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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 20 October 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

International Baccalaureate

1. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What steps she is taking to ensure the provision of adequate funding for pupils to study the International Baccalaureate. [905851]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): Funded institutions for those aged 16 to 19 have the freedom to decide how to use their funding for the provision they offer, including whether they offer the international baccalaureate.

Alison Bennett: Varndean sixth-form college in Brighton is the only state-funded IB provider in Sussex. It has warned that, without the large programme uplift, the IB will become financially unviable. Many Mid Sussex students have gone on from Varndean to study engineering, medicine and maths at leading universities. Does the Minister think it right that this world-class qualification becomes available only in the private sector, entrenching a two-tier education system? Will he meet me and Varndean students to discuss the benefits of the IB for state-educated pupils and why this decision must be reversed?

Josh MacAlister: The Government made big decisions at the spending review to increase the overall funding available to 16-to-19 courses. Next financial year, there will be an increase of over £800 million.¹ That means that per-pupil funding is going up substantially. The large programme uplift sits on top of that, and the Government have made the decision to prioritise the large programme uplift for students doing multiple A-levels in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects. We still support the international baccalaureate and recognise it as a programme that can work for many students.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's support for the international baccalaureate. Ashcroft technology academy in my constituency runs a successful IB programme. Will he confirm that the programme will still be funded and that pupils can still choose to study the international baccalaureate at Ashcroft academy?

Josh MacAlister: I know that my hon. Friend is a champion for Ashcroft academy and has visited it many times. I can confirm that the changes that the Government are making will mean that the international baccalaureate can still be studied. We are providing funding for 16-to-19 provision so that sixth-form colleges can make those decisions.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): This week I have been inundated by families who send their children to Europa school just outside my constituency; they are so concerned by these changes. I taught the IB for 11 years, and I know full well the difference that its incredible curriculum can make to children's lives. Does this policy direction not send a negative signal from the Government? I remind the Minister that it was a Labour Government who introduced the funding in the first place. Surely this is the wrong direction.

Josh MacAlister: The decision is essentially about where in the system resources go. Over 75% of students in receipt of extra support from the large programme uplift are studying A-levels, and we want to prioritise support for the vast majority of students who are studying A-levels and taking extra A-levels, including further maths. That is right for our economy, and it is also right for the vast majority of students. We still recognise the international baccalaureate as an important course and we want to support it.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I, too, have a school in my constituency that offers the international baccalaureate. Dane Court school in Broadstairs has an extremely successful programme in breaking down barriers to opportunity for a large number of pupils in an area of significant deprivation. Only 10% of the children in East Thanet succeed in passing the Kent test; we need to be able to ensure that those children and others get the maximum opportunities available. Will the Minister reassure me, the senior leadership team, and parents and children at Dane Court that the international baccalaureate will still be possible for those children and for future generations?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for her advocacy for her constituents. This year, per-student funding is rising to £5,105—up from £4,843 last year. These decisions made across the further education system and for sixth-form colleges mean that institutions can make the best choices for their students, including, where appropriate, backing students to study the international baccalaureate.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his new role. I have been listening to him closely, but I have to say that the rhetoric does not match the actions. In fact, the headteacher of Ashcroft academy wrote to the Secretary of State saying exactly that the IB cannot be delivered because the additional funding has been cut. The international baccalaureate is recognised globally and allows British students to compete internationally. Cutting funding will mean that those who can afford it will have access to it, but those who cannot—namely in our state sector—will not. Why is the Minister scrapping funding for the IB and undermining standards in our state schools?

1. [Official Report, 30 October 2025; Vol. 774, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

Josh MacAlister: The system provides the level of funding necessary to 16-to-19 providers. The Government have made big decisions, which have not been backed by the Conservatives in spending reviews or Budgets, to ensure that the funding is there for colleges to make those choices. On top of that, there is the large programme uplift. In that respect, we are rightly making the decision to prioritise the vast majority of students who are taking more than three A-levels, especially in STEM subjects. We are prioritising those subjects, and we are being frank and honest about that choice. The international baccalaureate can be chosen by colleges where that is right for students.

Free School Meals: Eligibility Criteria

2. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of changes to eligibility criteria for free school meals on levels of children in poverty. [905852]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): As Secretary of State, I have secured free school meals for half a million more children and we are set to lift 100,000 children out of poverty and put £500 back into families' pockets. Alongside our roll-out of free breakfast clubs, 30 hours of Government-funded childcare and Best Start family hubs, I am acting to deliver Labour's moral mission on tackling child poverty.

Mr Dhese: Labour's expansion of free school meals will reach 8,750 children in Slough, saving parents in Slough up to £500, as well as maintaining attendance and attainment and improving behaviour. I know that this will be welcomed by families across my Slough constituency and ensure the very best for their children's future. Can the Secretary of State outline what measures the Government are taking to increase awareness of this scheme and to ensure that eligible pupils do not miss out on this excellent support?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for everything he does to champion children and families across his constituency. It is fantastic to hear how many children in Slough will benefit from the expansion of free school meals. It is a policy that is pro-learning, anti-poverty and properly Labour. Of course, we want as many families as possible to benefit from it, and to that end we are working with schools, local authorities and the wider sector to notify families about the changes that are coming into effect.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Under the existing criteria for free school meals, university maths schools have an excellent record for widening participation. We know that 7% of A-level maths students across the country are eligible for free school meals, compared with 13% of students at university maths schools. Will the Government consider expanding the number of places available at university maths schools?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman was very imaginative with his question there, and I credit him for that. Of course, we have to take decisions about school placement and school places overall, across the whole system, but if he would like to provide me with more information, I will happily provide him with an update.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): We Liberal Democrats warmly welcomed the Government's decision earlier this year to finally adopt our long-standing policy of extending free school meals to all children in households in receipt of universal credit. At the time, Ministers repeatedly refused to confirm how they were funding this extension; research from Northumbria University now shows that, on average, every primary will have to find £11,000 and every secondary about £25,000 to do so, at a time when they are already cutting teaching assistants and extracurricular activities to balance the books. Given that the Secretary of State has made this policy and the rolling out of school breakfast clubs the centrepiece of her bid for deputy leadership of the Labour party, will she confirm when she is actually going to fund them?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for drawing attention to the fantastic Labour policies that this Government are rolling out.

We are expanding free school meals to half a million more children, backed up with an extra £1 billion of funding through the spending review. That is the difference that a Labour Government are making. I am delighted that we now have 750 new free breakfast clubs, and that from April next year another 2,000 will open, reaching half a million more children, lifting children out of poverty and backing families. That is the difference a Labour Government make.

SEND System: Cheadle

3. **Mr Tom Morrison** (Cheadle) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help improve the special educational needs and disabilities system in Cheadle. [905853]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): As part of our plan for change, we are determined to improve the SEND system across the country so that every child has access to the best opportunities. We are committed to improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools through the earlier identification of needs, as well as to ensuring that special schools cater to those with the most complex needs.

Mr Morrison: Paul and Ellie are children with special educational needs in a primary school in Bramhall. Their parents, like many across Cheadle, have reached out to me for help. Their SEND provision has been suddenly taken away. Paul and Ellie's parents are now considering withdrawing them from mainstream schooling. Parentkind research shows that more than one in three parents of children with special educational needs say that their needs are not being sufficiently met. Paul and Ellie's parents deserve much more certainty and clarity, so can the Minister confirm when they will bring forward the schools White Paper and, with it, the crucial information on the SEND reforms for anxious parents?

Georgia Gould: I have heard so many stories like Paul and Ellie's, and I am so sorry about the experiences they have had. That is why it is so important that we are already taking action to invest in mainstream inclusion, to improve teacher training and to support early identification, and it is why we are investing £740 million to support schools to provide more specialist places.

We are already taking that action, and we are working very closely with parents around the country, like Paul and Ellie's, to bring forward a wider set of reforms.

Children with SEND: Mainstream Schools

4. Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream schools. [905854]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): By prioritising early intervention, training and inclusive support in mainstream schools, we are expanding the capacity to deliver timely, consistent and high-quality SEND provision. This will improve support for children and families. We are engaging with children, parents and experts about the challenges in the system and how we can work together to make sure that every child has the right support when they need it.

Jo Platt: I thank the Secretary of State for visiting Golborne All Saints during the summer. As she saw, it is a shining example of inclusive education in action. As we mark ADHD Awareness Month, will the Minister outline the potential impact of the curriculum review on children with ADHD, and how that can become standard for all children with SEND, so that every child can thrive in a nurturing environment?

Georgia Gould: The Secretary of State was telling me just this morning what a wonderful visit she had to Golborne All Saints Catholic primary and pre-school, and about the amazing practice there. I read with interest the report from my hon. Friend's constituents at her recent SEND roundtable. The review is looking closely at what affects children's learning in mainstream schools, including those with SEND, ADHD and those without a formal diagnosis, making sure that every pupil can access a broad and balanced curriculum.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Elstree village school in my constituency is an excellent example of a small and nurturing school that specialises in supporting children with special educational needs. Sadly, we have recently been informed that Hertfordshire county council is considering closing the school. Will the Minister join me in sending a clear message to Herts county council that they should reconsider that decision and prioritise the needs of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools?

Georgia Gould: I have been very clear that we want to invest in early intervention and nurturing provision for children with special educational needs. If the right hon. Member would send me more details of the case, I would be happy to look into it.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I recently held two events, with professionals and with families, on the subject of SEND in my Carlisle constituency. Their concerns are very much backed up by figures that show that Cumberland is spending less per pupil on those with education, health and care plans, and that there are fewer specialist education places in and around Carlisle and north Cumbria than the rest of the country. Can the Minister tell me how I can work with the Department for Education to increase the number of specialist education places in my constituency?

Georgia Gould: One of the best parts of my new role has been getting letters from people across the House who have had conversations with their communities. They bring stories of challenges but also of some of the great practice that is happening around the country. I read my hon. Friend's letter about those challenges with interest, and I am committed to working alongside her. As I set out, we have invested £740 million to increase the number of specialist places around the country. I look forward to a conversation about how that can benefit her constituency.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The previous Schools Minister, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), was so excited to hear from me about Manor Mead special school in my constituency that she undertook to visit it. Sadly, she had to cancel that visit and has now clearly moved on to other things, so would the new Schools Minister like to visit Manor Mead special school and see the fantastic work being done there?

Georgia Gould: I am proud to follow on from the previous Schools Minister, and would be delighted to visit that school with the hon. Member.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): On Friday, I attended a meeting in Cornwall of the National Association of Head Teachers. We discussed the adversarial nature of the SEND system for all stakeholders. As we develop a system that focuses on inclusion, does the Minister agree that a key indicator of its success must be that it drives out the combative environment that was allowed to flourish under 14 years of Conservative failure?

Georgia Gould: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have spoken to too many parents who have had to fight so hard just to get the support that their children need. The support should be available when children need it, which is why we are so determined to invest in early intervention and to back parents to get the support they need.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The number of EHCPs being maintained by Hampshire county council is rising exponentially, but the funding is simply not keeping pace with the demand and the cost. Surprisingly, the proportion of pupils receiving SEND support in mainstream schools is going down, which demonstrates to me that teachers simply do not feel sufficiently supported to support those children. The last Government introduced the Oliver McGowan mandatory training in neurodivergence for all health and care professionals. I met the Minister's predecessor to discuss introducing a similar programme for education professionals. Would the Minister look again at how that programme could support teachers who are struggling in some of the most difficult educational circumstances?

Georgia Gould: The Government have invested an extra £1 billion into the high-needs block, and we have changed the teacher training package to ensure that it includes material on supporting children with special educational needs. The PINS programme—partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools—is working across the NHS and education to provide more training

for teachers on neurodiversity. We are absolutely aware that teacher training is a huge issue and will continue to listen to ideas from both sides of the House.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): As I have made clear in this Chamber on numerous occasions, in my part of the world there are sadly far too few specialist school places for children with SEND. Headteachers across Weymouth and Portland have made clear to me that only with a new special school will we be able to deal with this problem. Given the urgent need, will the Minister work with me behind the scenes, by hook or by crook, to open a new SEND school at the Osprey Quay site in Portland in my constituency?

Georgia Gould: My hon. Friend has already reached out to me several times to advocate for his constituents and the importance of specialist places. I very much look forward to working with him to increase provision in his constituency.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): On Friday, I met primary schools in my constituency that are accommodating in their classrooms children who they are not set up for. One school had to convert its library for two children for whom the main classroom setting is overwhelming, and a second had to do the same for its IT department. What reassurance can the Minister give those teachers and schools that they will get the funding and resources they need to accommodate children with additional needs?

Georgia Gould: I have visited bespoke resource centres. I was recently in a resource centre in Southwark that provides that kind of brilliant provision. The £740 million we have set out is exactly to provide more specialist places that allow children to get the right support they need, often within mainstream schools and within their local communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I welcome the Minister once again to her place. SEND is a huge issue for every parliamentarian in this House, but for months parents and children across the country have been left in the dark with no clarity as to how the Government will support children with special educational needs. There has been much speculation that EHCPs might be scrapped—speculation caused by the Labour Government—and the Minister gave no answers in the packed Westminster Hall debate before the recess. I wrote to her after that debate. That was over a month ago, and I have yet to receive a letter providing any clarity. Will she give clarity to the parents she speaks about, confirm when the White Paper might be published and tell us whether the Government will be amending the 2014 legislation and scrapping EHCPs?

Georgia Gould: The previous Government had 14 years to deliver this reform. Where was any of this urgency when they were in power? I ran a council in which I saw every day the broken system we were left to operate—the one that the last Conservative Secretary of State for Education called “lose, lose, lose”. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this is urgent for me. I have seen the problems and heard stories from across the House

about the challenges that we face. We are determined to work with families, teachers and experts to get the reforms right and ensure that we do not make the mistakes that the previous Government made.

SEND Provision

5. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help improve the SEND system. [905855]

7. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform SEND provision. [905858]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): As we have already heard today and in a packed Westminster Hall debate last month, too many children and families are being let down by the current SEND system. We want children to have support when they need it, without a battle. We are already investing in early intervention and early inclusion; there is new support for SEND in the early years and £740 million available for specialist places.

Dr Chambers: In 2024, fewer than half of education, health and care plans were issued within the 20-week limit. Five months is a huge chunk of a child's life, and parents of Winchester tell me every single week about how hard they have to fight to get the support that their child needs and is entitled to. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that EHCPs are issued in a timely manner?

Georgia Gould: Parents and children should not have to wait for support; they should have it when they need it. We are working closely with councils with waiting lists to improve provision and, if necessary, to bring in specialist SEND advice. We will continue to push on that.

Kim Johnson: I welcome the Minister's response and the £740 million investment into the sector. However, although Liverpool has improved waiting times for EHCPs, there remains a shortage of specialist school places and necessary support. Some 8,000 children in Liverpool now require an EHCP—that figure has doubled over the past three years—but almost half of them are educated in mainstream schools that do not meet their needs. More children with SEND are excluded from school and sent into inadequate pupil referral units and alternative provision. What steps will the Government take to ensure that SEND reforms deliver real improvements for families in Liverpool Riverside, and that no child is excluded from education because of a lack of services?

Georgia Gould: I recently saw some brilliant specialist provision in a neighbouring Liverpool constituency, but I know that, for too many children in Liverpool and across the country, waiting lists are too long for them to get the support they need. That is why we have already started investing in early intervention. Where there are concerns about a local authority's capacity to make improvements, we will help them to identify barriers and put in place an effective recovery plan. This year's high needs funding increase will help mainstream and special schools with the cost of supporting pupils.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I have spoken to many anxious parents whose children have not been in receipt of an EHCP or local authority funding but would historically have benefited from independent education provision because of their SEND needs. One of their concerns is that such provision can no longer be afforded because of the imposition of 20% VAT on those schools. On behalf of those parents, I implore the Government to look at that again and do a U-turn.

Georgia Gould: Would the Conservatives support cutting breakfast clubs? Would they support reducing the expansion of free school meals? Would they sack teachers? Those are some of the things being invested in because we made that decision. We are determined to provide support for children with special educational needs wherever they need it. We want children to be able to go to their local schools, but we will support them with their needs.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My Committee's recent inquiry on SEND found that, although support from health services is critical in enabling many children with special educational needs and disabilities to access education, health is often not represented at the table and there are no effective mechanisms to hold health services to account for the vital role that they play. What engagement does my hon. Friend the Minister have with her Department for Health and Social Care counterparts to ensure that health services play their full part in supporting and enabling children's education?

Georgia Gould: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her leadership of the incredibly detailed Education Committee report, which I read with interest. I know how much expertise went into that, and how many conversations there were with parents; there is so much rich information in it. I agree that the partnership with health is essential, and that is something I am focused on. To give children and young people the best opportunities, we must work across Government to support young people with special educational needs.

Higher-level Learning Target

6. **Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that it meets its target of two thirds of young people participating in higher-level learning. [905856]

14. **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that it meets its target of two thirds of young people participating in higher-level learning. [905865]

18. **Linsey Farnsworth** (Amber Valley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that it meets its target of two thirds of young people participating in higher-level learning. [905869]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Later today I will make a statement on our post-16 education and skills White Paper, which sets out measures

to support this learning ambition. For too long, skills have not been taken seriously, and that stops with Labour. Our long-term plan for national renewal will unlock opportunity for our young people, and drive growth for our country with clearer pathways, stronger alignment, and a renewed partnership between Government and business.

Anneliese Midgley: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. In Knowsley, while we are making progress with work from the council and organisations such as the Brilliant Club, we still fall below average for young people going into higher learning. Barriers remain to continuing education, and to developing skills for good jobs and good lives. Will she meet me to discuss how we can improve that?

Bridget Phillipson: I know how passionate my hon. Friend is about securing better life chances and more opportunities for children across her constituency, and I would be more than happy to meet her to discuss that, whether it is through the expanded work that we are delivering in our schools to raise standards, opportunities for young people to get into vocational or technical education, or further measures in the White Paper that I will be setting out later this afternoon.

Mr Perkins: The construction skills hub in Staveley in my constituency is a great example of the value of apprenticeships, and this year 68 young people came straight out of school and started a new construction apprenticeship. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way we will be able to achieve the Government's ambitious construction plans is by getting more people to take on a construction career? In welcoming the announcements that she is making, can she say what more she will do to ensure we get more young people into our construction industry?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right, and I know he has championed this cause for many years to ensure there are strong vocational and technical routes, including into areas such as construction. Around 5,000 more construction apprenticeship places will be made available each year, thanks to our £140 million investment, but that investment comes with reform, such as new foundation apprenticeships to equip young people with the skills they need, and construction technical excellence colleges in every region, working together with business, to ensure that we are training the plasterers, the electricians and the bricklayers of the future. Those are fantastic careers with great prospects, and we must ensure that they are available to more young people, including in my hon. Friend's community.

Linsey Farnsworth: In my constituency of Amber Valley the David Nieper academy teaches employability skills in conjunction with local industry, and it has had zero NEETs—those not in education, employment or training—at age 18 for the past two academic years. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating its students and its staff, and will she commit to visiting, to see how by bringing the workplace into the classroom it celebrates both the academic and the vocational?

Bridget Phillipson: That is fantastic to hear, not least given the challenges that we still see with quite high levels across our country of young people who are not

in employment, education or training. I and the Work and Pensions Secretary are determined to take action on that, and I would be more than happy to do my best to honour my hon. Friend's request.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): After the creative reimagining of the Government's target for hiring more teachers, it would be helpful to have some precision on the record for the target of two thirds of young people in higher learning. We know that higher learning means level 4 or above, but what exactly is a gold-standard apprenticeship? Does it mean one in growth sectors with very high levels of completion?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, that is one area. We are refocusing our target to ensure that there are strong technical and vocational routes for our young people, as well as the opportunity to go to university. Going to university remains a strong option for many young people who want that chance—I know Conservative Members have always been keen to do down our fantastic universities—but the big gap that we have as a country is around level 4 and level 5, especially in technical and vocational education. The right hon. Gentleman spent a long time in the Department for Education looking at that issue; this Government will tackle it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Bath college offers more than 1,000 courses up to degree level and is home to 10,000 learners. Its alumni include gold medal winner Jason Gardener and drum and bass producer Danny Byrd. I heard the Secretary of State speaking this morning about the vital importance of vocational training. What can the Government do to support Bath college to expand its programmes and training courses?

Bridget Phillipson: Through the spending review, from next year we are investing £800 million in 16-to-19 funding. That funding will run alongside the many commitments in the White Paper that I will set out, around more foundation apprenticeships, new V-levels and better routes into technical and vocational opportunities for our young people, working closely with businesses in key areas such as defence, construction and engineering—but there is more to come.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Too many young people are being saddled with huge debts from universities with little to show by way of career prospects. There is a clear case for the Government to slash poor-value degrees and redirect the savings to the apprenticeship budget, doubling it to, say, £6 billion a year. Will the Secretary of State explain why she is allowing low-quality university courses to continue unchecked, while taxpayers write off billions of pounds every year in unpaid student loans?

Bridget Phillipson: In my statement later today on the White Paper I will be setting out the action that we will be taking to ensure that the regulator, the Office for Students, has the power to ensure high-quality courses and good outcomes for young people going to university. The policy that the hon. Gentleman has just outlined was in the Conservative manifesto, which was roundly rejected by the British people and ridiculed for being financially illiterate, because the funding system simply does not work in that way. The message that I want to

come across loud and clear from this Dispatch Box is that if young people have got what it takes and they have the qualifications to go to university, that is a good route for them. *[Interruption.]* They should not have their prospects and opportunities dismissed in such a casual and snobbish way by the Conservative party.

Mr Speaker: Secretary of State, I do not cough for my benefit—it is to help you rather than me having to get up. I call the shadow Minister.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): On higher-level learning, universities have spent at least £2.5 million since the attacks of 7 October on additional security for anti-Israel protests and the clean-up operations that follow, yet many of the disciplinary cases against those disrupting study have been dropped. Will the Secretary of State confirm how many students have been expelled or disciplined for causing criminal damage, inciting violence and chanting antisemitic abuse?

Bridget Phillipson: Let me be absolutely clear: there is no place on our university campuses, in our schools or anywhere in our society for antisemitism, and I send that message loud and clear. That is the message that I have extended to university vice-chancellors, who should be in no doubt that we expect to see action on campus on this very serious issue. That is why we are putting more funding into training and support, including in our universities where we expect to see action, because there can be no excuse for Jewish students feeling unsafe on campus. Freedom of speech does not mean people have a right to harass or intimidate Jewish students, and university vice-chancellors should be in no doubt that they have a responsibility to act to safeguard the wellbeing of all students.

Free Schools: Application Decisions

8. **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): What plans she has for the free school application decisions that were paused in October 2024. [905859]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): The Government's spending watchdog reported in 2017 that planned free schools would add an estimated 57,500 more spare school places. We are taking a common-sense approach, so that we can prove value for money from every pound of taxpayer money spent.

Mr Brash: Residents in Wynyard, in my Hartlepool constituency, have waited for far too long, thanks primarily to the mess left by the Conservative party, for their new primary school, St Joseph's, which has been caught up in this review. Understandably, parents are frustrated by the continued delays, so will the Minister commit to using every possible lever at his disposal to expedite the decision, so that Wynyard families can finally have access to the high-quality school provision that they have been promised for so long?

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend has been a vocal champion for St Joseph's Catholic primary school since he entered this place last year. I want every child in the country to go to school in an appropriate building. His community wants certainty, and that is what we want too. An update will be provided later this year, and I would be happy to speak to him before that time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers, and I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) for setting the scene so very well. We in Northern Ireland are very keen to learn from the education system here. I believe that the Education Minister from the Northern Ireland Assembly—he is a colleague in my party, by the way, so I understand his interests in these matters—will be keen to listen to and hear the suggestion put forward by the Minister. Will the Minister share his ideas for Hartlepool with us in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can all benefit in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Josh MacAlister: In another part of my brief, I am already in touch with Ministers in devolved nations regarding children's social care, and I would be very happy also to share wider learning from the school rebuilding programme.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): One year ago, the Education Secretary paused plans to open 44 approved free schools. In January, she said that she was “working rapidly” to make a decision. That was nine months ago—enough time to make a baby, but not enough time for her to make up her mind. When will our Ministers tell those free school founders—among whom are some of the best education leaders in the country—if they can open great new schools?

Josh MacAlister: There is a choice here. We are debating how the Government, within only a few months of being elected, are making big progress across the education system. That includes big decisions made at fiscal events to invest capital into programmes such as this one, which at every opportunity the Conservatives have failed to support. We are able to make these decisions to improve our school estate only because of the decisions made at fiscal events.

British Sign Language GCSE

9. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): When the British Sign Language GCSE will be available in schools. [905860]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): This is a really important qualification that is a step forward in opening up British Sign Language. However, the GCSE is a new qualification, and a lot of work is going into ensuring that the new assessment works for a wide range of students. Ofqual has consulted on its proposed assessment arrangements and expects to publish its final qualification rules this autumn.

Sarah Owen: [*In British Sign Language: I thank the Secretary of State for her commitment to introducing a GCSE in BSL.*] Beyond qualifications, what work is being done to ensure that deaf children and their whole families can access BSL teaching without cost, especially in the early years, when their deaf babies' brains are developing language skills?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and her passion for opening opportunities for deaf children. I hope she can support me to be able to answer

questions in kind at future oral parliamentary questions. Funding is available through the adult skills fund for qualifications focusing on British Sign Language up to and including level 2. I welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue further.

Vocational Training: Under-19s

10. **Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support vocational training for people aged under 19. [905861]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): We have cut red tape, put in record investment and tilted the system in favour of young domestic talent, and the proof is in the pudding. Apprenticeship starts, participation and achievement are up, up, up under this Government.

Matt Vickers: Using funding delivered by the last Conservative Government, work is under way to deliver an incredible, brand new, purpose-built vocational training centre for the Neta Training Group in Stockton. It will offer youngsters the chance to get great skills and jobs. Does the Minister agree that we should be capping any debt-trap degree courses that fail to deliver employment opportunities and instead increasing the apprenticeship budget—maybe even doubling it—to give young people career-focused routes to success?

Josh MacAlister: This is where I think the last Government got it wrong. We can be pro-further education, pro-technical education and pro-higher education; there is absolutely no need to trade them off against one another. Under this Government, we have 120,000 new training opportunities, up to 30,000 foundation apprenticeship starts and an unprecedented £3 billion being invested in apprenticeships. It is great that the hon. Member and his constituents in Stockton are benefiting from that.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Last week, I met representatives of Centrepont. They highlighted that some 2,800 young people in my constituency are not in education, employment or training, despite having extensive STEM skills and a real drive to participate in that part of the economy. Connecting those young people with existing opportunities is a major challenge, and I would like to hear how such opportunities are being created through the exciting propositions of technical colleges and, perhaps, V-levels. What work is being done to ensure that those things are accessible to young people in constituencies such as mine?

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend is right to highlight this issue. A million young people in this country are not in education, employment or training, which is a moral stain that the Government are absolutely committed to doing everything they can to address. The future of our skills system sits right at the heart of that effort, and I encourage my hon. Friend to be in the Chamber for the statement later today to hear what the Government's further plans are.

Childcare: Affordability

12. **Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase the affordability of childcare. [905863]

17. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help increase the affordability of childcare. [905868]

Mr Speaker: Welcome, Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): As it is my first time at the Dispatch Box, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), and say what an honour it is to build on his work to give every child the best start in life.

This Government have delivered a record expansion of childcare, saving working parents £7,500 a year, and we are working with our fantastic private, voluntary, and independent sector and new school-based nurseries to ensure that this expanded provision reaches every eligible family.

Liam Conlon: I thank the Minister for her response and welcome her to her place. I recently had the pleasure of welcoming my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary to St Anthony's Catholic primary school in Penge, where we saw preparations for the opening of its new school-based nursery. St Anthony's is one of two schools in my constituency of Beckenham and Penge to be awarded money for school-based nurseries in the first round of funding, the other being Oak Lodge Primary in West Wickham. Does the Minister agree that school-based nurseries such as these are essential for providing the high-quality places we need and, crucially, for tackling early childhood inequalities and closing the attainment gap before children start school?

Olivia Bailey: I do agree with my hon. Friend, and I congratulate St Anthony's and Oak Lodge, as well as my hon. Friend for being a tireless champion for his constituents. This Government have delivered 5,000 places at new school-based nurseries this year alone, with 7,000 more to come next September. I encourage Members across the House to get their local schools to apply for a phase 2 grant.

Alice Macdonald: As the Minister has said, nurseries are an important part of the childcare picture. Last month, I visited Mousehold infant and nursery school, which—thanks to the funding it has received from this Government—has been able to double the number of places it offers to families in Norwich North. The team there told me how this will make a real difference, as did families. Will the Minister join me in thanking the fantastic team at Mousehold, and expand a bit further on the steps being taken to ensure that more provision like this is accessible to families in my constituency and beyond?

Olivia Bailey: Absolutely—I thank the brilliant team at Mousehold, who are so dedicated to giving every child the help and support they need. This Government want every child to have the best start in life, which is

why we have expanded childcare entitlements, are supporting schools to open new nurseries, and—after the Conservative party dismantled them—are bringing back family hubs in every community in our country.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent Seb told me how pleased he was when the Government extended the role of free childcare, but his nursery changed the rules so that the free hours can be taken only after 1 o'clock and have to be spread over four days a week. That means that the previously paid-for care is not now free, but costing £500 more than before. We know that this is happening across the country as nurseries struggle with the jobs tax and other excessive costs, so what are the Government going to do to help those families get what they are entitled to?

Olivia Bailey: I encourage the hon. Lady to write to me with the details of that case, because we are absolutely clear that in this rapid expansion of childcare—which half a million children have been able to access this September—those 30 hours should be available, and it should not be the case that extras are charged or anything else. I am happy to look at the specifics of the case.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The Minister is new to the Dispatch Box, so perhaps we can forgive her for suggesting that the Conservatives cut the number of family hubs, since we invented them. Focusing on the issue of cost and moving away from primary schools, private providers are finding that the jobs tax and other hits are making it more and more difficult to pay the bills and ensure that that entitlement—which we all want to see given to parents—is delivered. Can I invite the hon. Lady to give any reflections from her early days as a Minister on how we can deliver that? Can she reach out to those in the Treasury and elsewhere to make them understand the ecosystem in which those providers sit?

Olivia Bailey: Sure Start was one of the greatest successes of the last Labour Government, and it drove significant improvements for our children. The Conservative party systematically dismantled that across our country, with significant negative consequences for our children and young people. When this Government say that we are prioritising early years, we are putting our money where our mouth is—unlike the Conservatives, who had a pledge with absolutely no plan—with £8 billion this year and £9 billion next year to expand childcare and give every child the best start in life.

Topical Questions

T1. [905891] **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The launch of Labour's best start in life campaign last week marked a watershed moment. The Conservatives slashed family services, leaving children and families across our country without support, but Labour is building back that support, reviving Sure Start for a new generation. It is more than just the Best Start adverts that people have seen on the telly and heard on the radio; it is bricks and mortar, too. From Derbyshire

to Darlington, and from Staffordshire to Swindon, Labour is giving local authorities the funding they need to open Best Start family hubs, so that community services are truly nationwide once again. Labour demands the best start in life for children growing up in our country. That is how we will get a record share of children school-ready. That is the difference that a Labour Government make.

Manuela Perteghella: I declare that I used to work as a university lecturer before being elected. One of my constituents has already paid nearly £500 for their French visa, just to be able to undertake their year abroad as part of their degree. These costs will exclude students from disadvantaged backgrounds from vital international opportunities. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the excessive visa costs faced by British students undertaking international placements?

Bridget Phillipson: If the hon. Lady would be so kind as to provide me with some information and more details, I will happily ensure that she gets a proper response.

T3. [905893] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): We recently had brilliant news in Dartford for young people in the constituency and across the region, with North Kent college designated as a technical excellence college, with a focus on transforming construction training. That is perfect for the lower Thames crossing just coming on stream. The college, however, is full to the brim and wants to expand. Will the Minister look at how colleges such as North Kent can gain access to crucial capital to enable them to expand?

Bridget Phillipson: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the fantastic team at North Kent college on all their hard work, and congratulate him on his championing of great vocational and technical routes for our young people. The Government have committed £80 million of capital funding to construction technical excellence colleges. We will also be investing a further £375 million over four years to provide additional places for 16 to 19-year-olds. I will be saying more on that shortly, and I am happy to discuss it further with my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): The Education Secretary talks about wanting to improve outcomes for white working-class boys, yet disadvantaged children in Wales are being failed by the very model that she wants to introduce here in England. Is it not the case that the best thing she can do for white working-class pupils is to stop her school reforms?

Bridget Phillipson: I do not know how the right hon. Lady has the brass neck. For 14 years, we saw groups in our—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I have got to get all these people in during topicals. Having a private conversation as the Secretary of State tries to answer the question does not help.

Bridget Phillipson: The Conservatives had 14 years. We take this issue seriously, because we know that far too many children in our country from white working-class

communities do not get the outcomes they deserve. A little humility on the Conservatives' part would go a long way.

Laura Trott: What we did for 14 years was improve school standards. Not content with destroying standards, this afternoon the Secretary of State will, according to media reports, introduce a new lower-level qualification targeted at white working-class pupils. That is simply watering down standards for some of our most deprived children. Will the Secretary of State confirm that under this Government, the soft bigotry of low expectations is back?

Bridget Phillipson: It is absolutely nothing of the sort. What we inherited was a systematic failure of white working-class kids and children with special educational needs and disabilities in our country. I read the right hon. Lady's conference speech with great care, and I looked out in that speech for any mention of children with SEND, of children with additional needs or, indeed, of some of the groups she has been talking about this afternoon. She had nothing to say on the topic. It is the usual confected outrage that has become the right hon. Lady's hallmark.

T4. [905894] **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): I was delighted to welcome the Education Secretary to St Mary's Catholic primary school in Derby, the greenest school in the country, where every classroom looks out on to green spaces. We are also lucky to have the stunning River Derwent flowing through our city, which children can paddle, walk and row along. What assessments have been made of the benefits to children of having access to nature as part of their education?

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): That sounds idyllic, and I hope I can follow the Secretary of State on a visit to that beautiful school. Improving connection to nature helps to address key priorities in the opportunity mission, and we are supporting the University of Oxford's assessment of the impact of nature-based programmes in secondary schools.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Esther Ghey, the mother of Brianna Ghey, is in Parliament today, campaigning to keep phones out of the classroom. Given that young people themselves are saying that they want a "break from the stress" of social media at school, and given the impact of phones on children's concentration and focus, will the Secretary of State finally listen to her own Children's Minister and put the Government's guidance on mobile phones in schools into law, to give teachers and headteachers the back-up and, crucially, the resources that they need in order to restrict their use?

Bridget Phillipson: I too have met Esther Ghey, and heard from her about the incredible work that she has been leading in the face of profound personal tragedy following the loss of her daughter. I pay tribute to her for her campaigning efforts. Phones should not be out in schools—it is as simple as that. Schools have the powers, and headteachers have the powers, to enforce restrictions on their use, and in doing so they have my full backing. We can have no distractions when it comes to mobile phone use in our schools.

T6. [905896] **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): Five primary schools in Sandwell now have free breakfast clubs, including St Mary Magdalene, which I visited earlier this year, and I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State announce that 2,000 more primary schools would benefit next year. Can the Minister say more about how the free breakfast clubs in primary schools that Labour has introduced are helping children and families across our country?

The Minister for Equalities (Olivia Bailey): Breakfast clubs give children a great start to the day. They drive improvements in behaviour, attendance and attainment, and they can save families up to £450 a year. I congratulate my hon. Friend and the schools in her constituency on their efforts, and I look forward to more and more children benefiting as we continue our roll-out.

T2. [905892] **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I acknowledge that the Government have inherited local government finance and SEND requirements in what is probably their worst crisis in history. However, Cornwall has faced one of the steepest—indeed, the steepest—demands for education, health and care plans in recent years, and one of the greatest SEND needs, as well as one of the lowest levels of high-needs funding. Would the Schools Minister be prepared to meet me, along with fellow MPs from Cornwall and representatives of the local education department, in order to avoid further crises?

Georgia Gould: The Government have put £1 billion into the high-needs block to support children with special educational needs, but I want to hear from Members from around the country about their ideas for reforms, and I am happy to meet the hon. Member and colleagues.

T7. [905897] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Let me first declare that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for schools, learning and assessment and the APPG on social mobility.

Businesses, schools and young people in Bracknell Forest all tell me that essential skills such as financial, digital and media literacy, creative problem-solving, communication and collaboration are more important than ever, but are not formally recognised or measured. How can we help young people to succeed by developing and recognising those essential skills?

Georgia Gould: I look forward to working with the APPG. We agree that we need to equip young people with key knowledge and skills to adapt to a rapidly changing world, and the curriculum and assessment review will say more about the wider curriculum.

T5. [905895] **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): According to a survey carried out by campaigners from the adoption and special guardianship support fund, just 40% of respondents believed that the previous £5,000 fair access limit was sufficient to meet their children's needs. Following its reduction to £3,000, 71% reported a reduction in the number of therapy sessions. What will the Minister do, as a matter of urgency, to address the detrimental impacts of the changes to the ASGSF?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): I thank the hon. Member for that important question. This is National Adoption Week, which I am sure Members across the House will want to celebrate, recognising the importance of adoption and the need to fill the adoption gap—about 1,500 adoptive parents for children are being waited for at the moment. We are looking at the future of the adoption and special guardianship support fund, which provides essential support, and we have tried to ensure that the scheme is accessible to as many families as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I say to those on the Front Bench that when I start coughing and shaking my head, I am trying to move you along, not indicating that you should carry on? I think I am getting my signals wrong.

T8. [905898] **Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I recently met dedicated parents from my constituency who choose to home-educate their children. They raised questions about duties on parents and providers to report details of their children's education and recreational activities included in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Could the Minister reaffirm his support for home-education families and meet me, so that we can provide clarity for these parents?

Josh MacAlister: England is an international outlier by not requiring the registration of electively home-educated children, and we are remedying that with the Bill's measures. Information on non-educational activities will not be required for inclusion in the registers. I will happily meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Time and again in my constituency surgeries, I hear stories of children's needs going unrecognised and unsupported for years. Given the aim of increasing mainstream inclusion, what are the Government doing to ensure that all teachers receive comprehensive SEND training?

Georgia Gould: Teacher training is an incredibly important part of mainstream inclusion and, from this September, we have changed the core teacher training to ensure that it includes SEND content. We are also supporting early years provision to have specialist SEND support, alongside the wider work to support mainstream inclusion.

T10. [905900] **Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): Sacriston academy, a primary school in my constituency, has ceilings held up by scaffolding joists. The classrooms, built in 1910, are unusable due to water penetration through the ceilings and walls. Can the Minister say when the funding might be available to repair the school, after 14 years of Tory neglect?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy for his constituents and for the school concerned. A number of schemes are available that may be able to support the school with the situation it faces, and I would be happy to speak to him further about that.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Arts and Humanities Research Council receives £70 million in public money to fund postgraduate research. What mechanism and powers does the Secretary of State have

to check that such substantial funds are not squandered on politically tendentious projects, such as those exposed by Laurence Sleator on page 27 of *The Times* on Saturday? Will she perhaps take a look at the article and write to me?

Josh MacAlister: I am sure that we would be happy to look at the article, but the last thing that people outside this building want is politicians deciding what research should be done, in the same way as we do not want judges being appointed by politicians in this House either.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Last week I visited Oak academy's new building—a net zero, solar-powered, inspiring environment for young people. I would love young people across my constituency, and across the rest of the country, to have the opportunity to learn in such environments, so can the Secretary of State tell me what her Department is doing to improve the environmental performance of our schools?

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend has been a very effective champion for Bournemouth on these matters. St Joseph's school in her constituency is benefiting already from solar and other measures, thanks to the partnership with Great British Energy. It is projected to save the school £8,000 a year, which could be spent on extra support for pupils and teachers.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Over 50% of parents of children who have special educational needs have admitted to neglecting their own health because they are too busy prioritising the health of their children. What is the Minister doing to ensure that parents' health and mental wellbeing are being prioritised in this very adversarial process?

Georgia Gould: I, too, have heard from too many parents who have had to give up their jobs or fall behind on their health, as the hon. Member has set out, because they are having to fight in a very adversarial system. We are determined to reform the system so that support is available at the earliest opportunity for young people, so that parents can collaborate with schools and are supported, and we are rebuilding the support around families.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Last month, I held a SEND community consultation in south-east Reading in my constituency, attended by over 60 parents, children and local experts. We all agreed that the current system is broken, and one of the young people, Megan, spoke about the feeling of being let down by the system and constantly fighting a never-ending battle. Does the Minister agree that too many children are in Megan's position, and will she set out how the upcoming SEND White Paper will improve the lives of those children?

Georgia Gould: I read with interest my hon. Friend's report of that constituency conversation, which contained many creative ideas, and we are determined to work with young people and parents to get these reforms right.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Following the tragic murder of her daughter Brianna, Esther Ghey has dedicated herself to making our schools safer. I have just come from an event that she is hosting

in Parliament, at which she is calling for a statutory ban on smartphones in classrooms. Will the Minister for Children and Families, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), make time to attend today's event and make it clear whether he supports a statutory phone-free education for all children?

Olivia Bailey: I am absolutely happy to pop into the event this afternoon, and I applaud Esther Ghey for her fantastic campaigning work. The Government are completely clear that mobile phones should not be used in school, and the Government guidance says as much.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): Colleges are the backbone of working-class communities such as mine in Clackmannanshire, but the funding model for colleges in Scotland is fundamentally broken because of SNP cuts. Will the Secretary of State write to her counterpart in the Scottish Government and highlight the importance of Alloa campus to the people of Clackmannanshire and the wider Forth valley, and stress that all Scottish colleges need to receive proper funding?

Bridget Phillipson: I am very grateful for that question. Here in England, we are investing more in brilliant further education colleges. It is such a shame that in Scotland the SNP Government are cutting that support. I have heard directly from my Scottish Labour counterpart, Pam Duncan-Glancy, about the devastating impact that is having on young people across Scotland.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Schools on the Isle of Wight have some of the most serious challenges to levels of attainment. The Isle of Wight council is a small unitary authority with unique challenges in an area disconnected from the UK mainland. What will the Government do to better support education on the Isle of Wight, rather than resort to top-down education views that do not cater for the unique pressures faced by my constituents and our children?

Georgia Gould: We are determined to have high standards for children in every part of the country. I am very happy to talk to the hon. Member about his specific concerns for that community.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Mainstream schools in my constituency are taking steps to provide their own inclusive, in-house SEND provision. Penair secondary school has been creating a forest school on its land, and some of my heads have expressed their desire to create area resource base units in their schools. Does the Minister agree that such types of mainstream, inclusive provision could provide a way forward, and will she come down to Cornwall, maybe when she meets us, to see it?

Georgia Gould: I have seen amazing examples of how this kind of provision can bring children back into mainstream classrooms and cause them to start to enjoy school and achieve again. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and visit the school that has been set up.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I have visited many schools in North Devon, and many are facing the dilemma of whether to fund essential maintenance or

to lay off teaching assistants. What is the Minister doing to ensure that adequate funding reaches rural schools so that they do not have to cut teaching staff in order to balance the books?

Josh MacAlister: I am happy to correspond with the hon. Member about the situation facing that school. In relation to school buildings, a number of schemes are available to provide support.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): In Blackpool, too many young people needing SEND placements have been sent outside the borough, often an hour away. There is a proposal on the table for two new SEND schools in Blackpool with 120 places, but it seems to be in limbo. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss this and how we can get adequate support for our great young people?

Georgia Gould: This Government want every child able to be educated in their community, not having to travel long distances. That is why we have set out the £740 million investment in specialist places. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the circumstances.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that the Secretary of State needs to speed up publication of the guidance on single-sex spaces used by trans people in schools, so can the Secretary of State confirm that the guidance will be published before the conclusion of Labour's deputy leadership contest, or will she continue to forsake female-only spaces for her own political ambitions?

Bridget Phillipson: I will happily answer the hon. Gentleman's question directly, but he is a little confused about the question he is asking. The code of practice from the EHRC is about adults; it is not about schools. On the particular question of the code of practice from the EHRC, we received it at the start of September. It is a 300-page-plus document. We are considering it carefully. I required further material from the EHRC, which was provided only last week. It is utterly baseless to suggest that there is any going slow on what is a sensitive and

important area that we must get right. As someone who used to run a women's refuge, I know how important single-sex spaces are. I also know it is important that trans people continue to receive protection under the Equality Act 2010, free from prejudice, harassment and discrimination.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Under the previous Government, British parents had the highest childcare costs in Europe. Will the Minister please set out how the expansion of early years education is reducing the cost of living for hard-working British parents?

Olivia Bailey: Happily. The average family will save £7,500 per child per year under this Government's record expansion of childcare.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): A serious fire at St Martin's school in my constituency has left most of its secondary children without face-to-face education for nearly four weeks now. Will the Minister meet me to determine how we can ensure that the buildings are brought back into use as quickly as possible, and how the children can be brought back up to speed, so that they are not disadvantaged?

Josh MacAlister: I would be very happy to have a discussion with the hon. Lady about the arrangements, to ensure that we can get students back into proper classrooms as soon as possible.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): A new school has been in the offing in Bidwell West for almost a decade now. The independent council promised me that places would be available from September 2027, but now appears to be backtracking. Is the Minister willing to meet me to discuss the obvious concerns of parents, many of whom moved into the new build estate because of the promise of a brand-new school?

Josh MacAlister: I would be very happy to find out more about the situation my hon. Friend describes, and to offer any help or support that we can.

Alleged Spying Case: Home Office Involvement

Mr Speaker: Before we come on to the urgent question on the Chinese spy case, I would like to reiterate my remarks from last week. I remain disappointed by what has happened in this case. I am, alongside the Lord Speaker, continuing to seek advice from officials and specialist legal advice on what further steps might be taken to pursue this issue in other ways. While it would be not appropriate to talk in detail about security matters on the Floor of the House, I am also speaking to officials about access arrangements.

3.43 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement about Home Office involvement in the alleged China spying case.

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I thank the shadow Home Secretary for the question, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to it today.

As I have repeatedly set out to the House, the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the wider Government are extremely disappointed that this case will not be heard in court. I have heard the strength of feeling right across the House and I share Members' concern about the threats we face from espionage. The witness statements released last Wednesday vindicate what the Prime Minister and other members of the Government have stated repeatedly: the deputy National Security Adviser faithfully, and with full integrity, set out the various threats posed by the Chinese state to the UK, and he did so in order to try to support a successful prosecution.

This urgent question asks about the involvement of the Home Office. Following the charging decision made in early 2024, under the previous Government, the Crown Prosecution Service advised the witness that he could not share the evidence with others in government. The Home Office's involvement following the charging decision that was taken under the previous Government was therefore heavily restricted to avoid breaching the CPS's requirements.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): Listen to that.

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not need any help from the Government Front Bench. This is a very important statement that really does affect Members of this House.

Dan Jarvis: As I have repeatedly made clear in this House, Ministers and special advisers were not involved in any aspect of the production of the evidence, and I stand by that statement today. The Prime Minister has also made clear that he was informed of the CPS's decision only a matter of days before the case collapsed. There is nothing that the Prime Minister or any other Minister could have done at that point that would have changed the law and the policy under the previous Government between 2021 and 2023. Those who have read the DNSA's statements will know that they clearly articulated the threats posed by China based on the

previous Government's policy at the time, detailing the damage caused by the alleged offences. Ultimately, it was an entirely independent decision by the CPS to discontinue the case, and the CPS has confirmed that it came under no outside pressure to do so.

Like Members from all parts of the House, I remain very frustrated that this case will not be heard in court. We wanted to see the trial go ahead. I have made it clear on many occasions that the decision not to proceed was an independent decision by the Crown Prosecution Service, and the Director of Public Prosecutions has given assurances that there was no Government interference in that decision.

I note that the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy will be undertaking an inquiry on the case and intends to hold public evidence sessions. The Intelligence and Security Committee has also indicated that it will investigate. We welcome the launch of the inquiry and the investigations, with which the Government will, of course, fully co-operate. I have already set out the range of activity that this Government are taking to combat the Chinese espionage threat, and I hope that that is well understood. Let me also provide the House with the reassurance that the Government will take all necessary action to keep the UK safe and secure.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp: Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister told this House that no Minister or special adviser was involved in the handling of the China spy case, yet *The Sunday Times* has since reported that the Home Secretary had

"heard that the case might collapse and had made representations to ensure the evidence put forward was as 'strong as possible'."

