really important. One of Ada’s mentors was a woman called Mary Somerville, a scientist and polymath. It was Mary who introduced Ada to Charles Babbage, whose work would capture her interest and provide the inspiration for her most significant contributions.

Babbage was a professor of mathematics and a celebrity in the scientific world. He was a visionary, with countless unfinished plans for clockwork calculating machines. At the time, his fascination was his latest device, the analytical engine, a proposed improvement on his earlier

and uncompleted difference engine. The analytical engine, he said, would be able to perform any calculation set before it, but the patience of his parliamentary sponsors had worn thin. Having funded him to the tune of £1.7 million in today's money, they refused to finance a second machine while the first was unfinished.

Babbage was therefore forced to look abroad. After he gave a lecture at the University of Turin, the Italian engineer Luigi Menabrea wrote up his notes and published them in French. Charles Wheatstone then suggested that Ada translate them into English, as she was fluent in French and other languages. She showed the translation to Babbage, who was ecstatic, and he suggested that she add her own notes because as he put it, she understood the machine so well.

Ada's footnotes tripled the paper's original length, because she understood Babbage's device, but she also saw further. She rightly saw it as what we would now call a general purpose computer. For Babbage, these machines were nothing more than calculators, but Ada saw past that. She understood that a machine capable of manipulating numbers—and of representing any value, from letters to musical notes—would have a grip on a world beyond mathematical calculation. Crucially, Ada's vision for computing recognised that technology must be applied for, in her words, "the purposes of mankind." Technology must serve humanity, not the other way around.

At the time, Ada's ideas amounted to little more than a vision. Let us remember that she was working in the 19th century, before there were even any functional computers. Her work was not revisited until nearly a century later, when Alan Turing quoted her in his work.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** The Ada Lovelace event held earlier this week in Parliament was an excellent way of highlighting for many of us the importance of women in manufacturing and STEM, but Ada Lovelace was clearly a visionary. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to keep that visionary sense at the heart of all we do when encouraging the next generation of women into STEM? That means encouraging the further education sector to work with businesses and apprenticeship providers, such as In-Comm from Aldridge, whose representatives were at the event.

**Lizzi Collinge:** I absolutely agree with the right hon. Lady. Having that visionary view of science—looking beyond what is to what could be—is absolutely essential. The providers and the businesses that she talked about are essential to that.

Ada contributed to a debate that is extremely pertinent today when she discussed the possibility of machine intelligence back in the 1800s. She said:

"The Analytical Engine has no pretensions...to originate anything. It can do whatever we know how to order it to perform... Only when computers originate things should they be believed to have minds."

That is in contrast to Alan Turing's later thought that computers should be understood in terms of their ability to appear to think. He termed her thoughts "Lady Lovelace's objection", which I think is rather beautiful.

What developments would we have seen by now if we had understood earlier the potential that Ada saw? What developments do we still lose out on because we do not see the potential in women? The barriers keeping

women and girls back from STEM do not just disadvantage them; they disadvantage all of us. The 2025 Lovelace report, written by Oliver Wyman in collaboration with the organisation WeAreTechWomen, found that the tech industry loses between £2 billion and £3.5 billion every year through a broken career framework that drives out talent, with women bearing the heaviest cost.

**Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Ada Lovelace's legacy is absolutely stellar, as everybody points out. I have the slightest link because I was lucky enough to get married in Newstead abbey, her father's ancestral home—we all want a piece of Ada. Hers is a name that people recognise and her contribution is rightly credited. What concerns me is that the Lovelace report found that

"80% of women surveyed have recently left or are interested in leaving their tech roles".

As has already been touched on, if you can't see it, you can't be it. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is an absolute travesty that only 20% of people in tech are women, and that we have to work to combat that?

**Lizzi Collinge:** I absolutely agree that that is a travesty. We are losing women in STEM at a terrible rate, which I will come on to.

The UK has made bold commitments to become a global leader in machine learning and digital technology, but to meet our goals we need to double or triple our workforce capacity in that sector. How can we do that when there is a steady exodus of women from STEM, with approximately 40,000 to 60,000 women each year leaving their tech or digital role? Surface-level takes have attributed that to caregiving responsibilities, but surveys from the Lovelace report found that caregiving was cited in less than 3% of cases. The true culprits are systemic: underpayment, stalled career progression and lack of opportunities for influence and leadership. Surveys show that more than 70% of experienced women pursue extra qualifications, yet 60% still struggle to go into leadership roles. That damages progress and profits.

Evidence suggests that not only do more diverse teams come up with better solutions to problems, but companies with more women in senior leadership roles are more profitable. Change comes through different perspectives, different worldviews and different visions for the future. On vision for the future, the world's most powerful military, in the Pentagon, is now running a programming language called Ada. That is quite a legacy, and we need to ensure that that legacy is available for future women and girls in STEM.

Finally, I come to my daughter Ada. I want her to see the story of the woman who inspired her name and I want her to know that nobody can tell her what she can or cannot achieve.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Gill Furniss (in the Chair):** Order. I remind all Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

3.24 pm

**Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Morecambe

[*Ian Sollom*]

and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) on securing this important debate. Some Members may remember a debate that I held a few months ago on the contribution of maths to the UK. There was, I think, cross-party agreement that increasing the quality and uptake of mathematical education will be central to the Government's growth mission. I will not repeat the arguments I made in that debate, but I will focus on maths today. Historically, it is one of the worst-performing subjects in terms of gender equality, and one where issues emerge long before women reach the leaky pipeline of STEM careers that others may mention today.

The gender imbalance in STEM is not just about fairness; it is about meeting a national need. Jobs in engineering and technology are expected to grow faster than other occupations across the UK through to 2030, yet women make up just 15.7% of the engineering and technology workforce. That is quite stark.

Around the country, excellent work is already being done to increase the participation of women and girls in maths. Yesterday evening, I attended a reception to celebrate the achievements of uMaths, the network of university maths schools that tackles under-representation in STEM through core programmes of maths and further maths A-levels, with university-linked enrichment. One of these schools is Cambridge maths school, which serves my constituency, and which I was delighted to visit earlier this year. Already nearly 50% of the school's year 13 pupils are female, which is something to be proud of—indeed, it is amazing, considering the national figure on the uptake of maths and further maths A-level is nowhere near that level of parity. More than 10,000 male pupils took A-level further maths in 2023-24, but the number of female pupils taking the subject was less than half that.