So I ask the Minister: when did the Home Secretary become aware that the case might collapse, and what representations did she or her proxies make about the evidence and to whom? Why has the House been told—including just now—that Ministers and advisers were not involved in any way when *The Sunday Times* reports that they were?

The Sunday Times also reported on a key meeting that took place on 1 September—a meeting that the Government originally denied took place. Is it true that Jonathan Powell chaired that meeting? Did that meeting discuss the CPS view that the evidence provided to that point was inadequate, and the possibility of providing further evidence in the case? Will the Minister agree to publish the minutes of all meetings in which this case was discussed and the correspondence relating to it?

The Sunday Times reported that following the meeting, the Attorney General's Office was asked to speak to the CPS. Did anyone from the AGO speak directly or indirectly to the CPS after that meeting? Can the Minister confirm that Dan Chugg from the Foreign Office was at the 1 September meeting, and that it was the same Dan Chugg who approached the Lord Speaker with a proposed deal in which the Chinese ambassador would be allowed back into Parliament? *The Sunday Times* also reported that the DNSA is understood to have acknowledged privately that the decision not to say that China is an ongoing threat was political in nature. Is that true?

[Chris Philp]

Finally, the current Government's position has been that all the evidence provided related to the previous Government's policy, but we now know that that is categorically not true. In paragraph 8 of Matt Collins's third statement, from August this year, which he copied and pasted from the Labour manifesto, he stressed the importance the current Government attach to a "positive relationship" with China, weakening the evidence compared with 2023 and bringing in current Government policy, contrary to what we have been told in recent weeks. Why have the Government been providing this House with inaccurate information, and why did Ministers know what the CPS wanted but refuse to give it to the CPS?

Dan Jarvis: With great respect, a lot of what has just been said does not actually relate to the urgent question that was initially asked by the shadow Home Secretary. I have to say, the Opposition's position is confusing. They initially criticised the Government for intervening. Then—[*Interruption.*] I will answer the question. I am answering it. I think it is important that on these matters of national security, we try to debate things in a reasonable and sensible way. That is the approach that this Government will seek to take. If Members opposite—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we have had enough.

Dan Jarvis: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Opposition's position is confusing. They initially criticised the Government for intervening. Then, when it became absolutely clear that we had not done that, they criticised us for not intervening. They asked for greater transparency, then when we provided it they accused the Government—wrongly—of hanging people out to dry. Given that this urgent question relates to the activities of the Home Office, I am not at all clear why the shadow Home Secretary thinks it is appropriate—given accusations that have been made previously about hanging officials out to dry—to name an official in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. How does that relate to the urgent question that was asked? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think I need to help a little bit. It is in order to mention another Department. You cannot ringfence this and not refer to other people. It might not be comfortable, but the fact is that a question has been asked that is within order, and that is what matters.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Speaker. I am simply pointing out to the shadow Home Secretary that Conservative Members have previously criticised Ministers and the Government for, to use their words, hanging officials out to dry, and now the shadow Home Secretary has just named twice an official from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I have said to the Government Front Bench that I do not need any chipping in. I certainly do not need it from all along the Opposition Front Bench.

Dan Jarvis: I do wonder whether at any point the shadow Home Secretary and certain Conservative Members—not all, but certain Members—have considered the need to have some humility and acknowledge their part in this. These activities took place on their watch, when they were in government, and under the legislation of the time.

Chris Philp: Don't just read that out. Answer the question.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Philp, you have had the benefit of an urgent question. I have had the benefit—some might say—of listening to you, so I want you to have the benefit of listening to the Minister.

Dan Jarvis: The shadow Home Secretary would be well advised to listen to the points being made. I am seeking to respond to the questions that he and other right hon. and hon. Members have raised. I am trying to do that in good faith, and I would be grateful for the opportunity to do so.

I remind the shadow Home Secretary that we are here today only because the previous Conservative Government did not move quickly enough to fix the glaring holes that existed in our national security laws. The charges in this case, as I hope is well known, were brought under the Official Secrets Act 1911. This antiquated legislation was drawn up before the first world war, and the Conservatives began reviewing it in 2015 because it was widely known that it was not fit for purpose. But it took eight years for them to introduce the National Security Act 2023. Fortunately, the law has now been updated, with cross-party support, but not in time to protect our Parliament from Chinese espionage. If the Conservatives had acted more quickly and the National Security Act had been in place when these alleged offences happened, the prosecution would likely have proceeded. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Look, I am trying really hard. People who hold positions should know better.

Dan Jarvis: Let me make this point crystal clear: no member of this Government, nor any special adviser, was in any way involved in the evidence submitted to the CPS or the decision by the DPP not to proceed with the case.

There was an important omission from the shadow Home Secretary's remarks. As hon. Members will know, the first substantive witness statement was provided under the previous Government, when the right hon. Member was a Home Office Minister, yet neither he nor the Leader of the Opposition have taken the opportunity to say what involvement Conservative Ministers and Conservative special advisers had in the main tranche of the evidence.

The Prime Minister has confirmed that no Labour Ministers or special advisers were involved with the provision of evidence for the case. Last Wednesday during Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister asked the Leader of the Opposition to confirm whether that was also the case under the previous Government. I was in the House last Wednesday, and I think that I heard the Leader of the Opposition confirming from a sedentary position that she did know the answer to that question, but the Conservative party has refused to

confirm if any Conservative Ministers or special advisers were involved in the provision of evidence under the previous Government. I wonder if any of the former Ministers in the Chamber can provide the answer.

As Ministers have repeatedly said from the Dispatch Box, the Government are extremely disappointed that the case did not proceed to trial. I gently say to Opposition Front-Bench Members that they need to stop throwing mud and start coming to terms with what happened on their watch.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), and other relevant Select Committee Chairs, including me, have met the Director of Public Prosecutions and sent him a detailed series of follow-up questions. The Chair of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), has convened an inquiry and is likely to call a number of relevant witnesses, including Government Ministers. The Minister mentioned that the ISC will be looking at this matter. Can he assure the House that the Government will co-operate fully with those inquiries and responses, and that that is the best way to take these matters forward in a thorough and timely fashion?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and for the role he has played in these proceedings. Yes, I give him the absolute assurance he seeks. There is an important role for the House to play in looking carefully at precisely what has gone on. That is why, on behalf of the Government, I very much welcome the work that will now be done by the JCNSS and the ISC. Both those important Committees have an important role, and I am sure that hon. Members across the House will want to make other contributions as part of that process.

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

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): What a mess. We have three questions for the Minister. First, what conversations has he had with all relevant parliamentary authorities—that might include the Speaker's Office—about plans to tighten vetting or ongoing monitoring of researchers and staff to ensure this does not happen again?

Secondly, in the witness statements released by this Government, there is a reference to the use by the previous Government of “back channels” to attempt to dissuade the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) and the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) from raising concerns about Confucius institutes. What is the Minister's understanding, based on the evidence, statements and any other information available, of the meaning of “back channels” in that context? Does it refer to the previous Government's Whips Office, Government officials or somebody else?

Thirdly, given that the Prime Minister's spokesperson still refuses today to say that China is a threat to Britain's national security, would the Minister be comfortable with Labour MPs accepting meeting requests from representatives of the Chinese Communist party or any nations allied to China?

Dan Jarvis: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Member for the points he has raised. Let me take them in turn. I lead on behalf of the Government on vetting, and a lot of work has taken place in government since we came into office to ensure that the systems and processes that underpin our vetting are fit for purpose. The hon. Gentleman is right to ask about it. Although it might seem like a reasonably niche point, it is an important one because our national security is underpinned by our ability to vet those who have access to privileged information. He, for reasons that I completely understand, made reference to a link between the work that we are doing in government and the importance of ensuring that the appropriate vetting procedures are in place for this House. I know he will understand that, fundamentally, that will be a matter for the Speaker and for this House, but I can give him an absolute assurance that we will work closely with Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and all those in this place to ensure that we look carefully at what happened and satisfy ourselves that the vetting arrangements are absolutely fit for purpose.

The hon. Gentleman's second point related specifically to two Members of this House. I do not believe that either of those two Members are in their place today. I am keen to meet them and work closely with them, and to ensure that the Government are providing the support that they may want or require. I am happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman and to those Members about the point that he has made.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's final point, which was specifically about China, I hope he will acknowledge that the Government have been crystal clear about our position with regard to China—[*Interruption.*] Right hon. and hon. Members may chuckle, but we have had this debate previously. If there are Members who think that the nature of our relationship with China can be defined by a single word, then I do not believe that they are serious about the nature of the relationship. All Members in this House have an absolute responsibility to decide for themselves what meetings they take. With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not believe that it is for Ministers to opine from the Dispatch Box about whether individual Members should take meetings or not.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Personally, I am very clear that China remains an active, persistent and everyday threat to our country and has done so for many years. In the light of this, what steps is the Minister taking on behalf of the Government to ensure that parliamentarians across this House are much better protected in the years to come from the kind of foreign interference that we saw—regularly, unfortunately—on the last Government's watch?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not only for his question but for his previous service and for the work of his constituents with regard to underpinning our national security. He makes an important point. He will know—as will you, Madam Deputy Speaker—that the National Protective Security Authority recently published guidance designed specifically to provide hon. Members with advice and guidance to ensure that they are best able to deal with the risks and threats that all of us in this House face.

On the second part of my hon. Friend's question, that is something that the Government take incredibly seriously. We inherited the defending democracy taskforce

[*Dan Jarvis*]

from the previous Government. That was a good institution, and I have on many occasions paid tribute to all those Conservatives Members who were involved in setting it up. The Prime Minister has renewed the mandate of the defending democracy taskforce. It is the fulcrum point across Government that brings the different Departments and law enforcement together, alongside Members of this House, to ensure that we are doing everything that we can to address and tackle the threats that we face. I have always believed and maintained that that should be a shared endeavour right across this House, and my door will always be open to Members of the House who would like to discuss it.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I rather thought that, in a civilised country, whether or not someone was prosecuted depended on the evidence. Was it therefore wise for the witness statement to replicate—word for word—the words of the Labour party manifesto, and has it ever happened before?

Dan Jarvis: I always appreciate the Leader of the House's questions—[HON. MEMBERS: "Father of the House!"] Forgive me. I always appreciate the Father of the House's questions because he brings a long-standing wisdom and perspective to these matters. I hope he will understand that, in line with the point that he made about civility, it is not for Ministers to critique the decision that was made by the CPS. The Government have made it clear to the House on many occasions that this was an independent decision that was taken by the CPS, and the DPP has been clear about the fact that no special adviser and no Minister interfered in that process.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I share your frustration at the collapse of the case. Two questions remain top of mind for Members of the House and for people in my constituency. First, what is the Minister's assessment of the risk of spying on MPs in this House? Secondly, what is his assessment of the ongoing transnational repression of British national overseas passport holders in Milton Keynes and elsewhere across the country? Does it not show a pattern of Chinese Government activity right across the UK, which is a risk to us?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise her concerns in the way that she does. I hope that she understands, as the House does, that this Government have been absolutely clear that no interference in our democratic process is remotely acceptable and that there are no circumstances under which we will tolerate countries, wherever they may be, seeking to cause harm to anybody who is resident in the United Kingdom. She specifically mentioned transnational repression. That is something that the Government take incredibly seriously, and we have done a lot of work on it through the defending democracy taskforce. Let me say again to her and to the House that it is completely unacceptable that China or any other country should seek to harm anybody who lives here in the United Kingdom.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I first of all thank the Minister for what he said about co-operation with the work of the Intelligence and

Security Committee on this matter. I agree with him, as I often do, that the Government are entitled to clarity about what the question they are being asked is. The question for me is not whether the Government sought to intervene to persuade the DPP to take a different view. I do not think the Government did that. Neither do I think the Government went back and sought to change evidence it had already submitted. The question is, when the CPS asked for additional evidence, as it undoubtedly did, whether the Government chose to supply that evidence or not. That is not about interference; it is about responding to a request made to Government by the CPS. Given that we now know that the request was to make it clear in terms that, during the relevant period, China was a current national security threat to the UK, who in the Home Office or elsewhere decided that that could not be submitted in a further statement of evidence in very clear terms?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman; the remarks I made earlier about the ISC, which he sits on, are genuinely meant. I think that the ISC has an important role to play in looking at precisely what has happened here, and I give him an absolute commitment that we want to work very closely with his Committee on this specific issue and on others.

Let me try to give the right hon. and learned Gentleman a bit of detail, because he asked his question in an entirely reasonable way. I reiterate the point, which I hope is understood by him and his Committee, that the final evidence went in August this year, and there was nothing that any Minister could have done post that. I hope he is crystal clear, as I am, that there was no political interference.

Let me just say something about the DNSA: he is an outstanding public servant who does a very important job and does it very well, and I think it is a terrible shame that there has been commentary about him as an individual. He has acted with integrity throughout this process, and we as a Parliament owe him a debt of gratitude for the service that he has offered. Let me say something about the evidence that he gave: in each of the three statements, the DNSA makes it crystal clear that China poses wide-ranging threats to the UK. In his third statement, he says:

"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 interests and security of the UK."

He was very clear about that. He adds:

"China's espionage operations threaten the UK's economic prosperity and resilience, and the integrity of our democratic institutions."

He has been very clear in the evidence statements that he provided. I do not think that there is much more that I can add to that, other than to reiterate that it was then ultimately a decision for the DPP.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Malign foreign actors will always try to find the next weakest link, and my concern is local authorities, which have the spending power of £127.1 billion. What action is the Home Office taking to ensure that our councillors and other democratically elected people at the lower levels of government are also given the protection they need?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because he raises an important point. We have a defending democracy taskforce precisely to ensure that our response is rooted across government—not only here but in the regions and nations. We work very closely with local government and are acutely conscious of the fact that important elections will be taking place around the country next May. We are working at pace to ensure that those elections can take place in an environment that we would all want to see. I can absolutely give him an assurance that we work closely with our partners not only in local government but in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Notwithstanding the Home Secretary's reassurances about spads or Ministers not being involved in the advice, does the Minister accept that this matter has reinforced the growing concern in this country about a lack of clarity on our position towards China, the fear of a threat to our energy security from the involvement of Chinese companies, and the super-embassy in London? My constituents are becoming increasingly concerned about the activities of the consulate in my constituency. Can the Minister reassure us that this Government will make their position towards China absolutely clear in the near future?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member because she asks an entirely reasonable and constructive question. She acknowledges, I am sure, that the previous Foreign Secretary made a statement to the House about the China audit, and I hope she will acknowledge that the nature of the relationship is complex. I am not aware that anyone in this place thinks that we should not have some form of economic co-operation with China. It is in our country's national interest to be clear-eyed about the nature of the relationship. Where we are able to co-operate economically where it is in our national interest to do so, we should proceed, but we should proceed, as I say, with a clear set of principles that underpin that. Fundamentally, our national security comes first. This Government will of course look for opportunities to co-operate economically with China, but fundamentally, we will always do what we can to keep our country safe.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sorry that the Minister finds himself in a position which was not of his own making. I am also sorry that only four members of his parliamentary party out of over 400 are standing up to contribute to the debate. Does he accept that one reason for the cloud of suspicion of political interference around this matter is the decision to appoint a highly political special adviser as National Security Adviser for the first time? That has put the deputy National Security Adviser in the firing line. Can the Minister at least confirm that if and when, as I am sure it will, the Intelligence and Security Committee asks the National Security Adviser to come and give evidence in its inquiry that he will do so?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman refers to what he described as a “highly political” appointment. With great respect to him, and he knows that I hold him in the highest regard, I disagree with his characterisation of that appointment. The National Security Adviser is someone who has huge experience of government, is

extremely well connected—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members may think it is not a good thing that we have somebody occupying a very important role in government who is known around the world; the Government contend that it is a good thing. We only need to look at the comments made by President Trump's foreign affairs adviser just the other day, commending the important work that the National Security Adviser has done. He works incredibly hard to secure the security of our nation. Rather than talking him down, we should get behind him and ensure that he is supported to do the important job that he has been given.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): As has been mentioned, the spokesman for the Prime Minister, when asked whether China was a threat, referred to the DNSA's statement, which said that China conducts “large scale espionage operations” that

“threaten the UK's economic prosperity and resilience, and the integrity of our democratic institutions”.

By anyone's definition, that would mean that China is a threat. I am a sanctioned Member of this Parliament. That is what this is all about: I have been spied upon, and I have had a wolf warrior from China follow me around the world and impersonate me very threateningly. Does the Minister think that I ought to refer to China as a threat?

Dan Jarvis: It is for the right hon. Gentleman to choose his own words. He is a very experienced Member of this House. The activities that he describes are completely unacceptable. That is why this Government have been clear on numerous occasions that we want to work across the House to ensure that all right hon. and hon. Members have the protections they need to speak their views in this place without fear or favour. If he wants to discuss those matters further, I would be very happy to do so. I hope that we can find a way of discussing these incredibly serious issues in a more grown-up way, as has been the case previously.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): After the Cabinet Office meeting of 1 September, did the Prime Minister receive a note on this case in his ministerial red box, and, if so, did he approve it? Additionally, did the UK Government give Chinese officials private assurances at any point and in any form that the application for the Chinese embassy in London would be approved?

Dan Jarvis: Hon. Members will know that there is a very long-standing custom whereby Ministers do not comment on the contents of the Prime Minister's box, but under these particular circumstances I am very happy to confirm that there was no note to the Prime Minister.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I first invite the Minister to clarify what he said in response to my question last week? I pointed out that, in his letter to the Select Committee Chairs, the Director of Public Prosecutions was clear that he had asked for a statement that China was a national security threat, and it was not forthcoming. The Minister shook his head and appeared to dispute that. Will he now acknowledge that that statement was not forthcoming?

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

Furthermore, when the DPP informally approached the Government after the third statement of evidence had been supplied to him to complain that the words “national security threat” were still not contained in that document, the Government consciously chose not to give any further response. Is that correct? Why, at that point, given all the things that the DNSA had already said, did nobody in the Government think that they could use the three words “national security threat”?

Dan Jarvis: This is the third time that I have appeared at the Dispatch Box to answer questions from Members, including from the hon. Gentleman, so I hope that he will forgive me if I cannot remember the specific detail of the question that he put to me when we were last here. I have sought to provide clarity. In response to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) a moment ago, I gave a detailed account of the three statements from the deputy National Security Adviser.

We have been clear—as was the deputy National Security Adviser in the statements that we provided. The fact that China poses a range of threats to the UK is not in doubt. As the Government have said before, the question in this case was whether the overall legal threshold for a realistic prospect of conviction had been met in the totality of the evidence available to the CPS. Although I understand why Members will focus on the three individual statements from the deputy National Security Adviser, there was clearly other evidence available for the CPS to consider as part of this process. I could not have said more times or been more clear that the decision lies with the DPP.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Last Thursday, the Minister at the Dispatch Box agreed with me that China is indeed a national security threat, and the Government have consistently said that they are “disappointed”. As the Minister knows, I like to be helpful and constructive at all times, so I asked a KC to advise as to whether a private criminal prosecution could be brought under the Official Secrets Act. The advice I have is that the answer is yes, as long as it has the consent of the Attorney General, and as long as the Government are helpful and constructive by providing evidence and witness statements. Will the Minister confirm whether the Attorney General will give such consent and provide appropriate evidence?

Dan Jarvis: For the sake of clarity, “extremely disappointed” is the phraseology that we have used. We seem to have moved on from the original question about the Home Office, and the hon. Member will understand that I am not responsible for the actions of the Attorney General or the Solicitor General. Colleagues in the other place and in government will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s question, and I would be happy to discuss it with him further.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I think the reason we are gathered here today—although I cannot see into your mind, Mr Speaker—is because of the story in *The Sunday Times*. That is why the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), asked this: when did the Home Secretary hear that the case might collapse? That

was question No.1. Are we not owed an answer to that question? Did the Home Secretary, as *The Sunday Times* said, then make representations as to the evidence being as “strong as possible”? Did she or didn’t she?

We are here because of that piece, Mr Speaker; I assume, although I cannot know your mind, that that is why you agreed to this urgent question. This Minister refuses, disgracefully, at that Dispatch Box to answer the question about the role of the Home Office in this spy scandal. Will the Minister now answer, not with his obfuscation and not with his flannel? Will he answer the question directly?

Dan Jarvis: We are here because of activities that happened under the previous Government. That is why we are here—I repeat the point I made earlier about Conservative Members showing a bit of humility—and I gave a response to the shadow Home Secretary.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): A senior Chinese Government official invited Britain to “fulfil its obligations and honour its commitments”

over the so-called super-embassy, but can the Minister shed light on what those obligations and commitments were? If he is going to say that no such commitments or obligations were offered, can we file that under another threat to this country by the Chinese?

Dan Jarvis: We do not recognise those claims. Of course, given the quasi-judicial nature of the process, it would have been entirely improper for anybody to have made any comment that basically cut across the legal process that is being led by the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I appreciate the Minister’s clarity, which he keeps talking about. On that basis, let me say this. The case collapsed. This is about leadership. He has seen all the evidence in public, and all the evidence in private. Was China spying on two Members of Parliament in this case—yes or no?

Dan Jarvis: I am happy to debate issues of leadership with anyone in this House, not least because I have spent all my professional life trying to keep the country safe. I will continue to serve in government to make sure that we do everything we can to stand against the threats we face. I had hoped, entering into government, that that process would be consensual, and that we could work across the House to keep the country safe. That has been the approach of this Government, and I am sad that Conservative Members do not want to proceed on that basis.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Does the Minister believe that the collapse of this case has weakened the UK’s position on the international stage, and that we will see more foreign state actors trying to carry out operations of espionage against Members of Parliament?

Dan Jarvis: That is precisely why we work closely with our Five Eyes allies, and why the United Kingdom hosted the five country ministerial in London just a couple of weeks ago. This needs to be a shared endeavour with our allies, our partners and our neighbours. We have

a huge amount in common with our international allies, particularly the Five Eyes alliance, and this Government will continue to work closely with them. We will ensure that if any country—whether China or whoever it might be—seeks to interfere in our democratic processes or to harm those who live in our countries, we work collectively across those alliances to stand against those threats.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I would like to ask the Minister about another case of foreign interference in our politics. Nathan Gill, the former leader of Reform UK in Wales and a constituent of mine, pleaded guilty to accepting bribes from Russia. He was stopped by the police in September 2021, but only charged in February this year. Reports now suggest that the Kremlin operation targeted not only him but at least two other Members of the European Parliament and a Member of the House of Lords. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that Russian networks cannot continue to influence UK politics?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady raises an important case that will be a matter of concern to Members from right across the House. I can assure her that we take these matters incredibly seriously, specifically with regard to her point about Russia. I can also give her the assurances that she seeks that we work incredibly hard, alongside our allies, to make sure we are doing everything we can to combat the threat that we all know we face from Russia.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I think most people would consider things that are threatening indeed to be threats, so we can only assume that the Minister has been instructed that he cannot make such a statement from the Dispatch Box. Will he help us to understand better the Government's position on their relationship with China. Is China an ally? Is it a friend? Will he explain that?

Dan Jarvis: I would be very happy to do so. I repeat the point that I made a moment ago: no one who wants to be considered as serious thinks that the nature of our relationship with China can be defined by a single word—I hope that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that. As I said a week ago, this Government assess that China poses a series of threats to UK national security, from cyber-attacks, foreign interference and espionage targeting our democratic institutions to the transnational repression of Hongkongers. However, we are also alive to the fact that China presents the UK with opportunities as the world's second largest economy and the UK's third largest trading partner. We have to be clear-eyed about both the challenges and the opportunities.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I have now asked the Government why China is not included in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme three times. On 9 June, I was told

“that particular report is coming forward in due course.”—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2025; Vol. 768, c. 613.]

On 15 September, I was told

“no doubt we will have more to say about it in due course.”—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 1194.]

And on 13 October, I was told

“any decisions about the enhanced tier will be brought forward in the normal way.”—[*Official Report*, 13 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 85.]

The Government are now panicked about the Chinese embassy decision, they are desperately trying to deflect from attention on the Chagos deal that the National Security Adviser negotiated on, and they appear to be decriminalising spying for China. What is the Government's rationale for not including China within the enhanced tier? Given the threat, when will it be added?

Dan Jarvis: I am old enough to remember when Conservative Members said that we would not introduce the foreign influence registration scheme by 1 July. We worked at pace to introduce the scheme on 1 July. The hon. Gentleman knows the answer: we are looking carefully at whether other countries should be added to the enhanced tier, but we will take that decision in due course and bring it forward in the normal way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is striving incredibly hard to answer these questions; some would say—well, with respect, we will leave it at that.

The news of suspecting spying in Parliament is worrying—there is no that this poses a huge threat to this country and to us as MPs. Mr Speaker, we owe you a debt of gratitude for the stand that you are taking on behalf of MPs to ensure that we are protected. We thank you for that. It is equally worrying that cases such as this are under no scrutiny by the CPS and no accountability is taken. What assurances can the Minister give our constituents that the Government will put pressure on the CPS to prosecute this case? Will he please understand the level of disappointment and betrayal felt by MPs because of the lack of action on the case?

Dan Jarvis: It is always good to hear from the hon. Member, and I agree with the sentiment that he has expressed. I hope there is a unity of view across this House that collectively we can be incredibly concerned about what has happened. I pay tribute to the work that you have done, Mr Speaker, through the Speaker's Commission; the Government will want to work very closely with you and look carefully at the findings of your commission.

We need to work across this House to ensure that all the protections are in place so that, as I have said previously, Members can have their say in this place without fear or favour. That is precisely why additional guidance was published just a week or so ago and why, just before the House went into recess back in July, I wrote to every single Member of this House spelling out what support and protections are in place. We take very seriously our responsibilities to safeguarding our democracy, and we want to work very closely with Mr Speaker on that process.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): The Minister has been asked why further steps were not taken to provide the evidence requested in this case, knowing that the case was on the verge of collapse. He may feel that he has provided clarity, but I am afraid that he absolutely has not. Will he ask the Attorney General to come to this House and make a statement about what the CPS wanted and why that was not provided by the Government?

Dan Jarvis: With great respect, it was the decision of the Opposition to table the urgent question in the way that they did; they could have chosen to table it in the way that the hon. Member describes. The Attorney

[Dan Jarvis]

General and colleagues right across Government looked very carefully at the circumstances of this particular case. I have spelled out in some detail the information that the Government are able to put into the public domain about the three witness statements published by the Prime Minister last week. The final piece of evidence was sent by the deputy National Security Adviser in August; there is nothing that any Minister or special adviser could have done thereafter.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It seems to me that the key question, which has not been answered despite three sessions on this subject, is the following. We know that in April 2024 the evidential test for prosecution under the Official Secrets Act 1911 was met. We also know that come September '25, the CPS was saying that it was not met. The key question is: what changed? Part of the answer seemed to come from the CPS, when it said that it asked for Government information, which it did not get to a satisfactory level. Does that not suggest that there was a failure on the part of Government that contributed to the collapse of this prosecution? If the Government simply said, "On the one hand, China is a threat; on the other hand, it is an opportunity," how could we ever put beyond all reasonable doubt in a criminal case the fact that it was a threat? Was that equivocation not the source of the problem?

Dan Jarvis: As I have said previously, in each of the three statements the DNSA makes it crystal clear that China poses wide-ranging threats to the UK. In his third statement, in August '24, he says 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 interests and security of the UK".

I do not think that there could have been any greater clarity.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The Minister has repeatedly said that he is extremely disappointed that this case did not proceed to trial. That is thin gruel if all the steps necessary to ensure that it got to trial were not taken. With that in mind, can he set out whether the report in *The Sunday Times* over the weekend that the Prime Minister and other Ministers were aware of the imminent collapse on 12 September is correct? If that is correct, can he set out what steps the Home Secretary took to ensure that the CPS had the evidence it needed?

Dan Jarvis: I hope the hon. Gentleman understands that the point about the Government being extremely disappointed is absolutely genuine. I could not have been clearer, from day one, that the Government are extremely disappointed that we will not be proceeding with this trial. However, it is not for Ministers to opine on a decision taken independently of Government.

Final evidence went in in August, and I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that there is nothing the Prime Minister or any Minister could have done thereafter.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Minister has been asked by numerous people, not least by the shadow Home Secretary and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), when the Home Secretary knew that this case was going to collapse. We have not been given an answer. The Minister has also been asked by numerous people if the Home Secretary made representations; again, we have not been given an answer. These should be relatively straightforward questions with straightforward answers. Will the Minister answer those questions or give a reason as to why he cannot do so?

Dan Jarvis: I have done my very best to provide the clarity that hon. Members are asking for. There is, of course, still an unanswered question about the position of the previous Government. The Prime Minister put that point to the Leader of the Opposition last week, and there are a number of former Government Ministers in the Chamber—perhaps they could tell us the answer.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I am going to give the Minister a fifth chance to answer. Did the Home Secretary make representations when she discovered that the case was about to collapse—yes or no?

Dan Jarvis: I have given the House the response—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Could we calm down? Marvellous. I call Robin Swann.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Chinese officials recently briefed Stormont's Finance Minister on the status of a local company in his constituency owned by the Chinese state. Information on that briefing, released under the Freedom of Information Act by the Department of Finance, withheld details, citing freedom of information laws that protect confidential information obtained from a foreign state. In the current climate and in the interests of openness and transparency, does the Minister agree that it would be best to release all the details of that meeting, rather than hide behind FOI laws?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman has asked quite a technical question. I am not entirely clear which meeting he is referring to, but I am very happy to write to him with the details.

Graham Stuart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The points of order will come after the urgent questions and the statement. Can it wait?

Graham Stuart indicated assent.

Maccabi Tel Aviv FC: Away Fans Ban

4.36 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will make a statement on the decision to ban Maccabi Tel Aviv FC fans from attending their fixture against Aston Villa.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): Last week, Aston Villa released a statement that away fans would not be permitted to attend their game against Maccabi Tel Aviv on 6 November. The decision was taken by Birmingham city council on the advice of the safety advisory group, and based on a risk assessment by West Midlands police. That risk assessment considered a range of factors, such as the risk of protests, the threat of wider disorder, previous fixtures with Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, and the impact on the wider community.

It is a long-established principle, set out in law, that the police and safety advisory group are operationally independent of Government, and that it is for them to take decisions on safety. However, this decision has far wider implications. In any situation, there is a risk that must be assessed, but in this case the inherent risk that the event presents is in no small part down to where the away fans come from and who they are. It is in that context that the solution that is proposed—to exclude a group from attending—is wrong. It chooses exclusion, rather than looking at the full range of options available to manage that risk and include.

This is about who we are as a country. A lot of the public discussion about this game has focused on events in the middle east. Let me be clear: it is perfectly legitimate to hold and express strong views about what is happening in Israel and Gaza. People in this country are free to protest peacefully; they are free to lobby Government and event organisers about which countries can participate in tournaments; and they are free to choose not to attend events or purchase products that they find unacceptable. However, they are not entitled to dictate who can participate in competitions, attend a football match, or walk the streets, for fear of threats or reprisals. Whatever one's view on the events overseas, that is a fundamental principle that this Government will fiercely defend.

Let me also be clear that the decision was not made in a vacuum. It is set against a backdrop of rising antisemitism in this country and across the world, and of an attack on a synagogue in Manchester in which two innocent men were killed. It has a real-world impact on a community who already feel excluded and afraid. It is therefore completely legitimate to support the independence of the police to conduct that risk assessment, and to question the conclusion that follows when it excludes the people at the heart of that risk.

Following the decision last week, the Government have been working with West Midlands police and Birmingham city council to support them to consider all the options available and to tell us what resources are needed to manage the risks to ensure that fans from both teams can attend safely. If the assessment is revised, the safety advisory group will meet again to discuss options.

In the past few days, I have spoken to Jewish community groups, sporting organisations, fan groups and Aston Villa football club to ensure we have the fullest picture possible. The Home Secretary and the Communities Secretary have had extensive discussions with the police, local government and others. Ultimately, the law is clear that responsibility for this decision lies with local agencies. It is not for the Government to assess the risks surrounding this football match, but we are clear that resources will not be the determining factor in whether Maccabi Tel Aviv fans can be admitted. The fundamental principle that nobody in our country will be excluded from participating in public life because of who they are must be upheld.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the right hon. Lady for those comments, because I am sure most of us in this House believe that the decision to ban Maccabi Tel Aviv fans from the upcoming Europa league game against Villa was the wrong one. It is also embarrassing and a disgrace. Have we really reached the point where we cannot welcome visitors from overseas to our second city, because we cannot guarantee their safety on British streets and in British football grounds? This is not how modern Britain should present itself to the world. Some, astoundingly including some in this House, have claimed that the ban on Israeli fans is for their own safety. That safety has been put at risk precisely because of the anger and hatred being whipped up by some of those very same people demanding a ban, such as by equating football fans with terrorists. We cannot give in to that kind of rhetoric, and I hope the Minister will join me in condemning it.

Football and all sport has incredible potential to bring people together. It should not be used as a deliberate tool to divide. The UK has a great and hard-won reputation for hosting major international sporting events, and banning an entire fanbase sends the wrong signal and may jeopardise our ability to host such events in the future. How disappointing this decision must be to the residents of Birmingham, who only three years ago welcomed people from around the world to the Commonwealth games, which showcased Birmingham and the west midlands at their diverse, vibrant and hospitable best. We therefore call on the Government to intervene and get this ban reversed.

Aston Villa and the safety advisory group may only be able to reverse the ban with guarantees of additional support from the Government. Can the Minister therefore confirm what additional resources may be provided and who will pay for them? Can she confirm when the Home Office and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport were first made aware of the intent of the safety advisory group to make this obviously controversial decision? Is she confident that they talked to all the right people before making the decision? If the decision is reversed, what practical steps will be taken to ensure the safety of all fans and residents? While many football teams have some undesirable supporters intent on causing trouble, let us recognise that the vast majority of fans want nothing more than to enjoy a good game of football.

Does the Minister agree that, if we are truly to wrap our arms around the Jewish community, as the Prime Minister promised following the attack on the synagogue in Manchester, we need to take action and not just

[Nigel Huddleston]

spout warm words? Finally, is she confident that this incident will not jeopardise our ability to host major international sporting events in the future?

Lisa Nandy: First, may I thank the shadow Secretary of State for bringing this urgent question to the House? I know the issue is of concern to so many parliamentarians and to so many people outside this place. I also thank him for his tone. I have watched with dismay as people in this debate have sought to use this moment to heighten tensions, and I commend him for how he has conducted himself.

The shadow Secretary of State asked a particularly important question about who will pay. Across Government, the Home Secretary, the Chancellor, the Prime Minister, the Communities Secretary and I are united in saying that we will find the resources that need to be made available, once West Midlands police has come forward with the risk assessment. We will work as one Government to make sure that those resources are forthcoming, because of the important fundamental principle that is at stake about what sort of country we are.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I was confident that the decision had been based on the right information. In recent days I have seen a great many “facts” flying around that do not seem to have any evidential basis, especially on social media, and we are working with our international partners to ensure that West Midlands police have the fullest range of information on which to base an assessment.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the impact that this is having on the Jewish community. I absolutely feel and understand that, and I have had numerous conversations with members of the Jewish community over the past few days. We have vast experience of policing events in difficult circumstances in this country, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the behaviour of a minority of supporters in every club, and in this club in particular, is reprehensible, but that is not true of all fans. What is astonishing in this case is that it is unprecedented in modern times for all away fans to be banned because of the behaviour of a small minority, and we are working with the police to help them to look at that in the round.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that we need action, not just warm words. Having met Jewish fans, I am particularly concerned about the impact that some of the events in the middle east are having not just on national competitions, but on grassroots sport. I have committed myself to working with them on that, to ensure that young people in this country can turn up at local grassroots events and not feel anxious about participating, or not being able to participate, because of who they are.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the signal that this sends to others around the world. That is not lost on us. We are a tolerant, diverse nation, and Birmingham, as one of our great cities, is a great example. That is what we are fighting to uphold and defend, and that is the Britain in which we believe. The message from this Government is that we will always defend that country. We are a better country than some of the comments that have been made and the actions that have been taken in the last week, and we are determined to uphold that.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend will know from her discussions with the Jewish community—which will have been similar to those that I have had following the dreadful murders at the Heaton Park synagogue just over a fortnight ago—what they want is to be assured by the Government, local authorities and other security authorities that they can live and walk about in this country in complete safety. Whatever the risk assessment in Birmingham was, it would be a disgrace and a shame if this country could not guarantee the security of a group of a group of Jewish fans, coming from Israel, walking down our streets. Can my right hon. Friend give that assurance to this House this afternoon?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his Jewish constituents. I have met Jewish community organisations over the last few days to give them that assurance that the Government will always defend and uphold their right to participate fully in public life, and that includes being able to attend football matches. In a number of the discussions that we have had with partners, they have made the point to us that many of the people who want to attend this match as Maccabi Tel Aviv fans are actually British citizens who live here in the United Kingdom. That should be in all our minds when we think about whom we are excluding from being able to attend.

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

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): The decision to ban Maccabi Tel Aviv fans from attending their team’s Europa league match because West Midlands police could not keep the fans safe is a serious mistake, and sets a dangerous precedent. We appreciate the difficulty in ensuring the safety of fans and local communities, but the Liberal Democrats believe that this decision must be reversed, and that the Government should work alongside local authorities and the police to ensure that the match goes ahead with both sets of fans. The situation at Maccabi Tel Aviv’s match in Israel this weekend reminds us of the importance of ensuring that our police forces have the resources and support that they need to keep major events safe. The UK has made significant progress in tackling football hooliganism, but the police must always be prepared for small numbers of fans who seek to cause trouble. Will the Minister recommend “bubble-like” security restrictions to boost security checks and police presence around the stadium to ensure that everyone is served and protected?

The Home Secretary said that she did not know about the fans being banned until the night before it was announced, but she was apparently aware as early as last week that a decision was being made. Can the Minister clarify when the Home Secretary was made aware of the potential ban? If she knew last week, why did she not intervene earlier?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions; I will try to address them all. I think the Home Secretary has given a full account of the fact that she was kept updated about these events, but the decision was not communicated to the Government until, sadly, we saw the statement from Aston Villa on the recommendation of the police. I want to be really clear that the police

have a role here that is operationally independent of Government, and that they have a right and responsibility to assess the risk. I have no basis to believe that the police did anything other than act in good faith in trying to make that assessment.

The reason that the Government have intervened in this case is because we believe that it has far wider implications. The upshot of the decision is that it breaches a fundamental principle about who is entitled to participate in public life and walk our streets safely. Because of that, we have been forthcoming with all the support and resource that the West Midlands police may need in order to ensure that this game can go ahead in the manner that the hon. Lady suggests.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): The people charged with the protection of public safety carry a heavy burden, and not all the information that they consider has yet been laid out in the public domain. However, I have deep concerns about the principle of block-banning entire groups of opposition fans—some of whom, let us not forget, may be UK residents or nationals—and about some of the descriptions of Birmingham in parts of the press and other areas of our political life that are not a true account of our city. Does the Secretary of State agree that Birmingham overwhelmingly remains a diverse and welcoming place, and will she join me in commending the calm leadership that the council leader, John Cotton, has brought to bear by calling for a review?

Lisa Nandy: My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary has worked very closely with Birmingham city council, and I echo my hon. Friend's comments about the leader and commend the council for the constructive way in which it has worked with us, the police and other local agencies in order to deal with this issue. We have also worked very constructively with the West Midlands police, Aston Villa football club and a whole host of agencies in order to try to resolve the situation. He is right to say that it is unprecedented in recent times that an entire group of away supporters have been entirely banned from a game, and it is something that we in this country do not make a habit of. We have become very skilled at policing football matches, even where there is considerable risk involved, in a way that includes everyone. Finally, may I say that those who seek to divide and exclude people in Birmingham should consider the signal that it sends to the rest of the world about one of our great and vibrant cities?

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): On Friday, the club's chief executive raised concerns about what the ban on fans actually signals. The Secretary of State will be aware that this is not the first time we have heard about Jewish people not feeling safe at either cultural or sporting events, whether that was the scenes at Glastonbury this year or the boycotts, protests and cancellations of Jewish performers at venues around the country. I am really grateful for the Secretary of State's commitment today, but can she set out a bit more on what specifically she is doing to ensure that Jewish people feel safe and welcome to participate in cultural life in the UK?

Lisa Nandy: Earlier this year, I hosted a roundtable with Lord Mann and the Board of Deputies to discuss the role of Jewish people in the widest range of public life,

particularly in relation to arts, film, TV, broadcasting and media. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that this specific case is not occurring in a vacuum, and we are working on a strategy to make sure that Jewish people are included and that their contribution to British public life is recognised and celebrated.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I would like to preface my comments by saying that everybody in this place was horrified by the attack on the synagogue in Heaton Park, and that my comments today are purely based on safety.

A year before the Hillsborough disaster, safety concerns at Sheffield Wednesday's stadium were raised by an official, but the ex-council safety officer was told by bosses in 1988 to keep his nose out of such concerns. Nobody in this place needs to be reminded of what happened as a result of ignoring that safety advice: 97 innocent men, women and children lost their lives. We have safety advisory groups for a reason, and it is a slippery slope when safety concerns are ignored. I believe it is unprecedented for a Government to try to overturn such advice, and I respectfully disagree with the Secretary of State that bans do not go on, because we have had a lot of cases, both nationally and internationally, with the most recent one being Napoli versus Eintracht Frankfurt.

Can the Secretary of State be explicitly clear: has she seen the safety advice? If so, does she disagree with the safety advice? If she does disagree, can she tell the House on what grounds she disagrees? It is imperative that this House is clear, because if the Government are successful in having the decision overturned, particularly after the scenes we witnessed last night at the Israeli derby, people are going to ask questions.

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend. As somebody who represents some of the Hillsborough families, I say to her that we as a Government, and I as an individual member of that Government, take the safety of all fans and the wider community with the utmost seriousness. We would never treat safety as a secondary consideration.

My hon. Friend says that we are trying to overturn the police advice. We are doing absolutely no such thing, and I think I made that completely clear in the response I have just made. We are working with the West Midlands police and local partners to make sure that we take into account the risks they have raised in order to ensure that this game can go ahead safely with both sets of fans present. In the discussions about and the consideration I have given to the risks that the West Midlands police has highlighted, what is completely different about this case is not just that it is the first time in this country since the early 2000s that a decision has been taken to ban away fans entirely from attending a game, but that the risk assessment is based in no small part on the risk posed to fans attending to support Maccabi Tel Aviv because they are Israeli and because they are Jewish. We should be appalled by that, and never allow it to stand.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for the tone and the clarity of her response to the urgent question. I echo what she said about the police making the decision in good faith, but it is, as she has said, the wrong decision. Can I also echo what she has said about this not being the sort of

[Sir Andrew Mitchell]

country to make such a decision? It is not the sort of city Birmingham is either. There are outstandingly good community relations there, largely because of the excellent work done by the faith communities across the city.

Lisa Nandy: I echo those comments, and I take this moment to pay tribute to those faith organisations. The Communities Secretary and I have been pleased to work with them in anticipation of the threats of significant disorder that have been made by people outside Birmingham who seek to travel to Birmingham to create strife. Their message is ours as well: they are not welcome there.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It was reported over the weekend that, in August, a legal observer to one of the protests was arrested simply for wearing a Star of David because it was considered to be antagonising. Now, with the decision to ban the Maccabi fans from coming to the UK, there is a genuine cumulative effect on what it means for Jewish people in this country, and the effect on the families of Jewish people in this country who watch their friends and family being tortured about whether or not they have a role in this country any more. We should all be significantly aware of that.

If this ban is allowed to go ahead, there will be this challenge. The game after the Maccabi game is with the Swiss-based Young Boys, whose fans have been involved in two riots, including hospitalisations. If their away team is not banned, the question should be: what is different between the Maccabi fans and the Young Boys fans, and what is it that we want to talk about?

Lisa Nandy: I think my hon. Friend has put it better than I could.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): As the Member of Parliament for the very area set to host this match and for the community whose public safety many Members of this House wish to play fast and loose with, I know the reality on the ground. I know that there has been a deliberate, disingenuous move by many to make this a matter of banning Jews, and to conflate matters of policing with those of religion. Just this morning, I saw a video of Jewish community leaders standing outside Villa Park saying that they too support the banning of this team's fans, and I will release that video outside the Chamber.

Those who are not welcome in Aston are the hooligans who have a long history of violence and vile racism, with chants like "f*** the Arabs", "we will rape their daughters" and "there are no schools in Gaza because there are no children left in Gaza". It is these hooligans who are not welcome. Can I ask the Minister how many millions of British taxpayers' money her Government are offering to overturn the respected expert judgment of the West Midlands police and the safety group?

Lisa Nandy: Can I just say to the hon. Gentleman that I am appalled by the specific incidents and chants he mentions, and that none of us in this House should seek to condone them in any sense? But can I also say to him that it is entirely disingenuous to say that you respect cohesion and inclusion when you are seeking to divide and exclude? [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I ask Members to temper their language and not accuse each other of being disingenuous.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Ensuring that all fans can attend sporting events in safety and without fear must always be our first priority, and we must fully respect the operational independence of the police. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that this Government will provide the necessary resources to support local policing in this case, particularly in the light of the heightened and very deep concerns around antisemitism, to ensure that resourcing is not the reason given for the block banning of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans?

Lisa Nandy: I am really happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): As a British Muslim who grew up in Birmingham and the west midlands and did business there, I was deeply saddened by this decision—I was saddened for the British Jewish community. We are a tolerant, diverse nation, and a tolerant, diverse region. This decision was bad for two reasons. First, it was bad for Birmingham and the west midlands, and bad for the British Muslim community. Many have reached out, saying that they did not want to be dragged into this and that they feel similar amounts of anger. Secondly, my worry now is that a flashpoint has been created. There will now be those who will want to take advantage of the fact that it is in the headlines. There will be those who will want to come and cause trouble, and drag Birmingham's name, and that of the west midlands, through the mud.

Lisa Nandy: I acknowledge that. I, too, am saddened by the way this has played out. I am saddened about the impact on people in Birmingham, who I have always found to be extremely welcoming and tolerant, and who know that they are stronger for their diversity, not weakened by it. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that recent events and the way in which a number of people have sought to prey on them has heightened the level of risk. That is something that West Midlands police of course have to consider, but my commitment to him and to all Members of this House, and to the people of Birmingham, is that resources will not stand in the way of this going ahead.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): Let me just say from the outset that all forms of bigotry are abhorrent. A Dutch police report into the disorder in Amsterdam at the Ajax versus Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture determined that Maccabi fans tore down a Palestinian flag, set fire to it and chanted, "Fuck you, Palestine." That is vile, disgusting Islamophobia in action. How about preventing that from happening here, because there is an extreme hooligan element of Maccabi fans who consistently behave in that manner? Do the Government not see that Islamophobic behaviour is highly likely if these fans travel to Birmingham? What about the safety of our Muslim citizens?

Lisa Nandy: Look, everybody in this House is entitled to strong opinions, but they are not entitled to a selective version of the facts. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out that, among a minority of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans in the instance he raised, there was appalling

behaviour, which none of us, including most Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, would seek to condone. But there were also attacks on those fans, and that has formed part of the assessment of risk that West Midlands police have had to make. I think it is just worth me reiterating the point about just how rare it is for away fans to be excluded wholesale from attending European football matches in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) pointed out just a moment ago, we have had to deal with this in this country for a very long time. We have done it recently and in many parts of the country. We have found a way to police safely and effectively. It cannot be beyond our collective wit to do so in this case.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As things stand, the decision to ban Maccabi Tel Aviv fans reflects so badly on Birmingham, the west midlands and our country, and at a time when football can often bring people and communities together. Will the Secretary of State assure us that she will do all she can to ensure that any reviews under way are concluded before kick-off?

Lisa Nandy: I can hear and understand the right hon. Lady's frustration. We are working at pace and pulling every lever at our disposal to give the police and Birmingham city council the support they need. The police need to be able to conduct that risk assessment and review thoroughly, because the safety of fans and the community must be paramount. We are working as fast as we can and are determined to get there as quickly as we can, not least to provide clarity to both clubs so that they can make the necessary preparations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I know that this topic is very important, but I need questions to be short and answers to be just as precise.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to the volunteers who serve on the safety advisory groups—a thankless but hugely important task—who will be really worried about today. The safety of football fans has, at times, been at the very bottom of priorities in this place. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that the safety of supporters is absolutely paramount in the Government's thinking, rather than the politics around this matter?

Lisa Nandy: I am really happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I thank him for the work he has done over many years, and not just on Hillsborough but on football as a whole.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's remarks and commend her for her conciliatory tone and attitude. Yes, safety is paramount for all football supporters, but, as she has said, this is not taking place in a vacuum, and this country is now in a very tense situation. She mentioned a strategy going ahead to make Jewish communities feel more welcome. Can she outline a wee bit more of that, setting out what we might expect and when we might expect to see it?

Lisa Nandy: I have been extremely concerned to hear examples from the Jewish community in addition to the specific instance that we are talking about, with Jewish film directors having their shows cancelled, not because it was to do with anything in Israel or Gaza but because they were Jewish, and Jewish presenters being advised

to stay off the airwaves. I am working with them, with the help and support of Lord Mann, to ensure that we pursue an overarching strategy, and I have also had discussions with individual organisations to ensure that where those incidents take place, those individuals know that they do not have to challenge those things alone.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for the tone in which she delivered it. The police always act in the interests of public safety, and I am sure there was no antisemitic intent. It is the threat of the mob that has led to this decision. Does she agree that we must never allow the rule of the mob?

Lisa Nandy: Completely.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend the right hon. Lady for her statement, which covered everything precisely. I disagree with one or two of those who have come out against her on this matter. I simply say this: when the partial assessment was done, everybody centred on what happened in Amsterdam, but when they played a game in Istanbul there was no trouble at all. It is a bit partial to choose one bit of evidence over the other. I simply say that with the rise of antisemitism now in the UK, the right hon. Lady is making the right decision to protect those people.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He raises the important question of whether this decision is proportionate, and whether, if there had not been a risk to the Maccabi Tel Aviv fans because of where they come from and who they are, this decision would have played out in the way that it has. That is what is exercising a lot of Members of this House, and it is obviously a view that we share.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Is it not the case that the police, acting on intelligence, believe that Maccabi fans should not be allowed to attend the match for public safety reasons? Their record of hooliganism will have contributed to that. Such bans have happened with fans of other teams across Europe, yet in this case there has been a dangerous push to once again claim that any criticism of Israel is antisemitic. Should the Government not just admit that they have it badly wrong on this and let the police do their job without political interference? Surely the real issue here is the right of local people to be kept safe.

Lisa Nandy: The difference in this case is that what has tipped the balance of the decision is the risk presented to Maccabi Tel Aviv fans because they are Israeli and, in many cases, because they are British and Jewish.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): What has happened is that a political campaign—led, I am ashamed to say, by Members of this House—has caused the police to change their decision and calculation. The Secretary of State is right to suggest that this is not simply an operational decision. She is talking a good game, but she also says that all she can do is question the conclusion of the police, and now she is offering more resources and asking them politely if they will change their decision. Do the Government not recognise that, under the Police Act 1996, they have the power to direct police forces to make certain decisions and, if necessary, to dismiss

[*Danny Kruger*]

the chief constable? If they do not, will the Government clarify the law to ensure that they do have the power to overturn decisions like this?

Lisa Nandy: There is a long-established principle in this country, as set out in law, that the police are operationally independent, and I am surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman seek to question that. I have been clear that the risk assessment and decisions around what would be needed for the game to go ahead safely, with all fans present, is for the police. The right and proper role of the Government is to work with and support the police to ensure that that happens.

It is not just a question of resourcing. We are looking at a whole range of factors and practices that are well established in this country and across Europe, including ensuring that there is transportation to get fans safely to and from the game. We are looking at the number of ticket sales made available to away fans, as well as measures that have been tried and tested in order to ensure that those who would seek to create trouble are excluded from the game. It is absolutely not right to characterise the position of this Government as simply standing on the sidelines. The fundamental principle that people, whoever they are, should be entitled to walk the streets and attend football games in our country is, for us, non-negotiable.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State will find the irony in the fact that last weekend—as I am sure they will next weekend—premier league footballers took the knee to demonstrate the need to drive out racism from football. What has happened here is antisemitism at its heart. If the issue is the safety of the fans outside the ground, it is the case in many away matches that away supporters are escorted by the police on coaches to the entrance and then collected from the exit to go back to the airport. There is no reason why that cannot be done now. Will the Secretary of State go back to the police and say, “Let’s make people safe”? I support Tottenham Hotspur, and we have a massive Jewish population among our fans. If this means that we are not safe to go to Aston Villa because of attitudes outside the ground, that is a demonstration that in the UK Jewish people are not safe on our streets.

Lisa Nandy: I fundamentally agree with the hon. Member.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, I congratulate the Secretary of State on the very clear message that she has given today. Is it not a fact that, despite some of the excuses coming from Members behind me, this is all about the religion of the supporters who will be attending this match, and indeed that the only people they are likely to be in danger from are the hate mobs we have seen marching across our streets for months, waving Palestinian flags and supporting terrorists? Would she agree that the police ought to be told: “You need to make the streets safe for everyone, Jewish people as well as anyone else”? That is their duty, and they should live up to that.

Lisa Nandy: I would say that it is all of our duty to ensure that we live up to that as a country, and in the vast majority of cases we do. I also make the point to

those who say that it is perfectly legitimate to try to drive the fans out of the game that our assessment is that the vast majority of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans who want to attend are British. The only distinguishing feature is that they are Jewish.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): My Jewish community have been coming to me for years to say how unsafe they feel and that antisemitism has reared its head in this country for many years. The Secretary of State’s tone is welcome, and she is absolutely right, but let me put it bluntly: Jewish hatred in this country has grown and grown. May I ask the Secretary of State to pull every lever she can to ensure that the idea of Jewish hatred is not borne out by people saying, “Because you are Jewish or because you are Israeli, we hold you all responsible for the actions of a Government”? The reality is that that is xenophobia, racism and antisemitism, and it needs to be called out.

Lisa Nandy: I am happy to join the right hon. Member in calling that out.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, in coming to the decision, the authorities in Birmingham took account of the behaviour of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans on many other occasions in many other places and decided it was unsafe for the match to be played in Birmingham? It is absolutely not about banning Jewish people, or any other people, from going to the match or going to Birmingham. Can we separate the issue about the behaviour of a group of fans from the wider question of how everybody—whether Jewish, Muslim or anything else—must be safe to walk the streets of this country?

Lisa Nandy: On the right hon. Member’s last statement—that everybody must be safe to walk the streets of this country—I agree with him. Perhaps he might make that point to the people he now associates with on his left and right, because that is not what we have heard from them in the last few weeks.

Can I just clear this up? I have heard a lot of hot takes on social media about the evidence on which the police relied to come to their decision. It is right to say that the police, as we would expect, took into account in particular the game in Amsterdam at which Maccabi Tel Aviv fans were present and where a small element caused the most appalling disorder, but they also took into account the real risks presented to Maccabi Tel Aviv fans on the basis that Maccabi Tel Aviv are an Israeli team and many of the fans who would attend are Jewish. I hope that the right hon. Member will be as exercised about that as he is about the behaviour of those fans.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Hopefully we can rely on the police to arrest any hooligans who break the law, whichever team they are supporting. Will the Government take into account the fact that—knowing the way in which terrorist minds work—as there will be such a concentration of police resources on this particular location, Jewish establishments in that part of the country need to be extra careful on that day, such that advantage is not sought to be taken by people who mean them harm?

Lisa Nandy: The right hon. Member will be aware, because it has all played out publicly, that there have been specific threats against Jewish people and Jewish organisations. We and the police are taking that extremely seriously.

Because of the way in which those on all sides of the debate have sought to heighten tensions over the past week, there are concerns about the safety of a whole range of people across the community—Muslims, Jews and the wider community. A number of hon. Members have made the point that far more work needs to be done to defuse those tensions, to take the heat out of the situation, to support everybody in this country and, in particular, to be emphatic, as the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) said just a moment ago, that nobody in Britain is responsible for the events playing out in the middle east. To hold people—whether British Muslims or British Jews—responsible is entirely unacceptable.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Last year, the chief constable of the West Midlands police force told Muslim elders that he would always police without fear or favour and that he would not tolerate any sort of racism, but the banning of Maccabi fans is quite clearly racism. Does the Secretary of State agree that if the police chiefs cannot police a football match, they should no longer be in office?

Lisa Nandy: I do not think it helpful to question people's motives. In the work we have done with West Midlands police, I have no hesitation in saying that they have made an assessment of the risks, as is their responsibility. What happens next is not just a question for them; it is a question for all of us.

The police have done their job to assess the safety and risks posed across the board. The Government have intervened in this case because the decision they have come to has wider implications that we believe have led to the wrong decision, and that cannot stand. However, I do not question the police's motives for a moment. Our job is to work with them and support them to be able to police the match in a way that ensures that people can attend, and do so safely.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The message that this decision sends is that the police will bow to religious pressure, and it legitimises antisemitism. The Secretary of State made reference to the game between Ajax and Maccabi Tel Aviv. The vast majority of fans arrested that evening were Ajax fans. Ajax are playing Chelsea at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday evening, but no one has talked about banning its fans from attending that game. Article 27.04 of the Europa league regulations states that

"to ensure that a rescheduled match can be completed, if necessary without spectators, the home club must have access to a back-up stadium".

Given that it is now likely that this fixture will attract bad faith actors to Birmingham who are not fans of either team and who are looking to cause trouble, what assessment has the Secretary of State made of playing the match behind closed doors at a neutral venue, or a venue where the police are prepared to provide security?

Lisa Nandy: We as a Government are not prepared to accept that people cannot attend a football match in Birmingham because of who they are. There are many,

many Aston Villa fans who are looking forward to this fixture. There is no risk posed by them. It is in their home city and they should be able to attend. It is also our strong view, as the hon. Gentleman sets out, that the majority of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans should be allowed to attend, as they have done safely at many other matches, and not be discriminated against because of who they are. We are working with the police and other local partners to make sure that we do everything we can to achieve that end and deal with the wider issues that many Members here have raised.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): Maccabi Tel Aviv's racist fan hooliganism cannot be separated from Israeli militarism. Many of these fans—*[Interruption.]* Many of these fans are active or former soldiers who have taken part in Israel's genocide in Gaza. They should be investigated for war crimes the moment they set foot on British soil, not welcomed into our stadiums. Let us be clear: this Labour Government are no innocent bystander. They have armed Israel's genocide, they have provided diplomatic cover and they have shamefully denied that genocide is even taking place. So I ask the Minister: is there anything this Labour Government will not do to defend the genocidal apartheid state of Israel?

Lisa Nandy: I like the hon. Lady, but I have to say that she is doing the people of Birmingham no favours with that sort of rhetoric. The conflation that she makes between all Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters and the actions of the Israeli Government is precisely what the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold was saying about blaming British citizens who happen to support Maccabi Tel Aviv for actions that are taking place in the middle east. I have to say that conflating being Jewish and being Israeli is in itself antisemitism. I think she should take more care with her remarks.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Birmingham's best band is, of course, Black Sabbath and it has counselled us that:

"If you listen to fools, the mob rules."

This is a case of mob rule here. The Secretary of State has done a tremendous job of setting out the Government's position. Will she review, while maintaining police independence—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. If Mr Kruger and Ms Zarah Sultana want to continue their own personal debate, they need to take it out of the Chamber.

John Cooper: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Back to the Sabs. Will the Secretary of State review the rules around sporting and entertainment events to make sure that this Government, and any future Government, are not rendered impotent in the face of the mob?

Lisa Nandy: We are not considering making changes to the principle that has stood for a long time about the operational independence of the police, but as I have set out to other Members, we are clear that there is a role for Government here and we are determined to play our part in helping to resolve this. *[Interruption.]* I have to say, listening to the racket that is going on in the corner

[Lisa Nandy]

of the Chamber, that I have just talked about the impact that this issue is having on young people in this country who are turning up, putting on their strip on a Sunday morning, going to play football and finding that they are not welcome. That sort of behaviour is exactly the opposite of what this House should be modelling.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State and thank her very much for her statement. I was saddened to hear of this decision and, more importantly, the message it sends to our Jewish community. This is a dire situation, and we must make use of UK policing services to find a way for this sports event to take place and for fans to attend in safety. Jews are welcomed and protected everywhere, as are people of all faiths and none. A scenario in which we give into intimidation and threat is a slippery slope to appeasement within our country. What steps will be taken to ensure the deployment of police from other areas? For instance, the Police Service of Northern Ireland has been used just in the last month to do some of the policing. Police must be used to allow international supporters to attend and to send the correct message that we are one nation and that freedom is not zoned or excluded in any area of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Lisa Nandy: As I made clear, we are looking at a whole range of options to provide the support and resources that West Midlands police need. We are very clear that this cannot be a responsibility for it alone. There are wider principles at stake, and we are providing everything that it needs in order that we can live up to the principles that the hon. Gentleman just set out.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The Government, politicians from across the House and the media establishment have condemned the proposed ban of Maccabi Tel Aviv fans as antisemitic, yet this group has a record of violent behaviour and racist chants, including “Death to Arabs” and the mocking of the killing of Gazan children. Given the UK’s adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition, which rightly warns against holding Jewish people collectively responsible for Israel’s actions, does the Minister agree that the conflation of criticism of Israel—with its ongoing genocide, war crimes, breaches of international law and current genocide trial at the International Court of Justice—with antisemitism against British Jews or Jewish people in general actually undermines that definition? [Interruption.] I will not sit down.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Is that the question?

Mr Hussain indicated dissent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Quickly put the question.

Mr Hussain: And if the UK rightly imposes cultural and sporting boycotts on countries like Russia over war crimes, why should Israel be treated differently?

Lisa Nandy: I have made it absolutely clear that it is perfectly acceptable for people to hold strong and passionate views about what is happening in Israel and Gaza, and that there is a right in this country to make representations to sporting governing bodies and the

Government about who can participate in—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman is not listening, so I think I will just leave it there.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Antisemitism is vile, and no one should be prevented from enjoying their sporting game, whatever it may be, simply because of their faith. As a football fan, I take the decision to ban any fans very seriously, but the Prime Minister’s decision to interfere with the independence of West Midlands police and the SAG should concern all of us in this House, especially when the same Prime Minister failed to intervene when British aid workers were killed while volunteering for World Central Kitchen, failed to intervene when his own MPs were denied access to Israel and the west bank, and failed to intervene when the Israel Defence Forces boarded flotillas with British citizens onboard and detained them. Millions will now be spent on a football match to defend some hooligans—it is not all fans—who chant that there are no schools in Gaza because there are no children in Gaza. Does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister should respect the independence of the police and the safety advisory group?

Lisa Nandy: Had West Midlands police made a different decision, I really do wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would have come to this House to question that decision. I am afraid that I suspect the answer is yes. This is part of the problem with this debate: the chants that he talks about I think appal absolutely everybody in the House. He characterises the Government in a particular way, but he fails to make reference to the very many robust actions that we have taken around the Israeli Government’s actions in Gaza: we have condemned them, we have sanctioned members of the Israeli Government, we have restricted arms sales to Israel, and we have been out there on the ground playing our part in peace negotiations and pushing for aid to get in at pace—we still are. But he does not reference that because, sadly, I think he is trying to gain political support for his position.

Only a few of them have bothered to listen to any of the debate, but if hon. Members really want to resolve this, I say to them that they should work with us to ensure that all communities can express their passionate, deeply held views in appropriate and peaceful ways but that this country can remain an open, tolerant, diverse place where everybody is free to walk the streets and attend football games regardless of who they are.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): After the conflation of antisemitism with the banning of football hooligans who happen to come from Israel, and the abuse that I and other people have received for supporting the ban on safety grounds, I must put on the record that I and those people are not antisemitic—never have been and never will be. The Prime Minister described the decision to ban the violent Maccabi hooligans by West Midlands police and Birmingham city council’s safety advisory group as antisemitism. The leader of Reform, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), said that the police gave in to extremist intimidation. The leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), called for the decision to be reversed, saying,

“You don’t tackle antisemitism by banning its victims.”

And there were racist comments by the would-be leader of the Tories, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who said that integration has failed in Birmingham.

Let me ask this: was it antisemitic for the Israeli police to cancel a football derby in Tel Aviv last night after those same hooligans forced the match to stop through violence and injury to fans and the police? Do we want those scenes to be repeated in our stadiums and on our streets?

Lisa Nandy: The decision that was made last night, as I understand it, was on the basis of rioting occurring at a live event. It was not a decision that is unprecedented in the UK from a safety advisory group in recent times—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, does the hon. Member want to know my answer?

Iqbal Mohamed: Yes, please.

Lisa Nandy: In that case, can we have a little more decorum, because there are people outside of this place whose lives are being directly affected by the debate we are having and the tone of this debate.

The hon. Member tries to equate the two, but the truth is that he reveals himself in the language he uses. He refers to the “banning of football hooligans” and specifically to violent football hooligans, but this is not a decision to ban football hooligans; it is a decision to ban all away fans from a game, which a safety advisory group has not done in this country for nearly 25 years. It was a decision taken not on the grounds that he suggests, which was the risk posed by Maccabi Tel Aviv fans; it was a decision taken in no small part because of the risk posed to them because they support an Israeli team and because they are Jewish. I would gently say to him that if he is conflating everybody who supports an Israeli team—the vast majority of whom by definition will be Jewish—with violent football hooligans, he should consider whether he can really stand in front of this House and say that he is not behaving in a way that is antisemitic.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I do not want to continue the debate. Are the points of order absolutely necessary right now and relevant?

Ian Byrne indicated assent.

Zarah Sultana indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Ian Byrne.

Ian Byrne: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) stated that Maccabi Tel Aviv have “played a game in Istanbul where there was no trouble at all.” UEFA moved the game to Hungary after Turkish authorities refused to stage it in Turkey. Hungarian authorities then had it played behind closed doors, hence no trouble.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not sure that was actually a point of order, and I do not want to continue the debate, but the hon. Member has indeed put his point on the record.

Zarah Sultana rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Is it an appropriate point of order?

Zarah Sultana: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Zarah Sultana.

Zarah Sultana: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In my question to the Secretary of State, I clearly stated that the Maccabi Tel Aviv football team is inextricably linked to the Israeli state, which is an apartheid state. The boycott of apartheid regimes, such as apartheid South Africa, is a legitimate political stance. To label such a position as antisemitic, as the Secretary of State did, is entirely false and dangerous, and the way the Secretary of State has referred to me and my colleagues is also laced with Islamophobia—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Ms Sultana, I should not have to repeat myself: that is a continuation of the debate, and the urgent question has concluded.

Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy

5.35 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to update the House on the Government's work to transform further and higher education in this country.

The House should be in no doubt: transformation is what we need, because the world is changing, with artificial intelligence, machine learning, green energy and new and exciting technologies. Global forces are reshaping the world of work more and more quickly. They bring fresh and exciting chances for growth and opportunity. However, unless education and training in this country also change, we risk missing those chances and our young people risk being left behind.

We have seen that before. Under the previous Government, who thought that colleges and technical education were for other people's children, apprenticeship starts for our young people plummeted. They talked down our universities and were more interested in headlines for culture wars than in head-starts for students. We will never take that path. I know that Members on both sides of the House will agree that we in this country have a duty—to our people, to our businesses and to our great history—not just to keep up but to lead the way.

Today we publish our post-16 education and skills White Paper to seize the opportunities of this changing world, to deliver growth for our economy and opportunity for our communities, and to lead the way. My vision for post-16 education in this country is a skills system that drives growth and is more balanced, more responsive and more reflective of the evolving world of work. It will add dynamism, invention and expertise to our economy, and it will go further by inviting working people to be part of that economic strength and to add to and share in that success.

The young person who has just left school and is not sure of what is next deserves a range of quality options to choose the route that is right for him—a great apprenticeship, a top course at his local further education college, or to go off to university. A working mother deserves the opportunity to upskill and make the most of her talents. For her, it means more than a job; it means a career, security and opportunity. I want to see that opportunity cascade into our communities, with local businesses becoming more productive, taking on more people and paying higher salaries; hustle and bustle returning to the high street; the skilled workforce that we need to build more local homes; and empowered NHS staff with the right skills to deliver a transformed service that is fit for the future—getting this country moving again.

That is why the skills system is fundamental to national renewal. The White Paper is the turning point in how we go from a quarter of a million skilled vacancies sitting unfilled to a pipeline of top-quality training to fill those jobs and create new ones, from a muddle of confusing pathways to a coherent system meeting the needs of the modern economy, and from further education treated as the poor relation to our colleges standing side by side with our world-class universities.

The public will have heard such warm words about skills before, and they will know that warm words often fizzle out into nothing—no action and no change. But that

is no longer the case, because our reform of the skills system has already begun. We have established Skills England, reformed the growth and skills levy, slashed red tape on apprenticeships, introduced technical excellence colleges and stabilised university finances, and we are rolling out the youth guarantee.

Today, we are going further, guided by our industrial strategy. We will fill gaps and meet needs, through our new foundation apprenticeships or through shorter courses in priority sectors, which from April will be funded by the growth and skills levy. To deliver growth, we are investing £187 million for our “Techfirst” digital skills and AI learning, £182 million for engineering, £182 million for the defence talent pipeline and £625 million to train 60,000 more construction workers. That is all backed up by 29 new technical excellence colleges.

Clean energy, defence, digital, advanced manufacturing, construction—what we need is technical excellence, and that is what our colleges can provide. Through this White Paper we will work with our fantastic FE staff. We will draw on their passion and expertise. We are strengthening professional development in our colleges, partnering with industry, and building on the evidence of what works. We will pair that support with improved performance measures, to bring our colleges out of the shadow of the university route, and to make it a pathway of equal importance, equal value, and equal pride in the eyes of the nation. As the Prime Minister has said, that will be a defining cause for this Labour Government: no longer a Cinderella service, but rather a system of high esteem, matching high support with high challenge, and spreading best practice from across the country to deliver high standards in every college. To seize the opportunities of the tech revolution, this country needs not just lawyers, economists, and scientists; we need wind turbine technicians, video editors, and builders—careers that we on this side of the House respect, and work that pays and lifts up communities.

We are introducing rigorous study pathways, giving young people a clear line of sight into great careers. That includes V-levels, the brand new vocational pathway unveiled in our White Paper today, sitting proudly alongside A-levels and T-levels, and building the skills and knowledge that employers value. We are backing those changes with £800 million of extra investment for young people in our colleges and sixth forms next year, above and beyond what was planned for this year and supporting 20,000 more students. That is why the target for 50% of our young people to go to university is evolving, because to compete in this changing world, we need to nurture a much broader range of talent.

As the Prime Minister has announced, we have a new ambition. No longer just half; we want two-thirds of our young people to get into high-level learning, be it academic, technical, or an apprenticeship. But pro-technical and pro-vocational does not mean being anti-academic. Our universities are a stamp of quality recognised across the world, a source of immense national pride, and a driver of economic strength in our regions. To any young person growing up in England today, I say this: if you want to go to university, if it is right for you, and if you meet the requirements, this Government will back you. That is why we are introducing new targeted maintenance grants for those students most in need, funded by a levy on international students' fees, because in this country, opening up access for domestic students from disadvantaged communities is my priority.

We also need a system that delivers for working people living busy lives. That is why we are making higher-level learning more flexible and available in bitesize chunks, with break points in degrees, and supported by the lifelong learning entitlement. But it is not only degrees that matter. I want to see our universities working with colleges to deliver more level 4 and 5 qualifications, and to spread that excellence far and wide, making it easier for people to take those vital courses in their local further education college, and delivering the “missing middle” of skills that is so important for our economy and for our people seeking their next promotion.

To safeguard the excellence in our universities for future generations, last November I announced that tuition fees would increase by £285 this academic year. Today I confirm that we will increase undergraduate tuition fee caps for all higher education providers in line with forecast inflation for the next two academic years. We will future-proof our maintenance loan offer by increasing maintenance loans in line with forecast inflation every academic year. To provide long-term certainty over future funding, we will legislate, when parliamentary time allows, to increase tuition fee caps automatically in the future, linked to quality. We will not allow institutions that do not take quality seriously make their students pay more. Charging full fees will be conditional on high-quality teaching, balancing stability for universities with fairness for students and taxpayers.

Within this White Paper is a challenge to our universities to build on what makes them great, drive up access, drive out low-quality provision, improve collaboration and push forward innovation, deliver the research breakthroughs that will revitalise our economy, and feed that energy back into our local communities.

We will support every young person to take the pathway that is right for them—technical, academic or vocational—but I will not accept their having no pathway at all. Far too many of our young people find themselves not in employment, education or training. From there, they become isolated from society, disconnected from success and their hope fading, and that must change. We will strengthen the part played by schools in the transition to post-16 education, we will improve accountability, with a bigger role for strategic authorities, and we will introduce a new guarantee. Any 16 or 17-year-old not in education or training will automatically get a place at a local provider. I will not let opportunity slip away, just as those young people are getting going in life.

The White Paper delivers on that promise to our young people to give them the skills that they need, but the task of revitalising our skills system is not the isolated work of one Department or another. It is the collective undertaking of local and national leaders, together with our workforces, businesses and trade unions. It is mission-led Government in action and the prize is huge: opportunity for our young people, growth for our economy and renewal for our nation. I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.45 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

I will start with V-levels. If they are a continuation of the reforms that we began to simplify the post-16 qualification landscape, I welcome it, but without the White Paper it is hard to understand whether that is the case. There are fundamental questions regarding the announcement that the statement does not answer, so I hope the Secretary of State will be able to shed some light on them today. Are V-levels simply a rebranded continuation of the reforms that we began, or are they a completely new qualification that will take years to develop? What is happening with BTECs, Cambridge technicals and other applied general qualifications? Are they all being scrapped? If so, what is the timeline for that? The Secretary of State says that she will consolidate 900 qualifications, but into how many? How will employers be involved in shaping the new courses?

As I said in oral questions earlier, I am deeply concerned by reports today about the introduction of the so-called lower-level qualifications aimed specifically at white working-class people. There has long been a term for that in education policy: the soft bigotry of low expectations. We reject that. Let me be clear: if this is a plan, it is an insult. Are we really saying that white working-class children are less capable of achieving the same qualifications as their peers, or that the answer to disadvantage is to lower expectations rather than to raise ambition? We should aspire to the best qualifications, teachers and outcomes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

We should not hard-bake the acceptance of second best into Government policy. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that pupils who fail their English or maths GCSE will be expected to retake them? Or is she content to assign them to second-tier qualifications? Will she ensure that every single pupil, whatever their background, can expect to be supported to achieve the same high standards? The truth is that under Labour, young people are being badly let down. Youth unemployment is rising and job prospects are sinking as a result of this Government's choices.

The Conservatives have a clear plan to put an end to debt-trap low-quality degrees and to double the budget for apprenticeships. Labour's plan is all over the place. At the Labour party conference, the Prime Minister declared that the ambition for 50% of young people to go to university is not “right for our times”. The Prime Minister clearly has not been paying attention, as he abolished a target that the Conservatives had already got rid of. What is more, today's plan, as set out, would mean two thirds of young people would be in higher-level learning, but, as I understand it, with only 10% in higher technical education or apprenticeships. That would increase the proportion of those going to university from 50% to around 57%. Only a Prime Minister like this one could abolish a target that does not exist, then accidentally announce one that goes further than the non-existent target he just pretended to get rid of.

It is rather rich for the Secretary of State to boast that she has taken decisive action to fix university finances—the House will forgive me if I take that with a pinch of salt. Before the election, she promised that graduates “will pay less” under Labour. Well, it turns out that they will pay more—quite a lot more—and every penny of the extra cost this year is swallowed by Labour's national insurance jobs tax. To be absolutely clear, the rise in tuition fees is a spending commitment, as it costs the Exchequer significant sums. The cost does not just fall on students; it falls on the taxpayer too.

[Laura Trott]

When we were in government, we introduced T-levels and degree-level apprenticeships and put English and maths at the heart of all vocational qualifications, because that is what ensures that young people have the best start in life. All this Government are doing is embedding the soft bigotry of low expectations in our system and doing nothing to help young people with debt-trap degrees. It is not good enough.

Bridget Phillipson: It is a real shame that the right hon. Lady cannot bring herself to welcome anything that we have announced today. It is par for the course; that is how she likes to do things. In government, the Conservatives talked about how they valued post-16 education. Their record was very different, of course. The difference between record and rhetoric is the difference between our parties, and it is clear for all to see.

We are investing £800 million more in further education, while colleges were cut to the bone under the Tories. We are putting a real focus on vocational education and FE, restoring their esteem, giving them proper respect and simplifying the qualification landscape that the Tories made even more muddled, and we are securing the future of our world-renowned universities. I did not hear whether the right hon. Lady accepted, disagreed, welcomed or did not support what I have set out today about university funding. If she does not support it, I would like to know how she intends to safeguard our world-leading universities into the future.

As usual, we heard plenty from the right hon. Lady about debt-trap degrees. We often hear a lot of talk about low-value courses or Mickey Mouse degrees, with an answer never given as to which young people should not be going to university, which courses that applies to or which institutions she has in mind when she makes sweeping generalisations of that kind. It is always working-class kids and other people's children who will lose out from the snobbery that comes from saying that education is not for people like them.

This Labour Government will deliver a world-leading university system alongside brilliant technical and vocational routes so that all our young people have access to brilliant careers and training opportunities, including throughout their lives. This is about choice for young people and finding the route and the path that is best for them. This Labour Government say to young people, "Further study is important; it is for you. It matters to us, and it should matter to you as well." That is why we are bringing changes to the qualifications landscape.

In answer to the right hon. Lady's question, we believe that T-levels were a welcome and important addition to the qualifications landscape. They provide high-quality technical qualifications, with strong work placements alongside them, and sit alongside well-established A-levels, but the rest of the system alongside that is missing. We are making sure that we have good, strong routes through V-levels that young people will be able to combine with A-level study. That is for those young people who are not quite so clear at the age of 16 whether they want to specialise in one particular area. As the right hon. Lady will know, a T-level is the equivalent of three A-levels, and it requires young people at the age of 16 to make a definitive choice about the future of their career. We want to ensure that there is a range of high-quality

options so that those 900 qualifications will move towards becoming part of the new V-level system. We will launch a consultation on how we deliver that, and we are keen to hear from businesses as a part of that.

The right hon. Lady asked about GCSEs and English and maths resits, and she criticised our plans to get more young people through their English and maths GCSEs. In order to do that, there has to be a stepping stone to making it happen. An endless cycle of unnecessary resits is not the way to support more young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to get English or maths GCSEs. She and her party were happy to consign a generation of young people to failure, endless resits and a sense of desperation. We want to ensure that they make progress and master the basics then move on to getting that good, strong GCSE pass.

This Government will ensure that all our young people have the opportunities and chances that they need to get on. The Conservatives might be determined to ensure that fewer young people have the chance to go on to university and that our businesses do not have the skills they need, but this Labour Government will ensure that apprenticeship starts are there, with good, strong FE options alongside our world-leading universities. That is what this White Paper is all about.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nurat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I welcome the Government's focus on further education and skills, which have been overlooked for far too long and are critical to the delivery of the Government's missions. My Committee has recently undertaken an inquiry into FE and skills, and I am pleased to see a number of our recommendations reflected in the statement, particularly in the commitment to address the vortex of failure in which the current system of English and maths resits traps far too many young people.

I welcome the priority of increasing the quality of further education, but there are two key contributors to quality that the Secretary of State did not mention in her statement. The first is the 15% pay gap between teachers in schools and teachers in FE colleges, which is a barrier to recruitment and retention for colleges. The second is the inability of FE colleges to reclaim VAT, a situation for which my Committee found no justification and which City College Norwich told us made the difference of a whole floor to a new building that it had recently completed. How does the Secretary of State plan to ensure that the further education sector has not only the policy framework to improve quality but the necessary resources?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the Chair of the Education Committee. We continue to keep all such matters under review, and I can be clear with her that we believe that further education colleges are engines of growth and opportunity in our communities. This White Paper is about ensuring a prestigious, world-class system in which we will reform initial training in further education, continue to invest in whole-career professional development for FE teachers and build ties with industry to ensure that FE teachers have the greatest opportunity to develop their teaching skills and subject expertise to help young people to achieve and thrive. Alongside that, we will match that support with appropriate challenge, so that

we continue to raise the bar on standards through the new Ofsted system with the backstop of the FE Commissioner.

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

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I too thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. There is far too much in this White Paper to respond to comprehensively in two minutes, so let me focus on three critical issues.

The first issue is V-levels. The Secretary of State talks about ending confusion, yet she is introducing a new qualification that sounds remarkably like BTECs—they are flexible, sector-based and can mix with A-levels. BTECs already work: 200,000 students took them last year, 99% of universities accept them and one in five UK workers have one. If we are recreating BTECs, why scrap them first? We should keep both until 2030, so that we can compare outcomes. T-levels reached 1% uptake after five years, so let us not repeat that mistake.

The second issue is lifelong learning. The Secretary of State rightly speaks about the working mother needing to upskill, but will the support be sufficient to make that real? The lifelong learning entitlement is welcome, but the Government have cut over-21 apprenticeships, including those in shortage professions such as nursing and social work. What confidence do the Government have that their LLE can cover the costs of providing that vocational education, particularly in subjects with high operating costs?

The third issue is the international student levy. We support maintenance grants—another manifesto commitment we made that the Government have adopted—but funding them by taxing international students is self-defeating. This is incredibly tricky to model, but analysis shows that the levy could cut up to 135,000 domestic student places over five years and reduce our economy by £2.2 billion. That is not helping disadvantaged students. Will the Secretary of State make the modelling transparent and promise that opportunity will not be narrowed by the levy? There are many more questions, but I appreciate that I do not have time to ask them all.

There is much to welcome in this White Paper's ambition, but we must guard against unintended consequences and missed opportunities. The Lib Dems stand ready to work with the Government to get this right.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. V-levels will replace around 900 qualifications for 16 to 19-year-olds at level 3. The current system is fragmented, with a vast array of qualifications that are too difficult for employers and young people to navigate, so we will introduce new V-levels. That is a new vocational option that will sit alongside A-levels and T-levels at level 3, to make sure we have the right qualification mix available for young people. We will keep funding for most existing qualifications in place until new V-levels and other qualifications come in, but funding for all qualifications in other T-level areas under review will continue on the current timeline. We will confirm the list of qualifications that will have funding removed soon.

Turning to the lifelong learning entitlement, this is an important change that will transform the student finance system in England. It will broaden access to high-quality, flexible education, including for adults who want to go back into education. It will launch in academic year 2026-27 for learners studying courses that start on or after 1 January 2027. This will allow learners to use the new entitlement more flexibly than ever before to fund individual modules, as well as full courses, at levels 4 to 6, regardless of whether they are provided by a college, university or independent provider.

The hon. Gentleman asked about international students and the international student levy. To be clear, international students make an important contribution to our country, our communities, our towns and cities, and our society. However, I do think it is right that with the contribution we are seeking through the international student levy, we will be able to reinvest in new targeted maintenance grants for domestic students. While I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the introduction of such new grants, the Liberal Democrats will have to set out how they intend to pay for them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We will have just another 30 minutes or so of questions, because we have a big debate later, so colleagues must keep their questions short.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The previous Government tried hard to take a hatchet to many vocational courses, reflecting how little they valued those hugely important subjects and skills. Can the Minister confirm that the new V-level qualifications show that this Government have listened to the education sector, employers and students, and will allow more young people greater choice in achieving their pathway to a successful future?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, that is right. V-levels will offer a genuine choice for young people to pursue several interests before specialising. They will sit alongside T-levels and A-levels, and will be linked to the skills and knowledge that employers tell us they need and the careers that young people wish to pursue. This is an important step forward, one that will ensure all of our young people have a good range of options available to them.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Having five children, I understand that not everybody learns the same way, as all my children are different. However, what consideration has been given to the position of students with special educational needs and disabilities and the ruralities of constituencies such as mine, which can pose challenges?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes on both points. I recognise the challenges that people in rural communities sometimes face in accessing work placements, and we continue to work with businesses and colleges to make sure they are available for T-level courses. On support for children with SEND, many of our FE colleges already lead the way on what good provision looks like. They are an important step for many young people making that transition at 16, including from specialist provision into mainstream provision. As part of our wider SEND reforms,

[Bridget Phillipson]

we want to make sure that children's journey from early years through the school system and into further education and beyond works with those moments of key transition. Our FE colleges have a critical role to play in that.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Exeter has a fantastic tertiary college—Exeter college—which, thanks to this Government, will be a technical excellence college for construction. We also have an exceptional specialist maths school that provides excellent maths, physics and computing education, which are skills we really need in the south-west. How will these reforms raise standards for every child in Exeter, to help make sure they reach their full potential?

Bridget Phillipson: Technical excellence colleges, including those in my hon. Friend's community, will act as hubs of excellence that will raise standards across the FE sector. Each TEC hub will offer advanced facilities, expert staff, and high-quality curricula developed with the industry. This will also allow other providers and businesses to meet the needs of high-growth sectors, including construction.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): The Government say that they want to simplify the post-16 system, but the reality is that funding for further education remains chronically low. Will the Secretary of State look again at further education funding streams—for example, letting colleges reclaim VAT, as schools with sixth forms do, and extending the pupil premium to post-16 levels?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her suggestions. For further education, we will invest nearly £800 million extra in 16 to 19 funding next year, alongside capital investment of over £2 billion to support the expansion of capacity, modernisation of college estates, and delivery of training in the areas of greatest need. However, there is more that we need to do, especially in providing support for young people who are NEET. That is why today's White Paper sets out our direction for making sure that all young people have good routes into employment, education and training.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): This is a timely set of proposals in an area that is too often overlooked by Government. In my constituency, further education has not functioned properly since the Tories' failed top-down review of post-16 education in Cheshire led to the closure of the main FE campus. NEET levels in Winsford are now five percentage points higher than the borough-wide average. To this end, the proposed enhanced support for 16 and 17-year-olds to take up education or training and stay engaged will be critical. What role can the Secretary of State see the mayoral combined authorities having in setting the strategic direction and providing governance for post-16 education in places such as Mid Cheshire?

Bridget Phillipson: We do think there is an important role for our mayoral strategic authorities, especially when it comes to supporting colleges and making sure we have good link-up between colleges and businesses. I would be happy to look in more detail at the situation my hon. Friend outlined.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The Secretary of State has claimed today that she is expanding opportunities, while raising tuition fees and cutting international baccalaureate funding for sixth forms in Bexley with little notice. Who did she consult on the decision to cut IB funding? What analysis was undertaken, and will she apologise to the schools across the UK left in limbo by her reckless approach to education?

Bridget Phillipson: As I said, next year, we will invest £800 million extra in 16-to-19 funding. We have sought to refocus the large programme uplift that sits alongside that investment on maths and STEM for those studying four or more A-levels, because we think that is important for our industrial strategy priorities, but there will be transitional protections for those schools affected. Students will still be able to study for the IB, and schools will be welcome and able to offer it through the funding streams they receive.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I am delighted that Bedford college has been named one of 10 new construction technical excellence colleges, backed by £100 million of Government investment, to train the skilled professionals that the UK needs for housing and infrastructure. I also welcome today's measures to strengthen vocational qualifications. The new qualifications to better prepare students for GCSE English and maths resits are positive, but can the Secretary of State confirm that those qualifications will be fully funded, given the current financial pressures on FE colleges?

Bridget Phillipson: We are investing more in further education, with £800 million extra next year. We are also committed to establishing 19 more technical excellence colleges on top of the 10 construction TECs launched in August—including Bedford, as my hon. Friend mentions. Those technical excellence colleges will act as hubs of excellence, raising standards across the sector and providing more opportunities for young people to move into careers such as those in construction-related fields. That is why we have also brought in new foundation apprenticeships, to give more young people the chance to understand a broad range of offers within an area before deciding to specialise.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As young people will now have to choose between T-levels and the new V-levels, can the Secretary of State explain what are the main distinguishing features of the two qualifications, and what in broad terms are the likely differences in career outcomes?

Bridget Phillipson: The new system will involve A-levels, T-levels and V-levels. T-levels represent three A-levels; A-levels are already well understood by many people in this country, while T-levels are a relatively new addition, but a very high-quality technical route. Alongside A-levels, there will be V-levels. These will not replace the large-scale programmes that T-levels offer, but will provide opportunities for young people to combine study of both academic and vocational qualifications, particularly those young people who are not quite clear at 16 exactly which area they wish to specialise in. This will allow for a combination of study.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I strongly welcome this strategy today, particularly the commitment that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have made to guarantee all 16-year-olds a college place. However, will she commit to working towards closing the legislative gap, where children between the ages of five and 16 with SEND can access home-to-school transport, as can those with SEND from age 19 to 25, but between the ages of 16 and 19 there is currently no statutory provision for them to have home-to-school transport. An estimated one in seven disabled young people, equating to 13,500 people, were unable to access college this year alone as a result.

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the passion and expertise that my hon. Friend brings to this subject, and I would be happy to discuss that issue with her in more detail.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Perhaps the biggest single barrier that prevents young people from rural communities such as mine accessing vocational studies through FE colleges is that they live so far away and travel costs a fortune. For a student living in Appleby, Kirkby Stephen, Coniston or Windermere, it can cost them £1,000 a year to get to Kendal, Barrow, Lancaster or Penrith. What will the Secretary of State do to put an end to that barrier to young people staying in further education?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the additional barriers that exist around transport, which are a particular challenge in rural communities, sadly, although not uniquely in rural communities. That is part of the reason why this Government are bringing forward wide-ranging reforms, including to our bus network, to make sure that it serves the interests of communities, businesses and students much more effectively. I gather from my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) sitting next to me on the Front Bench that extra investment is going into rural bus services in his and the hon. Gentleman's part of the world.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I warmly welcome this statement. One of the most shameful legacies of the last 14 years in Peterborough has been the rising number of young people leaving school with no qualifications and no hope, with NEETs up and apprenticeships down. Skills are not just good for growth, but good for hope, good for young people, good for their parents and good for communities. One of the most difficult parts in the whole vocational network is the navigation that employers and young people have to do with career services, which have been broken over the past 14 years. Can my right hon. Friend tell us more about how career services and good quality advice will be at the heart of reinvigorating vocational qualifications in Peterborough and the country?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend always champions young people in Peterborough and the need to take action in this area. We will ensure that young people have good careers guidance and work experience. The White Paper also sets out an automatic backstop for all 16-year-olds that guarantees them a further education place in reserve. That will ensure that young people at risk of dropping out of education are given a place and wraparound support, because we know that the faster we work with young people, the more likely it is that

that will be effective. That runs alongside strengthening requirements on schools to make sure that their pupils have places in post-16 provision.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State says that she wants to see empowered NHS staff with the right skills to deliver a transformed service, with which I absolutely agree. Level 7 apprenticeships, such as those provided by Cranfield University in Mid Bedfordshire, are so important to delivering that, but the Department for Education has cut funding to level 7 apprenticeships, meaning that the Department of Health and Social Care will be funding ongoing provision. Does the Secretary of State think it is responsible for her to balance the books of her Department on the back of the NHS?

Bridget Phillipson: It is right that we refocus our skills system on young people, and that is what we have done through the changes that the hon. Member mentions. We have also made sure that under-22s continue to be eligible for the level 7 funding that he talks about, but I make no apology for refocusing the system on young people and their opportunities, and I am making sure they have every chance to get on.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): My constituency is blessed with two world-class universities and an excellent further education college that provide a range of degrees, apprenticeships and qualifications. I recently met the Samee charity, which provides a structured training programme for young people with learning difficulties to get into self-employment. Can the Secretary of State tell me how this White Paper supports those types of training programmes and supports those young people to thrive?

Bridget Phillipson: It is good to hear about the provision that exists in her community in Bournemouth. We know that we need a range of options for young people, whether through further education or independent training providers. I also recognise the critical role that many who sit outside of formal systems can play in supporting young people, whether through mentoring or ongoing support, particularly those who have had difficult experiences in life and are furthest away from the labour market.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The Education Secretary's focus today is on the new vocational qualification training, which will be welcome for students in England. In Wales, however, where her party has led the Government for the past 25 years, the apprenticeship budget has been cut by 14%. Will she be lobbying the Chancellor ahead of the Budget to ensure that Wales has a fair funding settlement that would support apprenticeships?

Bridget Phillipson: Wales and Scotland both secured the biggest post-devolution settlements that we have ever seen, yet they still continue to be against them.

Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her announcement today, particularly the planned increase in tuition fees and maintenance loans, which will be warmly welcomed by students and the two world-class universities on my patch, the University of Sheffield and Hallam University.

[*Abtisam Mohamed*]

Will the Secretary of State join me in affirming that the Government are committed to ensuring equal access and full support for the disadvantaged? Will they explore whether we can address adequate maintenance support for children by increasing it in line with the cost of living? Will no specific pathway be excluded, allowing students to have opportunities and driving economic growth?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend always champions the fantastic institutions in her community, and I know the important role that they play in Sheffield and the wider region, providing jobs, training and opportunities not just for our young people, but for adults returning to education. That is why we have today taken the decision to increase fees, giving institutions the certainty they need while providing more support around maintenance loans and starting the process of introducing new targeted maintenance grants for less well-off students. I should add that, as part of this reform, we are also announcing additional support for care leavers. They will be automatically eligible for the maximum maintenance loan. That welcome step will provide a big support to some of the most vulnerable children in our country.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Secretary of State praises the fantastic FE staff and describes FE colleges as

“no longer a Cinderella service, but rather a system of high esteem”.

How does she propose to do that while still maintaining the pay gap for FE staff compared with teachers in other educational settings?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the challenge there. It developed over many years, and we as a Government inherited that. We are investing more this year in further education, and there will be £800 million more next year into 16-to-19 education, which will make a big difference. But I recognise the ongoing need to support our brilliant staff working in FE, whether they are teaching staff or support staff. Through our “improving education together” partnership in the Department for Education, we are ensuring that their voices are heard as part of the reforms we are taking forward.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the Government’s continued commitment to promoting vocational and technical education, which is welcome. Can she outline how the White Paper will address the capacity issues that a lot of colleges and sixth forms are experiencing, including in my constituency? That will help us get that NEET rate down.

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the challenge that we have seen, in part because of the big numbers of 16 to 19-year-olds we have coming through the system. That is why we are prioritising investing in 16-to-19 funding for our colleges and ensuring we have more capital available to create the places that are necessary, working with local areas. Running alongside that are our technical excellence colleges, which will drive up standards, spread best practice and be hubs of excellence in their regions working with other colleges.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Media reports, but not the statement, talked about the resit regime for English and maths, and I hope that the young people who fail to achieve the grades but who thrive with functional skills were not listening to the shadow Minister dismiss their achievements. Was the Secretary of State aware that young people achieving a 3 in year 11 are forced to retake, but if they achieve a 2, they are allowed to take functional skills? Where a young person fails a second time, there is no funding for colleges to move them across into that other pathway. I recognise what is coming up, but the young people in the system now need some urgent attention, so that they do not fall into a doom loop. Will she comment on that?

Bridget Phillipson: We want to ensure that more young people secure a good, strong GCSE in English or maths, but we recognise that if someone secures a grade 1 in August and is then expected to resit a full GCSE a matter of months later, that is not likely to lead to the best outcomes that we want to see. We have focused on improving the teaching of English and maths in further education, and we have issued new guidance to give institutions a clearer direction. However, I think it right for us to help young people to secure a firmer foundation in the basics through the new qualification, and then move on to a GCSE. That sits alongside the changes we are making for adults in respect of occupational standards, to allow more of them to complete their apprenticeships as well.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): A constituent has written to me to highlight that they have successfully completed a level 3 BTEC diploma in musical theatre. To go on to university, they need an extended diploma—a third year—but their college will not let them do it because they have not achieved a grade 4 in GCSE maths, which their university course would not require anyway, so my constituent is being held back from a degree and a career as a result of not passing an exam in an unrelated subject. How can we break down these barriers so that young people are not held back in life?