Cambridge maths school has clearly made a huge impact simply through its core offerings and ethos, and it is looking to increase support for female students even more. Over the summer, in partnership with the university and Raspberry Pi, it ran a free Girls Enjoy Maths summer school that offered interactive workshops, talks from leading female mathematicians and time to speak to current Cambridge maths school students about their experience. It gave female students a much-needed opportunity to meet role models and see that mathematics does not have to be the masculine-dominated world it may have been for quite a long time. That is vital to increasing participation. Days such as Ada Lovelace Day should not be a historical anomaly. We should be celebrating Ada as much as possible, and I am really glad that we have this debate to do that.

If we are truly to open access to STEM careers to all, I do not think we can rely just on the provision of maths schools that separate students into the STEM versus humanities dichotomy. The Liberal Democrats believe in a broad and balanced approach to the curriculum that gives students, no matter what subjects they study, the skills that they will need in careers that are increasingly technology-driven. That matters particularly to women because research shows that the gender gap opens early—by age 10, only 11% of girls aspire to engineering careers compared with 44% of boys. Between 2019 and 2023 alone, interest in science among 11 to 14-year-old girls declined by 10 percentage points.

Evidence shows that female students are generally more likely to want to study a broader range of subjects than their male peers. It is speculated that it is partly for that reason that the uptake of further maths, a subject that makes one twice as likely to pursue a mathematically intensive STEM degree, is so low. If someone takes further maths, that means filling two of their A-level options with maths, which narrows the opportunity to choose a broader option with more humanities. As a result, many female pupils opt for only single maths, even if they are capable of much more.

Given that suffering from early pigeonholing, the other thing that I would highlight is the opportunity to reskill.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is also an important role for apprenticeships, particularly apprenticeships in the tech sector? There are some excellent apprenticeships of that nature in Reading and the surrounding area. Would he perhaps also offer a few words of support for the Government's new policy of increasing the number of apprenticeships and setting a much higher target for both apprenticeships and university entrants?

**Ian Sollom:** I certainly support the increase in apprenticeships; getting more young people on to any course that offers opportunity is ultimately what it is all about, and I look forward to scrutinising the Government's White Paper on post-16 education when it comes out—in the near term, I believe.

Lifelong opportunities are important as well, giving those people who might have been hampered by the choices they had to make at a young age an opportunity to reskill and join the STEM workforce later in life.

I want to highlight an event happening next week: the University of Cambridge's Institute for Manufacturing is co-hosting the Women in Manufacturing 2025 conference in Coventry—a clear recognition by the sector of the importance of breaking down barriers, and of supporting women to enter and progress in manufacturing careers. Breaking down barriers to women's inclusion in STEM careers also requires cross-departmental thinking, with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology all involved with STEM and careers. I hope that promoting such cross-departmental thinking is something that the Minister can commit to today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Gill Furniss (in the Chair):** I am afraid that I now have to limit future speakers to three minutes each.

3.32 pm

**Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for bringing this important issue to the House for debate today.

As we know, Ada Lovelace Day is a time to celebrate the achievements of women in science, technology, engineering and maths. I am honoured to speak in this debate and to champion women in STEM, in Leigh and

Atherton and across the country, and to commit to fostering progress in helping women to thrive in these often male-dominated fields.

I will cut my speech as I go along; I always get a time limit imposed on my speeches. I will talk about some of the work that I did before being elected to this place. I think that it is important to mention my time at Leigh Spinners mill. I am the former manager of the mill, and I would often talk about Ada Lovelace when showing visitors around the heritage looms in the scutching room. The punched cards that were used to automate the weaving of intricate patterns were a key part of the tour. It is often said that they were the inspiration that Ada Lovelace drew upon when developing the idea for the analytical engine, which is widely considered to be the first computer.

Just a few floors up from the scutching room, on the fourth floor of the mill, sits the newly formed Northwest Computer Museum, an interactive showcase of the history of computing. It is a brilliant space that connects our industrial past with our digital future, and Ada Lovelace's legacy is woven through both.

Remarkably, 80% of the businesses at the mill are still run by women. That is a legacy and a powerful example of strong female leadership. I am extremely proud of that project—this is not the first time I have mentioned it in this House.

We must support pathways that nurture future women entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers and tech leaders—and let us not forget the arts, humanities and creative sectors. That means investing in education, mentorship and inclusive workplaces. It means challenging the stereotypes that tell girls that STEM is not for them. It is not just about gender: class plays a part too. Working-class women are doubly overlooked in elite spaces. When I walk into a meeting, I bring my femininity and my northern working-class spirit with me.

Let me shine a light on two examples of brilliant women driving STEM innovation in Leigh and Atherton. Cat is a leading figure at Leigh Hackspace, a dynamic, collaborative hub, based in the mill, where people passionate about tech, science and digital art come together to create, experiment and inspire. It is a space built on curiosity and community, and it is inspirational to see a woman at the helm of such forward-thinking work.

Then there is Emily Simcox of the ComputerXplorers, which offers children aged three to 13 specialist computer classes, offering an engaging blend of fun and education that is designed to capture the imagination, spark their creativity and prepare them for a tech-driven future—

**Gill Furniss (in the Chair):** Order. I call Jim Shannon.

3.36 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I want to say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for leading the debate. In the short time that she has been here, she has shown herself to be formidable, dedicated and committed. I want to say well done for her excellent speech on this subject—we all enjoyed that.

It is a real pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I do not know about double-jobbing; I think she was a Whip the last time I saw her. I do not know whether she has been elevated or is doing both jobs, but I wish her well.

I will very quickly give a Northern Ireland perspective. I remind everyone that we are all part of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—better together. Because of that, we share ideas about what we do back home and what we do over here, and hopefully we can all learn.

In Northern Ireland in 2021, 59% of students who gained qualifications in the narrow STEM subjects of engineering, technology and computing were male, and 41% were female, so the differential was not too high, but the Department for the Economy has identified other gaps, specifically in engineering and computer science, so there is more to do. Women are often under-represented in many STEM workforce roles—especially technical roles—in Northern Ireland. There are many initiatives in Northern Ireland, some of which have been set up to support women in gaining skills and unlock access to the sector. Organisations such as WOMEN'STEC and the WE Bridge programme at Ulster University provide training and personal development for non-traditional careers, especially in sectors such as construction and IT. Those are not alien to ladies, and they can do those jobs too, so we want to encourage those initiatives.

Careers advice in schools—especially in sixth form—is important. I often hear of younger ones saying that they remember being clear about their options. Their careers advisers in schools from certain employments really helped them to get a steer on the kind of industry that they wanted to be involved in. Back in 2017, I gave a young girl work experience in my office, and she is now a member of my staff. She had the social skills and what was needed to move forward.

If we do not have more female role models in STEM subjects, it is harder for younger women to believe that those pathways are accessible to them. It is all about breaking barriers and providing opportunities at a young age to ensure that progression is possible. It is important that we bring forward encouraging news from all our constituencies.

I will keep exactly to your three minutes, Ms Furniss, so I will conclude with this. We cannot overlook any section of our society, for the future of our economy and the workforce. I believe that we have world-class potential across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; if we want to stay competitive and creative, we must ensure that the opportunities to succeed are open to everyone. I believe that they are in Northern Ireland, and that they can be here too.

3.39 pm

**Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) so much for securing this important debate.

Other hon. Members have already outlined some fantastic initiatives to encourage women and girls in STEM. Such initiatives are so important. There is one in my constituency, at the all-girls Sandbach high school, which runs an extracurricular club called CAUC—Complete and Utter Chaos—for their female students. To be honest, it does not sound chaotic to me: together they design and build electric cars in the school's workshop, and then race them against other schools at prestigious circuits around the country, including Silverstone. I have been and it is honestly phenomenal. They have this car building workshop, and it is just incredible.

[Sarah Russell]

The aim of CAUC is to inspire and encourage female students to pursue careers in traditionally male-dominated industries. We know that, at the moment, only 14.5% of UK engineers are female. The club looks to expose its students to a unique hands-on learning opportunity and many of them have gone on to do STEM degrees and become engineers and have obtained placements, including with Bentley and an F1 racing team. They are doing great stuff.

There is also the Jodrell Bank observatory in my constituency, which I truly love and have spoken about before—I should mention that a member of my immediate family works elsewhere within the University of Manchester. There are lots of fantastic women at Jodrell Bank doing groundbreaking research and discovery, and I want to recognise that Jodrell Bank has made active efforts to improve the percentage of women using its radio telescope with double-blind evaluation of applications for it. Having done that, female scientists now take up 50% of the telescope's usage, which is fantastic and what we should all be aiming for.

The point I want the Government to look at is that there is a massive problem with childcare for people doing PhD studentships. I do not regard childcare as exclusively women's work, nor do I regard it as exclusively their financial cost to bear. None the less, if a person doing a PhD is a young woman wishing to have children, it takes years and it is quite likely to be within a time during which they might want to have kids. At the moment, if they do a fully funded PhD, paid for by the state, they are not eligible for free childcare hours within nursery settings. An average PhD stipend is £15,000, whereas an average full-time nursery place is £12,500 a year. People would be completely unable to live and parent on that sort of money. We should urgently change that. Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell discovered radio pulsars during her PhD. We could be losing all kinds of talent by having that restriction.

3.42 pm

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for securing this debate.

Ashley Combe, which sits above Porlock Weir, was Ada Lovelace's home for many summers. She would walk across west Somerset, admiring its fauna and flora, including the forked spleenwort. There is a famous quote from the late, great Christopher Hitchens:

"The cure for poverty has a name, in fact. It's called 'the empowerment of women'."

It is in that spirit that I speak today.

Despite the rich intellectual legacy Ada has left behind in her summer spot, STEM paths in the area, and in particular the numbers of girls going into STEM, leave much to be desired. The west Somerset part of my constituency, for all its natural beauty, suffers from the country's lowest social mobility and ranks among the poorest for travel times to employment—at the 96th percentile. In our part of the world, we are hampered by inaccessibility which stifles ambition and aspiration. The development of Hinkley C in the years ahead will lead to inward commuting and a further exacerbation of inequality in transportation.

I laud the fact that Nicola Fauvel has been appointed station director at Hinkley Point C, having migrated from Hinkley Point B, where she became only the second woman to head a British nuclear power station. A cultural sea change was needed, and I know that Nicola has been supported no end by the group chief executive officer for the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, David Peattie, and his fantastic team.

Enter the wonderful Ada in Porlock community action group. And I am delighted to say that members from the committee at Ada in Porlock join us here today. Still somewhat in its infancy, having run for just a year and a half, it has been at the heart of a number of community projects. Those initiatives have unveiled the truth that the gap between male and female interest in STEM widens, although the number of STEM students has risen by half in the last five years.

In each generation there is an Ada Lovelace and a Marie Curie. Somewhere out there today is a female scientific savante who does not know it yet. It is that potential force—the potential energy, to borrow from scientific speak—that has not been tapped into to the fullest extent. That is where the wonder lies: the randomness of greatness, the untapped potential of so many. There are more Adas out there. We know it, especially in Porlock in west Somerset—in my beautiful, wonderful constituency.

3.45 pm

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I am truly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for securing this debate and for her powerful speech.

One of this debate's origins was a question raised by a pupil at St Thomas Aquinas school in Kings Norton. They wanted to know what more could be done to improve the share of women and girls in STEM subjects and employment. I hope the fact that we are asking ourselves these questions today will be taken as proof that representations to us as MPs make a difference in Parliament. If more time was available, I would love to talk about the work going on in my constituency to sustain and improve those shares.

Many women other than Ada Lovelace have made foundational contributions to the development of science and mathematics, but there is something that draws us back to Ada Lovelace in particular. Her insights into the possibilities of computing speak to us 200 years on—they seem sometimes to be more of our time than of her own—yet she was also unbound by today's boundaries between arts, humanities and other subjects. As she wrote in one early letter: "give me poetical science". Perhaps it was Ada Lovelace's combination of science and poetry that allowed her to see, in a way that no contemporary did, the true potential of the analytical engine and general purpose computing.

As has been said, Ada Lovelace's comments on the creative potential and limitations of computing, and her foresight about the power of general purpose programming for the common betterment of mankind, speak in a remarkable way to the debates that we have in this House today. On the question of whether Ada was a true programmer, the fact that the first and famous note G contained a very small bug, and that her periods of intense concentration were followed by occasional intense frustration, will resonate with anyone who has engaged in programming.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale said, we should imagine what might have been accomplished if Ada Lovelace, and uncounted millions before and after, had enjoyed the same formal and informal advantages as men. How many great discoveries in the fields of medicine, manufacturing and technology have been delayed or are still undiscovered because there were not women in the room? Towards the end of her life, Ada Lovelace hoped that she would leave a mathematical legacy; the inspiration that she has left means that that hope is fulfilled.