Bridget Phillipson: We do want to ensure that more young people obtain that strong GCSE pass at grade 4 or above, but about a third of 16-year-olds do not achieve that at present, and sadly the number is even higher among white working-class pupils, who are more than twice as likely as their more affluent peers to need to resit their exams. That is something that we absolutely must tackle, but if my hon. Friend will give me some more information, I will be happy to look at the case in that wider context.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I welcome the announcement that the Government are enhancing their provision of post-16 vocational qualifications, but when will the Secretary of State outline a dedicated post-16 strategy for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities? I recently held a heartbreaking roundtable with young people with learning disabilities in Eyres Monsell, in my constituency. Although they had been doing work experience for years, when it came to giving them full-time work, our corporate supermarkets let them down. They want to work, they are able to work, and with the right support they will work.

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise what the hon. Gentleman has said, and I have heard of similar experiences from my constituents and families across the country who have spoken about the need to reform the SEND system across the board, throughout education. We want to build on what is already working well in post-16 provision, to ensure that more of that successful transition can happen for young people with SEND. We will provide more details in the schools White Paper, but I want to acknowledge the incredible work that many FE colleges already do in supporting that transition. We are continuing to invest through the internships work consortium to ensure that supported internships are there for young people who need them.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): In my constituency, major employers offer excellent apprenticeships, but the number of places is limited. They have told me that they would welcome the ability to share unsuccessful applications with similar employers, such as small and medium-sized enterprises in their supply chains, rather than their being lost to the system. What can the Education Secretary do to encourage such collaboration between employers to boost the take-up of high-quality apprenticeships?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend sets out what sounds like an interesting and useful approach to allow employers to work together more effectively, but we also want to see more collaboration between colleges, and between colleges and universities. The White Paper sets out a vision for a more coherent system that will be easy for both students and employers to navigate, but I would be happy to hear more from my hon. Friend about the work that is going on in his constituency, and to establish whether there are any wider lessons that we can take into the Department to look into what more can be done.

Steve Darling (Torquay) (LD): Torquay Boys' grammar school has long delivered the international baccalaureate. My own eldest son, George, has benefited from that and, under the scheme, has volunteered in a care home. He is now on the cusp of becoming a registrar for care of the elderly. During my meeting with the head of Torquay Boys' last Friday, he expressed particular concern about the impact of the lack of social mobility and the impact on the ability to deliver languages. Will the Secretary of State think again about these cuts to the international baccalaureate?

Bridget Phillipson: We are talking about a relatively small number of students. Colleges and schools will retain the freedom to decide what study programmes they wish to offer their students, but we as a Government have decided to reprioritise the large programme uplift on industrial strategy priorities, involving, for example, those studying for four or more A-levels in STEM subjects, including further maths. We think that is the right decision, but there will be transitional protections for institutions that currently offer the international baccalaureate.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I welcome the statement, including the key commitment to breaking down barriers to opportunities to enable young people to gain the education that they deserve.

This new focus will also support the employers who have been consistently talking to me about the skills challenges they face, particularly those relating to vocational skills. However, kids in my constituency are often locked out of vital opportunities simply because of the lack of transport. What work is the Secretary of State doing with transport colleagues to challenge that barrier and ensure that those young people in my rural constituency have access to those technical qualifications?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the challenge that my hon. Friend has mentioned. It is, of course, a challenge for rural communities in particular, but it often affects areas that are not rural, because of our fragmented transport network and the lack of join-up between transport systems and the increasing lack of bus services. We, as a Government, are taking action in respect of bus services to provide more opportunities for young people to get to college in order to study, but also to grow businesses. I have seen some fantastic work, led by many of our mayors, to bring together a better offer for young people, to allow them to travel to places of study and to work placements, and to gain access to other opportunities. That is a model that those in other areas might be able to consider in the future.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I welcome the Government's focus on vocational skills, but I fear that schools in my constituency will struggle to keep pace with qualification changes, and that 2027 is too soon for the transition to V-levels to be completed. Colleges such as Esher sixth form college deliver BTECs, and have done so successfully for many years. What assurance can the Secretary of State give to those colleges that they will be supported in that transition, and how exactly will it be implemented by 2027?

Bridget Phillipson: There will be a consultation to which businesses, representatives of the education sector and others will be able to contribute. We want to ensure that we get this right, but we believe that it is necessary to simplify the vast array of qualifications at level 3 through vocational routes, and to align those routes better with A-level study as well.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesend) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of visiting North Kent College in Gravesend, which is one of the 10 new construction technical excellence colleges. The announcement of the new V-levels is a welcome step, giving vocational education real parity of esteem with academic and technical routes. Can the Secretary of State assure me, however, that the assessment of V-levels will involve physically demonstrating competence, such as practical or placement examinations and building a portfolio of evidence, rather than exam-based memory tests, which do not reflect real life? Will she meet me to discuss that further?

Bridget Phillipson: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I am delighted that North Kent College will be one of our first 10 new technical excellence colleges. That will give young people in her community and beyond the chance to obtain a well-paid, secure job in one of the Government's key areas as we seek to build more homes. I would be happy to discuss further with

[Bridget Phillipson]

her the reforms that we intend to introduce, and there will be a full consultation in which people will be able to take part.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): I welcome the statement. In Blackburn I have been working with our college and jobcentre to help young people access real opportunities, but in towns such as mine, which is among the most deprived in the country, it is not talent but investment that is lacking. What strategy will the Secretary of State employ to ensure that skills funding truly reaches places such as Blackburn, and will she meet me to discuss the serious shortage of ESOL spaces, which is causing many constituents to wait for up to a year, out of work?

Bridget Phillipson: We are investing more in further education and also in our schools system, but we recognise that one in seven young people aged between 16 and 24 are not in education, employment, or training. We urgently need to bring that figure down, because every single day we see the consequences of that failure, both for the individual young person and for our wider economy. That is why many of the measures in the White Paper are about how we can give young people the support that they need. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will respond to his specific point about ESOL.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I should draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as a governor of a sixth-form college in Stoke-on-Trent and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sixth form education.

The V-levels provide an exciting opportunity for vocational qualifications, and the Secretary of State is right to praise colleges, but she will know that those same colleges are deeply worried about the defunding of BTECs and what that means for student choice in the 2026-27 academic year. Will she give a commitment from the Dispatch Box that BTEC funding will continue until V-levels are in place, and if she cannot, can she explain what young people accessing further education next year will be able to look to before they are in place?

Bridget Phillipson: Students wishing to study for a large qualification should study for T-levels where they are on offer, but to ease the transition to V-levels, the DFE will retain funding for qualifications with 719 guided learning hours or below in T-level areas until the new V-levels are introduced for that area, so we will be keeping funding for most existing qualifications. We will keep that in place until the new V-levels and other

qualifications come in, and we will confirm the list of qualifications that will have funding removed in due course.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): We have new technical excellence colleges, new defence academies and new clean energy colleges, but not in Scotland, because further education and skills are devolved to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Auditor General's report, published this month, showed that funding for Scottish colleges has been cut by 20%. Does the Secretary of State agree that only Scottish Labour can stop the SNP systemically hollowing out Scottish colleges and robbing Scots of all ages of opportunities, including in my West Dunbartonshire constituency?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree very strongly with my hon. Friend. As he says, colleges in Scotland have had a 20% real-terms funding cut in this parliamentary Session, according to a new report from Audit Scotland, and the SNP Government have been accused of guillotining the sector. That goes hand in hand with fewer opportunities for apprenticeships for our young people, with starts falling by nearly a third in eight years under the SNP Government—and that is before we even get on to their terrible record on the incredibly wide attainment gap and the shocking outcomes for working-class children across Scotland. That is why Scotland, now more than ever, needs a new First Minister in the shape of Anas Sarwar.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Nearly 6% of Knowsley's 16 to 17-year-olds are not in employment, education or training—one of the highest rates in the country—so I very much welcome today's statement. By the way, A-levels left not just my constituency but the whole borough of Knowsley under the last Tory Government, so we will take no lessons in aspiration for young working-class people from them. Can the Secretary of State tell me how the measures outlined in the White Paper will ensure that Knowsley's young people get the opportunity their potential deserves?

Bridget Phillipson: One of the measures outlined in today's White Paper is an automatic backstop for all 16-year-olds that guarantees them a further education place in reserve, so that young people at risk of dropping out get wraparound support to ensure that they remain in education or training. We know that if we do not get that support in place ahead of the start of the academic year, we will see a big drop-off, and we also know the damage that that does throughout people's lives. My hon. Friend consistently champions the need for expanded provision in her constituency, and as I committed in oral questions earlier, I would be happy to discuss that further with her.

Point of Order

6.32 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will not seek to repeat discussions from the urgent question earlier, nor will I repeat the comments that have been made about me on social media, but may I seek your advice on how Members on both sides of the House can be encouraged to temper their language outside this place? Comments made on social media can quickly get out of control. They have an impact on wider public discourse and, as I have experienced at first hand, on the safety and security of Members and their families.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. While Mr Speaker is not responsible for what individual Members say, he is nevertheless clear about the importance of the safety and security of Members and their families. I would always encourage Members to speak about one another with courtesy and respect, and to be mindful of the content that they put on social media and of its impact on balanced public discourse.

Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill

Considered in Committee

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

COMMENCEMENT OF TREATY AND MAIN PROVISIONS OF THIS ACT

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

Before we begin proceedings on the Bill, I can inform the House that I, as Chairman of Ways and Means, am minded to select amendment 7 and new clause 1, in the name of the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and amendment 9, in the name of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), for separate decision at the end of the debate.

6.35 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

“(1A) The Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act do not come into force until the duties outlined in section [The additional period and right to extend: duty to publish legal advice and risk assessments] are discharged.”

This amendment together with NC2 would prevent the Treaty from coming into force until the Government has published any legal advice or risk assessments regarding the UK's ability to extend its rights over Diego Garcia after the initial period specified in the Treaty.

The Chairman of Ways and Means: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Amendment 7, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

“(1A) The Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act do not come into force until the Secretary of State lays before Parliament a memorandum on the obligations under international law which require the UK to cede sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory to the Government of Mauritius.

(1B) The memorandum specified in subsection (1) must include—

- (a) a summary of the legal advice received by the UK Government on this issue;
- (b) an analysis of the status of UK's sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory under international law;
- (c) the legal argument for the cessation of British sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory; and
- (d) the risks which the UK Government may have faced had it not reached an agreement with the Government of Mauritius.

(1C) The report specified in subsections (1A) and (1B) must be laid before Parliament no later than two months after this Act receives Royal Assent.”

Amendment 9, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

“(1A) Before sections 2 to 4 of this Act come into force, the Secretary of State must—

- (a) seek to undertake negotiations with the Government of Mauritius on whether Mauritius will establish a right for Chagossians to return and reside in the Chagos Islands; and
 - (b) seek agreement to a referendum for Chagossians on self-determination within any negotiations which take place under paragraph (a); and
 - (c) lay before both Houses of Parliament a report on progress on establishing negotiations with the Government of Mauritius and the outcome of any that take place.
- (1B) Within two months of the report being laid before the House of Commons under paragraph (1a), the Secretary of State must table a substantive motion in the House of Commons on the contents of the report.”

This amendment requires that the Government must undertake negotiations with Mauritius on a Chagossian right of return and on a referendum, with a report laid before Parliament on the outcome of the negotiations. The Government must subsequently table a substantive motion in the House of Commons on the content of that report.

Amendment 10, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

- “(1A) The Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act do not come into force until the Secretary of State establishes a public consultation of Chagossian people residing in the UK on the Treaty.
- (1B) The public consultation under section (1A) must be established within two months of this Act receiving Royal Assent.”

This amendment requires the Government to establish a public consultation with the Chagossian people residing in the UK, before the Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act can come into force.

Amendment 11, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

- “(1A) The Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act do not come into force until the Secretary of State makes a statement before Parliament outlining proposals for a public consultation on the Treaty.
- (1B) A statement made under subsection (1A) must be made within two months of this Act receiving Royal Assent.”

This amendment requires the Government to make a statement before Parliament outlining proposals for a public consultation on the Treaty within two months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, before the Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act can come into force.

Amendment 14, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

- “(1A) The Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act do not come into force until the Secretary of State lays before Parliament an impact assessment detailing the benefits and costs to the United Kingdom, including in financial and security terms, of the Treaty.
- (1B) The Secretary of State must lay the impact assessment under section (1A) within 2 months of the passing of this Act.”

This amendment requires the Government to publish an impact assessment detailing the benefits and costs to the United Kingdom, including in financial and security terms, of the Treaty within two months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, before the Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act can come into force.

Clause stand part.

Amendment 13, in clause 2, page 1, line 17, leave out subsection (b).

This amendment removes section 2 (b) of the Bill which aims to remove citizens of the British Indian Ocean Territory from the list of British Overseas Territories recognised under the British Nationality Act 1981, thus preserving British Chagossian's nationality and associated rights.

Clauses 2 to 4 stand part.

Amendment 3, in clause 5, page 3, line 29, leave out subsections (1) to (4).

Amendment 4, page 3, line 36, at beginning insert—

“With the exception of the subject matters listed in subsection (3A),”.

Amendment 8, page 3, line 40, leave out subsection (3) and insert—

“(2A) An Order under this Act may not be made unless a draft of the order has been laid before Parliament and approved by a resolution of each House.”

This amendment provides that any order made under the Act would need to have the approval of each House of Parliament.

Amendment 6, page 3, line 40, leave out

“is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament” and insert “may not be made unless a draft of the order has been laid before Parliament and approved by a resolution of each House”.

Amendment 5, page 4, line 3, at end insert—

“(3A) An order under this section relating to Diego Garcia, or the rights of Chagossians residing in the United Kingdom, may not be made unless a draft of the order has been laid before Parliament and approved by a resolution of each House.”

Clause 5 stand part.

Amendment 2, in clause 6, page 4, line 17, leave out “see section 1(2)” and insert “see section 1(1A)”.

This amendment is consequential on NC2.

Clause 6 stand part.

New clause 1—*Approval of payments to Mauritius by the House of Commons*—

“(1) No payment may be made by the Government of the United Kingdom to the Government of Mauritius under Article 11 (1)(a) of the Treaty without the approval of the House of Commons.

(2) No development framework under Article 11 (1)(c) may be agreed by the Government of the United Kingdom with the Government of Mauritius without the approval of the House of Commons.

(3) No payment may be made under any development framework agreed between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Mauritius without the approval of the House of Commons.

(4) The approval required by subsections (1), (2) and (3) must be in the form of a resolution of the House of Commons.”

This new clause requires parliamentary approval for any payment by the UK Government to the Government of Mauritius under the Treaty.

New clause 2—*The additional period and right to extend: duty to publish legal advice and risk assessments*—

“(1) Within six months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Secretary of State must lay before both Houses of Parliament any legal advice and any risk assessments given to the Government relating to—

- (a) the ability of the United Kingdom to extend the duration of the Treaty's provisions for the additional period of 40 years (“the additional period”) specified in Article 13(2) of the Treaty, including—
 - (i) any advice pertaining to the automaticity, or otherwise, of the UK securing the additional period;
 - (ii) any obligations placed on both parties to negotiate the additional period;
 - (iii) any risk assessment of the impact on the United Kingdom's strategic interests of not securing the additional period; and

- (b) the ‘right of first refusal’ offered to the United Kingdom should the additional period not be negotiated at the end of the Treaty’s initial duration under Article 13(5) of the Treaty, including whether such a right exists if the additional period expires without a further extension being agreed.”

New clause 3—*Written instrument on the Marine Protected Area: approval by the House of Commons*—

“(1) No written instrument on the establishment and management of its Marine Protected Area in the Chagos Archipelago provided for by Article 5 of the Treaty, including any changes to current restrictions on fishing, commercial and extractive activities, may be agreed to by the Government of the United Kingdom unless—

- (a) a Minister of the Crown has laid before Parliament a copy of the written instrument,
- (b) the written instrument and an explanatory memorandum has been published, and
- (c) period A has expired without the House of Commons having resolved, within period A, that the written instrument should not be agreed.

(2) Period A is the period of 21 sitting days beginning with the first sitting day after the date on which the requirement in subsection (1)(a) is met.

(3) ‘An explanatory memorandum’ has the meaning given in section 24 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.”

This new clause provides that any written instrument on the Marine Protected Area will be subject to the approval of the House of Commons in a process equivalent to that required for treaties under section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

New clause 4—*Ecological status of the Marine Protected Area*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within two years of the passing of this Act and within every subsequent two years, lay before both Houses of Parliament and publish a report on the status of the Marine Protected Area (the ‘MPA’).

(2) Any report made under subsection (1) must include, but not be limited to—

- (a) numbers of different species of coral, fish and molluscs in the Marine Protected Area;
- (b) coral reef resilience;
- (c) fish stocks;
- (d) ocean acidification;
- (e) any degradation of the marine or terrestrial environments; and
- (f) a complete record of the vessels (nature and flag) that enter the MPA.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to report regularly on the status of the Marine Protected Area.

New clause 5—*Reports to the Intelligence and Security Committee*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within twelve months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, and every year subsequently, report to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, established under section 1 of the Justice and Security Act 2013, on the security of the military base on Diego Garcia and the buffer zone.

(2) The report in subsection (1) must include, but shall not be limited to—

- (a) the security of the buffer zone;
- (b) the management and use of the electromagnetic spectrum;
- (c) the presence of any foreign security forces on the islands, whether civilian or military;
- (d) a complete record of the vessels, including their nature and flag, that enter the Marine Protected Area;
- (e) a complete record of the notifications the United Kingdom has given the Government of Mauritius about activity on Diego Garcia;

- (f) a complete record of any information passed from the United Kingdom to the Government of Mauritius, including any military operations, personnel movements, infrastructure development, communications, and logistical support.

(3) For the purposes of this section, ‘buffer zone’ has the meaning of the 24 nautical miles surrounding the island of Diego Garcia.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to report annually to the Intelligence and Security Committee about the security of the military base on Diego Garcia and the security of the buffer zone.

New clause 6—*Report on the impact of UNCLOS on the operation of the Treaty*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must report to Parliament within one year of the passing of this Act, and each subsequent year, on the impact that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (‘UNCLOS’) has had on the operation of the Treaty.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament annually about the impact that the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea has on the operation of the Treaty.

New clause 7—*Rights of Chagossians*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must consult the Chagossian community based in the United Kingdom on the implementation of the Treaty.

(2) The matters the Secretary of State must consult on shall include, but not be limited to—

- (a) the Government of the United Kingdom’s response to any consultation by the Government of Mauritius on the regulations to establish a Trust Fund under Article (11)(b) of the Treaty; and
- (b) any areas of dispute concerning the rights of the Chagossian people that arise between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Mauritius, before such disputes are formally discussed in the Joint Committee under the dispute settlement process established in Article 14 of the Treaty.

(3) Within six months of the passing of this Act, and at least once every subsequent year, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report containing an assessment of the efforts of the UK Government to uphold the rights of Chagossians under the terms of the Treaty.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to consult the Chagossian community in the UK on the discharge of the UK Government’s obligations under the Treaty, and to report annually on how the UK Government has upheld the rights of Chagossians.

New clause 8—*Report on compliance of the Treaty and the Act with UN General Assembly Resolutions on Decolonisation*—

“(1) Within six months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Secretary of State must produce a report on the compliance of the Treaty agreed with the Government of Mauritius, and the provisions of section (2) of this Act, with the following Resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly—

- (a) Resolution 567 (VI),
- (b) Resolution 648 (VII),
- (c) Resolution 742 (VIII),
- (d) Resolution 1514 (XV).

(2) The report specified in subsection (1) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament and, within two months of its publication, the Secretary of State must ensure that a substantive motion relating to the report is tabled, and moved, in both the House of Commons and House of Lords.”

New clause 9—*Marine Protected Area: Progress Reports*—

“(1) Within twelve months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, and every twelve months thereafter, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report on—

- (a) the progress made in establishing; and
- (b) managing a Marine Protected Area in the Chagos Archipelago.

(2) The reports required under subsection (1) must include—

- (a) a list of any meetings held during the twelve-month period between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Mauritius in which the Marine Protected Area was discussed;
- (b) a summary of the non-financial support and assistance provided by the Government of the United Kingdom in the establishment, and management, of a Marine Protected Area; and
- (c) the costs incurred by the United Kingdom, including any money paid by the Government of the United Kingdom to the Government of Mauritius, in connection with the establishment, and management, of a Marine Protected Area.

(3) Within two months of a report being laid before the House of Commons under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must table a substantive motion in the House of Commons on the contents of the report.

(4) Within twelve months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Secretary of State must seek to undertake negotiations with the Government of Mauritius to secure additional guarantees of its commitment to the development and preservation of a Marine Protected Area.”

This new clause requires the Government to produce an annual report on progress in establishing and managing, and to seek negotiations on securing further guarantees of Mauritius’s commitment to, a Marine Protected Area in the Chagos Archipelago.

New clause 10—Annual report: Treaty implementation—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within twelve months of commencement and every twelve months thereafter, publish and lay before both Houses of Parliament a report on—

- (a) the expenditure of public funds made under the Treaty during the most recent financial year; and
- (b) progress on the UK’s implementation of the Treaty.”

This new clause requires the Government to publish an annual report on the expenditure of public funds made under the Treaty and on the progress of the UK’s implementation of the Treaty.

New clause 11—Annual Parliamentary Oversight and Approval of Expenditure—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, once every financial year, lay before the House of Commons, for its approval, an estimate of the expenditure that is anticipated to be incurred by the Government of the United Kingdom in connection with the commitments made under the terms of the Treaty, including, but not limited to—

- (a) any payments made or to be made, or financial commitments entered into, with the Government of the Republic of Mauritius in accordance with the Treaty; and
- (b) the costs associated with the continued administration, maintenance, and operation of Diego Garcia.

(2) If the payments incurred by the Government of the United Kingdom are greater than those anticipated in the estimate specified in subsection (1), the Secretary of State must lay before the House of Commons, for its approval, a supplementary estimate.”

This new clause provides for an estimates and supply scrutiny process for expenditure to be incurred by the UK Government as a result of the Treaty and the UK’s continued involvement in Diego Garcia.

New clause 12—Review of the welfare and needs of Chagossians residing in the UK—

“(1) Within a year of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Secretary of State must undertake, and publish the findings of, a review of the welfare, integration, and general needs of Chagossians residing in the United Kingdom.

(2) In undertaking the review specified in subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult representatives of Chagossians residing in the UK, including community organisations.

(3) Within a month of publishing the report specified in subsection (1), the Government must make time available for a debate in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords on a substantive motion relating to the report.”

This new clause requires the government to undertake a review of welfare and integration of Chagossians in the UK within a year Act receiving Royal Assent with a substantive motion relating to the report of the review tabled in both Houses of Parliament.

New clause 13—Impact of this Act and the Treaty on Chagossians residing in the United Kingdom—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the day on which this Act is passed, consult with—

- (a) Chagossian persons residing in the United Kingdom; and
- (b) bodies representing, or working with, the Chagossian community residing in the United Kingdom regarding the impact of this Act and the Treaty on the Chagossian community residing in the United Kingdom.

(2) The terms of reference for the consultation specified in subsection (1) must include, but not be limited to the impact of this Act and the Treaty on—

- (a) the socio-economic status of Chagossians residing in the United Kingdom;
- (b) the family life of the UK based Chagossian community; and
- (c) any implications for the Chagossian community residing in the United Kingdom, of changes to British nationality law.

(3) Within twelve months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must lay a report before Parliament summarising—

- (a) any findings from the consultation; and
- (b) any steps the Government intends to take as a result of those findings.”

This new clause requires the Government to consult the UK based Chagossian community on the impact of the Act and the Treaty, and to publish the findings of the consultation.

New clause 14—Duty to produce proposals for a referendum of Chagossians residing in the UK—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay before both Houses of Parliament proposals for an advisory referendum of Chagossians residing in the UK, seeking their opinions on the Treaty signed with the Government of Mauritius and the provisions of this Act.

(2) Within a month of publishing the proposals specified in subsection (1), the Secretary of State must make time available in both Houses of Parliament for a debate on a substantive motion relating to the proposals.”

New clause 15—Review of the operation of the Treaty—

“(1) Within five years of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Secretary of State must commence a review of the operation of the Treaty.

(2) The review must include, but need not be limited to, an examination of whether it is in the UK’s national security interests to continue being a signatory to, or to seek the termination of, the Treaty.

(3) A report summarising the findings of the review must be published and laid before both Houses of Parliament.”

This amendment would require the Government to undertake, within five years of the Act receiving Royal Assent, a review of the operation of the Treaty and publish its findings, including whether it is in the UK’s national security interests to continue to be a signatory to the treaty.

New clause 17—Access to the archipelago under the Treaty—

“In any discussions with the Government of Mauritius relating to the provisions of Annex 1(3)(d) of the Treaty, the Secretary of State shall not give consent to the presence of any Indian or Chinese security forces, either civilian or military in nature, in the Chagos Archipelago.”

This amendment would require the Government to withhold consent, in any discussions with Government of Mauritius held under the provisions of Annex 1 (3) (d) of the Treaty, to the presence of any Indian or Chinese civilian or military security forces in the Chagos Archipelago.

Wendy Morton: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Chairman, and to speak to the amendments that stand in my name and in the names of other right hon. and hon. Members, as we open this Committee of the whole House to debate Labour’s Chagos surrender Bill.

It has been more than a year since the surrender of the Chagos islands was announced, with the Prime Minister, the then Foreign Secretary—now the Deputy Prime Minister—and the Attorney General waving the white flag of surrender and putting the demands of their left-wing lawyer friends above the British national interest. Since then, Labour has denied this House a vote on the whole treaty under the 21-day process in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, and has kept details secret from us.

Over in Mauritius, the Prime Minister of that country has been bragging about how he squeezed concession after concession after concession out of Labour. It is shameful that we have found out more about the treaty from debates in the Mauritius Parliament and statements by its politicians than from Ministers accountable to this House. It has been five months since the Prime Minister of this country signed away £35 billion of British taxpayers’ money, stumbling through a press conference rather than coming to this House to face scrutiny and challenge.

At a time of serious fiscal challenge for the public finances, Labour has imposed a £35 billion surrender tax on our country—money that could fund public services here in Britain or support an easing of the tax burden. Instead, it will be handed over to a foreign Government who are using this resource to cut taxes for their citizens. Not only is it shameful, but Ministers have tried to pull the wool over the eyes of the British people by using accountancy methodologies and valuations to try to show a far lower cost. Even then, it is an extraordinary figure of £3.4 billion. The Chancellor may struggle with numbers, but the British people do not. They can add up, and they see what the real cost of this is. On top of that, Ministers still cannot tell us from which budgets in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence the money will come.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Is the simple truth not that this deal is cheaper than what was proposed by the Conservative party in government, and actually has more protections baked into it?

Wendy Morton: I think the hon. Gentleman needs a little memory check, because we did not propose a deal.

The British Chagossians, some of whom are watching from the Gallery—I pay tribute to them for their dignified and strong campaigning over many, many years—have been betrayed by Labour. Their rights have been ignored,

as have their fears, leading to hundreds fleeing Mauritius and coming here. Labour’s surrender Bill, as presented, does nothing for them. It does nothing for the marine protected area—one of the most important and largest marine environments in the world—which has been protected while under British sovereignty and has become a centre for scientific research and development. That is at risk, and promises and aspirations announced by Ministers to ensure that it continues are not reflected in the Bill.

Shockingly, Labour’s surrender Bill as drafted does nothing to safeguard, defend and protect our national security. Labour is surrendering British sovereignty and territory to a country that is increasingly aligned with China.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): The right hon. Lady describes this as a surrender Bill. Can she please tell me which flag will be flying over the Chagos islands if this is a so-called British surrender? It will be a British flag that is flying. Is that a point she understands?

Wendy Morton: There will be one flag that is flying, and that is the white flag of surrender.

Thousands of Mauritian public officials are being trained—or should that be “indoctrinated”?—by China on courses the Chinese are paying for. Both Russia and China are signing partnerships with Mauritius, but Labour’s surrender Bill fails to protect our interests.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): Reports today suggest that China and India are entering into negotiations to sign leases to islands surrounding those on which British military operations will continue under the proposed lease agreement. Does she think that connection to China would be a risk and pose a threat to national security?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is 100% right, and that is one of the reasons why we oppose this Bill and have done so from the very start.

The promises given by Ministers that nothing can happen in the Chagos archipelago that threatens our interests are already being undermined. Mauritius is in discussions with India about a security role that it can play in the archipelago, and the UK is not even in the room. If these discussions with a friendly country are taking place without the UK, one can only wonder what discussions are taking place in secret with China and Russia. There has been a report that China is already negotiating with Mauritius for Peros Banhos. When he speaks, perhaps the Minister can tell us what he knows about that.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I want to say on that point that this is absolute nonsense. Is the shadow Minister willing to provide any evidence that that is going to take place? This treaty protects the security of the outer islands and expressly prohibits foreign forces building bases on them—something on which her Government did not succeed in their negotiations.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to the Minister, but can he actually give me the reassurance that no discussions are taking place? Perhaps he can answer that question when he responds to the debate later.

[Wendy Morton]

The promises given by Ministers that nothing can happen in the Chagos archipelago that threatens our interests are already being undermined. If these discussions with a friendly country are taking place without the UK, I can only wonder what discussions are taking place in secret. If such discussions are taking place, that would undermine the assurances Ministers have given to this House and be an act of bad faith on the part of Mauritius. The House knows that this Government kowtow to the Chinese Communist party, leading it to threaten our interests here. Now, they are failing to take seriously the warnings about China, and the threats it poses to Diego Garcia, our military assets and our interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My right hon. Friend has highlighted the Prime Minister misleading—perhaps I have to say inadvertently misleading—us about the cost of this, when the Government Actuary's Department has shown that it is £35 billion. More than that, he was suggesting in his press conference that China, Russia and others—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): Order. The right hon. Member may like to rethink his words about the Prime Minister.

Graham Stuart: I bow to you, Ms Nokes. Having misrepresented—I think I am allowed to say that—

The Second Deputy Chairman: No.

Graham Stuart: Oh, I cannot say “misrepresented”. Having inadvertently confused the £35 billion that is actually going out with the £3.5 billion he claimed was going out, the Prime Minister, equally inadvertently, Ms Nokes, made out that China, Iran and Russia were in the column—he used the word “column”—of those opposing this deal, although I think each and every one of them came out publicly to say how much they welcomed it. Can my right hon. Friend share any knowledge about that with us?

Wendy Morton: I think my right hon. Friend makes some very interesting points, and perhaps not surprisingly, one might ask the question: are the Government sleeping with the enemy here?

Stephen Doughty: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Wendy Morton: If the Minister will allow me, I will just finish this point. The key thing we are asking for is a reassurance from the Minister, and he will have more than ample opportunity later to respond to the points I am making.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way, but she and the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) have raised China, Russia and Iran. Why does she think that the United States, our closest security ally, backs this deal if there is any possibility of any of the fantasy things she is suggesting taking place. They cannot take place, because the treaty prevents them. She clearly has not read it.

6.45 pm

Wendy Morton: It can be very easy to back something when you do not have to pay for it, but let us move on.

Now, the Government are failing to take seriously the warnings about China, and the threats it poses to Diego Garcia and our military assets and interests in the Indo-Pacific. Labour's surrender Bill is bad for British taxpayers, bad for our national security, bad for the marine environment and bad for the Chagossians. It also grants Ministers huge powers to make further decisions and avoid parliamentary scrutiny.

Amendment 1 would in effect block Labour's surrender treaty coming into force and the dissolution of the British Indian Ocean Territory unless and until Ministers reveal the legal advice they have received about Britain's ability to extend and exercise sovereign rights over Diego Garcia after the initial 99-year period. The Government constantly claim they have secured the military base, but they have totally failed to do that. All they have done is pay Mauritius £35 billion to lease back a base we currently own, but only for 99 years. We have no certainty whatsoever about the fate of the base after the 99-year period. After paying Mauritius £35 billion, it would kindly give us the option to extend the treaty for another 40 years, but on what terms? If we extend it, will Mauritius make it conditional on more extortionate payments? What if we are outbid by a hostile power? In fact, what is to stop China putting in a bid? If no agreement is reached before the specified deadline and the base is offered to another country, what will happen to all the fixed assets belonging to Britain? We have had no answers from the Government on any of these vital points, which is unacceptable, and the terms of the treaty and the Bill, as they stand, are reckless.

Amendment 7 is necessary because the Government's legal justification for surrendering the Chagos islands constantly shifts, because it has no legal basis. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) explained on Second Reading, the Government's entire legal case is spurious. Many of us have been asking where the binding judgment we are constantly told is inevitable would actually come from. No credible answers have been forthcoming. We know it cannot be the International Court of Justice, and we know that a case at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea would see the UK able to put forward a decent legal argument. Then the Government completely contradicted their own argument about the electromagnetic spectrum. They are planning to dissolve a strategically invaluable British overseas territory, and they cannot even tell us on what legal basis they are doing so.

It looks as though this is part of a wider sinister picture—the Government's relationship with China. We know that the Government are desperate for Chinese investment to help grow our economy, which they are trashing with their reckless economic policies. The Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius has credited China for its support in enabling Mauritius to gain sovereignty over the Chagos islands. Why? Because China wants to deepen its strategic partnership with Mauritius, which it believes to have strategic advantages. Once again, the Prime Minister does not have the backbone to stand up for our strategic interests against China. Amendment 7 would flush out the truth once and for all.

Taken together, amendments 3, 6 and 5 would delete a huge and unacceptable Henry VIII power that the Government are brazenly trying to award themselves, and would give this House the oversight it is entitled to on the implementation of the treaty. It is wholly unacceptable—in fact, it is quite outrageous—for the Government to give themselves such a sweeping power that they could, through an Order in Council,

“make any provision that appears to His Majesty to be appropriate as a result of the Treaty”.

This is a totally open-ended power. The military base itself is in scope, and so are the rights of Chagossians. The House should not be deprived of a voice on these matters of huge concern. Our amendments would ensure that this House has a voice and a vote. That is totally right and proper.

Turning to our new clauses, the Government could have inserted a money authorisation clause into the Bill. They chose not to and no wonder. The Government want to spare their own disgruntled MPs the ugly spectacle of having to vote in favour of spending tens of billions of their constituents' money to Mauritius, as Britain's economy sinks under the weight of the Chancellor's inflation, unemployment, debt and taxes. Labour is asking the hard-pressed British taxpayer, already struggling under the weight of the Chancellor's punitive tax rises, to stump up £35 billion to lease back a territory we already own and which we are not legally obliged to give away. As it leaves pensioners vulnerable and cold, destroys family farms and crushes businesses, the Minister is content to send our constituents' hard-earned money to Mauritius with no strings attached, allowing the Government there to cut taxes—tax cuts over 6,000 miles away and tax rises at home. And Labour is inflicting this surrender tax on the British people because of its abject failure to negotiate. We all know that when Labour negotiates, Britain loses, but this is a new low. At seemingly every twist and turn, this Government have rolled over and capitulated to the demands of the Government of Mauritius.

Graeme Downie: The right hon. Lady mentions that she does not believe there is a legal basis. What was the legal basis for the previous Government, when they conducted 11 rounds of negotiation and achieved absolutely nothing?

Wendy Morton: I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman has been for the past year and several months, but we have gone over this time and again in this Chamber. There was no legal basis. We stopped—[*Interruption.*] Maybe I will repeat this very slowly for his benefit: we stopped the negotiations.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way, but I must, Ms Nokes, correct the record here. This has been a repeated argument, by the shadow Minister and others, claiming that the then Government stopped the negotiations. They did not. In fact, they carried them on. There was a gov.uk statement on 24 February reflecting the continuing of the negotiations by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak). Indeed, they carried on into May, just before the election. It is there in writing on the previous Government's own website.

Wendy Morton: We have made it very clear, repeatedly, at the Dispatch Box. Lord Cameron, the then Foreign Secretary, stopped the negotiations.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab) *rose*—

Wendy Morton: I am going to make some more progress.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is doing a very good job of forensically demolishing the Government's case, such as it is. May I just correct what the Minister has said from the Dispatch Box? There is a very great difference between carrying on and discussing negotiations, and doing a deal. As I was the Deputy Foreign Secretary under both my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly) and my noble Friend Lord Cameron, I can tell the House that the then Government would never, ever have done this deal. Secondly, I do hope my right hon. Friend will probe the Minister further on where this extraordinary amount of money is coming from. Is it the defence budget or is it the development budget? Since the Labour party—a Labour Government—has slashed development spending from—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): Order. That is a very long intervention. Perhaps the shadow Minister should take over.

Wendy Morton: My right hon. and gallant Friend and constituency neighbour makes some very, very important points. He adds a certain weight and clarity to these discussions, and I urge Labour Members—certainly the newer Members—to listen to his wise counsel.

The House of Commons should be given a vote on the payments and that is the purpose of this amendment. In scope will also be the Chagossian trust fund, which, inexplicably, British taxpayers capitalise and Mauritius then distributes. We pay and Mauritius has total control over how it is spent. We will have no say over its governance and British Chagossians have no guarantees that they will benefit from it. How can that be right? The least this House and British Chagossians deserve is a vote on sending the money. What possible explanation could the Government provide against that?

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The former Government set up a trust fund of £40 million for the Chagos islanders. After four years, only £12,000 had been spent. That is how they treated Chagossians under the last Government.

Wendy Morton: The point, though, is where is this money coming from? This House has not had a vote. Where is the transparency? Where is the democracy?

Turning to new clause 2 and amendment 2, as we have already discussed, the duration of the agreement is a matter of serious national security concern. There are too many unanswered questions about what could happen to the base. We need to understand the basis on which the Government have settled that, especially as the then Foreign Secretary told this House on 7 October 2024 that the Government would have a right to extend the lease, which we do not, and the Mauritian Government claim the UK gave up a unilateral right of extension at

[Wendy Morton]

their request. If that is true, it would be a scandal. No wonder we never get straight answers from Ministers. But then, it was also a scandal for Labour to sign the agreement with a previous Mauritian Government just before that country went into an election, only for there to be a change of Government who then wanted to change the deal and extract more money. Extending the agreement is essential, because we simply cannot lose the base. The House deserves to see the advice that the Government are relying on when they ask us to sign this £35 billion blank cheque.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that under the Bill, if there is no agreement, although we can be first offer, Mauritius can decide simply to close and fold the base, leaving it completely void, so there is no protection against that?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is 100% right. This goes to the heart of the Bill. There are so many unanswered questions, which Conservative Members have been raising time and again. For example, how likely are we to be able to extend the base? What will the structure of the negotiations be? What conditions could Mauritius impose, given that it will have our negotiators over a proverbial barrel? How watertight is the first right of refusal?

Phil Brickell: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Wendy Morton: I will make a little more progress.

What happens if the base is not secured? Will it need to be decommissioned? How could we prevent an adversary inheriting our fixed assets? What is the role of the United States in all this? These are serious matters, and the House needs serious answers. The purpose of the amendment is to secure those answers.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): In this House, there is often talk about millions of pounds for this and billions of pounds for that. It is difficult sometimes to get in one's mind the scale of the money. Last year, the Chancellor said that she was going to raise national insurance and lower the threshold. We know how much damage that has done to the country, yet it was said at the time that it would raise £25.7 billion. That would not even pay for this deal. That is the amount of money they are going to give away today.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a really valid point by putting that into context. There is only one thing that will result from the Government insisting on pushing this through: tax rises. I reiterate my earlier point that we still do not know which budget the money is coming from: FCDO or MOD. Who is going to pay for it?

New clause 3 will give Parliament a vote over the agreement on the Chagos marine protected area. The Chagos MPA is one of the jewels in the crown of the Blue Belt programme, a magnificent achievement of the last Conservative Government and a globally significant contribution to marine protection. It should not be altered without consent. At present, we apply among the strictest criteria to the Chagos MPA and it has been very well preserved, unlike much of the Indian ocean, which has suffered terribly in recent years.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Wendy Morton: I will make a little more progress.

We are not talking about a small area. The British Indian Ocean Territory spans 640,000 square kilometres of ocean. The Government's treaty with Mauritius compels the UK to help Mauritius to establish and manage a new MPA, but we are being asked to fly blind with this Bill, because no agreement has been reached on what the MPA managed by Mauritius will look like.

Jeremy Corbyn: The marine protection zone was agreed by all parties. It is a sustainable protection zone. There has never been any debate or dispute about it; Mauritius has fully supported it all along and guaranteed its continuation. I do not understand why the shadow Minister is raising these matters. Does she believe that Mauritius will not look after the area properly? It seems to me that there is an attitude that is disrespectful of Mauritius and its determination to preserve the pristine nature of the ocean around the islands.

7 pm

Wendy Morton: I have to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman on many of those matters. We have raised questions about this issue time and again, and we have simply not received the answers from Ministers.

Dr Luke Evans: This issue has been disputed. Is it not the point that the United Nations convention on the law of the sea cannot pass judgment on sovereignty because of the ruling that was made between Mauritius and the UK on marine protection back in 2015? That was under annexe VII, which was tried and tested. Britain was found wanting on that, because we had not properly talked through what should happen with the Mauritians. What the Mauritians actually wanted to do was to open it for fishing. How can we assure the protection for this area? That is why we need to amend the Bill.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is exactly why we have continued and will continue to probe the Government on the MPA. We have not had answers to our questions; we have not had the transparency that I think this House deserves.

It is very possible—in fact, it is very likely—that Labour has committed Britain to helping Mauritius dismantle an MPA that we ourselves established. There are no assurances that we will not be committing British resources to actively harm our own interests and undo our work. Mauritius does not have the capability to manage, monitor or enforce an MPA. It does not have the infrastructure at sea or any such experience. It would leave the stocks in those waters exposed to real risk of pillaging, including by Chinese vessels. It is not likely to have the will to do so either, as we know the economic potential of the waters is of interest to Mauritius.

Despite the Government's ludicrous and insulting claim that those who oppose this deal side with Russia and its friends, Mauritius has been developing closer ties with Russia on marine matters, announcing as recently as May 2025 that the two countries are strengthening their ties on marine innovation, including marine research, while Mauritius's close relationship with China—a strategic partnership, no less—opens up the possibility of Chinese fishing trawlers in these waters.

It is therefore absolutely right that this House gets a say over the fate of the MPA, and the CRaG-equivalent process set out in our new clause would provide for an appropriate level of scrutiny.

New clause 4 would require regular reporting on the ecological status of the Chagos MPA, which is necessary for the same reason as new clause 3. The Government have bound us to support Mauritius to manage the MPA, so there must be scrutiny of what the Government are doing and the ecological consequences. There are widespread concerns across the House on the future of the MPA, and Ministers have so far failed to give any answers or any assurances; when asked, they have said that they do not know about the future and cannot tell us what resources and costs will be incurred to meet these obligations. Given our role in managing the MPA, the UK should be able to access the data required for this report. This new clause reaffirms our commitment to the MPA.

We recognise the sensitive nature of the military arrangements on Diego Garcia, but oversight of the agreement is none the less essential. New clause 5 would allow for appropriate parliamentary scrutiny while respecting the need to protect critical information. The new clause covers the key areas of security consideration and will act as a catalyst for the Government to maintain their own monitoring of each area. We believe that that is critical as there are holes in the provisions. There must, for example, be agreement on upgrading infrastructure in the buffer zone, such as sensors—but what if there is no agreement? Likewise, the treaty stipulates that Mauritius and Britain must jointly decide on the management and use of the electromagnetic spectrum.

Of particular importance in new clause 5 are paragraphs (d) and (e). On (d), we must ensure that only vessels that should be in the area are in the area, and that Russian and potentially even Chinese vessels are deterred from entering—I have already mentioned the closer ties and partnerships between Mauritius and those countries, which should concern all of us.

With reference to paragraph (e), the treaty states that the United Kingdom agrees

“to expeditiously inform Mauritius of any armed attack on a third state directly emanating from the base on Diego Garcia”.

Given the huge range of security threats in the Indo-Pacific and the middle east, it is far from impossible that in future this mechanism may need to be used. It is important that the notifications are presented to the Intelligence and Security Committee, as once again it would force the Government to log and monitor the mechanism, including any operational impacts it might have. We know that there are genuine concerns that third countries—potentially even China—might try to establish themselves in the archipelago, and the arrangements in the treaty must be monitored to ensure that they are sufficiently robust to stop that happening.

New clause 6 probes the Government’s argument that a legally binding ruling under UNCLOS would have an impact on our ability to operate the electromagnetic spectrum, and impede air and sea access as well as the ability to patrol the area around the base. We take issue with that assertion, not least because there is an argument that provisions under article 298 of UNCLOS allow for exemptions relevant to disputes concerning military activities. The Government have not addressed this

issue when we have probed, including on Second Reading, so we have had no choice but to table this new clause to test the Government’s assertion.

I turn finally to new clause 7. The British Chagossian community have been treated appallingly by this Labour Government. Twice the deal has ended up in the courts because of the way Labour has ridden roughshod over their concerns. This Bill sells them short, too. The resettlement programme for the Chagos islands under this treaty is entirely in the hands of Mauritius—a country to which, I should add, Chagossians feel little affinity. Indeed, we have seen many Chagossians arriving in the UK from Mauritius in recent weeks. I hope the Minister will respond to that from the Dispatch Box, because it is clearly concerning that they have been moved to take this action.

The Bill also stops British overseas territories citizenship being awarded on the basis of descent from a person born on the Chagos archipelago. Sadly, we cannot amend the treaty through the Bill; it just is not within the parliamentary rules. However, new clause 7 would require the Government to consult the Chagossian community on the implementation of the treaty—including on the establishment of the trust fund, which we capitalise and Mauritius distributes—and on areas of dispute arising between the UK and Mauritian Governments prior to their being discussed at the joint committee created by the treaty. It also requires the Foreign Secretary to present a report to Parliament within six months of the Act becoming law, and in every subsequent year, on how Chagossian rights are being upheld under this agreement. We have a national obligation and responsibility to the Chagossian community, and the Conservatives will always stand up for their rights.

To conclude, taken together, our amendments and new clauses will hold the Government to account. Let us be clear: the Conservatives oppose this surrender Bill, its colossal costs and the adverse impact on our defence and security. Accepting these amendments and new clauses will simply strengthen accountability and transparency.

Mr Calvin Bailey: I have set out the security and geopolitical importance of the treaty many times in this place, and would therefore have appreciated the opportunity today to engage with detailed scrutiny of the treaty and the defence arrangements it enables. Sadly, that is not the line that the Opposition are going down. Instead, we are faced with a series of wrecking amendments that do not attempt to improve the Bill in any way. They are designed to force the Government to let our allies down, undermining our international credibility and reputation, and creating greater geopolitical risk and legal and security risks to our base on Diego Garcia.

If Opposition amendments were passed today, it would be impossible for us to meet our commitments in a timely way by implementing the agreement with Mauritius that Ministers have completed—an agreement that the Conservative Government started and carried through 11 rounds of negotiations but now want to throw back, no matter the damage that it would do to our nations. At no point have they made clear the legal basis for starting the 11 rounds of negotiations in the first instance.

I fully understand and sympathise with the motivation behind amendment 9. The creation of the Chagos islands as a separate territory created a deep injustice, because

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

it was bound up in the dispossession of the Chagossians, but that historical injustice cannot simply be undone. We cannot turn back the clock, however much we might want to do so. The question of a right to return is not remotely simple, because access to Diego Garcia is inevitably a serious question of security. People obviously cannot return to exactly where their families lived, because of the highly sensitive military facility that now stands in their place. Perhaps a limited right of return could be negotiated, but that would engage security procedures that are secret and involve the UK and the US as well as Mauritius, as was acknowledged by the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). The amendment imagines that if the negotiations were rejected by even the narrowest of margins, the entire treaty would fall apart and would need to be renegotiated afresh, significantly increasing geopolitical risk to the base and our interests. Perhaps the Minister could invite some assistance on this point from those who conducted the first 11 rounds of negotiations.