As my hon. Friend said, this is a time to ask ourselves the famous question, “What should we tell our daughters?”

**Gill Furniss (in the Chair):** Order. I call Steve Yemm.

3.48 pm

**Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for securing this important debate.

Ada Lovelace Day is an occasion for us all to pay tribute to a trailblazer in the fields of science and technology, and recognise the importance of women who work in those sectors today. Ada was an incredible figure—the first computer programmer—and she remains a role model to many women in STEM careers and girls who aspire to follow them. She leaves behind such an impressive legacy. I hope that we can continue to honour her by empowering more women to get involved in these fields.

This issue is deeply personal to me. Working in the life sciences and technology field prior to entering Parliament, I saw at first hand the tremendous skills and knowledge that women provide in this field, but I also saw the difficulties women face in pursuing a career in what remains a male-dominated sector. As chief executive of a company in the science and technology field, I boosted the number of female staff working in the company to more than 50%, and all my senior leadership team were women. I am also a father of three girls, two of whom are chemists, so I recognise the importance of women working in science.

Currently, women make up less than 30% of the STEM workforce. That is why I welcome the Government’s industrial strategy, which aims to increase women’s representation in the sector to 35% by 2035. I also welcome the equality charter set out by the Government, which ensures that firms’ diversity data is publicly available. It is disappointing that previous Governments failed to capitalise on this issue. I am reassured by the Government’s approach and intention to unleash the skills, abilities and passions that many women have in this field.

As we remember Ada, let us appreciate her efforts as an inspirational figure for women in STEM, let us recognise the dedication, passion and the resilience of many women in STEM today, and let us commit to educating, training and employing many more women in STEM.

3.51 pm

**Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab):** It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for securing this debate—she beat me to it; I am absolutely delighted.

It is wonderful to be here to speak in this debate commemorating Ada Lovelace Day, which was earlier this week, and was founded by Suw Charman-Anderson—it is wonderful to see her sitting in the Public Gallery. Ada Lovelace was the world’s first computer programmer—a woman who saw long before her time that technology could be both analytical and creative. She reminds us that progress in science depends not just on logic, but on imagination—on putting the “a” for arts in STEAM, because when creativity meets science, innovation truly thrives.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for diversity and inclusion in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and the APPG on financial technology. I also speak today as the founder of Labour: Women in Tech, a network that brings together women from across the tech sector—and our male allies, which is super important—to push to get more women into the tech sector. We certainly need progress.

I am going to talk at a rate of knots. The recent Lovelace report, published by WeAreTechWomen and Oliver Wyman, found that the UK’s tech sector is losing between £2 billion and £3.5 billion because women are leaving the industry or being pushed into non-technical roles. That is a huge waste of talent and potential. Keeping women in tech is not just a question of fairness; it is about what is right for the economy and for innovation. When women are not in the room, the consequences show. Too often, products and systems that are designed mainly by men deliver the best for men—from voice-recognition software that fails to understand women’s voices to health apps that ignore women’s biology and car safety testing still based on the male body. If we want technology for everyone, it must be designed by everyone.

Right across the country there are great organisations such as InnovateHer, Stemettes, Tech She Can and Code First Girls to name just a few, which have been fighting for change for years in this field, mentoring, training and inspiring the next generation. They deserve our thanks and continued support. It was wonderful to be asked to be on the front row at the Labour party conference recently as the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology announced that she was creating a women in tech taskforce. That is a real step forward, and I look forward to it being resourced and empowered to deliver.

The priorities are clear: we need inspiration and education of the next generation, and existing people who would perhaps like a career switch; greater transparency on gender data; action to retain women mid-career; incentives for firms to embed inclusion in design and innovation; and an intersectional approach that recognises every barrier of race, class, disability and sexuality. Ada Lovelace taught us that imagination is the engine of invention, and if we apply the same imagination to how we build our industries, we will create not only fairer workplaces but better technology, and deliver greater economic growth for Britain.

3.54 pm

**Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab):** As my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and many others have so expertly touched on Ada Lovelace’s story, I thought I might—with your indulgence,

[Peter Swallow]

Ms Furniss—touch on another champion of 19th-century science who has always inspired me: Mary Anning, a pioneering palaeontologist renowned for her significant geological discoveries on the Dorset coast. Mary's findings heavily influence how scientists now understand prehistoric life. She discovered the first complete plesiosaur skeleton—she could say it better than I could—and the ichthyosaurus, but she was held back from the proper recognition she so badly deserved because she was working class, because she was uneducated and because she was a woman.

I have always been inspired by her story, and I know that many girls and women across the country have too, including Bracknell's all-girls robotics team, the RealTech Bots, who were crowned world champions at the FIRST Lego League international open earlier this year. The team, made up of school pupils aged between nine and 15, beat 96 teams and 11 countries, flying the STEM flag for Bracknell and the UK, and we are all extremely proud of them.

According to BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT, if we continue at our current rate, it will take women 283 years to make up an equal share of the tech workforce. Given the rapid development of AI and the fact that it is ultimately shaped by its designers, this lack of diversity should worry us all. That is why it is so important that the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has set up a new women's tech taskforce to, in her words—because the words of a woman here are more important than mine—

“finally smash those glass ceilings. Because Britain's future shouldn't just be shaped by the Tech Bros in Silicon Valley but our Tech Sisters—right here, in the UK.”

While other parties are arguing against diversity initiatives, it is important that this Government are recognising that economic growth must be underpinned by shared economic benefits to everyone.

Finally, I turn to the remarks made by the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) and others about the important intersection between Ada's mathematical legacy and the arts that so influenced her. She often blended mathematics with art, predicting the use of computers in music and visual art, as well as other things. She wrote:

“We may say most aptly that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves.”

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Gill Furniss (in the Chair):** There are three more Members left to speak, and I can only allow two minutes each, if we are to get everyone in.

3.57 pm

**Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to be here and to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for securing the debate.

We are here to celebrate Ada Lovelace Day—a day to celebrate women in STEM across the country and across the world. When I spotted this debate on the Order Paper, I was reminded of 12 July last year, when I received a Facebook message, of all things, from a former pupil—

I have no idea how she found me. She had just that day passed out, getting her doctorate in astrophysics, and had placed a note in the acknowledgements section of her thesis thanking me

“for being so inspiring and enthusiastic...and planting the seed by asking me the all-important question once after a class: Have you ever considered studying astrophysics at university?”