Let us get real: there are reasons why international treaties are negotiated by the Government and subject to democratic scrutiny in this House and through these procedures. What the Liberal Democrats are proposing amounts to making a UK foreign and defence policy dependent on a referendum, and that includes vital defence interests that are shared with the US and other allies. That referendum would apparently comprise non-UK citizens just as much as it would British Chagossians. Frankly, I would have thought that the Liberal Democrats more than others would have learned from the disastrous experience of Brexit that making foreign policy by referendum is not the wisest course of action.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Bailey: There is already a barrage of misinformation coming from the Opposition, and I am not going to invite any more of it to flow across the Floor. There are a multiplicity of bad actors internationally who would benefit from the collapse of this Bill—and just imagine how many more there would be if we took the course the Opposition urge us to take.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): The hon. Member just said that foreign policy should not be made by referendum. Does he disagree, then, with article 1(2) of the UN charter—that the right to self-determination is a core principle in international relations and that we should therefore have a referendum for Chagos?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. The Bill has been before the House already, and at the moment we are discussing the amendments that have been tabled. The hon. Member will soon have the opportunity to discuss the amendments he has tabled. However, abdicating this Chamber's decision—
[*Interruption.*]

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): Order. There is far too much noise and many private conversations, which make it very difficult to hear the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Bailey: Abdicating this House's responsibilities to a referendum is not something on which we will agree. This treaty is a vital step to secure UK interests. It puts the Diego Garcia base on a secure footing for at least 100 years. I understand that Opposition colleagues have a range of objections to this treaty, not all of which are jaw-droppingly hypocritical, however—

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. I will give the hon. Gentleman the same warning that I gave the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart). He needs to be very careful with his language.

Mr Bailey: Not all the objections are jaw-droppingly confused, but some colleagues will vote against the Bill tonight on the basis of them. That is no reason to support an amendment that would undermine the Government's ability to navigate the difficult and chaotic world we live in today and keep our country safe.

7.15 pm

The Second Deputy Chairman: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I will speak in support of seven amendments tabled in my name. For too long, decisions about the Chagos islands have been made without the consent of Chagossians. My grave concern is that the treaty to be given effect by the Bill fails to rectify that historical and ongoing injustice. Not only does it fail to provide adequate protection of their rights, it fails to establish a legally binding right to return or a binding programme of resettlement of the islands for Chagossians.

Turning to amendment 9, we recognise and support the importance of abiding by international law and believe that the UK was indeed right to open a process of negotiation with Mauritius—especially so given the risk that a judgment against the UK in any court could threaten our sovereignty over and security interests in Diego Garcia and the wider Chagos archipelago. However, the treaty that has emerged not only falls short in addressing past injustices, but introduces new injustices of its own.

At the very core of the United Nations charter—a document that this country helped to shape—lies the right of all peoples to self-determination. Article 1(2) could not be clearer: one of the purposes of the United Nations is to

“develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples”.

Yet for the Chagossian people that right has been denied for more than half a century. They were exiled from their homeland in the Chagos archipelago, scattered across the globe, and left without the means or permission to return. It was, and remains, a moral stain on our modern history.

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the lack of morality in how the Chagossian people were treated—he is correct on that. Would he accept that there was something fundamentally wrong in 1965 in separating Diego Garcia and the archipelago from Mauritius when the whole area had always been administered from Mauritius as part of

Mauritius, and that under decolonisation statutes they should have been included in the independence of Mauritius at that time?

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am aware that he has a long history in advocating for this particular cause, but I am relentlessly surprised by the position he takes on this point. He would seek to effectively reinscribe the colonial construction that was British Mauritius and in doing so ignore the right of Chagossians as a people to self-determine their own future. I do not see the colonial convenience of administration as anything other than overwriting a people's right to determine their own future.

On that point, in 2019 the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion that concluded that the decolonisation of Mauritius had not been legally completed and that the United Kingdom should end its administration of the Chagos islands as rapidly as possible. The General Assembly subsequently endorsed that same view. But I say to this House that the ICJ opinion, however well intentioned, poses a profound problem. It proposes to hand sovereignty not to the Chagossians themselves but to Mauritius, without consulting those who were born of the islands or who are descended from them. That is not self-determination but the transfer of sovereignty over a people without their consent. The right to self-determination belongs to peoples, not to Governments. It is not and should not be a device for tidying up the diplomatic ledger of empire, but a recognition that every community has the right to shape its own future. To remove the Chagossians once was a horrific wrong. To barter away their sovereignty now without their voice compounds that wrong.

If we truly honour the UN charter and the principles that this country has long championed, the Chagossians themselves must be placed at the centre of any future settlement. They must have a say over their citizenship, over the governance of their islands and over the prospects of return. The commitment to a referendum that sits at the heart of amendment 9 seeks to address that long and burning injustice by providing Chagossians with the opportunity to exercise their right to determine their own future.

Chris Coghlan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of having a right of referendum. I have had Chagossian constituents contact me with their outrage about the compounding of injustice in the new treaty. How realistic does my hon. Friend think it is to find people eligible to vote in a potential referendum, given the length of time that has passed since they were moved from Diego Garcia?

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He is right that, were a referendum able to be secured, it would be unusual because of the nature of the displacement of the Chagossians. But there have been previous international consultations, and with the collective will and intelligence of a House like this, the terms of a referendum could undoubtedly be negotiated. After all, Chagossians are not backwards in coming forwards and making themselves known to all of us.

For Chagossians, this is not a geopolitical abstraction, but a deeply human matter: one of belonging, fairness and justice. Requiring a report to be made to the House

would ensure their voices are not lost amid the technical language of treaties and transfers. Amendment 9 would enable transparency, accountability and, above all, genuine recognition of the rights of Chagossians to self-determination. I encourage right hon. and hon. Members across the House to think carefully when they vote tonight.

New clause 9 speaks to another vital principle: our shared moral duty to protect the natural world. The Chagos archipelago is among the most biodiverse marine environments on Earth. Its coral reefs, migratory species and rich ecosystems are a global ecological treasure and a testament to what nature can be when left largely untouched by human exploitation. In recent months, I have spoken with scientific advisers who are deeply concerned about the Bill's lack of provisions for establishing and governing marine protected areas. The environment and sustainability institute stresses that very large marine protected areas are vital for global conservation goals. Its research shows the archipelago's exceptional role in protecting diverse mobile species across the Indian ocean.

New clause 9 would require the Government to publish an annual report produced with the Mauritian Government setting out the progress made in establishing and managing marine protected areas and the meetings held between the two Governments on the issue. Such reporting is critical to ensure that environmental protection does not fade into the sotto voce diplomatic arrangements. It must remain a visible, audible and measurable commitment to international conservation standards. If the Government are to honour their biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction pledge, future Governments must ensure stronger marine conservation, sustainable stewardship and shared responsibility. I believe that the new clause would achieve that.

New clauses 10 and 11 would build on the principle of accountability by ensuring regular oversight of how the Bill and its associated treaty arrangements are implemented. We believe that the Secretary of State should, within 12 months, lay before both Houses a report detailing the expenditure of public funds made under the treaty during the most recent financial year and the progress made by the UK in implementing the treaty's obligations.

Chris Coghlan: At a time when the cost of living is so high, does my hon. Friend agree that the cost of maintaining and operating the Diego Garcia military base and military operations must be evaluated by the House against the expenditure of public funds made under the treaty each financial year?

Dr Pinkerton: The maximum possible financial transparency around the treaty arrangements is essential, not least for securing and establishing public trust. I fear that, without those high levels of accountability, public trust would rapidly dissipate. Furthermore, once every financial year, the Secretary of State should present to the House an estimate of the expenditure expected to be incurred in connection with the treaty, including payments or financial commitments to the Government of Mauritius and the cost of maintaining and operating Diego Garcia. If actual payments exceed those estimates, a supplementary estimate must be laid before the House for approval and parliamentary scrutiny. I reassure Conservative colleagues that the Liberal Democrats will support any amendment to the Bill that would increase financial transparency of the treaty.

[Dr Pinkerton]

However, our moral duty extends beyond matters of territory and finance. New clause 12 would require a comprehensive review of the welfare, integration and general needs of Chagossians living in the UK. Many Chagossians here face significant challenges, including housing insecurity, barriers to employment and limited access to public services. The review would assess what support is needed and ensure a full debate in this House and the other place on its findings. That is how we show genuine care for those displaced by the actions of our predecessors in the Chamber and in Whitehall.

Finally, new clause 13 would require the Government within six months to consult with Chagossians residing in the UK and the organisations that represent them on how the Act and the treaty affect their community socially, economically and legally.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is giving a powerful speech on the Chagossians and marine protected areas, as well as the need for transparency. But it is not just about transparency. What I have not heard from him, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, is any sense of outrage at the very fact that we are to pay out £35 billion for sovereign British territory on which we have arguably the most important base in the whole Indian ocean.

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. It is precisely in order to cast the strongest possible spotlight on the financial transaction involved that we are asking for financial accountability to be magnified. On his geopolitical point, nobody can question the significant geopolitical importance of the base—it is vital to our national security and to global security. It is essential that it is maintained in British hands, but that must be achieved with the consent of the Chagossians.

The resulting report to be laid before Parliament within 12 months would allow us to evaluate whether the Government's legislative intent has translated into justice and inclusion in the lives of those who are most directly affected.

These amendments would address critical shortcomings with the Bill. They would embed accountability, environmental protection and a commitment to the right to self-determination within its framework for implementation. I urge Ministers to ensure that the Chagossians are not treated as diplomatic collateral in any future discussions with Mauritius. They are not a footnote to be managed between states; they are a people deserving of justice, agency and dignity.

The Chagossians have waited more than 50 years to go home. The least we can do now is let them decide freely and finally what home means for themselves and ensure that they have the tools they need to exercise their rights. The amendments tabled in my name seek to afford those protections and ensure that those rights are respected.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I am delighted to be called so early. I will speak to the amendments in the name of the official Opposition, specifically on the reports going to the Intelligence and Security Committee, especially on security of the buffer zones, foreign security forces, military operations and personnel movements. The ceding of Diego Garcia is a monumental strategic

error that will diminish the UK's standing on the world stage, and I will gladly set out why I believe that is the case.

If anybody thinks they can predict what will happen in the next five years, they have learned nothing from the last five years. When we start extending that to 10-plus years in the current global geopolitical situation, that is so hard to look at. Everybody is playing by a set of rules and working to a past system, which is currently changing.

Strategic leadership is the ability to shape the environment we are in. Let us take two strategic leaders, regardless of our view of them at the moment: President Trump and Xi Jinping. They both want the world to change from where it is, and they want to adjust the shape of what it looks like. The world is currently seeing a disruption to the world order as we know it. The international rules-based order is being challenged. We are setting out a deal and a treaty based on an older system that we being asked to believe will be honoured for the next 99 years, but I do not believe it will be.

7.30 pm

China, Russia, Iran and North Korea all have a massive interest in and around the Indo-Pacific. We talk about Russia looking at Ukraine, but only 25% of Russia is in that space; 75% of Russia is in the Indo-Pacific. Russia is now providing training services to the Chinese military in airborne operations. North Korea is on the battlefield in Ukraine at the moment. We are seeing all the CRINK nations, as they are known, coming together, not adhering to the international rules-based order and not working as we would expect them to do. The Indo-Pacific area—I was recently there with Pacific Command—at 100 million square miles, is vast. There are 76,000 US Marines in the Indo-Pacific alone. That is phenomenal; it is bigger than our Army. Half the world's population sits in this space. At Pacific Command, we can see the clock showing Diego Garcia's time zone and all the multiple other time zones between there and the US.

Anyone who believes that China will honour its deals as we expect should look at the rare earth metals and critical minerals it is supplying, because 90% of some of those rare earth metals are processed in or by China. The average car contains \$200-worth of rare earth metals, as I learnt when I was on the Defence Committee and we visited Australia to look at this, but I am more interested in how much is in an F-35—it contains about 450 kg, give or take, of rare earth metals, many of which have a limited supply. All of this gives China huge leverage over the countries that need them. We are seeing a polarisation in the Indo-Pacific. The Philippines is now looking at hosting a permanent US base, and the same is true in northern Australia. Things that would never have been believed four or five years ago are happening now.

I am proud to have served in the UK's armed forces, and I believe the British Army is the most professional in the world, but it is a shadow of its former self. I believe it is getting harder for the UK armed forces to stand on the world stage because of the depletion of the military. Everyone will say that it is been hollowed out for 14 years, but a great book, just out, "The Rise and Fall of the British Army, 1975–2025" by Brigadier Ben Barry, shows that the UK armed forces have been in decline since 1981.

When we look at the UK armed forces' decline, and then we start looking at ceding our sovereign bases, that brings us to the table; that brings us to a foothold. Without them, we would not have the capability to stand in the Indo-Pacific and support our allies. A report released in the last two weeks by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, to which I contributed, talks about the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic. They are intrinsically linked. It is not a question of going to one space and leaving the other for the Americans. The rise of China and its defence industrial base is phenomenal, and the speed at which it is growing is huge. There are so many concerns and uncertainties at the moment. Key strategic locations include Cyprus, Hawaii, Svalbard, the Ascension Islands, and Diego Garcia and the Chagos islands.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I just want to re-emphasise the point that my hon. Friend is making about the growth of the threat. Is he aware that China today has 130 times the capability to build naval ships that America does? One shipyard in China in this last year has built more naval ships than the whole of the United States. We talk about the threat to the South China sea. It is done.

Stuart Anderson: My right hon. Friend makes a great point. I spoke to one of the submarine commanders from the US navy only about six weeks ago. He told me that 15 years ago he would see one Chinese ship or submarine per week, and now he sees 100 a week. The whole area is full of them. When we start looking at the security of buffer zones, we see that we cannot move in this area for Chinese submarines. The whole space is swamped with them.

We are doing a deal that will remove our ability to sit at the table where we used to have such strength. Our armed forces now would have trouble supporting our allies in any area, particularly the Indo-Pacific—*[Interruption.]* The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry says that is not true. We have HMS Spey and the carrier strike groups, but we have no permanent presence in the Indo-Pacific. With our current commitments, we would need a brigade strength or more to enable us to have a permanent base, to rotate troops through and to have a credible offering without burning out the UK armed forces, given the numbers who are currently on sick at the moment and the strength of the military. I want to see larger armed forces, but we do not have the ability to offer the level that we want.

We believe that the world is playing by an international rules-based order, but not all countries will do that. An international rules-based order is a set of rules set out by, normally, the largest countries around the world. When countries such as Iraq or Kosovo do not adhere to them, they expect everyone else to accept it, but the rise of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea is throwing everything into the mix. I believe that this will be a huge loss for us strategically. I reiterate my point that the ceding of Diego Garcia is a monumental strategic error that, in the next decade, we will come to regret.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson), who has spoken with great authority about the military threat. I also commend the hon.

Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton). I agree with everything he said; he spoke with great good sense and moderation.

I wish to speak to my new clause 14—I am grateful to my friends who have signed it—which states:

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay before both Houses of Parliament proposals for an advisory referendum of Chagossians residing in the UK, seeking their opinions on the Treaty signed with the Government of Mauritius and the provisions of this Act.

(2) Within a month of publishing the proposals specified in subsection (1), the Secretary of State must make time available in both Houses of Parliament for a debate on a substantive motion relating to the proposals.”

An advisory referendum would be a moderate and sensible proposal, and I am not sure why anybody would disagree with it. Surely we in this House have a moral duty to the Chagossian people, not to bureaucratic convenience or diplomatic horse trading. My new clause simply calls for the Chagossians to be consulted on their own future. That is not unreasonable. It is a modest and entirely proper request. After decades of exile and neglect, it is indefensible to negotiate their homeland's fate without even asking them. Have we ever handed over a people to a foreign power without even consulting them?

Proponents of paying Mauritius to take the island cite international law, but the entire point of decolonisation was to assert the self-determination of peoples. The United Nations was founded upon the principle that nations and peoples should be free to determine their own destiny in a peaceful way. Chagossians, as we now all agree, were wronged by both the British and the Mauritian authorities. By the way, I am probably the only person sitting in this Chamber who has actually been to the islands—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). I went there with the Defence Committee 40 years ago.

We kicked those people out of their homes, albeit for perfectly the legitimate reason of promoting the stability and security of the free world, and Mauritius accepted money to help look after displaced Chagossians. No one can dispute the fact that Chagossians are treated as having second-class status in Mauritius. Chagossians who have been living there are fleeing in increasing numbers to the United Kingdom. Many of them happily assert that they want the sovereignty of the United Kingdom to continue over the British Indian Ocean Territory, but they also want a right to return.

Righting the wrongs we have committed means listening to the Chagossians directly, and that is all I am asking for. The amendment would give Parliament the chance to ensure that justice is finally done for those who suffered most. Britain should not repeat the sin of dispossession under the guise of decolonisation. I repeat, Britain should not repeat the sin of dispossession under the guise of decolonisation. To hand the territory to Mauritius would not “end empire”, but merely pass the islands from one remote capital to another; from one imperial power to another. The United Kingdom must not compound historic injustice by ignoring the only people with a legitimate moral claim to these islands.

The Chagos islands are of course a linchpin of regional security for Britain, the United States and our allies in an increasingly contested Indo-Pacific. Undermining that strategic position would embolden hostile powers

[Sir Edward Leigh]

and weaken our ability to uphold freedom of navigation. Those who call this a colonial relic misunderstand it. It is a forward defence post, not a backward-looking possession. As has been said time and again, the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion carries no legal binding force and should not dictate British policy. Allowing unelected judges in The Hague to override Parliament's responsibilities is an abdication of national sovereignty. The Government should resist any creeping judicial globalism that seeks to erode British self-government under the cloak of "international law."

I will end on this point, and I believe it is a very powerful point: consultation with the Chagossians through a UK referendum is an act of basic democratic respect, not a legal technicality. My new clause would strengthen rather than weaken Britain's moral standing by showing that we act with fairness and consent. We should not wash our hands of responsibility for British subjects in favour of imagined diplomatic convenience. The right course is to combine justice for the Chagossians with the preservation of Britain's strategic obligations, not to sacrifice one for the other. Parliament should back these new clauses and amendments as an affirmation that Britain remains a nation that keeps faith with its peoples and its allies alike.

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): Before I speak to amendment 10, which stands in my name on the amendment paper, I have a quick reminder: the International Court of Justice made an "advisory" judgment—it has no force in law. Quite why the previous Government sought to enter 11 rounds of negotiation off the back of it is beyond me, but it is even more extraordinary for a Government that is full to the rafters with human rights lawyers. They believe in human rights so much that somehow they are seeking to follow a court that is part of the United Nations in total contrast, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) pointed out, to one of the most basic principles of the United Nations: namely, national self-determination. We thought it mattered so much 40 years ago that we sent a taskforce 8,000 miles away to defend the rights of the people of the Falkland Islands.

I feel great sympathy for the Chagossians. They got a rotten deal 50 years ago, and in many ways they are perhaps getting an even worse deal now. They should be consulted. The fact they are not being consulted is shameful for a Government who go on endlessly about human rights and the international rule of law. That is the human cost of this.

As to the economic cost, well, lots of sums have been bandied about, from £3.4 billion from the Prime Minister to £35 billion, but it all depends on the rate of inflation. If the average rate of inflation over the next 100 years is 3%, it will be over £50 billion, but that may be as nothing to the opportunity loss here. This marine park should have been turned decades ago into the greatest marine tourism site in the world.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): The hon. Member will be aware that his friend President Trump is in favour of this deal, so would he tell us whether he disagrees with him?

Nigel Farage: I certainly will, and I will come to that in short order.

The opportunity for marine tourism is massive; it is worth billions of pounds a year, and it would provide a lot of jobs for Chagossians. On top of that—perhaps more controversially—I have little doubt, having spoken to some geologists who work for the world's biggest mining companies, that within those waters we would find cobalt and many of the minerals needed for the very green revolution that this Government say that they are in favour of, so economically we are not just paying £50 billion or whatever the number is; we are losing out on a huge future opportunity.

7.45 pm

As was mentioned by the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson), strategically this is a disaster. Right at the moment, the American President is somewhat busy, having recently struck a remarkable peace deal in the middle east, and—whichever way people think he is going on it—being obsessed with ending the Ukraine war. This issue is very low down on his agenda, but he and America will wake up and realise that something they think now to be minor and not worth spending their time on actually will imperil the safety of their base. India has already negotiated a satellite observation deal, and China is currently negotiating.

It does not matter what the Minister says about what is in the treaty; Mauritius will not honour the terms of this treaty. Mauritius is poor. It is on the verge of bankruptcy. It will be bought by Chinese money, and China is negotiating leases already. If you want further proof of what will upset the American President, Huawei, which of course he railed against getting into the UK's 5G system, is already installing its "safe city" cameras all over Mauritius. None of this makes any sense. I do wonder what the role of our National Security Adviser, Jonathan Powell, is in all of this.

Stephen Doughty: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has the gall to come here and talk about national security today, when the former leader of his party in Wales admitted to taking bribes from Russia, and when again he has been using talking points that come right from the Kremlin in blaming NATO for Russia's invasion of Ukraine—absolutely shameful. The Mauritian Attorney General was interviewed on Mauritian TV today, and he said regarding the hon. Gentleman's tweets claiming that Mauritius was negotiating a lease on Peros Banhos that that was a gross falsehood and a political gimmick. The hon. Gentleman talks about the United States. The Secretary of War, Secretary Hegseth, said:

"Diego Garcia is a vital military base for the United States.

The UK's...deal with Mauritius secures the operational capabilities of the base and key US national security interests in the region.

We are confident the base is protected for many years ahead."

Why is the United States backing this deal, if anything that the hon. Gentleman says is true?

Nigel Farage: I can assure you that America is not backing this deal. What it is saying is, "What we have is what we hold." That is the American attitude at the moment, but as I said, when it wakes up to the satellite observation deal done with India already, as reported in *The Economic Times* of India on 12 September this year, and once you realise—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): Order. When the hon. Gentleman says “you”, he is referring to me. Perhaps he would refer to the Minister as “the Minister”.

Nigel Farage: When the Americans realise that, actually, Mauritius is not a trustworthy nation—it is bankrupt; it needs the money; it will not honour this treaty—we will be in a very different place. I do ask the question about the role of our National Security Adviser, somebody very much in the news in the last few days. He was seemingly very happy that a trial against two alleged Chinese spies, operating at times within this building, had disappeared. Not only is he honouring the Labour manifesto, which is very soft on China, but apparently he is very for this Chagos deal.

I put it to Members that this deal is un-British, it is against our national interest, and there is no upside or gain. I can assure them that a future that a future Reform Government will not honour this treaty—end of.

Graham Stuart: I refer the Committee to my interests, having observed the Mauritian elections last year as a guest of the Mauritius Labour party.

It is hard not to feel a little bit sorry for the beleaguered Minister at the Dispatch Box today, sent to defend something that is so clearly a betrayal of this country and its interests. Out of the grand total of 400-plus Labour Members of Parliament in this House, he was backed by just one—the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey)—who sat with his face glued to his iPad, reading the words put there by Lord knows who, and who struggled so much when he finally took an intervention and had to speak off the cuff. Indeed, he has fled now, doubtless to lick his wounds. Not one single other of those 400 Government MPs wanted to come here and defend this Bill.

The Minister is in fact a decent man, and he will know that this Bill has no defence and brings no benefit to this country. Last week, too, we had a Minister sent out to answer for the China spy case. He had never spoken at the Dispatch Box before; it was his very first outing, but he was thought the best person to defend the Prime Minister’s blushes by knowing nothing about the topic in hand and denying things—without lying—by dint of ignorance. It was indeed a triumph, of sorts.

Armando Iannucci and “The Thick of It” cast could not script something as cynical, empty and damaging as this Government’s behaviour in so many spheres. As we can see in the amendments and new clauses before us, which will doubtless all be rejected by the Minister, amidst the betrayal of first-time buyers, farmers, small businesses, special needs children, pensioners, young workers—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): Order. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman might stay within the scope of the Bill.

Graham Stuart: Thank you, Madam Chair. I was setting the context for the amendments to the Bill that we are rightly proposing to ensure that the Government report back on the money that they plan to spend and to ensure that the Mauritius taxpayer is not the only taxpayer to benefit from this.

As I say, the amendments and new clauses come amidst the betrayal of those first-time buyers, farmers, small businesses, special needs children, pensioners, young workers, restaurants and pubs, and amidst the expense grifting, tax dodging, scandals and resignations packed into 14 busy months. Amidst all that, this Chagos sell-out is still a stand-out disaster for this country, and the Ministers on the Front Bench know it. That is why not a single one of their 400-odd colleagues—bar one, glued to his iPad—has been prepared to come to this Chamber tonight and speak in favour of the Bill.

That is why there is no provision to allow a vote on the £3.4 billion—sorry, not £3.4 billion; the £35 billion that has now been set out. As the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) rightly says, that is based on a rather small conservative estimate of the interest, but that is what the Government themselves have said it is likely to cost. This Labour Government decided to give away UK sovereign territory and the location of a critically important military base to another country, and to pay £35 billion for the privilege.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: On the argument about the money, which comes up throughout all this and which we had in the last debate, the Government have used a dodgy system to calculate it. It is called the GDP deflator. Their own actuarial department has dismissed that completely because, of course, it is all about a forecast of where social issues will go on an island that will never have anything to do with us after all this, so we have no idea how to predict it.

Finally, clause 5 makes this whole debate meaningless, because the Government can change anything they like whenever they wish to, so what the heck are we doing debating this even now?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely powerful point. The Henry VIII powers in the Bill are not limited at all. I heard so many complaints when I was a Minister from the Labour party about Henry VIII powers. The Bill literally gives Ministers the ability to change any existing piece of legislation in any sphere whatsoever if it is necessary to implement this deal. There can never have been a Henry VIII power as powerful as that given to Ministers by this legislation, which is all to do with the surrender of Chagos and the transfer of tens of billions of pounds to a foreign power—a foreign power that is in a strategic partnership with China and in close workings with other countries that are not on our side. What on earth was the Prime Minister thinking? As the Minister lay in bed last night tossing and turning in anticipation of the debate, I am sure that that was the question that went round and round in his head.

So many questions remain to be answered. Why did the Prime Minister say that the payment would be £3.4 billion when the Government’s own offices now show that it will be at least £35 billion? Is this the most important strategic base in the Indian ocean? Can the Minister confirm that Diego Garcia is effectively a US base, manned by thousands of Americans, with at most a few dozen Brits there in liaison? If this is in fact a United States base and not operationally—

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): It is a joint base.

Graham Stuart: It might be a joint base technically, but what is it in reality? I would love an intervention from the Defence Minister; he could tell us. How much do we use it operationally, because there are thousands of Americans there and, as I understand it—unless he corrects me—at most dozens of Brits. In other words, it is a United States base on sovereign UK territory that we will pay tens of billions of pounds for over the next 100 years to provide it to the Americans for free. It makes no sense, and I do not see why we have had no answer from Ministers as to why that is a sensible use of public money.

Stephen Doughty *rose*—

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) *rose*—

Graham Stuart: I will give way to the Minister and then to my right hon. Friend.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his generous comments. He and I have always had robust but friendly discussions on many issues. However, I do have to correct him on this point. The US pays for the operations, and the value to the British taxpayer, the US taxpayer and, indeed, all our allies is priceless in that it protects the people of this country from multiple threats, so what he says simply does not make sense.

Graham Stuart: The United States plays a critical role as a member of NATO and as a key ally—if not the key ally—of ours, but despite the priceless nature of the service it provides, we do not typically pay for it. We do not normally pay for its bases; we pay for our own.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Graham Stuart: I said I would give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis).

Sir Julian Lewis: My right hon. Friend is quite right. On the face of it, this does not make sense, unless we look at it in one particular way. If the Government have made a decision that they wish to have a strategic economic partnership with communist China, this makes sense, the closing of the case with the China spies makes sense, and the willingness for China to have the biggest embassy of any country in Europe makes sense. Even though the Government say that that is a quasi-judicial decision, it is interesting that for political reasons, they put it off till December. None of it makes sense, or all of it makes sense, as long as the National Security Adviser wants us to suck up to communist, totalitarian China.

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. That is at the heart of it. There are so many questions but one question is: why? Why would a deal like this be done by the Government? He puts forward a credible case as to why it might be.

Phil Brickell: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Graham Stuart: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman, who is not brave enough to speak fully but is prepared to intervene, can tell us why he would like to vote, if only he was given the chance, to give £35 billion to Mauritius and hand over a sovereign British base to someone in strategic partnership with China.

Phil Brickell: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman can enlighten me on which of the amendments he is speaking to. New clause 4, which his party tabled, mentions coral, fish stocks, molluscs and ocean acidification in the marine protected area. Even the cynic in me is somewhat flabbergasted by the official Opposition's apparent interest in environmental and climate change all of a sudden, given their desire to ride roughshod over the Climate Change Act and frack our countryside.

8 pm

Graham Stuart: That is rather desperate. I give way to the right hon. Member for East Antrim.

Sammy Wilson: The Minister described this asset as “priceless”, yet he is giving it away—and not only is he giving it away; he is paying someone to take it! Is this the kind of decision people would expect from a rational Government? More importantly, if it is priceless in security terms, why are we compromising it?

Graham Stuart: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to ask that question. That is what we are trying to get to the bottom of, and we hope to hear answers from the Minister this evening so that ordinary citizens of this country can understand how it is in the UK's interest to do this.

Of course, other points have been touched on, including, quite rightly, the Chagossians. Why is the Labour party—the party so committed to human rights and which very much sees itself as champion for the underdog—absolutely disregarding the Chagossians? As the hon. Member for Bolton West suggested, Labour also sets itself out as a nature and climate champion, yet it is handing this asset over to a country without the wherewithal—I do not know about the will, but it is certainly without the wherewithal—to ensure that the protection of that marine area continues. That is the problem, and it is why we need answers from the Minister. The Government may be unable to get anyone to speak in favour of the Bill, but they should think again, accept the amendments and new clauses, and bring some light to bear on this rather murky issue.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The treaty that the Bill will implement is shocking for so many reasons: the security implications, the staggering costs, and the voices that it has ignored—the voices of British Chagossians. Their views and concerns are many and varied. I had the privilege of meeting members of the community when they came to Parliament, while the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), met British Chagossians only once, and that was on the very day that the treaty was signed—far too late for their voices to have any influence. They are rightly frustrated that they have been excluded from negotiations and denied meaningful engagement. It is painfully clear that their voices were not considered; if they had been, the treaty might have placed their rights at its very centre.

Instead, article 6 gives Mauritius the freedom to resettle Chagossians, but not the duty to do so. After half a century of waiting for it, their right of return is left entirely at the discretion of a foreign Government. Under article 11, despite the billions of pounds that the Bill will transfer to Mauritius, only a fraction—in the

form of a trust fund—is intended for Chagossians. Even then, it will be administered solely by Mauritius, with no guarantee that British Chagossians will have any say in how it is spent.

The treaty says that the UK and Mauritius want to “recognise the wrongs of the past”,

but how can we recognise a wrong if we refuse to listen to those who suffered it? New clause 7, tabled by the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), is vital because it would require the Government to listen to and consult the Chagossian community here in the UK, and to report back on how their rights are being upheld. That would give British Chagossians the voice that they have been denied again and again.

Another vital issue is the risk that the Bill poses to one of the most precious marine environments on earth. The waters around the Chagos Islands form one of the world’s largest and most pristine marine protected areas. As we have heard, it is a haven of biodiversity, untouched by industrial fishing since 2010. Yet the treaty places that fragile ecosystem in jeopardy. Mauritius has promised to establish a new marine protected area, but it lacks the capacity to enforce it. It has no navy, and its coastguard of nine vessels is already stretched by patrolling waters thousands of miles away. By contrast, the UK has spent over £1.2 million since 2022 on monitoring and protecting those seas, developing world-leading expertise in remote enforcement through ships, sensors and satellite imagery.

Illegal fishing is already rife across the Indian ocean. China’s distant-water fleet is the largest in the world and the worst global offender for illegal fishing, according to the illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing index. What confidence can we have that Mauritius—a close ally of China—will be able or willing to resist such pressure and protect these fragile waters?

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that Mauritius does not have a navy?

Aphra Brandreth: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It has no navy and only nine coastguard vessels; it is not able to protect those waters.

Even if illegal fishing were controlled, the Mauritian Fisheries Minister has already spoken of wanting to issue fishing licences around the Chagos Islands. The agreement provides no guarantees; the extent of future protections will be decided only after the Bill has passed. New clauses 3 and 4 are essential to ensure parliamentary oversight of any future agreement and regular reporting on coral health, fish stocks and biodiversity.

As it stands, the Bill would hand billions of pounds of UK taxpayers’ money to Mauritius, with no guarantees of protection of the marine environment, no provisions to safeguard the rights of British Chagossians, and no mechanism for Britain to monitor whether the safeguards around the strategic military base on Diego Garcia are effective. The Conservative amendments offer a chance for the Government to be transparent, publish the legal advice on which they surrendered the Chagos Islands, and give the House a vote on the payment of £35 billion to Mauritius. The treaty is damaging in so many ways, but let us not make the damage worse by waving it through unchecked.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Since this House first learned of the disastrous terms of the Chagos surrender deal, there has been significant focus on the spiralling cost and on the defence and security implications—we have heard many such arguments today. The Government’s weakness has compromised our national security. They are surrendering British territory to an ally of China and paying £35 billion—or perhaps as much as £50 billion—for the privilege. Their failure to defend the British national interest is shameful.

Equally shameful is the Government’s failure to consider the impact that the deal will have on environmental protections for marine areas. Members from across the House have reflected on that today, but it is a shame that so few Labour Members came to stand up for our environmental protections in the Indian Ocean Territories. I will address the importance of new clauses 3 and 4, two sensible amendments tabled by the shadow Foreign Secretary to strengthen oversight of the marine protected area.

The region of the Indian ocean that hosts the unique and remarkable Chagos Islands is of critical importance to wildlife. The archipelago is a biodiversity hotspot. The 640,000 sq km marine protected area, which has been monitored by the UK for the past 15 years, has kept the surrounding waters in near-pristine condition. The coral reefs in the untouched marine protected area are some of the healthiest in the world. They are a sanctuary for marine life, including endangered species such as hawksbill turtles, green turtles and reef sharks, and they are located along hugely significant migratory routes for species of tuna, whales and seabirds. The remarkable resilience of the reefs to coral bleaching events also makes them highly significant for scientific research to better understand resilience to changing climates.

Peter Prinsley: Like me, the hon. Member is a new Member, so I am puzzled: why does he consider that his party started these negotiations, if the whole thing is such a terrible idea?

Blake Stephenson: There is a difference between talking with other countries and doing a deal. I know that those on the Opposition Front Bench who formed part of the previous Government were not going to do this deal. They may have been talking, but as we have heard, there was going to be no agreement. I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and reflecting that I was not part of the previous Government, but he knows full well that this agreement would not have been made under these terms if the Conservatives were in government now.

The marine protected area is one of the largest untouched marine ecosystems, and it is globally significant. As such, instead of heedlessly driving this hopeless surrender deal through Parliament, the Government should have been ensuring that protections for wildlife and the marine environment were watertight. When answering questions before the Foreign Affairs Committee in June, the Minister would not give any clear assurances or guarantees on the future of the marine protected area. Within his obfuscation about separate agreements with Mauritius, which hope we can “share objectives and values”, he admitted that we can only

“take it on trust that there will be a Marine Protected Area” after sovereignty has been surrendered.

[Blake Stephenson]

We absolutely do not need to take that on trust. The Government have failed to secure any meaningful safeguards or guarantees, and are instead hoping—merely hoping—that a memorandum of understanding will somehow protect that pristine ecosystem. How on earth can we have any confidence in that at all?

A simple change of Government in Mauritius, or even just a change of heart, would render the UK powerless to stop Chinese trawlers turning up and devastating the marine environment. Given the evidence of China plundering the high seas, for example in the south Atlantic, just outside the Falkland Islands zone of economic interest, it absolutely will do the same in that territory.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point about the marine environment in the area, but does he accept that we do not even need a change of heart by Mauritius? We do not need it to decide that the treaty was not worthwhile—it does not have the ability to give the protection. Even if there was no change of heart, there is no ability to give such protection, which is why this is a bad deal for the environment.

Blake Stephenson: I absolutely agree, and I note that the right hon. Gentleman and I are the only Members in the Chamber from the Environmental Audit Committee, which I think is a damning indictment on those Members in this House who are here to protect our environment and hold the Government to account on environmental protections.

Will the Minister now explain what will happen to the MPA in future, and say whether the Government will commit resources to support the protection of the MPA? If so, where will those resources come from? With the fisheries Minister of Mauritius talking of issuing fishing and trawler licences, it is more important than ever that we have lasting confidence in marine protections before British territory is surrendered to Mauritius. When the Minister sums up the debate, will he say whether he shares my concerns over new fishing and trawler licences?

New clause 3 would require that any written instrument on the establishment and management of the marine protected area be subject to the approval of this House to ensure that it is fit for purpose. Will the Minister say what progress has been made with developing the “separate...instrument”, referenced in article 5.2 of the treaty? Will it be in place before Mauritius assumes sovereignty? Any agreement on the Chagos MPA must be scrutinised like a treaty and presented to Parliament.

New clause 4 would require the Secretary of State regularly to report on the status of the marine protected area. Reports from Committees in the Lords have raised concerns about Mauritius’s track record on environmental protections. Does the Minister agree with those concerns, and therefore agree that the ecological status of this extraordinary environment must remain on the British Government’s agenda, and will he reflect on that in his summing up of the debate? Will he now accept that, as well as costing British taxpayers £35 billion, betraying British Chagossians and undermining our security, without better protections secured in the treaty, the Government’s

Chagos surrender deal will harm the marine environment? All of this at a time when the Government argued that the state of public finances required tough choices—choices that punished pensioners, family farmers, and taxed education for the very first time.

The annual cost of the surrender of the Chagos islands could pay for 3,068 new teachers, 3,253 new nurses or 1,975 police officers. In the first year, the money paid to Mauritius could deliver a new GP surgery in 30 communities—communities such as Wixams and Wootton in my constituency of Mid Bedfordshire, which are still waiting for improved access to local healthcare. This was all a choice—a choice to prioritise ideological surrender over our communities, over our security, and over marine protections. It is shameful, and I encourage hon. Members across the House to support new clauses 3 and 4.

8.15 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): I speak in support of new clause 1, which would ensure that this House had a vote before any money was paid to the Government of Mauritius under the treaty. I support the new clause because it demonstrates the important principle of this House asserting its rightful role as the guardian of both public money and British sovereignty. The privileges of this House have been serially insulted in the debates we have had today, which I want to mention quickly. With this new treaty we see the height of what we saw earlier: a dereliction of the responsibilities of this House and the Government. Earlier, in the urgent question on the China spy case, we heard that politicians should not be consulted—

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. The hon. Gentleman will keep within the scope of this Bill, and not seek to rehash urgent questions held earlier.

Danny Kruger: I understand, Madam Chairman, and of course you are quite right. The point I was making is that there has never been a Government who are so reluctant to govern as the one we have today. We have heard from hon. Members how baffling the decision is to surrender the Chagos islands. The only rational reason that could account for it is some kind of secret deal with China. I do not know if that is the case. The Government’s obeisance to international law might well trump national sovereignty, and in fact there is no rational calculation behind this decision except that of submission to their ideas of international law.

Stephen Doughty: Again, I have to take serious issue with what the hon. Gentleman is suggesting. If what he is suggesting is true, why do the United States, our Five Eyes partners, and other key allies support this deal? It protects our national security, and it secures the base on Diego Garcia. Why would they support it? There is no secret deal—this is absolute nonsense.

Danny Kruger: I am grateful to the Minister. I suspect there has been a private conversation with the American Government as well, and that in recognition of the fait accompli that this Government have yielded to Mauritius, the Americans have extended this somewhat limited statement of support for the deal as some kind of favour to the Prime Minister, in exchange for support he has given them on other matters. The fact is that this

deal is bad for Britain and bad for Britain's sovereignty, and behind the scenes we know that the Americans do not support it.

I want to talk about secret deals, because my only addition to the debate—very powerful points have been made already—is to say that secret deals have been done with respect to the Chagos islands in the past. Under the 30-year rule, archival evidence has come out recently of a secret deal with respect to the base at Diego Garcia between the British Government of the day—the Thatcher Government—and the American Administration. That deal was done in the national interest. The renewal of the nuclear deterrent—the Trident programme—was being set up, and there was an agreement with the Americans whereby they could expand their access and the use of Diego Garcia in exchange for a reduction in the fee, essentially, that the British Government were charged for collaboration on the Trident programme. We had to pay significantly less than we would have paid otherwise because of the expanded access that we were giving to the Americans in those years. It was called the Diego-Trident package in the negotiations and the correspondence between the British and the Americans at that time. It was kept quiet for understandable reasons, and we only know about it now. I worry that there is a similar lack of transparency around this deal because, as I say, it cannot possibly be a deal that is in the national interest.

Graham Stuart: We are trying to get to the bottom of precisely why the Labour Government would make this deal. The hundreds of people who worked at the Vivergo plant in my constituency were sold out by the Prime Minister who, in a personal call with the President of the United States, surrendered the entire bioethanol market of this country to the United States, with nothing in return, at the end of an already concluded trade deal negotiation. It is things like that that make us worry what is behind this Bill, what is the secret deal and exactly who has been sold out.

Danny Kruger: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The key demand that this House is making is for greater transparency about what is going on behind the scenes with this deal. I implore the House to insist that, before Parliament accepts any new arrangements for the sovereignty of the Chagos islands, Ministers explain what is going on. Specifically, is the Minister aware of any effect on our nuclear posture? Is there any relationship between the deal that is being done today and implications for our deterrent? The base is vital to our national interest, and I would be grateful to understand whether any discussions have been had with reference to the deals that were done many years ago about the relationship with the nuclear deterrent.

Dr Luke Evans: I will speak to the amendments, starting with amendments 1 and 7, and take a canter through my position, as my constituents will have an interest in that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) asked the important question why. Amendments 1 and 7 try to address the most important issue: context. As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) pointed out, our signing this deal does not make sense. The Government have been weak in presenting the evidence

for why they think we should sign the deal. I wrote to the Government to ask them to explain, and I was able to pull their response apart on Second Reading, one step at a time, explaining why their reasons do not fit.

Context is really important. I thought that the deal did not make sense, but factoring in the collapsed spy trial, the billion pounds provided to the steel factories, the pending decision on the embassy—yes, maybe no—and the change in the language used around the subject of China, we need to get to the heart of what is going on. The amendments are an attempt to do that in the name of transparency, which is hugely important.

Blake Stephenson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are treating China like it is our friend, rather than the threat that it is?

Dr Evans: I would be interested to hear an answer to that, as we have tried several times to get the Government to quantify whether China is a threat, a friend, an ally or a foe.

Amendment 7 tries to look at

“an analysis of the status of UK's sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory under international law;”.

From talking about this previously, we know that UNCLOS, which is often used as the example of why we have to secede the territory, cannot preside over sovereignty, as was said in 2015 when dealing with the marine protected area. We have also heard the Government stress the importance of the International Telecommunications Union, saying that the issue is to do with spectre and spies. However, we know that there is a carve-out, because we heard about that on Second Reading.

That leaves us with the International Court of Justice, which is often held up as the key point. On Second Reading, I was taken by the fact that it is alleged that we have an opt-out under the Commonwealth, so I went away to have a quick look. On the ICJ website, as hon. Members can see, the “Declarations recognising the jurisdiction of the Court as compulsory—United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” were published on 22 February 2017. I quote:

“1. The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland accepts as compulsory ipso facto and without special convention, on condition of reciprocity, the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, in conformity with paragraph 2 of Article 36 of the Statute of the Court, until such time as notice may be given to terminate the acceptance, over all disputes arising after 1 January 1987, with regard to situations or facts subsequent to the same date, other than:”—

these are critical points—

“(i) any dispute which the United Kingdom has agreed with the other Party or Parties thereto to settle by some other method of peaceful settlement; (ii) any dispute with the government of any other country which is or has been a Member of the Commonwealth;”.

That is there in black and white.

However, the Government have yet to mention that in any of debates or letters about their legal position. We need amendments 1 and 7 to be able to understand why the Government do not see that as a strong enough argument to hold up. This nonsense about whether or not there are negotiations is answered there too, because those declarations say:

“any method of peaceful settlement”.

Any good Government would try to resolve the dispute in a peaceful manner.

[Dr Luke Evans]

I am surprised at that from a Labour party whose Members pride themselves on being trade unionists, who make a living from negotiating and trying to come to a solution without the matter going to a court. That is exactly what they should be doing, but the Conservatives are being chastised for trying to have a conversation to resolve the situation. The fact was that we did not come up with a deal because the deal was not good enough.

The Labour Opposition moved into power and have now put forward this horrendous Bill that gives away power, but at what cost? They are not even going to try in court or use some of the simple arguments which I, as a doctor, have found after spending time researching. I am sure that in this great country we have many legal buffs that could put forward that argument, but if the government do not feel that it stands, they should come to this House and tell us why—put it in evidence, write it out and tell us all, and we will go quietly. However, we are not hearing or seeing that from this Government, which is why we need amendments 1 and 7.

Turning to amendments 3, 4 and 6, as has been rightly pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness it is clear that the Bill gives carte blanche to this Government, or any other, to do whatever they want. We may as well not even bother having a debate about the Bill—it is not worth the paper it is written on—because the Henry VIII powers mean that Ministers can do what they will, when they will without coming to Parliament. At least these amendments try to ensure some accountability of the Executive to this House, because this House should be making these decisions, especially given their magnitude. We have heard from the Government that it is a priceless base and we have heard from the Conservative Benches about its geopolitical and security importance. Should the House not be making decisions about what that looks like?

New clause 1 talks about the payments. On Second Reading, I asked the Minister whether he could give me any example, from any part of the world, of when we have dealt with sovereignty using net present value. He said it was in the Green Book, but that is for domestic sites and used by the Treasury to look at civil development. I hope the Minister has gone away and done some research, because I think he will find that there is not a precedent, as net present value is not the correct measure and is open to political interference. For example, we use 3.5% and America uses 7%. We can fudge the numbers to fit the narrative that we would like to set.

There is one other problem. The explanatory notes stipulate only 30 years. Unless I have misquoted, this deal goes for 99 years, so what happens in the remaining 70 years? That is why new clause 1 would bring in a robust check to ensure that when the finances are paid out, we know exactly why we are paying, who we are paying and what we are paying for. Most importantly, we would know the mechanism of how the finances were calculated, because the Government still have not come to this place and set that out exactly.

Let me turn to new clause 2. What happens at the end? I raised that as my final point when I spoke on Second Reading. We have heard about long-term security, but in this place we think only on a five-year cycle; this is a 99-year cycle. My biggest fear is that my children's

children's children, if they are ever elected to this Parliament, will be having a debate in 99 years with the same issues about what happens. It is a dereliction of duty on our behalf in this House not to think things through.

Sir Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I am surprised that nobody has referred to Hong Kong. When the decision was taken and the agreement was reached in 1984 for the handover in 1997, China agreed that it would be “one country, two systems” for at least 50 years. Within less than half that time, Britain came to the conclusion that all those safeguards were being deliberately violated.

8.30 pm

Dr Evans: As ever, my learned right hon. Friend has pipped me to the punch. That is exactly a good example of the kind of sites we are worried about. What has that meant? We have taken on British nationals overseas and invited them in to give them security, because they feared for political interference and, worse still, for the safety of themselves and their families.

We are not doing our duties if we are not thinking about these things, because, as we have already seen, it is hard enough to predict things in two or three years' time, let alone 100 years. At that point, as it is written, we will get the best offer, but it will be only offered to us. We could be outstripped by China, Russia or a BRIC country in the future—we do not know; it is 100 years away—and there is no mechanism to solve that. Worse still, Mauritius could simply say, “We do not want a base here at all,” and there is nothing in this Bill that would stop that. The Government repeatedly have been asked those questions, and they cannot set that out. That is why new clause 2 asks for those impacts to be considered and looked at.

New clause 3 would move the marine protected area. I will return to a point I made earlier. The fact is that when Britain and the United Kingdom were taken under UNCLOS in 2010 by Mauritius under annex VII, we wanted to implement protections in the area. Mauritius felt that that impeded on its ability to make its own decisions, which the court found in favour of, and it also wanted to fish in the area. Hang on a second! We are putting weaknesses into this Bill when we know that Mauritius has set its intent. I hope it has moved on, as the debate on climate has, but this new clause would be a guarantee to ensure that that has been thought about.