That does not sound like an exact quote—I suspect there was possibly more sarcasm when I said it—but it made me reflect on the fact that we should never miss the opportunity to ask such a question of a young person.

We need to go further and faster. We need women working in STEM and women teaching STEM. We also need to change the way we do this. We need to talk about adjectives, not just verbs. We need to talk about the beauty of mathematics. It is hard to describe to a non-mathematician, but it is so beautiful. We need to talk about the creativity of physics. We need to talk about how caring some of the life sciences can be. We need to talk about the adjectives, not just the verbs.

We also need to make sure we have a cross-governmental response to encourage more people into STEM. It is the Department for Transport, DSIT, the Department for Work and Pensions and further afield. We need parity of esteem for vocational courses in STEM. We need access to triple sciences for more kids, not just the highest achievers. We need the measures in the Employment Rights Bill. We need the women's tech taskforce. Here's hoping that, soon, every day can be Ada Lovelace Day.

3.59 pm

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for giving us all the opportunity on Ada Lovelace Day to celebrate not just a brilliant mathematician but a trailblazer who, remarkably early, smashed a glass ceiling and proved that women could and should shape the future of science and technology. Ada wrote the first algorithm for a computing machine in the 19th century. Imagine that: while many were telling women to stick to sewing, she was coding the future. That message is so important for every young girl to hear, so that they dream big.

I speak as someone who spent 25 years teaching chemistry, encouraging girls to explore their natural intellectual curiosity and excel in STEM with confidence. Unfortunately, over the years I have also seen talent stunted not by ability but by stereotypes and lack of role models. Too often, brilliant girls quietly sideline themselves from physics or computing because culture says that it is not for them—well, I have always said nonsense to that.

Research by the Royal Society shows that the scale of the challenge continues. Interest in science among girls in years 7 to 9 has dropped from 75% to 65%, while boys' interest remains steady. We must continue to challenge and tackle gender inequality and the enormous barriers faced by girls, especially those from working-class backgrounds.

4.1 pm

**Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab):** I think we will need a longer debate next year. I am hugely positive about our technological future, but I also recognise that we are grappling with serious questions that will define

our future. Like it or not—trust it or not—information technology defines our age. There is not an off switch, and it is a dereliction of duty to pretend that there is, or to blithely insist that we can roll it back or that halting progress would mean that we somehow protect a version of our lives. If we do not endeavour to understand and take control of this industrial revolution like we mastered the last one, it will inevitably assert unacceptable influence over our lives and our national sovereignty.

Ada Lovelace's legacy presents profound opportunities for us all, but there are risks that we must mitigate. Those risks are undeniable, but there are benefits to the industrial revolution that we are living through. We must all work together to ensure that Ada's computational legacy benefits all, with women and girls, and diverse communities, included by design, not as an afterthought. That is why I was so proud to support my constituents Hazel McPherson and Jess Matthews to develop a national first in Weston-super-Mare: the CSIDES coastal cyber event at our awesome conference venue, the Grand Pier. Hazel and Jess brought internationally renowned cyber experts to join over 300 local business leaders and educators and 80 students to talk about cyber knowledge and resilience. Cyber is not just for the city—it is for the seaside as well. Such events are how we embody the spirit of Ada Lovelace, how we innovate and how we engage our communities—nothing about us, without us.

If the UK hopes to fulfil the ambition of the AI opportunities action plan, we have a lot of work to do to encourage women into STEM. BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT, found in its annual gender diversity report, which will be published next week, that if gender representation in the tech sector was equal to the workforce norm, there would have to be an additional 530,000 women working in the UK's tech sector. The gap is huge, and closing it will take a whole-system approach from schools, apprenticeships, universities and lifelong learning. There is loads more to say, but I have run out of time.

4.3 pm

**Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I congratulate the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) on securing this fantastic debate marking Ada Lovelace Day, which I am delighted to contribute to as the Lib Dem spokesperson for science, innovation and technology, and the daughter of a woman who studied engineering. In today's increasingly technological world, Ada's vision is more relevant than ever, and it is vital that we celebrate her achievements and the opportunities they continue to inspire.

In honouring Ada Lovelace's legacy, we must also confront the challenges that have been put forward during the debate. In 2024, for every woman working in STEM there were three men. Women are less likely to be encouraged to study physics at school, to start coding or to pursue engineering at university. There may have been an upward trend in the proportion of women in STEM, but the workforce is still not equal. Stereotypes in education, lack of female role models and biases at university act as systemic barriers to inclusion for women in STEM, as many Members have mentioned.

As has also been mentioned, failing to empower women in STEM is a loss not just for women, but for all of us, and for science, innovation and the economy.

That is why, when I started a tech company, the very first thing I did was look for mentors, because I felt that I could not do it without them. It was by interviewing and talking to so many great women that I felt inspired and able to move forward.

Ada Lovelace stands as a shining example of a woman who shattered barriers, paving the way for modern science and innovation. However, far too many women like her have been erased from history. Rosalind Franklin's image of DNA was crucial, yet the Nobel prize for that discovery went to three men. Esther Lederberg made breakthroughs in genetics that were overshadowed by her husband's receipt of the Nobel. Dorothy Hodgkin's scientific achievement was reported in the press under the headline "Oxford housewife wins Nobel". She remains the only British woman to win a science Nobel prize. That is not good enough. The instrumental role of women in STEM needs to be celebrated everywhere.

Rothamsted Research in my constituency of Harpenden and Berkhamsted stands as a strong example of inclusion. Pioneers like Katherine Warington and Winifred Brenchley, who worked at Rothamsted Research, are considered the first women in the UK to break into the field of agricultural science. It has been wonderful to hear about so many women's initiatives from Members in the debate today.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) mentioned, in 2014 the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee stated that the lack of women in STEM was a "leaky pipeline". Women have the talent and want to pursue a career in STEM, but along that journey, systemic forces push them out at every stage of their career. More than a decade on, the problem remains. We must recognise that more must and can be done to fix the leak of female talent.

We need to start challenging the core assumptions that push women out of STEM. For example, as the hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) mentioned, childcare policy must be reformed so that nobody has to choose between a career and starting a family. Doubling the statutory rate of shared parental leave would be a significant start. The Liberal Democrats' policy of six weeks' use-it-or-lose-it leave for each parent at 90% of earnings would support women who want to work. In the long term, a committed vision of universal childcare is a lasting solution that would break down those barriers.

It is not just childcare. Awfully, a UNESCO report stated that women in STEM are more likely to be a target of gender-based violence and sexism than those in other fields. We need stronger protections for women. More must also be done to include women and under-represented groups. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), we need better transparency on pay gaps and progression in the workplace. We need stronger support and career guidance from primary school onwards so that girls are always taught that women are in STEM. This also means talking about women in STEM that history has forgotten. Days like Ada Lovelace Day, International Women's Day and the International Day of Women and Girls in Science are important. They start crucial and wonderful conversations like the one we are having today. They allow us to reflect not just on what women are doing today, but what women have done in the past.

[Victoria Collins]

It is important to take these opportunities to push back and show that not enough has changed. There are still gaps that need to be filled to ensure that women are able to fulfil their potential. From Ada Lovelace to the countless women who have made significant contributions, history reminds us that barriers, not ability, have held women back in STEM. As my party's spokesperson for science, innovation and technology, and the proud female MP for Harpenden and Berkhamsted, I want to ensure that every woman in the UK can imagine herself at the forefront of discovery and innovation. I look forward to working with the Government on such issues. By breaking down these barriers today, we can honour the pioneers of the past and empower the scientists, engineers and innovators of tomorrow.

4.7 pm

**Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Furniss. I feel I should donate some of my minutes to some of the other hon. Members present, who, by the time they had finished their contributions, had effectively given a rap to the audience. *[Laughter.]* It was highly skilled. I loved the potted, warm biography of Ada Lovelace and the tribute to her own beautiful daughter by the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge). I was glad to hear of another father who has three girls, including chemists. My dad has three girls, but unfortunately one of them became an MP rather than a scientist—and this MP has not even got the brainpower to remember everybody's constituency names, so I apologise.

This morning I had the special privilege of visiting the Royal Society in St James's, and I was lucky enough to get a glimpse of its incredible archive. Founded in 1660, the Royal Society is the world's oldest continuously existing scientific academy. It was established by natural philosophers and physicists, including Christopher Wren and Robert Boyle. Its motto, "Nullius in verba"—"Take nobody's word for it"—reflects the commitment to evidence and experimentation that has defined British science for over three and a half centuries. Archivist Keith Moore brought out the most incredible selection of gems, including the society's founding register, which has the original signatures of Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Michael Faraday, Francis Crick and Stephen Hawking. It is simply extraordinary.

The first female signature comes only after 1945, the point at which women could be admitted as fellows. Since then the register has included the Nobel laureate Dorothy Hodgkin, who revealed the structure of penicillin; Dame Anne McLaren, whose research laid the foundations for IVF; and Dame Sarah Gilbert, the Oxford scientist behind the covid vaccine. Margaret Thatcher, a chemistry graduate, is also listed, and this month we mark her centenary. These are utterly remarkable scientists, who stand on their own merits and happen to be female. Keith also shared with me a letter from Ada Lovelace herself, who happened to be born at the wrong time to be admitted as a fellow. It reads:

"You were quite right to make your letter mathematical. I can understand that language better than any other."

Today, we mark Ada Lovelace Day, not only to highlight women's contributions to science, but as an opportunity to encourage more women into STEM—and

my goodness, what can be achieved by them if we do. Just recently, I found myself walking in the middle of a three-carriageway road junction next to the M25 as the junction 28 works neared completion. My guide was an inspirational young female engineer, around 30 years old. She had completed a degree apprenticeship in civil engineering, gone straight into the workplace and was now building the bridges and roads that impact thousands of my constituents' journeys daily. That is a practical, clear example of success in getting women into STEM careers. Other examples have been cited today, including that of women in nuclear technology by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour).

Right now, however, there are too many young people leaving university to a very tough job market. At the same time, too many employers in STEM industries are wondering how to get people with the right skills into their businesses. We have to get much better at matching those two challenges so they can solve one another.

Since 2010, successive Conservative Governments have worked on those challenges. Education reforms have raised standards, with a focus on maths, science and a knowledge-rich curriculum. Apprenticeships have been expanded, the apprenticeship levy introduced and skills bootcamps launched to support retraining in digital and technical skills. In my constituency, New City college has been awarded a prestigious accreditation as a STEM centre of excellence with strong industry partnership. I also have local job fairs to match companies such as AstraZeneca to young jobseekers in my constituency—other Members, including those elected in 2024, may wish to do that as they get more experienced.

We have things such as the Women in Innovation programme to support hundreds of female entrepreneurs, with women-founded tech firms raising £3.6 billion in 2022. The STEM ambassadors network reaches thousands of schools, providing role models in science and tech. The STEM returners programme helps women resume careers after a break, which has been discussed by a number of hon. Members. Indeed, the hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) made an excellent point about free childcare for PhD students. I fully understand as a working mother the unbelievable costs of childcare but had not been aware of the issue in relation to PhDs. Will the Minister touch on that? We also have the Turing scheme, which funds international placements for students in STEM subjects, and we have heard about many other initiatives today.

The former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), made mathematics a personal focus, recognising numeracy as the foundation of opportunity. The importance of maths was also referenced by the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom). There are still challenges, however, and we have heard some of the stats today, including from the Lovelace report and those cited by the Royal Society, which show the disparity between girls and boys in their interest in STEM subjects.

Teacher recruitment in STEM subjects is an enduring challenge. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) highlighted an example where he had provided inspirational leadership to a student simply by asking whether they had considered going into astrophysics at university. That is an incredibly insightful moment. What steps are the Government taking to get inspiring science and maths teachers into the classroom to encourage the next generation of female scientists and mathematicians?

I am also keen to know what is being done to combat youth unemployment, especially among graduates, and on a new skills policy to match skills gaps, especially for those seeking to work in STEM subjects. Also, what are the Government doing to make sure that, in the long term, we retain our position as a leading science and technology nation, especially in the life sciences? We have seen particular challenges in that area in recent weeks, with the loss of important investments such as that of Merck in King's Cross.

From Ada Lovelace's letter in the Royal Society archive to that young engineer I met building our infrastructure, I have seen what incredible scientists and engineers can do. I hope we will see many more young women with fantastic science and tech careers ahead of them, who will utilise their talent not just for themselves but for the good of others.

4.14 pm

**Jade Botterill** (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Furniss, and to respond on behalf of the Government for the first time in such an inspiring debate.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) for securing today's important debate. Her touching tribute highlighted many things about Ada Lovelace's pioneering spirit. A daughter of the arts, she studied widely and passionately and grew up to become the mother of an entire field. Without her insight into the possible applications for computers, who knows where we would be today? An 1836 portrait of Ada proudly graces the walls of No. 10, but her legacy is about much more than a picture hanging on a wall. It is a legacy of determination, achievement and inspiration that we should honour by giving women and girls every opportunity to follow in her trailblazing footsteps.