Let me turn to new clause 5. I appreciate the Minister stepping up, because there has already been debate about the Peros Banhos islands, and he has said there are no concerns that they will be leased to China. Let us be real: this Bill has only just come out—the ink is barely dry—and we already hear stories. Many journalists have already talked about this issue. Maybe I am wrong, but that shows the examples of what could and will come without paying attention to the security and the geopolitical and strategic advantage that these islands have, which my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) talked about. All new clause 5 asks us to do is ensure that that is reported on and looked at. Again, there is a dereliction of duty by not having that reported.

I could go on, because there are many more amendments, but the salient points in this debate have been made. All the amendments tabled in the names of Conservatives—

and, to be fair, in the names of Members of many other Opposition parties—ask for one simple thing: transparency and explanation. They ask for a simple way of seeing what the legal advice does and where the financial outcome comes.

Stephen Doughty *indicated assent.*

Dr Evans: The Minister is nodding along, but there must be something wrong if the public and Opposition Members cannot simply understand the arguments for what is being put in place. We cannot see the wood for the trees. It is a Government's duty to show those arguments, and I look forward to the Minister doing that in his response and putting these arguments to bed once and for all. Otherwise, the British public will not forgive him.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I will primarily focus on new clause 8, which is in my name and the names of colleagues. First and foremost, this Bill is about perfecting the decolonisation of the British Indian Ocean Territory—that is self-evident in clause 2—but it does that in a way that ignores a primary component of decolonisation. We subscribe to United Nations resolution 1514. That resolution talks about respecting not only the integrity of territory, but self-determination. The British Indian Ocean Territory has existed, *de facto* and *de jure*, for over 50 years, yet the Government's approach in justifying this completion of decolonisation is to focus solely on territorial integrity by claiming that the Chagos islands are, in fact, part of Mauritius.

Resolution 1514 contains a number of components. Its first point is that

“The subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights”.

Its second point is that

“All peoples have the right to self-determination”.

The question for this House is surely this: are the Chagossians a people? I certainly think that they are. They are distinct from the Mauritians by their ethnic background, by their religion and by geography. Mauritius and the Chagos islands are over 1,300 miles apart, approximately as far as it is from this House to north Africa, so after 50 years of the existence of the BIOT, it really is a stretch to say that the sole defining issue is that of territorial integrity. To say that is to ignore the right to self-determination.

This nation has dealt with decolonisation before, and we did not approach it on the basis that it is only about territorial integrity. Take the example of India. We decolonised in India, but we allowed it to be subject to self-determination—that is why we have India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is quite clear that this is not a situation in which territorial integrity trumps everything else. It does not trump self-determination. An experience of decolonisation such as India's shows that territorial integrity is secondary to self-determination, yet the right of the people who claim the Chagos islands as their homeland to any measure of self-determination is the one thing that has been utterly ignored in this process. We have in our history the shameful episode of their forceful removal from the Chagos islands, and now under this treaty, we are going to compound that shame by legitimising that removal. Saying that this is

only about territorial integrity is to legitimise their forceful removal from the Chagos islands—that is how we get around the question of self-determination. That is wrong. The people of the Chagos islands are a people. They are a people with a homeland; therefore, under international law, they are a people with a right to self-determination, so why do this treaty and this Bill trash that right? That is the fundamental haunting question when it comes to the humanity and international legal requirements of the situation that prevails.

The Government are obviously holding to the line, “It is only about territorial integrity,” but they are hoisted by their own petard, because they have recognised the Chagossians as a people by setting aside some millions of pounds for them. They cannot say it is only about territorial integrity, and there is no people to whom to give the right to self-determination, and then say, “For those people to whom we deny the right to self-determination, here is some conscience money.” They cannot do that, yet that is what the treaty does.

The BIOT recognised the separateness of the people of the Chagos islands, and even the much-vaunted advisory judgment of the International Court of Justice gives respect and acknowledgment—to an extent—to the question of self-determination. At one point, the judgment states:

“It follows that any detachment by the administering Power of part of a non-self-governing territory, unless based on the freely expressed and genuine will of the people of the territory concerned, is contrary to the right to self-determination.”

Even that advisory judgment recognised the exception of the freely expressed and genuine will of the people, but that is what we have not had on this issue. This Government have gone out of their way to deny the free and genuine expression of opinion by the people whose homeland is the Chagos islands. That shameful indictment compounds what we did to those people at the end of the 1960s. The Government now totally dehumanise their human rights by saying, “You have no rights whatever when it comes to self-determination.” That is fundamentally wrong.

If the splitting of that wider colony in 1965 was illegitimate because there was no self-determination, according to the advisory judgment of the Court, then equally the Chagos islands rejoining Mauritius without self-determination is illegitimate. The Government cannot have it both ways, but that is what this Bill is seeking to do. The Government say that because it was illegitimate to split the Chagos islands off from Mauritius in 1965 because there was no self-determination, the Bill is about territorial integrity only, but if the basis of rejoining the Chagos islands to Mauritius is without self-determination, then that equally is illegitimate. Those are some of the points that this Government have not faced, and if they have faced them, they have not answered them. This House is legitimately asking those questions tonight, and waiting for answers. If those answers do not come, it will illustrate how this is the tawdry, unacceptable and unenforceable Bill that it will ultimately be seen to be.

Jerome Mayhew: The Minister will try his best in a few minutes to defend this wholly indefensible Bill, but the public know what it is: they see it as an absolute sell-out. I suspect that the Government Members who are not filling the green Benches see it as a sell-out, too.

[Jerome Mayhew]

That is why every single one of them failed to support the Bill in Committee, save for one brave or perhaps misguided Member.

The public can see that they are a weak Government without the backbone necessary to stand up for the British public's interests. They see this Bill as the sell-out that it is geopolitically, with the Government blind to the associated security risks, the sell-out that it is financially, with £35 billion going to a foreign Government, and the sell-out that it is of the Chagossian people, with their exclusion from negotiations.

8.45 pm

The public are baffled by the Government's arguments in relation to this agreement, as indeed am I. Let us look at the legal rationale for capitulation. It has collapsed under scrutiny. We were told by the Minister at the Dispatch Box that the primary reason why this deal was needed was the "imminent threat of a binding judgment", yet no such tribunal exists. Originally, I believe, the Minister thought that it was to be the International Court of Justice, but we now know, as the Minister should know, that the ICJ does not have binding capacity when the UK is dealing with a former Commonwealth country, so it is not the ICJ.

We have also heard it said from the Dispatch Box that perhaps it is the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, but we also now know that in 2015 UNCLOS excluded itself from the ability to have jurisdiction on land-based disputes. So, my goodness, don't we need amendment 7, which would require the Government to publish the legal arguments behind their currently baffling decision to go through with this deal?

Graham Stuart: We are all wrestling with the question "Why?" As my hon. Friend has said, the Government's position was clear in 2017: namely, that the ICJ had no power over a deal we made with a Commonwealth member. Perhaps this Prime Minister has, without telling us, reversed that in some way, and the Government have decided that this should be subject to the ICJ, in which case the Minister would have a point, but should we not know that we made ourselves subject to the ICJ when previously we were not? What other answers are there?

Jerome Mayhew: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask those questions—questions that have been asked of the Government time and again throughout this legislative process, but to which we simply have not had an answer.

The Government seem to be blind to the risk of the craven withdrawal of influence from the Indo-Pacific region. This is more Jonathan Powell. He was, of course, the Prime Minister's envoy, and the architect of the negotiation and the deal. The more I learn of Jonathan Powell, the more I realise that he seems to have a long-term instinct to downplay the threat from China—a threat in the Indian Ocean through this negotiated deal. Let us not forget that this is the same Jonathan Powell who now wears a different hat. He is now the National Security Adviser, and that, very unusually, was a political appointment. There is the question of his involvement—or perhaps it is not his involvement—

in the collapse of the Chinese spying case. We are asked to believe that he was not involved in it, and that seems baffling as well.

Dr Evans: Was my hon. Friend as surprised as I was to find out that the National Security Adviser does not speak to his deputy? [Interruption.]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I do not think we need this chuntering from the Front Bench. Can we ensure that the speech remains within the legislation that we are debating and voting on tonight?

Jerome Mayhew: I will endeavour to do so, Madam Chair. In fact, I will more than endeavour; I will do so.

The reason this is relevant is that it speaks to new clause 5. While the Government have their head in the sand in respect of Mauritius's relations with China—this is why it is important, Madam Chair—their first argument is that Mauritius will not be influenced by China, and is it not awful of us to suggest that it might be. I raised this question with the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), back in October last year. I raised concerns that Mauritius was an ally of China and was open to influence from that country. With the disdain for which he is now famous, the right hon. Gentleman pooh-poohed that. He said that Mauritius was not a Chinese ally because it was not part of the belt and road agreement in Africa.

When we look at the relationship between China and Mauritius, however, we see that they have strong bilateral ties that go back to 1972, on economic co-operation and diplomatic support. China is the largest trading partner of Mauritius, which entered into a free trade agreement with China—the first such free trade agreement that China has entered into on the African continent. Perhaps it did not need to belong to the belt and road agreement in addition to its free trade agreement.

There is influence expressed through investments, loans and grants. China built the international airport terminal for Mauritius. It has invested in the Jinfei economic and trade co-operation zone—a flagship belt and road initiative—and between 2000 and 2012 China also funded 47 development projects in Mauritius through loans and grants. So forgive me, Madam Chair, if I do not swallow the argument that Mauritius is wholly beyond the influence of China.

The Government say, "If Mauritius is under the influence of China, don't worry, because China don't support this deal. China will be arguing against this deal." We were told by the Prime Minister that China, Russia and Iran do not support the Chagos deal. Therefore, presumably my geopolitical security fears must be wrong. Well, Ministers have repeatedly been asked for the evidence that China does not support this deal, and none has been provided to date. If I am wrong on that, perhaps the Minister will say from the Dispatch Box where China has expressed its concerns about this deal.

If you were to listen to the Chinese ambassador to Mauritius, even you, Madam Chair, would be forgiven for thinking that China is thoroughly in favour of this deal, because he sent "massive congratulations" to Mauritius and said that China "fully supports" Mauritius's attempt to "safeguard national security." That is the definition

of doublespeak if it does not mean that China is wholly in favour of this deal and is celebrating it with Mauritius. I am not convinced, and neither are the Government.

Mike Kane: I am fond of the hon. Gentleman, who speaks of “doublespeak”. It was not long ago in my political lifetime that the former Member for Witney, the then Prime Minister, invited His Excellency Xi Jinping for a pint in The Plough at Cadsden, in Oxfordshire. As he departed back to China from the airport in my constituency, I sat with the Prime Minister as he fawned over the Chinese Administration like it was some papal visit. What is going on with the Conservatives? Are you divided on what our approach to China should be?

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Kane, do not use the word “you”, because that refers to me.

Jerome Mayhew: I am not often compared to the noble Lord Cameron, but it is absolutely right that as the geopolitical environment changes, so should our policies. We on this side of the House are realists.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: As I was in government at the time, I can answer the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane): the golden decade proposed by the then Chancellor, with whom I did not get on very well, was a disaster. If anything should have been learned by that, his Government should have learned that when you sup with the Chinese, you better have a very long spoon, because they suck you in. We got nothing out of those 10 years, and now look at us.

The Chairman: Order. Mr Mayhew and colleagues who hope to intervene, let us remember the scope of the debate in front of us.

Jerome Mayhew: It is for exactly those reasons that we so desperately need new clause 5, which would require an annual security report to the Intelligence and Security Committee. That would mean that we are not caught with our heads in the sand again.

We are beginning to build a picture of a slippery Government who are not being honest with the British people, not being honest about the legal justifications for this deal and not being honest about the security risk associated with the deal, and who are now being slippery about the financial cost as well. Again, the Prime Minister himself said that this slippery deal was going to cost the taxpayer £101 million a year for 99 years. He rounded that down from £10 billion, which my maths would have come to, to £3.4 billion. Through a freedom of information request, the Government Actuary's Department has confirmed that the actual cost is £34.7 billion. Did the Prime Minister just get the decimal point in the wrong place, or was it something more sinister?

Madam Chair, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Government should no longer be trusted. They are changing their story in relation to this agreement, and they changed their story in relation to the China spy trial collapse. We need new clause 1 so that no payments can be made without direct approval from the

House of Commons. At least then the Government would have to explain the real figures and be open to transparency and scrutiny.

The public see through Labour's deal, and they know a sell-out when they see one. The Opposition amendments and new clauses bring transparency to expose this sell-out from a weak Prime Minister without the backbone to stand up for Britain. No wonder Labour Members are about to vote against them.

Jeremy Corbyn: I will be brief, but I am very pleased to be able to speak in this debate as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Chagos islands, which last week had its 103rd meeting. It has been ably supported by David Snoxell, the former British high commissioner to Mauritius, who has done incredible work with his knowledge of and empathy for the Chagossian people. There are two former chairs of the group in the Committee at the moment—the hon. Members for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)—and the former Member for Crawley was also chair of the group at one time.

We founded that group a long time ago to listen to, and take action in support of, the Chagos islanders, who were angry that they had been forcibly removed from their homes, angry at the way they had been treated by successive British Governments, and very angry at the initial decision that was taken and the sheer brutality that went with it. To give Members a brief example, in 1973 a 20-year-old Chagossian woman, Liseby Elysé, while carrying her unborn child, was forcibly removed from the Chagos island of Peros Banhos. She lost her unborn child soon after her traumatic upheaval and the journey, and she and her husband survived with considerable uncertainty and in very precarious living conditions, like all other Chagossians. However, 45 years later, in 2018, she represented her community at The Hague when she spoke about her life and her losses. Her story was compelling and memorable, like those of so many other Chagos islanders, because of the personal horror, trauma and abuse that they suffered. They have always demanded and fought for their right of return, and that is the central core of what the all-party parliamentary group on the Chagos islands has done.

I realise there are now different opinions in the group about the sovereignty or otherwise of the islands, but there has always been a fundamental agreement on the right of return. That led to massive legal actions, which were bravely fought by the Chagos islanders with very little support. There were a few people such as Richard Gifford, their solicitor, who were fantastic in their support. Eventually, we gathered wider support, and we got favourable decisions at all levels of justice around the world, including at the United Nations General Assembly.

It is worth recalling, as many Members have done, the 1965 decision made by Harold Wilson, then Prime Minister. In offering Mauritius its independence, he came to this extraordinarily complicated deal, which essentially involved the United States getting a base on Diego Garcia and, in return, Mauritius getting its independence. Somewhere along the line, as the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) pointed out, there would either be a discount on the next generation of nuclear weapons, or free delivery of weapons at some point in the future. A lot of this was shrouded

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in mystery, in the private conversations between Wilson and Prime Minister Ramgoolam at the time, so there is a lot of confusion surrounding that.

Somewhere at that time the idea was to set up the British Indian Ocean Territory, and somewhere at that time the decision was made that the archipelago—including Peros Banhos, which is a considerable distance from Diego Garcia—would be separated from Mauritius as well and that it would have to be depopulated, hence the utter brutality of the removal of the entire population from the islands. So the question that many Members have brought up is this: should the Chagos islands be separate from Mauritius or part of Mauritius? Interestingly, during the 1965 discussions Mauritius never accepted the separation. It never accepted that the Chagos islands should be separated either constitutionally or in any other way from Mauritius. As we know, the decision was basically forced on the Mauritians in return for their independence.

We now have a situation in which we have finally got a treaty. It has its imperfections—of that everyone is agreed. Personally, I am less than happy about the idea of a massive military base on Diego Garcia, and even less happy that it might be there in 100 years' time. However, a treaty has been agreed that will ensure the right of Chagos islanders to return to the Chagos islands, but unfortunately only a limited right of return to Diego Garcia itself. I am looking forward to the Minister's speech, and I would be grateful if was able to say a bit more about the rights of access to Diego Garcia for Chagos islanders, their right to visit the church and the graves of their ancestors, and whether there is some possibility of a degree of residence on Diego Garcia. There is no other place in the world where a military base is surrounded by an entirely depopulated area, in this case an island, and I would be grateful if the Minister was able to say something about that.

9 pm

We have fought for the right of return. I fully understand that Chagos islanders—some resident here, some in the Seychelles, many in Mauritius, and others in a diaspora all around the world, in France and many other places—probably all have different views and different memories, but in the surveys that were done when this issue was discussed at great length about 10 years ago, they were all in favour of the right of return. The issue of sovereignty under Mauritius was not really a great feature of those discussions, although it appears to be now.

We should listen to the Chagos Refugees Group, based in Mauritius and led brilliantly by Olivier Bancoult, who has been through every court case. Indeed, he started the whole process of demanding the right of return, which has eventually been successfully achieved. The statement that the Chagos Refugees Group made last week said:

“The Agreement therefore meets the aim of our community to be reunited with our Islands. It has been concluded after nearly 3 years of negotiation between Mauritius and the UK and extensive consultation. Unless, therefore, the Agreement is approved and implemented, our exile will continue with no hope of restoring our fundamental human right to return. It was the creation of BIOT on 8 June 1965, 60 years ago, which led to our exile.”¹

1.[*Official Report*, 22 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 4WC.](Correction)

We are seeing another page in the dramatic history of the Indian ocean. Surely we should recognise the human rights of the people who were so disgracefully treated by Britain—and by the United States, but principally by Britain. They, at last, will see some degree of justice and the ability to return to their islands. I hope, when the Minister replies, that he will be able to give me some hope and comfort on the question of access to Diego Garcia, and also explain why it is necessary to have these incredibly long leases for the US to continue its operations on Diego Garcia. It seems to me that we should be working towards the Indian ocean being an ocean of peace, not an ocean of conflict between rival powers.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): For no apparent reason, and in a crowded field, the Government have chosen the Chagos islands as one of the many hills they wish to die on. The surrender of the sovereignty of the Chagos islands has been a puzzling mis-step for months, with today's votes the culmination of it.

There was a clumsy rush to try to force the deal through, first before the elections in Mauritius and then before the US elections, and there now appears to be an attempt to salvage some dignity, having seemingly surrendered

“meekly to a Mauritian shakedown”,

as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) has put it, while trying to upsell the deal to a US Government that publicly backs it, given that it will not cost them a penny, but privately must have concerns over the impact of allowing Chinese encroachment in the region. With recent developments shifting the focus of US foreign policy to the Indo-Pacific, the Chagos islands deal surely takes on greater significance. The base is now more important to US policy, not less.

Last December, the previous Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who is in his place, announced that the deal

“secures the future of the UK-US base on Diego Garcia”,

and said that

“when everyone looks at the detail of the deal, they will back it”.—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 28.]

Indeed, the Minister for the Overseas Territories, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) confirmed to me that

“There has been no change to the substance of the deal”.—[*Official Report*, 5 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 764.]

That is strange, because the new Prime Minister of Mauritius, Navin Ramgoolam, described the deal struck with the previous Mauritian Government as a “sell-out”, stating that the deal should be indexed to inflation, take exchange rates into account and fully recognise Mauritius's ownership of the islands, which could affect the UK's unilateral right to renew the lease. That was in mid-January. Less than a fortnight later, the Minister confirmed to me in a written answer that the UK would not have the unilateral ability to extend the agreement at the end of the lease. What changes were made to the original deal during discussions with the Government of Mauritius, and why have the Government gone on record as saying that the deal has not changed, in direct contradiction with the statements of the Prime Minister of Mauritius? Surely the Minister for the Overseas Territories is not suggesting that Prime Minister Ramgoolam is mistaken.

In January, when I asked the Prime Minister whether he had ever discussed the Chagos islands with Philippe Sands KC, his answer was a brusque, “No.” Brevity is key when trying not to give too much away. Philippe Sands has represented Mauritius at the International Court of Justice in multiple disputes over the Chagos islands. In 2022, Mr Sands published “The Last Colony: A Tale of Exile, Justice and Britain’s Colonial Legacy” about Chagos. It is worth highlighting that Philippe Sands and the Prime Minister have apparently been very good friends for several years; they even interviewed one another at the Hay festival.

Earlier this year, *The Telegraph* reported that the national security justification for surrendering the Chagos islands used by the Prime Minister came from Philippe Sands, who wrote about it in the 2023 book, “The International Legal Order in the 21st Century”. With Mr Sands apparently no longer representing Mauritius following the change in regime, it does make one wonder if that was the reason why there was such a rush to conclude the deal before the election, after which Mr Sands’ services were no longer required—did the Government lose their in?

I would be interested to know how the Government think the International Telecommunication Union would block our use of the electromagnetic spectrum. How would it block communications equipment on Diego Garcia without encroaching on our territory? What active blocking of electromagnetic frequencies is a UN agency capable of doing anyway? What steps would the ITU have taken to block the US military’s use of the electromagnetic spectrum had we not progressed this deal? The national security argument simply does not stack up.

New clause 6 would require the Secretary of State to report annually to Parliament on the impact of UNCLOS on the operation of the treaty. The Government have previously stated that it is ITLOS that would pose the greatest threat to the operation of Diego Garcia. It was cited specifically by the Defence Secretary for the first—and only—time on 22 May, when he said:

“There are a range of international legal challenges and rulings against us. The most proximate, and the most potentially serious, is the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.”—[*Official Report*, 22 May 2025; Vol. 767, c. 1291.]

In July, the Minister for the Overseas Territories referred to ITLOS for the first time since he was a shadow Minister for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, when, in December 2022, he had stated that the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea

“did not have competence on territorial disputes”,

going on to say:

“It is a fact that China has made increasing encroachments into the territorial waters of its neighbours and vast claims in the South China sea while ignoring judgments against itself. That has been matched by a growing assertiveness, and even belligerence, towards some of our allies and partners in the region”.—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 162WH.]

He asked for assurances then. Now, nearly three years later, with a belligerent China flexing its naval muscle in the region and adopting a robust posture towards us over the delay to the decision on its London embassy and the obvious ongoing spy debacle, what assurances can the Government give the Committee that this opportunity will not be exploited by the Chinese Communist party?

As recently as August, the Mauritian Government referred to

“The strategic role of Mauritius as an investment gateway to Africa and a trusted partner for Chinese enterprises seeking to expand their footprint therein”.

Mauritius is committed to working closely with China—far closer, it would appear, than it is to working with us. Why are the Government prepared to embolden Chinese ambition in the Pacific? Why are they prepared to embolden Chinese spying in Parliament? Why are they prepared to allow the Chinese to build an embassy in London without absolute clarity on its structural plans? With all that in mind, why will the Government not include China in the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme? The shadow of Jonathan Powell looms large over this deal, as it has over every aspect of the Government’s dealings with the Chinese Communist party.

Across the globe, we are seeing changes in the rules-based order. We must navigate this better. My fear, which is shared by all on the Conservative Benches, is that this capitulation shows no understanding of the changes we are facing. We need to ensure that this great nation stands up for safety, freedom and security across an increasingly dangerous world, and this opaque and furtive deal puts that at unacceptable risk.

Sammy Wilson: A deal of such implication, one would have thought, would have been hotly debated in this House, yet as has been pointed out, there has been no attempt to defend it by the Government. In fact, one could hardly call this a debate—it has all been one-sided. In a debate, people usually argue in favour of whatever the proposal happens to be and listen to and rebut the arguments from the other side. We have had no rebuttal from the other side—the Government—today, despite the fact that this is such an important deal.

For some people outside the House, this deal might seem to be an unimportant issue—where are the Chagos islands, and why do they matter? However, even if the attitude taken by Government Members is to say, “Our constituents are not all that interested in the issues around the Chagos islands,” there are issues with this deal that have been raised this evening that should concern them all.

Let us look at the issues, because they are addressed by the amendments. The first is human rights—the human rights of the people who were displaced in the 1960s and who are ignored in this deal. Their rights to self-determination and to decide where they live are being ignored, yet we are not getting any response from the Government—the party that talks about human rights all the time. They say that we cannot leave the European convention on human rights because human rights are so important, but they are ignoring the human rights of the people who are affected by this deal.

Stephen Doughty: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sammy Wilson: Since we are going to have a debate, I will listen to the Minister.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the right hon. Member for giving way. He says that he wants a debate, and I have given a number of rebuttals. He mentions the Chagossians, whom I will come to in my concluding remarks. I respect what he has to say, but I point him to remarks from the

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Chagos Refugees Group, which said in its communiqué to all of us: “We urge all Members of Parliament to support the Bill at its final stages and deliver long overdue justice to all our people. Passing this Bill will mark a turning point and the moment when Parliament stands on the right side of history and begins to restore what was unjustly taken from us.” There are a range of views within the Chagossian community, and I think it is important that those are put on the record.

Sammy Wilson: Of course there are many who take a totally different point of view and whose wishes are not reflected in this Bill. The amendments that have been tabled to seek to remedy that situation are being ignored and opposed by the Government.

The second issue is the economy. On a regular basis, we hear how difficult the fiscal position is for this country—black holes we have to fill by taking money off pensioners, reducing benefits, cutting here and cutting there, and taxing people to the hilt. Yet when amendments are tabled that simply request transparency and the opportunity to look at the expenditure involved in this treaty, we hear no support from the Government. Either we are concerned about the fiscal position of this country or we are not. I would suggest that £35 billion—and rising—is a significant figure that we should be looking at.

Dr Luke Evans: The right hon. Member is making a powerful point. Is not part of the problem that we do not even know which budget the money is coming out of? That is the kind of simple question that the man or woman on the street would expect us to be able answer.

Sammy Wilson: We may not know which budget it is coming from, but we know whose pockets it is coming from: the pockets of taxpayers. To a certain extent it does not really matter, because all our constituents will pay for this deal. The Minister said that the Chagos islands were priceless, yet we are giving them away and giving away taxpayers’ money for them—and we do not even know how much we will be giving in the long run. I would have thought that some Government Members have concerns, if not about human rights then about the financial implications of the deal.

Especially at this time, national security is an important issue for every Member of the House, yet amendments that seek to ensure that there is scrutiny over what happens to these islands, who has influence in them and whether the treaty that has been entered into guarantees that our security will not be jeopardised are being refused. The Government are not even attacking the amendments or explaining their opposition.

Paul Holmes: Does the right hon. Member share my dismay that, despite a Government majority of over 170 and the fact that there are over 400 Government MPs, on an issue of national security only one Government Back Bencher spoke in this debate? Does he think that is an indication of how the Labour party views national security and an overseas territory being given away for nothing?

Sammy Wilson: I do. Since the hon. Member has given me the opportunity, I will make the point now—I was going to make it later on—that while no Government Members have been rushing to defend the Bill in the

Committee, hundreds of them will be rushing through the Lobby at 10 o’clock or half-past 10 to vote for it. That is the worrying thing. Defence of it, there is none; support for it, despite the issues we have highlighted, there will be.

9.15 pm

I hear time and again that the Government are the greenest Government there has ever been. Some people will say, as they already have, “Well, you can hardly talk about green government given your attitude towards man-made climate change.” The fact that I do not support the policies of net zero does not mean that I do not care about the environment. Indeed, we need to protect many aspects of our environment, and some of the green policies actually destroy the environment, but I will leave that there.

On the Environmental Audit Committee, we recently called for an end to bottom trawling because of the damage it does to the marine environment.

Phil Brickell: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sammy Wilson: I will in a minute, but let me finish this point. Yet here we have a Bill that does not give any long-term security to one of the pristine marine environments. Indeed, we are handing over responsibility for it to a Government who could not even get a boat to put a flag up, yet we are supposed to believe that they will be able to protect the marine environment if foreign countries attempt to destroy it by doing deep-sea trawling, bottom trawling and so on. I would have thought that the environmentalists on the Government Benches might at least have asked some questions about the treaty, or would have supported some of the amendments that seek to do that, yet we find that is not the case.

This is a bad Bill. It will have long-term implications for our country financially and it will have long-term implications for those people who felt that perhaps there was an opportunity for their rights to self-determination to be granted. They have not been. Of course, there are also dangers to our long-term security.

I will finish with this point. I have no doubt that the Minister will repeat the point he made. Sure, the Americans support it—as if the Americans always make good strategic decisions. They do not. Given the time tonight, I know that you would stop me, Madam Chairman, if I started going through some of the bad strategic decisions the Americans have made that we and the world have lived with and their consequences. Just because the Americans—for short-term gain or short-term interest—have supported the deal, let us not say it is okay. It is a bad deal. Amendments were made to try to improve the Bill. The shame is that those amendments were not debated. The Bill goes contrary to the beliefs of many Members on the Government Benches. Unfortunately, I suspect the Bill will go through with a huge majority.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): For the final Back-Bench contribution, I call Mr Jim Shannon. If people have contributed, they should make their way back to the Chamber. Danny Kruger, I am looking at you to whip your colleague.

Danny Kruger *indicated assent.*

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for allowing me to speak on this issue once again, Ms Ghani. I will prefix my comments with this. It is always good to see the Ministers—the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard)—in their place. They are both honourable men whose friendship I value. Being ever respectful, and with great respect to both hon. Gentlemen, I wish to make some comments that will be very contrary to what they have put forward today.

It will be no surprise that I rise at the last hour and as the last Back-Bench speaker—that is often the case, but none the less it is always a pleasure to make a contribution—to ask the Government again to reconsider their decision and ask the Committee to oppose the Bill, even though I know that the numbers game does not stack up.

As we all know, the treaty provides for Mauritius to exercise full sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago, with the UK exercising rights on Diego Garcia during an initial 99-year period. Over those 99 years, the UK will pay Mauritius a total of around £3.4 billion in 2025-26 prices, and that will probably rise. At a time when the Government are taxing farmers, taxing widows' pensions and taxing the middle class into oblivion, handing over £3.4 billion with a benefit that is not tangible is unacceptable. Our constituents will be worse off in the next financial year. Indeed, a typical British family are as much as £15,000 a year poorer than they were five years ago, according to recent *Telegraph Money* analysis. Why, then, have we entered into this agreement, which may fluctuate and cost substantially more than the figure that has been predicted?

I want to make it clear that I believe this treaty should be renegotiated from beginning to end, but if the Bill is to go ahead, it is essential that any increases in payments should come through this House, and that whatever Government are in place at that time should present that. I therefore support new clause 1, which would give certainty and security that increases would not take place without the approval of this House.

Turning to new clauses 2, 5 and 7, I have long stated that there are now substantial risks to our military bases, and that has been reiterated by every person bar one in the Committee today. I am anxious to understand our legal standing on this. I believe it is right and proper for the Committee to understand the nature of how renting from Mauritius will give us the safety and security needed to ensure that those stationed on the base, or relying on support from the base in that area, will not feel vulnerable or exposed. I believe that this deal does expose us, and that we need to be very much aware of our standing and take the necessary steps. That begins with having full knowledge and not simply empty assurances. The recent debacle with the Chinese spies decisions has shown that openness, transparency and accountability are needed even more tonight than they have been in the other statements and urgent questions today. New clause 2 would enforce that as a minimum.

New clause 9 is similar to new clause 8, tabled by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). I support new clause 9, given its similarity to the new clause brought forward by my

Northern Ireland colleagues, who are intimately aware of how issues on the ground can be vastly different from those that are reported. This addition to ensure that a report is made on the compliance of the treaty and the Act with the UN General Assembly resolutions on decolonisation is vital and, I believe, underlines the words of support that have been given to those in the area who are fearful of the removal of British influence and support and fearful of the Mauritian ideals, which were flagged by our American allies in their human rights report in 2023.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, I know that the two issues of human rights and persecution are married together as one, because when we highlight the issue of human rights, we also highlight the issue of persecution of religious beliefs, and vice versa. I really have to express some concerns over human rights in this context. I understand that the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth will reply to the debate. Although I believe he understands and believes in these issues as strongly as I do, I still have great concerns about human rights. It is essential that we do not simply hand over control and abandon not just the military base but all in the region who have relied on our support and friendship over the years.

Unfortunately, this has been a bad treaty from beginning to end. Our Chagossian citizens remain unhappy, our armed forces remain unhappy and the families who are footing the bill are unhappy. I believe that the Government have made the wrong decision on this. The recent Chinese debacle has heightened the need to continue to have boots on the ground and eyes wide open against those who would seek to thwart British interests and the interests of freedom and democracy worldwide. We have recently seen the result of appeasement when the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister highlighted the difficulties brought about by this Government's decision to recognise terrorism and a Palestinian state with no borders, no working non-terrorist Government and no social care system. The handing over of Chagos and renting it back will prove to be a costly and dangerous exercise in capitulation, and even at this very late stage I urge the Government to think again and, at the very least, accept additional protection for the sake of all our collective security.

Stephen Doughty: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. I will attempt to respond to the specifics of the amendments and new clauses in due course, but I want to come back to some of the fundamental points that have been raised during the debate first, and I also want to respond to some of the specific questions that were raised.

With the exception of some genuine questions in relation to the Chagossians, the MPA and the environmental protections, and the implementation of this treaty, it was a shame to see the rehash of the same arguments that were made on Second Reading. There were some outrageous and nonsensical arguments and claims, particularly relating to the costs and to other matters, which I will come to.

I was shocked by some of the anti-American, conspiracy-fuelled nonsense that we heard at various points during the debate. The base is critical to the

[Stephen Doughty]

United Kingdom, the United States, our allies and our national security, and the Bill and the treaty protect the functioning of that base. It does not surrender it; it secures it into the future. This is a Government who inherited a mess from the former Ministers on the Opposition Benches. We are getting stuff done. We are a patriotic Government; our first duty is to protect the national security of this country, and that is why we have got this deal done. It is why it is backed by the United States. It is why it is backed by our Five Eyes partners. It is absolutely crucial to protect the British people and our allies.

We have been very transparent about the reasons for it, and they are the exact opposite of what has been suggested. I come back, as I always have done, to the fundamental question: if there were not a problem and a risk to the operations of this crucial base, why did the previous Government start the negotiations, why did they continue them through 11 rounds of negotiations, and why did they continue them right up until the general election? Those are the facts.

Dr Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Doughty: I will happily take interventions, but first I want to respond to the points that have been made. This agreement has been backed by our key allies and international partners, including the US and our Five Eyes allies. India, Japan and South Korea have also made clear their strong support.

Many questions were asked about the robust security provisions that we have in place to protect the UK and the base for decades to come. The treaty and the Bill secure full operational control of Diego Garcia, a strict ban on foreign security forces across the archipelago and an effective veto on any activity that threatens the base on Diego Garcia. It has been welcomed by the International Agreements Committee and the International Relations and Development Committee in the other place, which said that they

“were assured that the Agreement preserves the UK’s and the US’s freedom of action.”

The legal rationale has been referred to many times, but legally binding provisional measures from the courts could have come within weeks, for example, affecting our ability to patrol the waters around Diego Garcia, and even if we did not comply, international organisations and other countries would. We have set out the legal rationale on a number of occasions. We have been very clear. We also published documents around it.

Paul Holmes: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Doughty: I will respond to some points first. Hon. Members have had plenty of time to make their case. I have also responded to many of their points during the course of the debate, and I am going to respond to the questions.

China has been raised erroneously on many occasions, but we have negotiated robust security provisions to protect the UK and the base for decades to come, and that includes a strict ban on any foreign security forces, including the Chinese, across the archipelago.

The question of finances was raised by a number of Members, and indeed a number of the amendments refer to it. I have to be absolutely clear, as I was on Second Reading: the £30 billion to £35 billion figure quoted by some from the Opposition is totally inaccurate and wildly misleading. It is utterly wrong to ignore the effects of inflation and the changing value of money on the real costs of a deal that lasts 99 years. We published the full costs alongside the treaty. [HON. MEMBERS: “How much?”] They ask how much. I have been very clear about that throughout the debate and at the earlier stages. The average cost per year in today’s money is £101 million, and the net present value of payments under the treaty is £3.4 billion. Just for comparison, the costs compare favourably to other international basing agreements. France, for example, as I said, recently announced an €85 million a year deal with Djibouti. This base is much larger and has much more capabilities, so it compares very favourably.

Conservative Members ask about costs. The total expected cost of the treaty using that NPV methodology, which is the same that has been agreed by the Government Actuary’s Department and others, is just over one third of the value lost by the Department for Health and Social Care under their Governments on PPE that was wasted in the first year of the pandemic, if they want to talk about costs and wasting money. This is a clear investment in our national security. We will not scrimp on our national security, and we will not apologise for keeping our base safe.

9.30 pm

Dr Evans: Could the Minister give any example worldwide where NPV has been used for sovereignty purposes?

Stephen Doughty: I have been clear throughout. We have set and published the methodology. It has been backed by the Office for Budget Responsibility, the statistics regulator and others, and I am happy to set that all out again in writing for the hon. Member if that would be helpful.

I was quite surprised to hear some of the unfortunate remarks made by some Members about the United States and its commitment to this base. The United States pays for the operating costs. We have a crucial national security relationship, which keeps us, the United States and our allies safe. This is a joint base on Diego Garcia. It is absolutely right that those arrangements are in place. As I said, the value from the capability of the base is priceless. This is absolutely the right investment to make.

I was appalled by some of the comments being made. I remind the Committee that President Trump, Secretary of War Hegseth and Secretary Rubio have publicly supported the treaty, as have Five Eyes partners and others.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Doughty: No, I will not give way to the hon. Member. He was not even here throughout the debate. His leader, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), is missing in action—oh, he’s turned up now. He came up with so many figures throughout this process, but he has finally turned up; it is good to see him here.

Questions were raised about the Chagossians, and I want to respond to them seriously because I recognise, as I have done, the very sincere feelings that are felt among different parts of the Chagossian community. We have heard a range of views expressed today by different Members, and I acknowledge the Chagossians who are here in the Gallery. I understand many of them will not support this treaty, but other Chagossians and Chagossian groups do support it, as we have heard during the debate. But I repeat again for the record that the Government deeply regret the way Chagossians were removed from the islands. We are committed to building a relationship that is built on respect and acknowledgment of the wrongs of the past. The negotiations were between the UK and Mauritius, with our priority being to secure full operation of the base on Diego Garcia, but we will finance a new trust fund for Mauritius to use in support of the Chagossian communities. We will work to start a new programme of visits, including to Diego Garcia. Of course, Mauritius will be able to develop a programme of resettlement on the islands other than Diego Garcia. We will continue our support to Chagossians living in the UK through new and existing projects.

Mike Kane: I hope the whole Committee can unite around this point. I pay tribute to the Chagossians in the United Kingdom for the contribution they make to the schools in their communities and to the Catholic churches where they live and, in my constituency, for their work at Wythenshawe hospital and Manchester airport—it is second to none. They are welcome here, and we value them very much, despite our political differences in this Chamber.

Stephen Doughty: I completely and wholeheartedly associate myself with those comments from my hon. Friend. I know he has been a passionate advocate for Chagossians in the UK, and particularly in his constituency, over many years. We have spoken about this matter many times, and I know he and other Members speak passionately on the matter.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the Minister reply to the point made by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), myself and others that not in the last 100 years since the exchange of colonies after the first world war has a people been transferred from the sovereignty of one empire to another without being properly consulted?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Member knows that we regret what happened historically in relation to the Chagos Islands. He will also know that the islands are not permanently inhabited. That was necessarily a negotiation between the United Kingdom and Mauritius.

Let me respond to the many points about the environment, on which many amendments were tabled. We are absolutely clear that the United Kingdom and Mauritius are committed to protecting one of the world's most important marine environments. Indeed, the Mauritian Prime Minister met the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed), in the margins of the third United Nations ocean conference in Nice on 9 June, where he reaffirmed his commitment to the creation of that marine protected area around the Chagos archipelago. That will

be supported by an enhanced partnership with us. The treaty has been welcomed by leading conservation NGOs, including the Zoological Society of London. We continue to work with Mauritius on the implementation of that measure. We are considering seriously the many genuine concerns that right hon. and hon. Members, including the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee and members of the Environmental Audit Committee, have raised. They are serious and important questions, and I assure the Committee that we are taking them seriously, and I will try to update the House on them in due course.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way—he is being very generous. In 2017, the clear position was that the International Court of Justice was not in a position to adjudicate on the relationship between us and a member of the Commonwealth. Has that changed, and, if so, when?

Stephen Doughty: We have been very clear about the legal position and the legal risk. The right hon. Gentleman's Government knew this; it is why they started the process. I do not want to detain the Committee by going through all the arguments that I made on Second Reading—*[Interruption.]* But he knows that we faced the comprehensive rejection of our arguments at the ICJ in 2019, we lost votes at the UN General Assembly, we had the maritime delineation judgment binding on Mauritius and the Maldives—*[Interruption.]*

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. I will hear the Minister.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Madam Chairman. The Opposition ask questions and then make so much noise—they do not even want to hear the answers.

I have mentioned the obligations placed on the BIOT Administration by UN bodies to cease specific activities. I have mentioned the series of procedural complications and blockages at international organisations, including the comprehensive nuclear-test-ban treaty. There are many examples of clear risks. I have explained before the potential under annex VII of UNCLOS—

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Potential.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman chunterers “potential”, but is he willing to gamble with our national security? Is he willing to gamble on the operational effect? *[Interruption.]* Oh, he is willing to gamble! I find it absolutely extraordinary that he is willing to gamble with our national security and that of our allies. That is exactly why the United States and our Five Eyes partners back this deal: it settles that debate.

I will turn to the amendments. The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) tabled amendments 1, 2 and 7 and new clause 2 on the publication of legal advice. She will know from her time in government that it is highly unusual for the Government to publish legal advice that they have obtained. That advice is privileged, and it is important that the Government are able to take frank and confidential advice, as she well knows. In some circumstances, the Government may publish a statement of their legal position, as we did in the case of the Diego Garcia treaty, on the day it was signed. As I have repeatedly explained—Members keep chuntering about

[Stephen Doughty]

it—if a long-term deal is not reached between the UK and Mauritius, it is highly likely that further wide-ranging litigation would be brought quickly by Mauritius against the UK. It might include, for example, further arbitral proceedings against the UK under annex VII of the UN convention on the law of the sea. A judgment would be binding on the UK.

Let me turn to amendments 11 and 14. The hon. Member for Clacton, who has finally turned up but is not even listening, tabled several amendments that appear to serve no function other than wasting Government and parliamentary time. The public consultation proposed in amendment 11, and the impact assessment, would be needlessly costly and time-consuming. They would only confirm the conclusion—on which he had no answers—already reached by our closest ally, the United States, by the International Agreements Committee and the International Relations and Defence Committee, and by our Five Eyes partners. The public already know that the treaty secures the future of the critical base on Diego Garcia. The strategic value has been debated at length and is well understood. We are not willing to gamble with our national security, even if the Member for Clacton is willing to. Quite frankly, he has some gall to turn up after his comments on NATO and Russia—I find it quite extraordinary.

In amendment 13, the hon. Member for Clacton offers an ill-conceived proposal that would keep Diego Garcia listed as an overseas territory while accepting that His Majesty the King would no longer be sovereign. Not only is that constitutionally inaccurate, but in the context of the British Nationality Act 1981 it would have serious consequences for the nationality rights of Chagossians born on different islands in the archipelago. Surely his intention cannot be for individuals born on Diego Garcia to be treated differently from those born on Peros Banhos or the Salomon Islands.

Amendments 3, 4, 5 and 6, tabled by the right hon. Member for Witham and amendment 8 tabled by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), seek to change or remove the statutory powers to make an Order in Council. It is, of course, absolutely right that Parliament should be able to scrutinise the use of power, which is why the Bill provides for the negative procedure to be used. The vast majority of changes that the Government will make using that power will be technical and operational amendments on matters to ensure that our domestic law is consistent with the new status of Diego Garcia—those are matters as varied as police pensions, copyright law, and changes to student finance. The proposed amendments would mean that the House would be obliged to spend valuable parliamentary time on each change to legislation for 99 years. Members surely cannot wish us to spend that amount of time on all those things, and that approach is consistent with powers taken to amend existing legislation in previously comparable situations.

New clauses 1, 11, and 10 regard the prior approval of payments. I have set out clearly the costs, and the absolutely nonsensical figures that have been put forward by the Opposition and the hon. Member for Clacton, and we wholly reject the new clauses. It is entirely usual and proper for payments under international treaties to be made under the royal prerogative, and requiring a

separate distinct vote before payments can be made would create unacceptable risk for the long-term sustainability of the treaty. Without the certainty that the Bill and the treaty provide, the UK and US military would not be able to invest in vital capabilities. That would have major operational implications for the base. On new clause 11 tabled by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, the House of Commons will scrutinise our annual estimates in the usual way, and spending under the treaty will be included in that process. New clause 10 is not necessary either.

New clauses 3, 4 and 9 are on the marine protected area. There is no requirement for the UK to consent to Mauritius establishing such an area or to its management, and that would be inconsistent with the treaty. Although the UK will be playing a different role in respect of the future MPA, both the UK and Mauritius remain committed to protecting that vital marine environment. That is why, under the terms of the treaty, we will provide technical support and assistance to Mauritius, in accordance with a separate written instrument. We will not make any additional direct payments to Mauritius as part of that activity.

On Chagossians and the right of self-determination, amendments 9 and 10, and new clauses 7, 8, 12, 13, and 14 concern the Chagossian community, and I understand and share the strength of feeling on the wider subject, and the historical treatment of the Chagossian communities. That is why the Government have put the preservation of nationality rights at the heart of the Bill. I am sympathetic to the concerns put forward about resettlement. I understand the intention of amendment 9, but it is not necessary. Under the agreement we have already agreed that Mauritius will be able to develop a programme of resettlement on islands other than Diego Garcia—I refer the hon. Member for Surrey Heath to comments from Olivier Bancoult and the Chagos Refugees Group. They have been clear that that is why they support this measure, and are urging us all to support the treaty. I also understand the questions on consultation, but as I have said, those negotiations were between the UK and Mauritius. The islands that make up BIOT do not have, and never have had, a settled population and have never been self-governing. No question of self-determination for a population therefore arises now.

New clauses 5, 6, 15 and 17 relate to national security issues, but they are simply not needed because the treaty protects our national security and secures the base. We have maintained full operational control of Diego Garcia with all the necessary rights and authorities, as well as a series of additional protections. In closing, the Bill and the treaty have been thoroughly scrutinised—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Stephen Doughty: No, I am not going to give way now. There have been plenty of debates and questions, and plenty of discussion. The Government have provided all the information necessary for Parliament to hold us to account, including publishing the full costs of the treaty and the legal rationale for the deal. The International Agreements Committee and the International Relations and Defence Committee have confirmed their agreement that the Bill does what we have set out, and the Government do not take risks with our national security, as the

Opposition or Reform would do. That has been our priority throughout. I reject the amendments and urge the passage of the Bill.

Priti Patel: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment proposed: 7, in clause 1, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

“(1A) The Treaty and sections 2 to 4 of this Act do not come into force until the Secretary of State lays before Parliament a memorandum on the obligations under international law which require the UK to cede sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory to the Government of Mauritius.

(1B) The memorandum specified in subsection (1) must include—

(a) a summary of the legal advice received by the UK Government on this issue;

(b) an analysis of the status of UK’s sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory under international law;

(c) the legal argument for the cessation of British sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory; and

(d) the risks which the UK Government may have faced had it not reached an agreement with the Government of Mauritius.

(1C) The report specified in subsections (1A) and (1B) must be laid before Parliament no later than two months after this Act receives Royal Assent.”—(*Priti Patel.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 174, Noes 321.