I thank all hon. Members for their powerful contributions today. It was good to hear about the girls enjoying maths summer schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), and about working-class women like Cat and Emily; I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) that northern women are some of our very best. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), who has spent much of her time in this place championing women in tech. I may not be a woman in STEM, but I am a woman in politics, and there are nowhere near enough of us in this profession either. It is great to see so many women in this Chamber giving this issue the debate that it deserves, and I am proud to see some of our male colleagues supporting us too.

Gender equality in STEM is not just about fairness, but about unlocking the full potential of our society. As this room shows, when women and girls are empowered to lead in any field, we gain richer perspectives, stronger teams and smarter solutions. STEM must reflect the world that it seeks to improve. It is wrong that women made up only 16.5% of the engineering workforce in 2024, and that only 22% of those in occupations developing artificial intelligence were women. That is especially troubling as we celebrate the legacy of Ada Lovelace, a pioneer in the field. A report by the Royal Academy of Engineering notes that more diverse and inclusive research

teams in the United States generated 121% more patent citations than those that were not diverse—clear evidence that we work better when we work together.

Diversity in tech is not just about fairness, however, nor is it a question of patent citations. It is estimated that £2 billion is lost annually as a result of women leaving the tech sector or changing jobs because of barriers to their work. The reality is simple: talent exists everywhere, but opportunities in the tech sector do not reach everyone equally. That is why the Government fully support increasing the number of women in STEM and supporting those who already work in those areas to thrive.

That work begins in schools. The Department for Education supports a range of initiatives, including the I Belong programme and the advanced maths support programme, which aims to improve girls' progression into advanced maths post 16, and which received £18.2 million in investment from this Government in May this year. That sits alongside our groundbreaking new £187 million tech skills programme, TechFirst, which creates the opportunities to inspire tech talent from early school age to entering the industry and beyond.

The Government support women who currently work in STEM roles in the civil service. The Government science and engineering profession is working to help women with peer support and mentoring specifically targeted at those working in science in Government. This work unites Government. A recent series of talks by women scientists about their work in the public sector attracted over 1,400 attendees from 55 Departments across Government.

It is important to recognise the work of our arm's length bodies in supporting women in STEM. For example, UK Research and Innovation encourages participation through the STEM ambassador programme—a network of over 28,000 volunteers, about half of whom are women, that reaches more than 3 million young people each year. The brilliant CREST awards recognise pupils undertaking project work in STEM subjects, with more than 50,000 young people in the UK gaining an award each year.

It is important to mention the great work of Innovate UK, the UK's innovation agency, which supports women in the process of creating ideas through to commercialising products, providing targeted funding, mentorship and opportunities for women entrepreneurs and researchers. Innovate UK's Women in Innovation programme has increased the number of women-led applications from one in seven to one in three, and an exciting new competition for Women in Innovation awards will open next year.

The UK's national academies also play a part in encouraging and supporting women in STEM, with the Royal Academy of Engineering working closely with partners across the sector to address the persistent under-representation of women and other groups in the engineering workforce. The academy's diversity impact programme, inclusive leadership programme and Culture+ platform all help to foster inclusivity in what has traditionally been a male-dominated field.

However, we know that there is much more to do. The fabulous female Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology was clear in her conference speech that one of her top priorities is getting more

[Jade Botterill]

women into tech, and she has announced a brand-new women's tech taskforce with BT Group's Allison Kirkby and the Stemettes founder Dr Anne-Marie Imafidon. The taskforce will bring together leading voices from across industry to identify interventions for Government and industry to attract and retain more women in the sector.

Crucially, women in tech are also women in the workplace—women who are being supported by new rights on gender pay gap publishing, protections for pregnant workers and an ongoing consultation on mandatory menopause action plans. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) has already beaten me to this line, but together this work will ensure that progress and innovation is led by more tech sisters right here in the UK, not just tech bros in silicon valley.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to all the women in STEM who have pushed the boundaries of knowledge in our societies forward, which of course includes Ada Lovelace herself, whose pioneering work forms the basis of so much of the technology that we use today. I reiterate the Government's support for the women who are currently working to make the United Kingdom a scientific powerhouse and encourage those currently in education to follow in their footsteps. Women in STEM is not just a slogan; it is thousands of girls in classrooms right across the country and countless women working across the sector as we speak. From listening to all the passionate contributions today, it is clear how we as leaders have a role to play in inspiring the next generation of women and girls in science, technology, engineering and maths. The talent is there in schools and laboratories across our country, and this Government are committed to unlocking its full potential.

4.22 pm

**Lizzi Collinge:** I thank colleagues across the House for their wonderful contributions. I am very pleased to welcome our visitors from Ada in Porlock and of course Suw Charman-Anderson, the founder of Ada Lovelace Day, along with others who have travelled here today.

We heard from the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) that maths is the worst topic for gender inequality—an inequality that opens up very early—and I am thankful to him for highlighting solutions. I also want to highlight the work

of the Good Thinking Society on identifying talented mathematicians at a young age and nurturing them. We have heard today about many such excellent schemes across the whole of the UK, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, but the question is how to link them up, including with museums such as the Northwest Computer Museum, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) mentioned.

I was fascinated to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) about the Complete and Utter Chaos team at Sandbach high school building EVs at school. We also heard about Bracknell's RealTech Bots and about Hazel and Jess at CSIDES in Weston. We heard more fascinating facts about Ada from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), but also about the practicalities needed to truly realise potential, such as financial equality and transport access.

My hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner), for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) and for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) spoke of Ada's belief in poetical science and the false split between science and humanities. We heard about hon. Members' personal and professional experience of boosting women in STEM from my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield (Steve Yemm), for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) and for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), as well as the need for good role models. My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) also made excellent points about realising the full potential of this new industrial revolution.

All those contributions have showed the strength of support across this House for Government support for women in STEM. They show that women's potential is not being realised, just as Ada's was not, and that that is damaging our country and our economy. It was an absolute pleasure to welcome the Minister to her place, and I am very grateful to her for outlining how this Labour Government are supporting women in STEM, and how together we will make sure that no future Adas are lost.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Ada Lovelace Day and Government support for women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

4.25 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

*Thursday 16 October 2025*

## CABINET OFFICE

### Public Sector Fraud Authority

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Josh Simons):** Fraud remains one of the biggest challenges facing the public sector, with estimated losses for fraud and error measured in the billions annually. The damage extends beyond just financial consequences: fraud erodes the public's trust in our public services and confidence in the Government's ability to protect taxpayers' money. Working people across the country expect their taxes to fund the vital public services that they and their families rely upon. When that money instead ends up in the pockets of fraudsters, it undermines the principle that everyone should pay their fair share.

Fraud against the public sector occurs in many forms and includes procurement fraud, benefit fraud, fraud in the construction industry and the fraud experienced by the Government throughout the covid-19 pandemic. Tackling fraud against the public purse is the responsibility of the Public Sector Fraud Authority, whereas the Home Office is responsible for fraud against individuals and businesses. That is why I wish to inform the House about the record-breaking success of the Public Sector Fraud Authority in protecting taxpayers' money. In the 12 months to April 2025, it has prevented £480 million from falling into the hands of fraudsters. This means the Government have millions more to invest in our plan for change.

These successes have been driven by artificial intelligence and advanced data-matching. The recently announced fraud risk assessment accelerator is part of this approach. The tool scans new policy proposals for potential fraud weaknesses and early tests show it could reduce the time to identify fraud risks by 80%, while preserving essential human oversight. The UK intends to license this technology internationally.

The Covid Counter-Fraud Commissioner has been tasked with recovering taxpayers' money from fraudsters. Over a third of the money saved by the Public Sector Fraud Authority—£186 million—comes from tackling fraud committed during the covid-19 pandemic. The National Fraud Initiative sits in the Public Sector Fraud Authority and is also responsible for a significant amount of these savings. It has prevented over £68 million in wrongful pension payments and saved £36 million for local councils across the country.

Wider investment in counter-fraud includes the introduction of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, and investment in significant measures that will deliver an estimated £9.6 billion in savings by 2030. This record-breaking year demonstrates that with the right technology, determination and leadership, we can go further, and do more, to protect taxpayers' money while delivering the Government's plan for change that our country needs.

[HCWS969]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Children's Hospice Funding

**The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock):** I am delighted to announce to the House today that the Government and NHS England can now confirm the continuation of the centrally administered children's hospice funding, previously known as the children's hospice grant, for the three years of the next spending review period, 2026-27 to 2028-29 inclusive.

This Government have already made it clear that we hugely value the important role that hospices play in supporting the palliative care and end of life care sector and the big role they will play in the shift of care from hospital to community settings, including via integrated neighbourhood health teams.

In December 2024, we announced the biggest investment in a generation for hospices, providing £100 million in capital funding to adult and children's hospices across England over 2024-25 and 2025-26, and continued revenue funding for children's hospices of £26 million in 2025-26.

We are now confirming that children's hospices will receive further revenue funding for the next three years: 2026-27, 2027-28 and 2028-29. This funding will see circa £26 million (adjusted for inflation) allocated to children's hospices in England each year, via their local integrated commissioning boards on behalf of NHS England, as happened in 2024-25 and 2025-26. This amounts to at least £78 million over the next three years.

This is in line with our 10-year health plan, promoting a more consistent national approach, while also supporting commissioners in prioritising the palliative care and end of life care needs of their local population. Further details on the process and delivery of this funding will follow in due course. The allocations to individual children's hospices will be refreshed to reflect updated prevalence data.

This funding will be in addition to existing local arrangements for services commissioned from children's hospices, and any locally agreed funding to hospices should continue at the discretion of the relevant ICBs, which are responsible for commissioning palliative care to meet the needs of their populations.

This Government's commitment to provide this much-needed funding until the end of the spending review period recognises that children's hospices need funding certainty in order to plan ahead, rather than relying on year-on-year funding decisions, and also acknowledges the invaluable support that children's hospices provide to children with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions and their loved ones.

Meanwhile, ICBs will work to embed strategic commissioning approaches, with the support of the Department and NHS England, to ensure that population of children and young people with palliative care and end of life care needs, including those currently met through the centrally administered children's hospice funding, are fully incorporated into their five-year organisational plans, as outlined in the planning framework.

We want a society where every person receives high-quality, compassionate care from diagnosis through to the end of life, and we recognise that access to high-quality, personalised palliative care can make all the difference for seriously ill children and their families. This funding

will allow children's hospices to continue to provide this all-important support to those who need it most, at some of the most difficult times of their lives.

More widely on palliative care and end of life care, the Government and the NHS will closely monitor the shift towards all-age strategic commissioning of palliative and end of life care services to ensure that the services reduce variation in access and quality.

Being able to plan for the long term is of vital importance to our children's hospices, so I am proud that this Government have removed the "cliff edge" of annual funding cycles, so that our children's hospices will now be able to operate on the basis of far greater certainty and stability.

[HCWS970]

### **Health and Care System: Tackling Antisemitism and Racism**

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** Today I am updating the House on urgent action to tackle antisemitism and racism across the NHS.

The NHS is a universal service which demands the highest standards of care and respect for all patients, regardless of their background. It is unacceptable that many people, including those in the Jewish community, do not currently feel safe working in or using the NHS.

The vast majority of doctors, nurses and healthcare workers embody the very best of our country. But recent cases have exposed something deeply troubling.

That is why we are taking immediate action.

I have commissioned Lord Mann, the Government's adviser on antisemitism, to conduct a rapid review into how healthcare regulators can better tackle racism. As well as addressing the real challenges of antisemitism, I also expect Lord Mann's recommendations to improve the NHS's ability to tackle all forms of racism in its ranks.

At the same time, all 1.5 million NHS staff will be required to complete updated mandatory antisemitism and anti-racism training, with existing equality, diversity and human rights programmes being expanded.

We are also asking NHS England and all Department of Health and Social Care arm's length bodies to explicitly adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism to ensure consistency across the health system. NHS trusts and integrated care boards are being strongly encouraged to follow suit. The Government are also reviewing the recommendations of the independent working group on Islamophobia.

NHS England is reviewing the uniform and workwear guidance last updated in 2020, in light of recent successful approaches rolled out at University College London Hospitals NHS foundation trust and Manchester University NHS foundation trust. NHS England will engage stakeholders on its proposals and issue new guidance shortly. The principles of this guidance will be that religious freedom of expression will be protected, patients feel safe and respected at all times, and that staff political views do not impact on patients' care or comfort.

Together, these actions will help us build a health and care system where everyone feels safe to work and be treated.

[HCWS971]

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