Division No. 314]

[9.44 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Cross, Harriet
Amos, Gideon	Dance, Adam
Anderson, Lee	Darling, Steve
Anderson, Stuart	Davies, Gareth
Andrew, rh Stuart	Davies, Mims
Aquarone, Steff	Davis, rh David
Argar, rh Edward	Dean, Bobby
Atkins, rh Victoria	Dewhurst, Charlie
Babarinde, Josh	Dillon, Mr Lee
Bacon, Gareth	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Duffield, Rosie
Barclay, rh Steve	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Bedford, Mr Peter	Dyke, Sarah
Bennett, Alison	Evans, Dr Luke
Bhatti, Saqib	Farage, Nigel
Blackman, Bob	Farron, Tim
Bool, Sarah	Foord, Richard
Bowie, Andrew	Forster, Mr Will
Brandreth, Aphra	Fortune, Peter
Brewer, Alex	Fox, Sir Ashley
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Burghart, Alex	Franklin, Zöe
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Freeman, George
Cane, Charlotte	French, Mr Louie
Cartledge, James	Fuller, Richard
Chadwick, David	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Chambers, Dr Danny	Garnier, Mark
Cleverly, rh Sir James	George, Andrew
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Gilmour, Rachel
Cocking, Lewis	Glen, rh John
Coghlan, Chris	Glover, Olly
Collins, Victoria	Goldman, Marie
Cooper, Daisy	Gordon, Tom
Cooper, John	Green, Sarah
Costa, Alberto	Griffith, Andrew
Coutinho, rh Claire	Griffiths, Alison

Harding, Monica	Pritchard, rh Mark
Harris, Rebecca	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Hayes, rh Sir John	Rankin, Jack
Heylings, Pippa	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Hinds, rh Damian	Robinson, rh Gavin
Hoare, Simon	Roome, Ian
Hobhouse, Wera	Rosindell, Andrew
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Sabine, Anna
Holmes, Paul	Savage, Dr Roz
Huddleston, Nigel	Shannon, Jim
Jardine, Christine	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Jarvis, Liz	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Slade, Vikki
Jenrick, rh Robert	Smart, Lisa
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Smith, Greg
Jones, Clive	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Jopp, Lincoln	Smith, Rebecca
Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Kohler, Mr Paul	Sollom, Ian
Kruger, Danny	Spencer, Dr Ben
Lamont, John	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Stafford, Gregory
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Stephenson, Blake
MacCleary, James	Stone, Jamie
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Maguire, Ben	Stuart, rh Graham
Mak, Alan	Swann, Robin
Malthouse, rh Kit	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Martin, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean</i>)	Taylor, Luke
Maynard, Charlie	Thomas, Bradley
McMurdock, James	Thomas, Cameron
McVey, rh Esther	Tice, Richard
Miller, Calum	Timothy, Nick
Milne, John	Trott, rh Laura
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Vickers, Martin
Moore, Robbie	Vickers, Matt
Moran, Layla	Voaden, Caroline
Morgan, Helen	Whately, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Morton, rh Wendy	Wild, James
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Wilkinson, Max
Munt, Tessa	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Murray, Susan	Wilson, Munira
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Wilson, rh Sammy
Norman, rh Jesse	Wood, Mike
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
O'Brien, Neil	Wrigley, Martin
Olney, Sarah	Young, Claire
Patel, rh Priti	
Paul, Rebecca	
Perteghella, Manuela	
Pinkerton, Dr Al	
Pochin, Sarah	

Tellers for the Ayes:

**David Reed and
Jerome Mayhew**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Antoniazzi, Tonia
Abbott, Jack	Arthur, Dr Scott
Adam, Shockat	Asato, Jess
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Asser, James
Akehurst, Luke	Atkinson, Catherine
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Atkinson, Lewis
Aldridge, Dan	Bailey, Mr Calvin
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Baines, David
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Baker, Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Bance, Antonia
Ali, Tahir	Barker, Paula
Anderson, Callum	Barron, Lee
Anderson, Fleur	Baxter, Johanna
	Beales, Danny

Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote
cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna (*Proxy vote cast
by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren

Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast
by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote
cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote
cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast
by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by
Liz Saville Roberts*)
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim

Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast
by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy

Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Searns, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris (*Proxy vote cast
by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul

Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean

Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Deirdre Costigan and
Stephen Morgan

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: 9, page 1, line 7, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

“(1A) Before sections 2 to 4 of this Act come into force, the Secretary of State must—

- (a) seek to undertake negotiations with the Government of Mauritius on whether Mauritius will establish a right for Chagossians to return and reside in the Chagos Islands; and
- (b) seek agreement to a referendum for Chagossians on self-determination within any negotiations which take place under paragraph (a); and
- (c) lay before both Houses of Parliament a report on progress on establishing negotiations with the Government of Mauritius and the outcome of any that take place.

(1B) Within two months of the report being laid before the House of Commons under paragraph (1a), the Secretary of State must table a substantive motion in the House of Commons on the contents of the report.”—
(*Dr Pinkerton.*)

This amendment requires that the Government must undertake negotiations with Mauritius on a Chagossian right of return and on a referendum, with a report laid before Parliament on the outcome of the negotiations. The Government must subsequently table a substantive motion in the House of Commons on the content of that report.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 83, Noes 319.

Division No. 315]

[9.59 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Glover, Olly
Amos, Gideon	Goldman, Marie
Anderson, Lee	Gordon, Tom
Aquarone, Steff	Green, Sarah
Babarinde, Josh	Harding, Monica
Bennett, Alison	Heylings, Pippa
Blackman, Kirsty	Hobhouse, Wera
Brewer, Alex	Jardine, Christine
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Jarvis, Liz
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Jones, Clive
Cane, Charlotte	Kohler, Mr Paul
Chadwick, David	Kruger, Danny
Chambers, Dr Danny	Lake, Ben (<i>Proxy vote cast by</i> <i>Liz Saville Roberts</i>)
Coghlan, Chris	Leadbitter, Graham
Collins, Victoria	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Cooper, Daisy	Logan, Seamus
Dance, Adam	MacCleary, James
Darling, Steve	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Davies, Ann	Maguire, Ben
Dean, Bobby	Mak, Alan
Dillon, Mr Lee	Martin, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Bobby Dean</i>)
Dyke, Sarah	Maynard, Charlie
Farage, Nigel	McMurdock, James
Farron, Tim	Medi, Llinos
Foord, Richard	Miller, Calum
Forster, Mr Will	Milne, John
George, Andrew	
Gilmour, Rachel	

Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Norman, rh Jesse
Olney, Sarah
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa

Smith, rh Sir Julian
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Zöe Franklin and
Susan Murray

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Carling, Sam
Abbott, Jack	Charters, Mr Luke
Adam, Shockat	Chownes, Dr Ellie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Collier, Jacob
Akehurst, Luke	Collins, Tom
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Conlon, Liam
Aldridge, Dan	Coombes, Sarah
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Cooper, Andrew
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Ali, Rushanara	Cooper, rh Yvette
Ali, Tahir	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Anderson, Callum	Coyle, Neil
Anderson, Fleur	Craft, Jen
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Creasy, Ms Stella
Arthur, Dr Scott	Crichton, Torcuil
Asato, Jess	Curtis, Chris
Asser, James	Daby, Janet
Atkinson, Catherine	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Atkinson, Lewis	Dalton, Ashley (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Darlington, Emily
Baines, David	Davies, Jonathan
Baker, Alex	Davies, Paul
Bance, Antonia	Davies, Shaun
Barker, Paula	Davies-Jones, Alex
Barron, Lee	Dean, Josh
Baxter, Johanna	Dearden, Kate
Beales, Danny	Denyer, Carla
Beavers, Lorraine	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Begum, Apsana	Dickson, Jim
Benn, rh Hilary	Dixon, Anna (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Berry, Siân	Dixon, Samantha
Betts, Mr Clive	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Billington, Ms Polly	Dollimore, Helena
Bishop, Matt	Doughty, Stephen
Blake, Rachel	Dowd, Peter
Bloore, Chris	Downie, Graeme
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Bonavia, Kevin	Eagle, Dame Angela
Botterill, Jade	Eagle, rh Maria
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Eastwood, Colum
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Edwards, Lauren
Brickell, Phil	Efford, Clive
Burgon, Richard	Elmore, Chris
Burke, Maureen	Entwistle, Kirith
Burton-Sampson, David	Esterson, Bill
Byrne, Ian	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Cadbury, Ruth	Farnsworth, Linsey
Caliskan, Nesil	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Ferguson, Mark
Campbell, Irene	Ferguson, Patricia
Campbell-Savours, Markus	

Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mak, Alan
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan

Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Deirdre Costigan and
 Stephen Morgan

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

DISSOLUTION OF THE BRITISH INDIAN OCEAN TERRITORY

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 318, Noes 174.

Division No. 316]

[10.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Baxter, Johanna

Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Lauren
Efford, Clive

Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hardy, Emma
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kumar, Sonia
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lake, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Liz Saville Roberts*)
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian

Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter

Quigley, Mr Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Sarah
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scroggham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle

Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie

Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Deirdre Costigan and
Stephen Morgan

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George

French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast
by Bobby Dean*)
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morton, rh Wendy
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben

O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Mohindra*)

Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Jerome Mayhew and
David Reed

Question accordingly agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

APPROVAL OF PAYMENTS TO MAURITIUS BY THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

“(1) No payment may be made by the Government of the United Kingdom to the Government of Mauritius under Article 11 (1)(a) of the Treaty without the approval of the House of Commons.

(2) No development framework under Article 11 (1)(c) may be agreed by the Government of the United Kingdom with the Government of Mauritius without the approval of the House of Commons.

(3) No payment may be made under any development framework agreed between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of Mauritius without the approval of the House of Commons.

(4) The approval required by subsections (1), (2) and (3) must be in the form of a resolution of the House of Commons.”—
(*Priti Patel.*)

This new clause requires parliamentary approval for any payment by the UK Government to the Government of Mauritius under the Treaty.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 172, Noes 322.

Division No. 317]

[10.25 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart

Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth

Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel

Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean*)
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morton, rh Wendy
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John

Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
David Reed and
Jerome Mayhew

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie

Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Lauren
Efford, Clive
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, Mr James

Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Liz Saville Roberts*)
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie

Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Deirdre Costigan and
Stephen Morgan

Question accordingly negated.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

King's consent signified.

10.41 pm

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

In a world that is growing more dangerous, this Labour Government will always put Britain's security first, and if there is one thing that Members should take away from today's debate, it is the absolute necessity of this Bill to secure the military base on Diego Garcia, which has played a critical role in defending the UK and our allies for over 50 years. Both the treaty and the Bill guarantee the long-term, secure operation of our military base and ensure that it will continue protecting our national security for generations to come.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Members on both sides of the House for their scrutiny of the Bill throughout its passage. I am grateful to those who contributed to the vigorous debate on Second Reading in September and to those who participated in today's Committee proceedings. I thank the International Agreements Committee and the International Relations and Defence Committee for their thorough inquiries into the substance of the treaty. In particular, I want to

thank the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for his tireless efforts in guiding the Bill through the House.

I would also like to thank the officials who worked on the Bill and the treaty, both under this Government and under the previous Government. Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our international allies, especially the United States, for their support throughout the treaty negotiation process. Their backing was crucial in ensuring that this treaty, in the words of the US Defence Secretary Hegseth,

“secures the operational capabilities of the base...for many years ahead.”

This treaty also recognises the importance of the islands to the Chagossians. This Government respect the diversity of views within the community, so we will continue to engage with the Chagossian groups over the coming months and years. We have also committed to increase our support through new and existing projects. The US, our Five Eyes partners, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea have all supported this deal. Our adversaries would have loved to see this deal fail and the military base placed under threat, but this Government are not risking our national security, as the Opposition parties would claim we are.

Let me make it clear why we are here today. We inherited a set of negotiations started by the Conservatives. They chose to start negotiations to deliver what Lord Cameron said in January 2024 would be the “safety, security and long-term viability of this base”.

The right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly) explained the objectives at this very Dispatch Box. He also said they were to

“secure an agreement on the basis of international law...to strengthen...cooperation”

with Mauritius on

“maritime security...the environment...and to tackle illegal migration”.—[*Official Report*, 3 November 2022; Vol. 721, c. 27WS.] That is what this deal secures, and that is why I wish it a speedy and successful passage through the rest of its parliamentary proceedings.

Let us be absolutely clear: the Conservatives started the negotiations. They held 11 rounds, but they failed to secure a deal. It is a question that not a single Tory MP wanted to answer today: why did they start these negotiations if it was so bad? If it was such a threat to national security, why was it a Conservative Government who started the negotiations? Why did they hold 11 rounds? It was a Labour Government who secured the deal; it is a Labour Government who are going to secure the future of our military base, and that is why I commend the Bill to the House.

Priti Patel: Let me begin my remarks by once again paying tribute to the heroic Chagossian community who have joined us once again for this debate and have been here for a good four hours. In response to the Minister's last point—he may have heard us say this previously on Second Reading and during Opposition day debates—no deal is better than a terrible deal, and the Conservative party would never have put this deal forward.

Throughout the process, the Government—[*Interruption.*] They can all make as much noise as they want on the Government benches. None of them were here—[*Interruption.*]

They can point their fingers as much as they want; none of them were sitting here earlier to defend their Government on this terrible deal.

Let me come back to the Chagossian community, because throughout this process, they have been silenced and ignored by this Government, and they have faced decades of pain and hurt. [*Laughter.*] This is not a laughing matter at all. Hon. Members may want to sneer about this, but they should pay some respect to the Chagossian people, because we praise them and are grateful to them for their dignified campaign. There are some Members in this House, even on the Government Benches, who have Chagossians as their own constituents, who they have made representations on behalf of as well. I think we should thank them for the work that they have done.

I also want to thank hon. Members from across the House for their interest in this Bill and their diligent scrutiny. I say that because the Labour Government have sought to keep debates on their surrender treaty as short and restricted as possible, and we have seen that again. [*Interruption.*] They have not been here to contribute to those debates—what would they know? I am particularly grateful for the efforts of hon. Members who have challenged and debated the Bill, including the interest in the Foreign Affairs Committee evidence session. Opposition Members on the Environmental Audit Committee and the Science and Technology Committee spent valuable time in Select Committees—let me emphasise that: in Select Committees—scrutinising this treaty. Opposition Members have been relentless and I thank them for their forensic questioning and for exposing the scandalous way in which this Government have acted. These debates have benefited from the legal expertise and knowledge of former Ministers and Law Officers, and I am thankful to them for their contribution and support.

I also want to pay tribute to the Minister for the Overseas Territories, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). He has been diligent in responding to questioning, and he has probably spent more time in the House debating this issue, as well as responding to written communications, than he originally expected. He has become the Minister for defending the indefensible. Although we do disagree robustly on this treaty, we thank him and respect him for his contributions.

Let us be clear: this is a bad Bill for Britain; the Opposition will continue to oppose it, and our colleagues in the other place will give it further scrutiny. It leaves Britain weaker and poorer, it gives succour to our enemies, and it has shown the world that, under Labour, Britain is being governed by weak Ministers who appease the whims of left-wing lawyers and activists, rather than standing up for our national interest. Friend and foe alike will now see Britain as a soft touch that can be bullied by lawfare into waving the white flag of surrender, rather than proudly flying the Union flag.

For Britain's standing in the world, for our defence and national security, and for our suffering British taxpayers, I bitterly regret the passage of this Bill. For months we have been calling on Labour to step back from the brink and ditch this mind-boggling surrender deal, but this Government have arrogantly blundered on. Britain comprehensively lost in these negotiations, the treaty and the Bill that we have considered today as

[Priti Patel]

a result. Ministers have squirmed and rolled over at every turn and have been eaten for breakfast by the Mauritian Government.

Let me be clear: we will oppose this Bill every step of the way in this House and in the other place. It is worth noting that within weeks of coming to power, this soft-touch Government decided that they would end more than 200 years of British sovereignty over this vital territory for our country's security and national interest, and for no justifiable reason. We are not just giving up the islands of the archipelago; more than that, the national interest is being squandered, and so is peace and stability in that area.

The Government are asking British taxpayers, whom they have already thrashed with vindictive taxes, now to shoulder the burden of this scandalous deal, and it is simply not on. Labour Governments often bang on about the redistribution of wealth, but today they take it to a new level with the redistribution of wealth from Britain to Mauritius. How much of the money will be plundered from the Defence budget, hindering our armed forces' ability to procure new capabilities at the worst possible time? It comes as the Minister for Defence Procurement has overseen a freeze on procurement as the world gets more dangerous, and we do know that the world is getting more dangerous. The much-vaunted strategic defence review, which Labour pledged would see off all the major threats, was overdue and underfunded—but guess what? Labour has no plan to pay for it now.

Here we are now: the Government have found it within themselves to spend £35 billion on this deal. This is not just money from down the line in the future; it is hundreds of millions of pounds each year within this Parliament. Today the Government have sunk to a new low: Labour MPs have voted against giving Parliament, this House, a say over sending £35 billion of our constituents' money to Mauritius with no strings attached. Mauritius will now use our money to reduce its debt and cut taxes because of this Government. Labour MPs have voted to block the publication of a summary of legal advice on which the Government relied to make this dodgy deal. We might have thought that they had learnt from the current China debacle that this is not the right way, but no, they still cannot offer a sound legal explanation for why they have rushed through this deal.

The Government have refused to adopt our amendments to ensure the monitoring of how the rights of Chagossians will be safeguarded. The Chagossians, to whom we have a special responsibility, have been neglected and ignored by Labour since the election, so it comes as no surprise—and it is now a bitter blow for them—that there is no cost implication or, indeed, any good reason as to why we are going down this route.

The Government have also declined to adopt our amendment to keep the Intelligence and Security Committee apprised of the security protections in this treaty, again denying hon. Members the scrutiny to which we are entitled. It is astonishing, in the light of the national security concerns that this terrible deal now brings, and it leaves our country weaker and poorer. This is a deal that this Government and our country will come to regret.

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

10.52 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton: It gives me no pleasure to say that this Bill fails the Chagossian people. For decades, decisions about the Chagos Islands have been taken without the consent of those most affected. The treaty continues that injustice, offering no guaranteed right of return, no legally binding resettlement plan and no meaningful protection of Chagossian rights.

The Liberal Democrats support negotiations with Mauritius and support respect for international law, but never at the expense of Chagossian dignity. The treaty, as it stands, lacks transparency, environmental safeguards and accountability for the substantial public expenditure that it entails. That is why we tabled seven amendments to inscribe parliamentary oversight, to protect the marine environment and to uphold Chagossian rights to self-determination. That includes provisions for scrutiny of ministerial decisions, mandatory environmental reporting and a referendum of the Chagossian people themselves. We also called for full financial transparency and a review of the welfare of Chagossians living in the UK, many of whom continue to face hardship as a direct result of their historical displacement. This is not merely a matter of geopolitical assets or territorial claims; it is about justice, belonging and moral responsibility to those who call the Chagos islands home.

I thank the Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for the numerous conversations that we have had during the passage of the Bill—he has been generous with his time. I am disappointed, however, that he did not feel able to accept some of my amendments and suggestions during that process.

I will finish with words lifted from the UN charter, a document that this country helped to shape:

“The Purposes of the United Nations are...to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples”.

That right has been denied to the Chagossian people for more than 50 years, so I urge Members across the House to think carefully when voting this evening about whether they wish to compound that half century of injustice or embrace the foundational principles of the UN. [Interruption.] If this House wishes to do the latter, we cannot allow the Bill to pass without ensuring that Chagossians themselves are sovereign over their citizenship, the governance of their islands and the prospect of return. [HON. MEMBERS: “How are you voting?”] I ask Conservative right hon. and hon. Members on my right-hand side, who have lauded the efforts of the Chagossian people but sat on their hands when they had the opportunity to give Chagossians the right to a referendum, whether they wish to keep chuntering from a sedentary position.

In direct response to the Minister, who challenged this in Committee, I say that the forced displacement of a people does not and cannot annul the identity or the rights of the Chagossians as a people. To suggest otherwise perpetuates the disgraces of the past and, as a sentiment, that is unworthy of this Bill and of this House.

*The House divided: Ayes 320, Noes 171.***Division No. 318]****[10.56 pm****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella

Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen

Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben (*Proxy vote cast by Liz Saville Roberts*)
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame

Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will

Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie

Vince, Chris (*Proxy vote cast
by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Deirdre Costigan and
Stephen Morgan**

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Cane, Charlotte
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie

Dillon, Mr Lee
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln

Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast
by Bobby Dean*)
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdoch, James
McVey, rh Esther
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morton, rh Wendy
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna

Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
**David Reed and
Jerome Mayhew**

*Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read the Third time and passed.*

PETITION Grove Park Station

11.9 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am pleased to be standing here this evening with this petition on behalf of my constituents. It states:

“The petition of Grove Park station users—
and local residents and local businesses—
“Declares that the Station needs improvement.”

It is shameful that these improvements have not already taken place. The petition therefore requests
“that the House of Commons urge the government to work with Southeastern Railway”

to undertake long-awaited improvements, which include enhancing accessibility, so that the station is accessible to everyone; improving safety by installing brighter lights, better CCTV coverage and regular security patrols; better shelter and seating; and better access to toilets. Local commuters deserve it.

Following is the full text of the petition:

*[The petition of Grove Park station users,
Declares that the Station needs improvement.*

*The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of
Commons urge the government to work with Southeastern
Railway to institute the following improvements:*

*Enhanced Accessibility: Provide step-free access to all
platforms to ensure the station is accessible to everyone.*

*Improved Safety: Install brighter lighting, increase CCTV
coverage, and ensure regular security patrols to deter
crime and enhance passenger safety.*

*Better Shelter and Seating: Upgrade the existing shelters
to provide better protection from the elements and install
additional seating to accommodate waiting passengers.*

Better access to toilets.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003119]

A50/A500 Corridor

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

11.11 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the important issue of the A50/A500 corridor, a route that is vital to our industry and people in both Staffordshire and the wider midlands. May I welcome the new Minister to his portfolio? I hope he has not already got earache from the amount of times I have mentioned this road to him already. The previous Roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), saw the chaos of the road for herself, and the same pleasure awaits him if he wishes to visit.

This corridor is more than a road; it connects our communities, links our manufacturers to markets and sustains thousands of jobs across the midlands. Every day, more than 60,000 vehicles travel along it, moving people, goods and opportunity between Derby, Uttoxeter, Stoke-on-Trent and the M1 and M6. It is a route that serves some of Britain's best-known businesses, including JCB, Toyota and Rolls-Royce, leading universities and tourist attractions such as Alton Towers.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The A50/A500 growth corridor offers massive potential for growth. In my constituency, I have junction 15 of the M6 and the Sideway roundabout, which joins the A500 with the A50 before it goes on through the Meir tunnel and towards Uttoxeter. It is often congested, but it is a vital part of the supply chain for the advanced manufacturing corridor. Does my right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, I have promoted him. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is really important that we start investing in improvements on this part of the road network?

Jacob Collier: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend has been a great champion for improvements alongside me. Congestion around Uttoxeter, Blythe Bridge and Sudbury undermines productivity and growth and turns commutes into nightmares. Queues stretch for miles at peak hours, average speeds fall below 20 mph and local roads bear the pressure of diverted traffic. My constituents experience that on a daily basis.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important Adjournment debate. I was recently contacted by a constituent who regularly travels between Castle Donington and Littleover. They say that every evening last year, the A50 was either closed or restricted, or the access slip roads were closed. Does my hon. Friend agree that everything possible needs to be done to improve this part of the vital network for the east midlands as well as his constituency?

Jacob Collier: My hon. Friend has made the case that this investment would benefit not just the people of Staffordshire, but the people of east Staffordshire and the wider midlands.

I hope that the Government will commit to the A50/A500 being part of the next road investment strategy in March 2026. The Treasury has already set aside £24 billion of capital funding for that programme, and my purpose this evening is clear: to ensure that the

[*Jacob Collier*]

A50/A500 is placed within that document, and that the Department for Transport commits to funding the next stage of upgrades through RIS3.

Midlands Connect, which has led the technical work on this route, has produced powerful evidence of what those upgrades could achieve. Its latest assessment shows that by 2031, improvements along the A50 could create more than 2,000 jobs across Staffordshire and generate £116 million for the local economy.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The point has been made that constituents get stuck trying to get to high-quality, well-paid jobs along the A50 corridor. I have residents in Kidsgrove, Mill Hill and Talke who regularly commute to the likes of JCB. Does my hon. Friend agree that the benefit of a better road connection would be felt not only in his constituency of Burton and Uttoxeter, but much further afield across neighbouring constituencies?

Jacob Collier: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There will be a £24 million benefit to Stoke-on-Trent, a £30 million boost to Uttoxeter and east Staffordshire, and an £11 million benefit to Newcastle-under-Lyme, which demonstrates the importance of investing in this corridor.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Jacob Collier: I will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Jim Shannon, on the subject of the A50/A500 corridor.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Member on bringing this debate before the House. He is an assiduous Member, and he is doing extremely well in bringing forward his constituents' issues. Does he agree that the Government must also look at the impact that long-term work will have on the motorists who rely on this road and, in particular, the emergency services? Does he agree that if any improvements are to happen, proper consideration must be given to the impact they will have on the day-to-day lives of the hundreds of his constituents who rely on this road daily, whether for employment or education, or, indeed, at times of emergency?

Jacob Collier: I was not sure whether the people of Northern Ireland use the A50, but I am grateful for that intervention. I am going to come on to safety concerns, which are a key part of this debate.

We have the full backing of 50 local business leaders and the Staffordshire chambers of commerce, who wrote with me to the Chancellor to urge investment in this vital corridor. That is a clear demonstration of the support we have from the business community.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend or right hon. Friend—sorry, my right good friend—and neighbouring MP for giving way. He has mentioned the Staffordshire chambers of commerce, which is so excited to see these investments happen. At the corridor's closest point to my constituency is one of the roundabouts in Uttoxeter that gets so snarled up—it is just 4 miles away. Improving these roads will affect not just constituencies along the corridor, but those adjacent to it and further afield. Does my hon. Friend

agree that investment in this road is not just an investment in getting to and from places faster, but an investment in real, good, high-quality, unionised jobs?

Jacob Collier: Absolutely, and if we see that investment, we can create even more jobs. Midlands Connect's long-term vision goes further by predicting 17,000 new jobs and £12 billion of added economic output for the region over the next 60 years. That investment will also support the delivery of 30,000 new homes. The corridor plays a vital strategic role in linking the east midlands freeport to the rest of the country, and with the expansion of junction 24 of the M1—which is being championed by east midlands mayor Claire Ward and east midlands Labour MPs—we can turbocharge that growth.

However, this is not just about economics; it is also about safety. At the McDonald's roundabout in Uttoxeter—a location that thousands of my constituents use every day—there has been a series of tragic and fatal accidents. Only recently, we saw another serious collision during the morning rush hour that caused chaos across the town. Each incident is a reminder that we must act with urgency. The current pedestrian crossing on the Uttoxeter roundabout forces pedestrians to cross multiple busy lanes of fast-moving traffic. It is unsafe and unsustainable.

Safety improvements must sit alongside wider upgrades to the corridor. Every serious accident leads to delays for hauliers, lost hours for commuters, and disruption for the emergency services. Safer design will save lives, as well as keep us moving. While many MPs might be lobbying the Department for road upgrades after decades of under-investment, few will have a stronger case than the A50/500. If we want to deliver economic growth, make commutes easier, create thousands of jobs, back business to succeed, build more houses and better connect our communities, we should invest in the A50/500. These upgrades are backed cross-party, cross-county and cross-region, because we can all see the benefits. The spending review has provided the cash, the analysis has provided the evidence, and our communities have made their case—what we now need is the political will to deliver. I therefore urge the Minister to confirm that the A50/500 corridor will be considered a key priority in the preparation of RIS3 and that work will now begin on that detailed business case.

The midlands has been held back for too long. This Government are already reversing that decline, but we can go further. My constituents and our businesses were first promised these upgrades in 2008 by a bloke called George Osborne, when he was shadow Chancellor. The Tories never delivered, and we are still waiting. This Labour Government can be the difference.

11.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) on securing this debate and for speaking so passionately about transport in his constituency and the implications for the wider region. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss transport in the region today. I assure my hon. Friend that this Government understand the significance and importance of transport to the people, communities and businesses that power local economies across the country. I have been interested to

engage with the ambitious proposals for development along the A50 and A500. These roads link Stoke-on-Trent, Uttoxeter, Burton upon Trent and Derby—all areas with rich histories of industry and manufacturing, but also home to exciting innovation.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I gently point out to the Minister that there is not just a rich history of manufacturing and industry, but potentially a rich future, too. We are still an area of the country that makes many things, whether that is high-tech agricultural machinery at JCB or fine porcelain ceramics in the city of Stoke-on-Trent. The roads and infrastructure that come with that could be the growth point for north Staffordshire, which would help deliver on the Government's economic agenda and allow the infrastructure to develop to build the homes that we need. It is win, win, win, if the Minister can confirm that we can have the upgrades we need.

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The area is also home to exciting innovation, new technologies and advanced manufacturing. This Government absolutely understand the importance of such routes to our daily lives, and they are core to key Government priorities such as kick-starting the economy, delivering housing growth and tackling regional inequality. In that context, while the A50 near Uttoxeter remains the specific focus of today's debate, it would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to highlight how the quality of journeys and transport across Staffordshire have been and are being improved.

This Government are committed to restoring pride and trust in our transport system, which works day in, day out for those who rely on it. June's spending review confirmed £2.3 billion of investment in local transport through the local transport grant. Staffordshire county council will receive a total local transport grant capital allocation of £92.98 million between 2026-27 and 2029-30. In addition, Staffordshire will also receive £3.39 million in local transport grant resource funding. That vital funding will help build local capability and capacity to develop and update local transport plans, to effectively deliver local transport infrastructure priorities, and to work with regional partners to progress regional priorities.

England's roads are a vital part of our transport system. Cars remain by far the most popular form of transport. This Government are dedicated to maintaining and renewing our road network to ensure it continues to serve all road users. It is why we are committed to long-term programmes of investment to improve road links throughout the region and to facilitate the growth and development that this nation needs, and it is why local areas such as Staffordshire have benefited from the £1.6 billion record investment in road maintenance funding for the 2025-26 financial year. This marks a £500 million increase in funding, and Staffordshire will be eligible to receive £39.4 million. Building on that, we will provide £24 billion of capital funding between 2026-27 and 2029-30 to maintain and improve our motorways and local roads across the country. This funding increase will allow National Highways and local authorities, like Staffordshire, to invest in significantly improving the long-term condition of England's road network, delivering faster, safer and more reliable journeys.

As for the specific issue of the proposal for development on the central section of the A50 near Uttoxeter, I acknowledge the difficult challenges that congestion

and uncertain journey times on key routes may cause for businesses and commuters, as well as the potential impact that this may have on growth, investment and employment. We recognise that the strategic road network plays a vital role in daily lives. Through our growth mission we will rebuild Britain, delivering new homes and the critical infrastructure that underpins economic growth.

In August the Department for Transport published its draft road investment strategy, which set out the Government's strategic objectives and included just under £25 billion of indicative funding for the operation, maintenance and renewal of our strategic road network and for the RIS3 period covering the period from 2026 to 2031. As part of the road investment strategy, the Department continues to consider improvements to the central section of the A50 near Uttoxeter, as well as junction 15 of the M6, as part of the pipeline of projects being developed for possible delivery in a future road investment strategy. I know that my hon. Friend has engaged extensively with officials from my Department, and with National Highways, on these matters for some time, passionately outlining the case for investment. National Highways is committed to continuing to develop these proposals, and, subject to a supportive business case, they will be considered for delivery within RIS4, beyond 2031—or late in RIS3, if funding becomes available.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for being so generous in giving way. Thirteen years ago, when I was leader of the local authority in Newcastle, I joined the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire local enterprise partnership board. This project was on the books then. The sclerotic nature of the last Government meant that it had not progressed at all, and I hate to think what investment has been lost. While I welcome the commitment that the Minister is making to future potential, will he at least recognise that we could be talking about 20 years after this was first raised by Members who are in the House today? We need a relatively swift conclusion of effort so that we at least know which projects we can green-light around the area for the jobs, the growth and the homes that we need.

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. National Highways will work closely with regional partners to consider the opportunities along the corridor as part of this process.

Let me end by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter for securing the debate. As I know he appreciates, transport plays a central role in lives and livelihoods across the country, including his constituency and the wider midlands. Today he has highlighted several important issues relating to Uttoxeter in particular. I want to reassure the House that the Government are providing record levels of investment in roads, rail, buses and active travel projects across the country to connect people with jobs, education and opportunities. I also want to reassure my hon. Friend that the Government have heard the case clearly, and will continue to take action to address the issues debated today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 20 October 2025

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

Asylum Seekers: Support and Accommodation

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Home Affairs Committee on 1 July, 10 June, 13 May, 29 April and 18 March, on asylum accommodation, HC 580.]

4.30 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 705383 and 718406 relating to support and accommodation for asylum seekers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I lead this debate for the Petitions Committee, and I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for the support I receive from the Refugee, Asylum, Migration and Policy Project. I start by thanking the petition creators, Robert Barnes and Bob Clements, and all those who have signed the two petitions. Mr Barnes's petition calls on the Government to

"Shut the migrant hotels down now and deport illegal migrants housed there",

and was signed by more than 256,000 people. Mr Clements's petition calls on the Government to

"Stop financial and other support for asylum seekers", and has more than 427,000 signatures.

Mr Barnes, whom I spoke with last week, does not oppose asylum. He believes that we should grant sanctuary to those fleeing persecution at home. He is absolutely right about that fundamental truth. It is who we are. Our British values of fairness and decency explain why, across generations, we have welcomed refugees from the across the globe—those escaping Hitler's tyranny, Idi Amin's brutality or Soviet oppression. Each time, some voices demanded closed borders, and each time, Britain chose humanity over heartlessness.

Those values were in action when, on 14 October 1914, 16,000 Belgian refugees reached Folkestone harbour in my constituency in one day, fleeing Germany's invasion. Those arrivals instantly doubled the town's population, yet locals immediately organised food, clothing, shelter and medical care. Some 250,000 Belgian refugees found sanctuary across Britain during world war one, which reflected the instinctive human compassion for others' desperation—a compassion built into our British sense of fairness.

We see those values enduring in my constituency today, in the activities of the local charity Napier Friends, which supports residents at Napier barracks. The charity has achieved incredible things, running English classes and creating volunteer opportunities to help our local community, including litter picking and organising gleaning, which is essentially collecting extra local produce to donate to food banks for people who need that extra food. My recent Napier visit showed outstanding work

both by Napier Friends and current staff, and I thank them for all their work and for the compassion they show in doing it.

The key question the petitions ask is simple: how should we treat people while they wait for their asylum decision from the UK Government? It is that waiting time that costs the state money, because asylum applicants cannot work for the first 12 months. There is a strong argument for shortening that period to around six months, as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain have done, to ease pressure on the accommodation system. Mr Barnes told me that he does not want to throw asylum applicants out on to the street. He wants to end hotel use. He wants to speed up asylum processing. He wants us to be quicker at removing people with no right to stay.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful for the hon. and learned Member's opening remarks. I too would like to put on record the support I get from the Refugee, Asylum, Migration and Policy Project. The Government have managed to get the number of people waiting for initial decision down by 18% in the last year, which is good, but the number waiting for an appeal is up by 88%. One in two asylum seekers has no access to legal representation through the process, and that is what is slowing it down. Would the hon. Gentleman agree that ensuring that asylum seekers get that representation is just, and also will oil the wheels so we get people moved quicker?

Tony Vaughan: I agree with the hon. Member that we absolutely must ensure that those seeking asylum have proper access to legal aid. It is much quicker and cheaper in the long run if we can flush out all the claims at the outset, so that we do not have them raised at the last minute, when perhaps costs are higher. I am absolutely behind the hon. Member on that.

On the points that Mr Barnes made to me, I agree with him, and I imagine that the Government do too. Labour's manifesto promised to end hotel use by the end of this Parliament, and we are already well ahead of schedule. Hotel use peaked in August 2023 at £9 million spent every day across 400 facilities; since taking power, Labour has already cut hotel numbers in half and slashed £500 million yearly from asylum hotel costs, closing 23 asylum hotels.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): On the hon. and learned Gentleman's claim that the Government are making progress, does he expect the total number of nights spent in hotels by asylum seekers to be higher or lower this year than it was last year?

Tony Vaughan: I do not know what is going to happen; I cannot predict the future. The point I am making is that the measures that are being taken are moving us faster in the right direction than even we had intended at the outset of the Parliament.

Labour also promised to clear the asylum backlog created by the last Government's effective pausing of asylum decision making. This Labour Government have recruited more decision makers and sped up processing. In the first six months of this year, the Government processed about 60,000 asylum claims—around 70% more than the same period last year. On removing those with

[Tony Vaughan]

no right to stay, enforced returns have been increased by 25%, compared with the Conservatives' final years in office.

There is of course still much more to do to win back public confidence in our asylum system. Mr Barnes supports the use of larger sites such as Napier barracks in Folkestone and former RAF Wethersfield. I visited Napier recently; while it has historically had poor conditions, they have improved in recent years. Napier costs the state around £106 per night, which is less than hotels, albeit not drastically so, and we should not forget that the set-up costs for large sites are huge—in the case of Wethersfield they were around £49 million.

The real alternative to hotels could be social housing. We must push for a better way than paying billions of pounds to private companies that make millions in profit, when that money could be spent on buying up assets and replenishing our national housing stock for the future. The BBC reports that the Home Office is looking into pilot schemes on that front. Any option that redirects even some of this accommodation expenditure into publicly owned housing assets, while supporting the asylum accommodation even temporarily, deserves serious attention.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. and learned Friend is making an excellent case. I understand that we are having this debate because 427,000 people signed the petition, but I hope that they are never in the circumstances that asylum seekers find themselves in. In terms of the accommodation, does my hon. and learned Friend agree that as we are moving people out of hotels and into better, community-based facilities, we need wraparound support in health and education, particularly learning English, legal support, integration into our communities and learning about British culture?

Tony Vaughan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

I will turn now to the issue of asylum support, and make two key points. First, people claiming asylum cannot access the UK's mainstream benefits system. They receive initial full-board accommodation for 90 days, plus about £10 weekly. After that they move to longer-term housing and get around £49.18 a week for food, clothing and toiletries, which is much less than universal credit rates.

Secondly, the UK's asylum support system is not a pull factor, as some, including Migration Watch, have claimed. The UK rate of £49.18 weekly barely beats France's €47.60. Once we add in the costs of making an illegal crossing from France, the UK benefits system does not leave an adult male asylum seeker in a better position than in France. Evidence also shows that family, community and cultural connections matter far more than the benefits system.

Picture this, Dr Murrison: imagine that tomorrow we cut all asylum seeker financial support and closed all asylum hotels. What would happen next? Without alternatives, it would increase rough sleeping by over 500%, with over 30,000 more destitute people on our streets. That approach would clearly be immoral, as I trust hon. Members would agree. It would also pile massive pressure on social services, local authorities, NHS emergency services and the police.

The petitioners' alternative to state support in the community is mass detention. Migration Watch also calls for the detention of all asylum claimants, as its director told me in a conversation last week as I prepared for this debate. Let us think that through. It would clearly be unlawful. It would also be inhumane, financially ruinous and completely useless. There are about 102,000 people in UK asylum accommodation, but our immigration detention capacity is only 2,200, so we would need a massive new detention facility expansion for immediate mass detention.

What would that expansion cost? Based on Ministry of Justice prison expansion plans, the National Audit Office estimates that a single new prison place would cost at least £470,000, excluding land and other costs. That is £47 billion for 100,000 detention places, which is about a third of the entire NHS budget. On top of that, immigration detention costs are about £122 per day, adding up to around £4.5 billion per year for that number of people. Clearly, detention on that scale would mean massive cuts to public services and huge tax rises.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): We would all like to see an end to the use of hotels, which is both wasteful and very unpopular in local communities. However, would the hon. and learned Member agree that the long-term solution to that, releasing pressure across the entire system, is a proper returns agreement with as many countries as possible, but definitely with France, so that we do not need to use any form of accommodation, large camps or hotels?

Tony Vaughan: We did have a returns agreement with Europe before we withdrew from the European Union—the Dublin regulation. It was this Government that negotiated a new agreement with France in the UK-France deal. That deal, which is compliant with all the international obligations we have, is the potential way forward to solving the problem.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the hon. and learned Member accept that under the Dublin regulation the United Kingdom was a net recipient of refugees?

Tony Vaughan: The reality is that, if we do not have a mechanism in place—and it was essentially jettisoned by the Conservative party—there is no way of creating either a deterrent or a way of working with our colleagues in Europe to address these problems upstream. If we took the position of the Conservative party, which is to withdraw from the European convention and other international instruments, who would work with us upstream? France would not have signed that UK-France deal—signed in the summer by the Prime Minister—if we had been outside of the European convention on human rights. It is Brexit 2.0 from the Opposition. The Government are offering serious alternatives that simply are not being offered by anyone else.

What would mass detention actually achieve? The answer is nothing at all. It would not make it easier to carry out removals, because detention is already used for people who are ready for removal. Somebody with an outstanding asylum claim or who has no travel documents cannot be removed anyway. Would mass detentions stop people from coming? That is highly doubtful.

It is easy to underestimate how incredibly desperate many of the people who are arriving on small boats are. We assume that deterrents will defeat desperation, but both the Rwanda gimmick and other populist plans assume too much about the psychology of the people making these dangerous journeys. Mass detention is easy to say, but it is just another gimmick—inhumane, extortionate and, I am afraid, completely pointless.

During my recent visit to Napier barracks, I met an Iranian teacher who said simply, “I just want to live safely.” I believe that we can show the compassion to give him that chance, while keeping order and control in our asylum system. The Government’s current path of clearing the backlog, cutting hotel use, and increasing removals where claims have been refused deserves our full support. Most people simply want a fair, competent asylum system that commands both our conscience and our confidence.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The hon. and learned Member said he met an asylum seeker at Napier barracks who said that they just wanted to be safe. Assuming that they had come from France, did he investigate with that person why they were unsafe in France?

Tony Vaughan: The logic of that is that every country neighbouring a conflict zone should take all the refugees. That is an absurd proposition. We have to take our fair share of refugees. We take fewer than other European countries, and a responsible approach to this issue accepts that there is not an obligation to claim asylum in any particular country. The question is whether we are taking our fair share and complying with our international obligations—which, as I have said, the UK-France deal will achieve if it can be scaled up.

Most people want a fair, competent asylum system that processes claims in months rather than years, with a sustainable asylum support system that ultimately upholds the values that make us who we are as a nation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they want to be called in the debate—I see that most colleagues are doing so.

4.44 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison.

In my constituency we have the Stanwell hotel, which is currently an asylum hotel. From correspondence in my mailbag, I had heard there was the potential for the Home Office to change its policy on use. Hitherto, the capacity for families at the Stanwell hotel was 114, and the families who were there had integrated well. They had gone to local schools, got involved in local churches and in some cases were undergoing medical treatment as a result of pre-existing conditions. There were also some single people there. I visited on 3 October and was told there had been no history of poor interactions between single males and families.

The residents of Trinity Close were very concerned because they got wind of a rumour that the Stanwell hotel was going to be reconfigured from being pretty much families only to being used for single males only,

so they asked me to try to find out. I wrote to the Home Office on three occasions and asked how long the contract for the hotel had been signed for, but the Home Office did not reply, so I had to raise it with the Home Secretary on the Floor of the House. I was assured that I would receive a response, including a date when I could visit. The Home Office team were then all cleared out; I could speculate on the reasons, but the Government will know.

I finally got a chance to visit on 3 October, when I spent two hours there and learned a number of things. First, the hotel had not quite transitioned to full capacity for single males. I was told it was going to take a matter of weeks, so it is possible that it has been done now. This is of great concern to local residents, who much preferred it when the hotel was used for families only, because of its proximity to schools and green spaces, which makes Stanwell village a pretty inappropriate place for 98 single males only.

I saw the conditions people were in, with two to a room. One thing really got to me. The Government’s line is that they want to reduce the number of hotels, so they are going to sweat the existing estate harder by putting more people into it so that they can close things down. I was aghast to find that the Stanwell’s capacity as a families-only hotel was way higher than when it is used for single males, which did not make sense to me.

Having written to the Home Office to ask when the contract was going to end, I was told in a letter that that was not the sort of commercial information it was customary to share. I was delighted to get a letter yesterday confirming that what I had heard on the visit was correct and the contract ends on 31 July next year.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes the local council has been trying to find out what has been going on, as I have in parallel. At an emergency general meeting the Conservative group on Spelthorne borough council proposed an amendment calling for the hotel to be returned to use as a community hotel, which is exactly what the community wants. It is the place where people went for weddings and funerals, for playing cards in the afternoon and for Sunday lunch, and that is what they want it to be again. I was fairly surprised, then, that Spelthorne borough council, which comprises independents, Liberals and Labour, voted against returning it to use as a community hotel, which is Government policy. The Minister might wish to follow that up with Labour councillors in Spelthorne.

Tim Farron: I commend the hon. Member for taking the time to visit to see for himself and to hear people’s voices, and I mean that sincerely. More colleagues should do that before forming opinions. What he is talking about is the use of a private asset for public purposes and at the cost of public money. At the same time, those in that hotel are on £9.95 a week, so they are not living the life of Riley, as I am sure the hon. Member agrees. There is a cost to the taxpayer, and misery and hardship for the asylum seekers. Does he think that one answer is to give asylum seekers the right to work, so that they can pay their own way and integrate better? It would be better for them and their families, and better for the taxpayer.

Lincoln Jopp: When President Macron visited earlier this year, he said part of the problem was that there were far too many pull factors in Britain. Giving people

[Lincoln Jopp]

the right to work would, to my mind, be another pull factor. The Government would quite rightly say, “Well, you didn’t manage to do it either,” but I would much rather we were able to control our borders ab initio, so that we did not have to face the problem of asylum hotels.

Tony Vaughan: I want to underline the point I made in my speech, which is that France has a six-month period before work is permitted, so there is not that pull factor, or certainly not at that point.

Lincoln Jopp: I thank the hon. and learned Member for his intervention.

I am going to be a bit “beggar thy neighbour”-ish, I am afraid, but my reason for highlighting the Stanwell hotel is that I believe a number of the other contracts run to two or three years longer than the one there. Given that it is Government policy to close all asylum hotels within this Parliament, I encourage the Minister to place the Stanwell hotel at the top of the list. Not only is it not good to renegotiate a contract when we do not have to, but if the Government are going to do all this in the space of this Parliament, they need to start somewhere, and I recommend that they start with the Stanwell hotel in my Spelthorne constituency.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I draw the House’s attention to the support that I receive from RAMP. Six years ago, we did not have asylum hotels in Stanwell or anywhere else, but we do now, because the previous Conservative Government signed contracts with private providers, which led to the mass increase in hotels. This Government’s policy is to reduce the number of hotels to zero. When the hon. Member was engaging with his constituents, did he set out that it was his party’s responsibility for opening asylum hotels in the first place?

Lincoln Jopp: My party’s responsibility—although I was not here myself—is not just for signing the contracts for the hotels; it is for losing control of our borders in the first place. The Government have said they are going to get control of the borders, but sadly the numbers simply do not support that. I did not intervene on the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) when he was moving the motion, but I was tempted to ask him how many had gone back to France under the one in, one out scheme. The answer is not going to change the price of fish.

When the Minister makes his plan for the closure of the hotels, he should be aware that the Stanwell hotel is now controversial. The residents very much do not want it to be used for single male migrants only; they were very accommodating when it was used for families. I fear that if it is not a high priority for closure, there could be drama in the offing, so I would add it to the Minister’s list of things to do—and I am going to make as much noise about it as it takes for him to want to shut me up by doing what I want.

4.53 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): My constituents voted for me to continue to oppose austerity, defend our local services, support survivors of violence

and press for urgent immigration reform that centres migrant rights and ensures legal protection, survivor support and dignity in accommodation. That is why we have been alarmed by campaigns that target asylum seekers who are confined in hotels, including campaigns outside the Britannia hotel in my constituency. Some of those campaigns claim it is a five-star hotel with a swimming pool, which I know is definitely not the case.

Anti-racist campaigners have reported co-ordinated efforts to intimidate communities with flag raising, anti-migrant chants, aggressive interventions in local debates, and even the filming of asylum seekers being transported to hotels. Charities and specialist organisations are warning that such campaigns are leading to the dehumanising of asylum seekers and cultivating climates of fear and division.

Asylum seekers are men, women and children exercising their right to seek asylum after being forced to flee wars and persecution. I am very proud of our long history as a refuge for immigrant communities. Poplar and Limehouse is a place where people fleeing persecution, seeking work or simply looking for a new start have found a home and built communities. In Poplar and Limehouse, we know that it is not refugees and migrants, but austerity measures that have weakened local infrastructure and public services, leaving communities struggling with high costs and underfunded support—a situation that the far right frequently and unjustly blames on migrants and asylum seekers, despite repeated evidence to the contrary.

What is that evidence to the contrary? Let me touch on a few examples. First, the UK’s current system forces asylum seekers to wait for over a year before they can apply for the right to work, and even then they are restricted to jobs on the shortage occupation list. Many survive on just less than £7 per day. That contrasts sharply with other European nations such as France, Spain and Germany, where asylum seekers gain the right to work after three to six months.

Just last year, research by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research found that lifting the asylum seekers work ban could reduce Government expenditure by £6.7 billion annually. The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill retains harmful policies, including expanded powers of detention. An amendment to lift the work ban was tabled, but it was defeated, despite cross-party support. Asylum seekers must be able to work unconditionally; that would surely support integration, mental health and the overall economy.

Secondly, the UK lacks accessible safe routes for refugees, forcing many to make perilous journeys. In February this year a report by the all-party parliamentary group on refugees found current routes to be “inaccessible and inadequate”. The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill itself introduces counter-terror-style powers to criminalise smuggling networks that risk prosecuting refugees. Campaigners have labelled it an “anti-refugee” Bill. Surely we need an expansion of safe routes, the establishment of emergency visa schemes and the repeal of deterrent-based policies.

Finally, the “Restoring control over the immigration system” White Paper, which proposes extending the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain from five to 10 years, is creating uncertainty for migrants, while the immigration health surcharge unfairly targets migrant workers. People cannot access public funds anyway, but targeting them through the immigration

health charge as well makes it essentially a punitive tax on people who are essential workers. We need to abolish the charge, reduce visa restrictions for care workers and reject the White Paper's punitive measures as a whole.

The UK really must be aware of the need to uphold its moral and legal obligations to protect refugees and prioritise humanity over hostility in the immigration system. From ending indefinite detention to creating safe routes, we need policies that reflect our values of dignity and compassion. That is why I will continue to push back against toxic narratives and stand up for solidarity, truth and the rights of all who live here.

That commitment is in line with the traditions of solidarity in the east end of London, where we see diversity as a strength and all our communities include migrants from all around the world—where Jewish communities and allies opposed fascists at the battle of Cable street in 1936; where the murder of Altab Ali brought people out on the streets; where the Bangladeshi community led the anti-fascist mobilisation in the 1970s and where the communities on the Isle of Dogs defeated the division, intolerance and hate spread by the British National party in the 1990s.

We know that hardship can be overcome collectively. That is why, as we look back on our rich history of welcoming refugees and migrants, we look to our present, fully aware that the far right is planning to target our area once again this week, on Saturday 25 October, amid a rise in racist, Islamophobic and antisemitic attacks—and where just a couple of years ago more than 700 people were evacuated from the East London Mosque, London Muslim Centre and nearby schools following a bomb threat. We will stand together in defiance on Saturday and we will say, “¡No pasarán! They shall not pass!”

5 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I acknowledge the petitioners and their call for

“a cessation of financial and other support”

but I rise to challenge the petition. I thank the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for his very learned contribution to opening the debate.

I will begin by responding to people who believe asylum seekers are a problem in our local communities. Those people's real enemy does not arrive on these shores in a small boat, wearing a lifejacket. Their real enemy arrives in a private jet, or in a big plane, wearing designer clothes and expensive jewellery. Some of the real enemies of the people sit on the Benches of this place and the other place. They appear on radio and TV, selling falsehoods like snake oil salesmen.

The SNP Government in Scotland have been clear: Labour must end the hostile environment for asylum seekers and deliver an effective and humane asylum system that meets the UK's international legal obligations. That means putting an end, as soon as possible, to accommodating asylum seekers in hotels. Politicians also need to end the ridiculous disinformation around those locations that suggests they are some form of luxury accommodation. As anyone who has visited such a facility knows—the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) has visited one, so he will know—they are nothing of the sort.

Labour's proposals to consider using large industrial sites and military locations are equally concerning. These people have fled war, persecution, famine, drought and terrorism. Military bases are not acceptable, nor is a lack of support services. That lack will exacerbate their problems, which often include mental health problems.

Chris Murray: How does the hon. Gentleman reconcile his point about the UK Government with the fact that, under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the Scottish Government's policy was to house Ukrainian refugees in hotels across Scotland, and on cruise ships?

Seamus Logan: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but what he is describing is not quite the same thing.

Many asylum seekers have valuable skills and are keen to contribute to society and the economy; it is Home Office dogma inherited from the Tories and driven by Reform UK that prevents them from doing so. The term “illegal migrant” is divisive, dehumanising and inaccurate. People are not illegal. The UK is a signatory to the 1951 UN refugee convention and the supporting 1967 protocol, meaning that it has international legal obligations to recognise refugees in the UK, to protect them and to meet minimum treatment standards. Article 31 of the convention gives refugees the right not to be punished for irregular entry into the territory of a contracting state. The UK is an island and it does not allow people to apply for asylum from overseas. Similarly, there is no visa allowing people to enter the UK to make an asylum claim.

People of course have the right to peaceful protest in a democracy, but the protests outside hotels and the accompanying rhetoric have often gone far beyond what is acceptable. Those protests are creating a sense of real fear and alarm for people who have been through so much. Refugees must not be scapegoated. They should be treated as decent human beings and their potential to be full members of our communities should be recognised.

Successive UK Governments' mismanagement of the asylum system is creating serious pressure for local authorities, especially Glasgow city council. The Scottish Government are making more than £115 million available in Glasgow to support the delivery of more social and affordable homes, but the Home Office must also urgently provide more financial assistance to enable local authorities to provide safety and sanctuary for people seeking asylum.

UK Ministers must also engage with the Scottish Government, who have called repeatedly on the Home Office to meet them and Glasgow city council, but to no avail. In April, the Scottish Refugee Council invited Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice to attend a roundtable meeting with the council and the UK Government. Disappointingly, UK Government Ministers chose not to attend.

Asylum seekers are not coming over here, taking all our jobs and our houses, living high on the hog on benefits, and clogging up our GP surgeries and schools. Those are the lies peddled by some politicians and wannabe leaders to distract us from the real issues that should concern people: the rising cost of living, sky-high energy bills, and wages stagnating while the rich grow richer at the expense of the working men and women of

[Seamus Logan]

this country. They are distracting us—"Look over here. Get angry about this!"—instead of focusing on the real issues. Scotland and its people want to take a different path—a path that echoes the best traditions of our ancient Celtic people, who prided themselves on providing hospitality and a welcome to the stranger.

The following facts might sit uncomfortably with the people in my constituency who signed this petition, but facts they are. Our birth rate is falling. Our workforce size is decreasing—declining. Our older people are living longer and growing in number. Who will care for them, treat them, feed them and pay taxes to run their public services? We need migrants to fill our labour shortages. Our health services need their skills. Our social care teams need their help. Our fishers and fish processors need them urgently. Our farmers need them. Our hospitality and tourism industries need their help. Therefore, rather than closing our borders to all, let us find safe and legal routes for the asylum seeker. Let us make migration routes clearer and easier to understand, not harder.

To conclude, I have four requests of the Minister and this Government. I ask them first, to end the use of hotels; secondly, to provide safe and supportive accommodation; thirdly, to grant asylum seekers and their dependants the right to work; and finally, to reframe messaging on migration in a more positive and humane way.

5.6 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. We need to close the hotels, but as a Labour MP I will make the progressive and moral case for doing so.

Let me first talk about the current law. There is a very helpful House of Commons Library report setting out the law: the Home Office must provide accommodation that is adequate for people's needs. As a parent, I will say why we must have concern for the living conditions of children in asylum accommodation. In my view, hotels are not suitable living environments for asylum-seeking children and their families for longer-term stays. Let us think about what we are talking about here—children sleeping while cockroaches scuttle by and rats run next to their faces. That happened in this country under the last Government. Even today, we find that many families are confined to small living spaces where the bed serves as the bedroom, living room, dining area and study space all at once. These are children in British primary schools.

I know personally of a case in which an asylum-seeking child did not have the space to store her disability equipment, and I have heard of toddlers who have insufficient room to crawl, use a highchair or go on their potty. These children have fled war-torn countries. Is it their fault that they are seeking asylum? Absolutely not. Do they deserve to live in unsuitable accommodation through no fault of their own? Absolutely not.

Let us think back to the performative cruelty of a certain Minister in the last Government who ordered the painting over of child asylum unit murals. That is who they are. Let me talk about our Government's dispersal strategy, because dispersal accommodation is more cost-effective, and I hope that we can all agree on the central premise that dispersal accommodation is also more appropriate for asylum-seeking families and children.

Lincoln Jopp: I omitted to say that, in Stanwell's case, all the families who were moved out of the hotel were simply moved to another hotel, so although I agree with the hon. Member, he needs to know what his Government are up to in order to make his case more strongly.

Mr Charters: I know the hon. Member will therefore welcome the Government's plan to end the use of asylum hotels. I hope he will join me in accepting the premise that dispersal accommodation, where it is more stable and more community based, is more suitable for children than the hotel that he speaks of in his constituency.

Closing the hotels is a progressive responsibility, but let me be clear about what the Government have already achieved. They have brought down the number of asylum hotels, from over 400 to about 210 now, and have reduced the number of people in hotels—

Mike Wood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Charters: Let me just finish. At its worst under the Tories, the system cost the taxpayer £9 million a day, which has already been cut to £5.5 million a day. That is not a gimmick; it is delivery.

Let me talk about the scandal of profiteering, however, because the public are paying the price while private hotel companies and contractors profit. I will be blunt: £180 million in profit was made by one hotel company where toilet roll was rationed, asylum seekers were fed inedible expired food, and families and children lived with cockroaches, rodents, damp and mould. That is absolutely disgusting—it is a disgrace, frankly, that under the last Government taxpayer money was funding such hotels. It is absolutely right that we work to close them by 2029.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about the number of asylum seeker hotels being reduced from 400 to roughly 200 in the last two years, and an important point about profit making. Does he agree that firms such as Serco have an obligation to be accountable, transparent and responsive to elected Members who are seeking not only to obtain information on behalf of their constituents but to ensure that people placed in dispersal accommodation are kept safe? In my experience, such firms are not responsive or transparent in the way that they should be.

Mr Charters: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that companies should be transparent about those things, not only on a contractual basis with the Government but on a moral basis. We are a country of great compassion, and where contractors are profiteering from asylum accommodation for children, they have to learn to embody the value of compassion that we have in this great country.

Many charities have raised the issue of children living in such terrible conditions. Let me say, as a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, that the situation also represents terrible value for money for the taxpayer. The National Audit Office found that since 2019, the three main accommodation providers have made nearly £400 million from asylum contracts—they are profiting from those terrible conditions. That is not who we are; it is not what Britain should ever stand for.

That is why I am proud that the Government are committing to making that stop, and that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is going to fix it. Through the Government's new dispersal strategy, we will see those hotels being closed, and much more suitable dispersal accommodation for asylum-seeking children and their families will be made available.

I must come on to Reform UK, which shouts from the sidelines. We have not yet heard from the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) about the few ideas that Reform is proposing, but perhaps she will address one issue in her speech. When we interrogate Reform UK's plans, we find that they talk about using the British overseas territories. As someone who has visited the Falklands and other overseas territories, I find that suggestion deeply troubling and unrealistic. When she rises to speak, hopefully she will give some assurance that Reform UK will rule out using the Falkland Islands in its asylum plans.

Reform UK proposes to deport 600,000 people over five years and to abolish indefinite leave to remain. Sadly, I believe that the latter idea is currying favour on the Opposition Benches, but the idea of abolishing ILR and tearing families apart is not policy; it is performative cruelty. Those proposals are fantasies that would rip this country apart, as the Prime Minister has rightly said.

We are a country proud of its compassion towards refugee children through the ages. Britain's tradition of welcoming and protecting refugees is deeply rooted in our history, from sheltering Belgian refugees in world war one to rescuing Jewish children through the Kindertransport and supporting Hungarians escaping Soviet oppression. More recently, in modern times, we have stood with Ukrainians fleeing war, through bespoke visa schemes. That commitment embodies the very best of British values, reflecting our openness and humanity in times of crisis.

Among those who found safety here was Freddie Mercury, a refugee from Zanzibar whose extraordinary talent transformed global music. Britain has also welcomed figures such as Lord Alf Dubs, a Kindertransport child who became a prominent MP in this place; Dua Lipa, whose family fled conflict in the Balkans; Nobel laureate Sigmund Freud, whose ideas changed the world, and so many others.

We are a tolerant and inclusive country that welcomes refugee families who are genuinely fleeing war and trauma, but we cannot go on as we are. There is a compassionate and progressive reason why hotels must be closed, so we must look with urgency to more suitable solutions, particularly for asylum-seeking children.

We are closing the hotels, not with slogans but with common sense and a serious plan that is grounded in compassion. We are overhauling the appeals system and introducing a new independent body with trained adjudicators, to cut the waiting times back from 54 weeks to a statutory 24 weeks. We are reducing the asylum backlog, and we are committing, of course, to ending asylum hotels by 2029.

People are frustrated. My constituents are frustrated. I get it. They should be angry about the reprehensible conditions that so many children are being forced to live in. We must ensure that there is suitable accommodation for asylum-seeking families with children. We are a kind,

decent and compassionate country that wants to look after people who genuinely need help, but we do not want to line the pockets of hotel companies and other contractors in doing so when the conditions are unfair. We are closing the hotels, with a serious plan. This is who we are. This is what Britain stands for.

5.16 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison.

I can entirely understand where the petitioners are coming from. After all, hotels are holiday accommodation, and for most people, the idea of spending a few days a year in a hotel is desirable—if probably unaffordable as things are at the moment—so I can completely understand people's anger and outrage at the taxpayer paying for others to stay in hotels. However, I want to point out that the issues of asylum seeking have been conflated with other migration—migration supported by visas. I also want to talk about how alternatives to hotel accommodation might be found.

A September 2025 Reuters report concluded that the UK media frames immigration overwhelmingly through the lens of illegality and crisis, giving disproportionate attention to small-boat crossings relative to their scale. Legal migration is routinely lumped into that same narrative, and the distinction is blurred. We can see that very well from the numbers. In the year ending March 2025, the UK issued 875,000 visas for work, study and family purposes—legal migration. Subtract from that number those leaving, and net migration is 431,000, which is a large figure. In the same period, there were around 44,000 irregular arrivals, largely on small boats. Arrivals that were not supported by a visa therefore made up about 5% of all new arrivals and 10% of net migration.

On migration supported by visas, 260,000 people who were born outside the UK work as doctors, nurses and care workers in our health and social care system. Without legal migration supported by visas, our hospitals, care homes and even some farms would simply grind to a halt.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point; we desperately need people to come and work in our national health service and care sector. Does he agree that the case for legally working migrants and refugees who genuinely need asylum, perhaps from Syria or Afghanistan, and the case for our communities, who want stability, have been undermined by the staggering incompetence of the asylum system? Waiting times for decisions have gone up to more than a year, or more like a year and a half in nearly two thirds of all cases. That incompetence is stirring division and disbelief, and it needs to be addressed urgently.

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Government have to speed up decisions, cut backlogs and return those asylum seekers who are unsuccessful in their applications and have no right to stay, and they must that so swiftly.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a really powerful speech. The Conservatives and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) created this crisis in small boat crossings. Before the botched Brexit deal, we had, in effect, a returns agreement with

[Clive Jones]

every other EU nation under the Dublin system, as our hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) said. Now this Government, like the last, are struggling to manage a rise in small boat crossings. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must urgently negotiate more returns agreements with other EU countries?

Richard Foord: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for talking about Europe, because our European neighbours are contending with exactly the same problems as us in this respect. The longer asylum seekers are drawn to the UK, the longer they are drawn into the European Union, so it is in our common interest to address this issue. I will talk a bit more about the EU and its member states later in my speech.

Pundits are blurring the two issues, and while people say that immigration is wrecking the economy, the truth is quite the reverse. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, higher legal net migration is expected to raise our total GDP by around 1.5% by 2028-29, while GDP per capita is likely to be raised by 0.8%.

Migrants arriving with visas tend to arrive in their prime working years, paying more in taxes than they take out in services. According to the Migration Advisory Committee, in 2022-23, the average skilled migrant made a net contribution of around £16,300 to the UK public finances in their first year in the UK. Legal migration is a cornerstone of our economy, and because of our ageing population, it will continue to be so for years to come.

I will now address migration through irregular routes, which is the focus of this debate, and in particular the use of immigration hotels. In May 2025, the Government noted that they would spend £2.2 billion this financial year on migrant hotels. That is an eye-watering sum, but it is part of the £1.28 trillion—or more than £1,200 billion—that the Government spend each year, so we are talking about less than 0.2% of public spending. None the less, £2.2 billion is an enormous sum of money.

The UK counts these domestic refugee costs as official development assistance, and the House of Commons Library reported that in 2024, one fifth of all foreign aid was spent domestically on hotels. That makes me really angry. I am angrier, perhaps, than any of the petitioners on this point, because when we spend that money here in the UK, we do not use it to its full effect or achieve its full purchasing power.

Let us think about what official development assistance has achieved for us in recent years. Between 2013 and 2019, the UK committed £400 million to the eradication of polio and helped to vaccinate millions of children, leading to Africa being declared polio-free in 2020. These sorts of things are partly benevolent, but they are also in Britain's interests. During the 2014 to 2016 Ebola outbreak, the UK provided £427 million in aid to Sierra Leone to address it. Had it arrived on these shores, we would certainly have had to spend so much more on addressing this absolutely appalling disease.

Sir Ashley Fox: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that it is Liberal Democrat policy that asylum costs should not come out of the foreign aid budget?

Richard Foord: I am of the view that asylum hotels should not be paid for by the foreign aid budget. This country has an international development budget that has fallen from 0.7%—when my party was in government with the hon. Gentleman's—to 0.3% today, which is honestly a great pity. That is not helping us to prevent conflict and deal with the problem at source.

From 2014 to 2015, we had the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which was set up by the coalition Government. It brought 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees, including survivors of torture and violence, to the UK, but in a way that was safe and legal. Those people were assessed for their suitability by the UN high commissioner for refugees. We are talking about women and children at risk, as well as those in severe medical need and survivors of torture. Those were people who did not try to get to the UK through Europe, because they were assessed for their vulnerability in the region, in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Let us remember the vulnerable three-year-old refugee, Alan Kurdi, whose fragile body washed up on a beach, with waves lapping into his dead face. A lot of people had a lot of sympathy at that time for taking asylum seekers who were in genuine need through a safe and legal route. Today, we need to think about deterring illegal ways of approaching the UK, and Britain should work with neighbouring countries and look to collaborate on proposing a third country where failed asylum seekers may be processed overseas, such as one in south-east Europe. That is something that EU member states are looking into at the moment. Unsuccessful applicants could appeal from third countries, rather than from within the UK or EU, as is happening right now. We should work with our European partners so that we can find a continent-wide solution, because the UK will not be able to solve this alone.

While such schemes may act as an incentive for people to apply from their own region, we also need to think about a deterrent. I was wholly opposed to the Rwanda scheme, which was brought forward by the Conservative Government at a cost of £700 million and then scrapped. More could be made of the fact that people are coming to a pretty appalling end in the English channel. The Migration Observatory reports that 73 people were confirmed to have drowned in the English channel while attempting small boat crossings in 2024. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution recalled rescuing children with chemical burns from leaked petrol, and others so frozen that they could not walk because they had spent 30 hours at sea. A Home Affairs Committee report found in 2022 that smugglers deceive migrants and downplay the risks and danger. More could be made of that.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. I have not imposed a time limit, but the hon. Gentleman has been going on considerably longer than other colleagues. He may wish to reflect on that.

Richard Foord: Thank you, Dr Murrison; I will conclude.

Legal migration builds our economy, and it staffs our hospitals and care homes. Crossings by people who do not have a visa are damaging trust in Government. A builder put it quite simply to me in recent months when he said that the last Government promised to stop the boats, but the opposite happened, and he had lost faith in Government as a result. We need to stop these

dangerous crossings and restore order to a broken asylum system. That means investing in safe and legal routes and working with our European allies and partners on shared solutions, communicating the truth about the dangers of crossing the channel to those who would try to do so. If we do that, we can protect our borders and values, while upholding the compassionate and common-sense country that we are.

5.29 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I want to start by saying clearly and plainly that people who are fleeing war, famine, persecution and life-threatening situations are fully deserving of our compassion and support. I fear sometimes in these debates it sounds as if we have lost our humanity, empathy and compassion. Despite what is commonly stated on social media by far-right figures and parroted by the media and some political figures, many of the people we are discussing are fleeing awful situations that many of us can only begin to imagine. In this debate, many of their stories are lost or overshadowed by claims that they are trying to cheat the system. That is simply not true.

We know that because almost half the applications for asylum submitted in 2024 were accepted at the initial decision and, of the other half, over 50% were granted on appeal. The overwhelming majority of those seeking asylum in the UK have a legitimate claim in law to be here. For clarification, that means they are not illegal. The UK has a duty under international law to accept and process asylum claims. As someone has already said, we receive far fewer than other European countries. As a signatory of the 1951 UN refugee convention, we must comply with that obligation. I am sure there are people who want to withdraw us from that convention; I hope the day when they have the power to do so never comes.

We also have an obligation under our own legislation—the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999—to house those seeking asylum while they await the outcome of their application. During that time, asylum seekers are not allowed to work. Many of them would want to. Many of them have overcome traumas and travelled to the UK because they want to make a better life for themselves and their families, but our laws prevent them from doing so.

According to Refugee Action, at the end of 2024, 124,802 people were waiting for an initial asylum decision, with 73,866 having waited over six months. That is unnecessary. Although the process has sped up slightly under the new Government, we have to recognise that there are some countries to which we are never going to send people back, so why would we not make the claim process faster? It does not make sense to make those people wait; while they wait, they are unable to work, so the economy is missing out on hundreds of millions every year in tax and national insurance contributions.

If we really wanted to reduce the cost of housing and financial support for people seeking asylum, we could simply give them the right to work and adequately staff the Home Office to handle their claims. We could give local authorities all the millions that we are currently sending to private companies to build and buy social housing. I was pleased to hear my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) mention that in his opening speech.

Implementing those simple solutions would be much easier than what we are currently doing, but I fear that those solutions are not chosen because it better fits the narrative that has become so popular in our discourse to say that we will ban people from claiming asylum if they came here through so-called illegal means—despite the fact that there are no safe and legal routes for them to come here—and house people in conditions far worse than those they are already in, all while private companies profit. I think that is the wrong narrative. We need to make a positive case and be clear that it is the system that is the issue, not the people.

I want to address the deeply misleading notion, which I was pleased to hear colleagues address, that asylum seekers are staying in luxury accommodation in so-called five-star hotels and being given a top-tier service. That could not be further from the truth. I have visited various types of asylum seeker accommodation in London and across the country, and there is nothing luxurious about it. It is one family per cramped single room, typically of a standard below what anyone would deem acceptable, many with infestations of bedbugs, cockroaches and other vermin. Some would have us believe that asylum seekers are being given hundreds of pounds a week to pay for a luxury lifestyle, but a vulnerable family seeking asylum is given a measly £5.84 a day—just over £40 a week—to live on. That is not a large amount for a family. It is hardly a luxury lifestyle.

The notion that those seeking asylum and refugees make up a significant proportion of people coming to the UK is false. In fact, the opposite is true. Too often those on other visas are conflated with those seeking asylum just to help create a negative narrative. When we have these discussions, it would be helpful for others to highlight that we are talking about a very small proportion of people in the UK's overall immigration figures and that the crisis is very much fabricated. We should meet our legal and moral duty instead of fuelling a false narrative.

5.35 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I welcome this debate. My constituents are angry about the increasing number of people crossing the channel in small boats, being rescued by the Royal Navy and brought to Britain, and then being housed in hotels at taxpayers' expense. Before the election, Labour Members repeated the mantra that they would "smash the gangs" to solve the problem. They presented it as though there was some mysterious solution to cracking down on people smugglers that simply was not being pursued by the previous Government. But in the year since their election, the problem has been getting worse, not better. The number of people crossing the channel is up by 50% on last year. The failure to control our borders makes our country look impotent.

Chris Murray: The Home Affairs Committee heard evidence last week from the new Border Security Commander, Martin Hewitt, who told us that he was working to bring together different parts of Government to focus on cross-border activity as a kind of organised crime similar to terrorism. When I pushed him specifically on whether that was new or whether it had been happening under the previous Government, he was very clear that

[Chris Murray]

it was a new way of doing things. Does the hon. Gentleman know more than the Border Security Commander about this?

Sir Ashley Fox: I hope the Government's policy is successful. It is just that in the 12 months since they took office, the problem has got worse by 50%. I will explain why. The large numbers of young men we see crossing the channel in small boats are not refugees; they are economic migrants. They have travelled through several safe countries before reaching Calais. The reason that people are prepared to pay to cross the channel in a small boat is that they know that having reached Britain, there is virtually no prospect of their ever being deported. This Government are guilty of self-harm in closing the Rwanda scheme before it started. Had the scheme been allowed to operate and large numbers of those crossing the channel been deported to Rwanda, the economic model of the people smugglers would have been broken. Instead, Labour lets them stay indefinitely.

Labour is increasing the use of hotels in town centres. In June 2024, 29,585 people were in hotels; now, the figure is 32,059. The numbers are going in the wrong direction and we cannot allow that to continue. We should close the asylum hotels and deport illegal migrants.

Tony Vaughan: Does the hon. Member accept that under the Conservative Government asylum applications were essentially paused, which had a huge knock-on effect on accommodation costs and the number of people who had to be accommodated, and that that caused the crisis that we are in?

Sir Ashley Fox: Of course; that is part of creating a deterrent in which we say to those crossing the channel, "If you enter the country illegally, you will not be entitled to claim asylum and you will be transferred to a third country." Interestingly, the European Union is now exploring that, and the facilities in Rwanda are currently being used by the United States, so other countries understand the need for a deterrent.

If we want to reduce the number of refugees in hotels and temporary accommodation, we need to change the way we deal with refugees. In my view, Parliament should decide how many refugees Britain accepts each year, exactly as we did with the Syria scheme. We should then provide a safe and legal route for those refugees, who should be taken exclusively from UN refugee camps. At present, we have the morally repugnant situation that millions of people are sitting in refugee camps around the world with no prospect of being rehomed, while those who jump the queue and pay money to get into a small boat are given licence to live in Britain forever. Does the Minister think that is moral? That creates a perverse incentive, which puts lives at risk, funds organised crime and stops us controlling who we let into our country. The Government must reintroduce the deterrent of deporting illegal migrants if they are ever to solve the small boats problem.

5.40 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Let us be in no doubt: no one in this place believes that the use of hotels to house asylum seekers awaiting

immigration decisions is acceptable. It is bad for the taxpayer, it is bad for our communities and, ultimately, it is bad for the asylum seekers themselves; we have heard terrible stories about the conditions that many asylum seekers face in accommodation. I am pleased, therefore, that the Government have rightly pledged to end the use of asylum hotels in this Parliament.

The use of hotels is a symptom of a broader systematic failure of our migration system. Under the last Government, the asylum system descended into chaos. The backlog of asylum cases reached a historic high in the tens of thousands, and asylum hotels popped up in many communities, including in Hillingdon, to house asylum seekers waiting to be processed. At the peak in autumn 2023, 400 hotels were in use, at a cost of almost £9 million a day.

The UK has a proud history of opening its doors to those fleeing violence and persecution. Jewish communities found their home here during the second world war—in my constituency, many Polish service personnel came and joined our Royal Air Force and worked alongside it to fight the Nazi tyranny; the Polish war memorial in South Ruislip reminds us of their contribution to humanity—and, more recently, Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion settled in our towns, villages and cities. Many Ukrainian asylum seekers settled in my constituency. Migration is part of our national story and it has enriched the lives of so many of our constituents in so many ways. I see that regularly in my constituency.

All of us, including those who have come to the UK and themselves call it home, want an immigration system that works fairly and effectively. We want a system that is able to promptly turn away those with no right to be here while treating genuine asylum seekers with the compassion and respect that they deserve. I know that the Government are committed to restoring order to our asylum system and ending the reliance on hotels. That will require rapid action to increase the pace of decision making and the removal of those who are found to be here without due legal cause.

I am pleased that the Government have made substantial progress in reducing the historic backlog. From January to March 2025, we saw the second highest number of initial decisions taken since records began in 2002, and more than double the number taken in the three months before the election. At the same time, the Government's new immigration enforcement programme has increased removals of people who have no right to be here; the number of people put on flights out of the UK had reached 30,000 by 18 May 2025.

I understand the frustration that many people in Uxbridge and South Ruislip have about the pace of change, and I share their concerns. With almost 3,000 asylum seekers in Hillingdon hotels, we are the local authority most affected by asylum hotels in the whole country, and we feel the impact acutely. I hope that the Home Office will increase its joint working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to properly resource local communities, local councils and local services and ensure the better management of hotels. Today we have heard terrible stories of profit making and contractors failing to live up to their responsibilities, and I hear them time and again locally, from partners in the community and those in hotels. We have to hold contractors to account for the services they are paid good public money to provide.

I hope that we will also improve and increase our work with the voluntary and community sector, which is stepping up and providing a significant amount of support in increasingly difficult and hostile conditions. A number of voluntary and community sector organisations that provide vital support to refugees and asylum seekers have recently been targeted by protests, with violent and extreme protesters threatening abuse, violence and even arson. That is clearly unacceptable and illegal, and it must be addressed.

It is also important that we provide accurate information in the public domain, and that, as public officials, we seek to lower the temperature and focus on practical solutions and on working together to solve this shared, long-term issue. Unfortunately, in my community, our council, rather than doing that, has hidden behind misinformation and used public resources to amplify fear and disinformation. It is hiding behind asylum seekers and refugees for its own financial failings, putting out communications, with public money, blaming decisions such as the removal of free garden waste collections on asylum seeker pressures, which is clearly not the case, not true and not helpful.

Public financial documents by the council's independent officers show that the council is approaching bankruptcy because of long-term funding pressures on local government, particularly owing to the last Government underfunding councils, about which my council said very little at the time—I wonder why. It is because of the pressures relating to social care, children's services and temporary accommodation that local government faces, and financial mismanagement by that council, as well as some immigration pressures. It is vital that we all seek to base things on facts, and on full and frank information, at this time when temperatures are rising and hate is being fuelled. Many of my constituents who have been here for years, and many who were born here, are increasingly facing violence, hatred and abuse in their communities.

Moving forward, I hope that we will close the hotels as quickly as possible, and do so in an effective way. Comments have rightly been made about how we cannot rush forward with simple solutions to this complex problem. We cannot close all the hotels today, as doing so will simply translate into a homelessness and rough sleeping crisis in our communities, sending many thousands of men, women and children on to our streets. That would be morally, legally and practically terrible for our towns and communities.

This Government are making progress; I would like to see us do so as quickly as possible. I assure my Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituents that I understand the seriousness of the matter and am completely supportive of the Government's efforts to get a grip on the asylum system and ensure that it is just, efficient and shares responsibility fairly across the country.

5.47 pm

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I commend those who have signed the two petitions that bring this debate to Westminster Hall. In my constituency, 461 residents signed the petition to shut down the migrant hotels and deport illegal migrants, and 871 residents signed the petition to stop financial support for asylum seekers. That shows how fed up my residents, and people

across the country, are with this issue. Make no mistake: it is the biggest issue facing this country at the moment. We talk about our proud history of accommodating and looking after asylum seekers—and that is true—but this is different. We are now facing an invasion, a national security issue and a national emergency.

The current cost to the taxpayer of housing asylum seekers in hotels is estimated to be £6 million a day. That figure is probably way below what it actually costs us. It is well publicised that asylum seekers in these hotels are receiving not only free accommodation, but free food in three meals a day, free pocket money, free cinema tickets, free—in my constituency of Runcorn and Helsby—driving lessons, free mobile phones and free anything else.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Pochin: I shall not. We have all seen pictures of asylum seekers hanging out of windows, laughing at the peaceful protests below. This leaves a sour taste in the mouth of the British taxpayer. We know that other European countries are laughing at us with our ridiculously generous asylum policy, and waving asylum seekers through to our shores.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: I will not. We know that the Americans are despairing at our asylum seeker policies, and are watching our country being overrun. The only people who do not seem concerned are the Government. How does this make us look to the world, and how does it make our loyal British citizens feel? Well, I will tell hon. Members: it makes us look weak. It makes us look like we do not put the British people first, and that has to change. The British people have had enough of seeing their hard-earned money being spent on people who have no right to be here. Financial assistance to these illegal migrants must stop. All illegal migrants currently in this country need to be deported. That is the starting principle of Reform policy.

Mr Charters: Is the hon. Lady courageous enough to give way?

Sarah Pochin: I will.

Mr Charters: Reform UK has mooted the idea of using British overseas territories as part of its asylum processing plans. Would the hon. Lady use this occasion to rule out any asylum processing ever taking place in the Falklands or Gibraltar as part of Reform UK's policies?

Sarah Pochin: No, I will not rule out any possible policy.

Apsana Begum: On that point, will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: No, I am going to continue; I have given way once. Anyone who has come to this country illegally will never be entitled to claim asylum here again.

Carla Denyer: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: I will make a bit of progress. The immediate action needs to be that all these hotels are closed to illegal migrants, and that they are moved out of the community into holding centres to be processed and sent home. The conditions in which they are held in these processing centres will be humane but not luxurious. There will be no free tickets to theme parks and no free trips out into the community.

I had an asylum hotel—the Daresbury hotel—in my constituency. My campaign in the recent by-election saw the hotel eventually shut down, but the implications of shutting the hotels are that these illegal migrants are dispersed in houses of multiple occupancy in our communities. In Runcorn, we have approximately 900 illegal migrants in 80 HMOs that we know about. Once in those HMOs, they are lost to the authorities, yet still live free at the taxpayers' expense.

Tony Vaughan: From the logic of what the hon. Lady is saying, we would detain everybody—we would put the 102,000 people currently in asylum accommodation in a detention centre. Does she accept that that will cost around £47 billion, which is not credible at all?

Sarah Pochin: I accept that we have to start doing something radical that sends a message, will stop people coming to this country, and will stop the pull factors that send people to our shores.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: No, I am going to continue. We have to stop the incentives to come to this country. We need to protect the public, particularly women and girls, from these sexually active young men currently free to roam our streets.

Seamus Logan: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: No, I am nearly finished. We need to prioritise our own citizens and stop this betrayal of our culture and our country. To finish, I would like to make this observation. The Home Office has just put out a contract to tender for asylum support and accommodation services to run from 2029 to 2036, so clearly, the Government have no plans to stop these hotels and are, in fact, facilitating them. The Minister can shake his head, but it is there online.

5.55 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I commend the 1,600 Hartlepool constituents who signed the two petitions that we are debating.

Asylum accommodation is an issue that stirs emotions, and for very good reason. Too often, legitimate concerns are dismissed as being racist or right-wing, and nothing could be further from the truth. Let me be clear: there are indeed those who would seek to sow division and want to weaponise the issue to incite hatred and further their political careers, but for the vast majority of people, being worried about a broken system is not racist or right-wing; they are simply common-sense concerns. People are concerned about their communities,

housing, public services and the fairness that underpins our country. Those concerns deserve to be heard and treated with respect.

When I was first elected, my constituency had one of the region's highest rates of dispersed asylum accommodation. Hartlepool has never had a hotel used for asylum, but we do have housing bought up by the Home Office contractor Mears concentrated in our town centre. Homes that could have gone to local families are instead taken for temporary placements. The system that we inherited of outsourcing to private companies more interested in profits than in people hardwired unfairness into the asylum process. I make this plea to the Minister: please do not renew those contracts, which targeted deprived communities because of their housing costs.

Let me also be clear that we must always play our part. A decent, confident country will always look to help the vulnerable. It is worth noting that, in 2024, the UK had fewer asylum applications than Germany, France, Italy or Spain. But fairness matters, and the fact that there are 46 asylum seekers for every 10,000 people in Hartlepool, compared with just nine per 10,000 in neighbouring County Durham, is simply not fair. Our town has seen major services leave over the past decade. Our A&E closed in 2011 under the Tories. Our custody suite closed in 2019 under the Tories. Our council services were slashed and our schools were underfunded by the Tories, yet we have borne a disproportionate share of responsibility for asylum—thanks to the Tories.

I took this issue directly to Mears and the Home Office last March. I argued that our town could no longer be expected to take the burden of unfairness that this system had produced, and they agreed. They confirmed that no new properties will be procured in Hartlepool for the asylum process and that existing ones will gradually close. We have already seen a drop of 5%. Sending vulnerable people to a place where NHS dental appointments are as rare as unicorns helps no one—not the asylum seeker and not those needing those already stretched services.

The system can work, and one example where the results are extraordinary is the Salaam community centre in Hartlepool, led by the magnificent Nancy Pout. It supports asylum seekers to become integrated into our town. I have personally witnessed the compassion and decency at the heart of that organisation, with asylum seekers volunteering to give back to our community. When riots led by thugs and criminals attacking local businesses and destroying Hartlepool property took place last year, it was the Salaam centre and its army of volunteers that took to the streets the next morning to clean up the mess. Its volunteers and staff come together time and again to work as an integrated community, celebrating our achievements.

The message is simple: we cannot impose further pressure on deprived communities that are already struggling. Let us also be honest that those posing as asylum seekers for economic gain damage trust and make life harder for genuine refugees. That must also be addressed. If they have no right to be here, they must be removed. But this debate should not be about being for or against asylum; it should be about fairness—fairness for those seeking refuge and fairness for the communities asked to do their bit to host them.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The hon. Member speaks passionately about the great town of Hartlepool, which I know well. He made a key point: our nation has always been very compassionate towards genuine asylum seekers. Under the previous Labour Government, some 20 years ago, the average number of asylum seekers was in the order of 20,000 to 30,000 a year, and they came legally. That is the crux of it: they came under legal and safe routes, and the country could absorb them. The hon. Member made a point about fairness; the current system is unfair, and too many of those now coming illegally are actually economic migrants as opposed to genuine asylum seekers.

Mr Brash: The hon. Gentleman does know my constituency quite well—I would not say very well, if we are honest about the short time he spent there—and he makes an interesting point. This is the second time that we have interacted on this issue and that he has eulogised the previous Labour Government, and I obviously welcome that once more. I also welcome his advocacy for free and safe routes, which I hope are now Reform policy—I look forward to that. He is right: the system is unfair; the system is broken, and it incentivises perverse behaviour and perverse levels of pressure on communities like mine. The critical thing is that if we get the balance right in our system, we will see stories of integration and hope. The current system leaves communities feeling abandoned and overwhelmed, and that cannot continue.

6.1 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hundreds of Mid Leicestershire residents who took the time to sign the two petitions. I want to speak directly to each and every one of them: you are absolutely right to sign, and you should not feel ashamed, belittled or even embarrassed for doing so; your views come from a deep sense of national pride, a strong belief in the rule of law and, above all, a commitment to fairness. They reflect a widespread feeling that the immigration system is failing. It is failing law-abiding British citizens, the British taxpayer and the integrity of our borders. We in this place must do better. Today, I proudly stand with my constituents, who deserve better.

[SIR JOHN HAYES *in the Chair*]

It is deeply disrespectful to the hard-working families in Mid Leicestershire and across the UK—who get up early, work long hours, pay their taxes and contribute to society—that individuals who come here illegally stay in hotels with access to three meals a day, healthcare and all the other benefits. Meanwhile, my constituents are struggling with the cost of living, and watching their purse strings tighten month after month. That is not sustainable, and it is simply not fair.

We must put an end to this open-door policy, which is placing unbearable pressure on our welfare system, public services and communities. We must close the hotels and deport those who are taking advantage of our system. It really is that simple—we just need a Government with the gumption to do it. As a country, we cannot continue to spend £6 million on these hotels every single day. Our once-great nation—the nation of the NHS, world-class education and the rule of law—is

choosing to spend billions on illegal migrants. That is money that could be better invested in our schools, police and hospitals. Hotels that once welcomed tourists to showcase the best of Britain are now occupied by individuals who in many cases have no respect for our borders, culture or rule of law, all while veterans sleep on the streets, local economies die and housing waiting lists grow rapidly. The system simply is not fair, and it is not what the British people voted for.

What did we get from the Government in response to the petitions? Bluster, what-aboutery and a clear lack of understanding. Governments of all colours have made mistakes on migration over the past 40 years. Many new MPs, particularly on the Conservative Benches, have articulated this point brilliantly to those Members who were in the House before us.

I know that the Leader of the Opposition gets this and has a plan. First, we will end the endless lawfare surrounding illegal migration. Then, as some Members have expressed it, we will deport, deport, deport. It really is that simple. The Conservative party is united in its commitment to leave the European convention on human rights and the European convention against trafficking and repeal the Human Rights Act 1998.

Tony Vaughan: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that withdrawing from those conventions will actually make those things easier? There is no basis for saying so. The truth is that we need those agreements to solve the problem—the deal with France is the start of this process of having a returns agreement again.

Mr Bedford: Many of these agreements were established 50, 60 or 70 years ago, in a completely different world. They are completely outdated and are not applicable to modern Britain. With regard to the hon. and learned Member's comment about the returns agreement, which has been mentioned by other hon. Members, when an agreement was in place before Brexit, we were a net recipient, so his argument simply does not hold water.

Time and again, these outdated frameworks have been used by activist do-gooders to block any form of deportation. We will never have control of our borders and do what the petitioners have asked for until we leave these conventions. A clean withdrawal from them will enable a future Government to act in a tough but fair manner for the people of Great Britain. We will not be deterred by woke protests or sneering lectures from the chattering classes; we will secure our borders and we will restore fairness.

And that is not all. A future Conservative Government will establish a dedicated removal force with real power and financial backing. That force will deport all illegal migrants within seven days of arrival, to ensure that foreign criminals have no place in the UK and to stop economic migrants abusing our system. Ultimately, we must put the British people first and restore fairness to the system.

Yes, my words today have been direct; they have been stark. That is because every petitioner from my constituency has had enough—I have had enough. It is time to stop the lawfare, deport those who have no right to be here, and restore confidence and fairness to our immigration system.

6.7 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for leading the debate.

I think that all of us in the Chamber agree on one point: hotels are simply not the right place to house anyone seeking asylum. They are used as hostels; they are also in areas people feel very uncomfortable about. That is all clear to us. They are not homes; they do not offer the stability or dignity that people need to rebuild their lives. Nor do they allow proper access to services or integration into our communities, to which many asylum seekers wish to contribute.

As we have heard from many Members, the impact of the current situation is felt locally. Public services are under pressure. Hard-working local taxpayers feel left out of the conversation. Those seeking asylum, who have often fled conflict, persecution and trauma, are left in a state of uncertainty and are unable to move forward with their lives. Tension is rising, protests ensue, fear is stoked, concerns are weaponised, communities feel demonised and the dream of the tolerant, diverse Britain that we know and love comes under threat.

However, let me be clear: I am not and will never be the type of politician who exists only to be against something. Neither I nor many other Members came into politics to cause tension, stoke fear and weaponise concerns. That is the cheap and easy route—promising the quick fantasy fix. That is the politics of weakness. I came into politics to get stuck into the difficult business of being for a solution. I can reject the use of hotels for asylum seekers and understand concerns about managing immigration levels fairly, while also rejecting those who wish to spin this broken record for votes until the sun goes down. It is time to roll up our sleeves collectively and fix this mess together.

Let me remind all Members here today that the previous Conservative Government created this problem. The hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), who is no longer in his place, talked about the Rwanda scheme.

Richard Tice: The hon. Member speaks passionately about all of us being keen to close down the hotels, including those in my constituency of Boston and Skegness. He talks about being for things, so is he for moving asylum seekers who are here illegally into houses in multiple occupation, or is he for moving them into processing centres in remote locations, as Reform suggests?

Kevin Bonavia: As I will come to later in my remarks, I am for reducing and speeding up the whole processing system and for finding more appropriate places than hotels—there are a multitude of those, and I am sure the Minister will set out where we get to on that. The point is that we should all agree that we need to have a fair system. It needs to be fast and to deal with genuine asylum seekers. Unfortunately, we currently have a broken system.

Returning to what the previous Conservative Government were apparently trying to do with their Rwanda system, they never gave us or themselves a chance to see that one through. They knew perfectly well that it was not working out and they got themselves into all kinds of knots.

We hear calls for leaving conventions. People blamed the European Union, but we left the European Union with a hard Brexit and immigration has gone up, so they go and find something else: the European convention on human rights. When that does not work, what is next? The refugee convention. While we are throwing all those rights out the door, it will be, “Well, we don’t need any of that stuff. Who cares about freedom from torture? Who cares about these rights for all of us in this country?” Talking about so-called outdated laws is not the solution. We need far more practical solutions. The answer is to co-operate with our neighbours. This is not a British problem; this is a European and a worldwide problem. If we treat it as a British problem, we will never, ever get the solution.

Other Members in this room seek to weaponise this issue for their own ends. It suits them to scaremonger about what is happening, I attempted to intervene on the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) to ask where her evidence was for all that she said. Those of us who try to look at the facts are dealing with fake news. Some people online on social media will not look at mainstream media or trust journalists who look for second sources, but will happily share a faked video. That is what is happening now: fearmongering and scaremongering from parties like Reform that thrive on division and hate. Give me evidence—that is all I ask. I want genuine evidence, not the fake news that we get on social media, with all the fake videos out there.

I welcome the much more sensible and practical approach of this Government. The British people are a practical and pragmatic people who believe in fairness, as do this Labour Government. That is why I welcome the beginning of the returns agreement with our neighbour France. France has a major issue with illegal migration and asylum as well. So does Germany. So does Malta, the country I was born in. People say that we live on a small island; Malta is a small island, much smaller than here. This is not just a British problem. We have to work together to find solutions, rather than running away from rules and clubs just because we do not like them and will not play that game.

The agreement with France signals a more constructive approach. What is needed is co-operation, because we have a shared responsibility. Of course, that initiative is not a silver bullet, but it is a practical step forward, unlike using our overseas territories to host people. The hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby did not rule out the use of the Falklands. Islands that we fought so hard for in 1982, against Argentine invasion, are now apparently going to be used for dispersal. She did not rule it out when she was asked to do so—it is under consideration.

Sarah Pochin: Now he is twisting things.

Kevin Bonavia: I am happy to take an intervention from the hon. Lady, if she wishes. By working with our European partners and other countries we can better manage arrivals, reduce pressure on local services and ensure that those seeking asylum are treated with fairness and dignity. Co-operation must be more than simply operational, however; it means tackling the criminal networks that exploit vulnerable people and ensuring that our asylum system is efficient and humane.

Our communities want clarity. They want to know that the system is working, not just for those who come here in search of safety, but for our local communities.

That starts with policies that build on partnership, not posturing. While I will always bang the drum for safer and stronger border management, I do not want us to turn our backs on those in need or give up on the multicultural Britain we know and love.

Britain has long been a place of refuge and opportunity. We have heard about the 250,000 Belgians this country gave refuge to in the first world war, the Windrush generation and the frontline workers who kept our NHS going during the pandemic. Immigrants have always played a vital role in shaping our country for better. We have a legal and a moral responsibility to support those fleeing persecution. That means building an asylum system that is fair, efficient and humane, and one that does not leave people waiting in limbo for years.

At the same time, we must be firm where it matters. If someone comes to this country and breaks our laws, they should be removed. That is not about prejudice; it is about protecting the integrity of our system and the safety of our communities. It is something that those who come here legally, and contribute greatly, wholeheartedly support—fairness matters to us all. That balanced approach must guide us.

We need to move away from the use of hotels, which were never designed for long-term accommodation. We must continue the work of clearing the backlog so that decisions are made swiftly and fairly. We must deepen our partnerships with international allies to address the drivers of migration, which affect all countries, at their source. With that in mind, I ask the Minister how and when local authorities will be notified that hotels in their area are being returned to public use, and what support will be provided to ensure a smooth transition for both our local communities and all those applying for asylum?

6.17 pm

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I must congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on an excellent, compelling and evidence-based opening speech of the debate. I declare my membership, alongside him, of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees.

The petitions call for three main things. They call for asylum hotels to be shut immediately, for people in hotels to be deported, and for all support—including food, shelter and medical assistance—to be denied.

Migration is a basic human thing to do. People move. Our earliest ancestors did it, and most of us have moved at some point during our lives, in search of work or a better life, or for love. Most of us, though, are lucky enough not to have had to flee for our lives, as many of those in asylum hotels have done. Whether we have travelled from Leicester to London or from Afghanistan to Aberdeen, moving is a part of life. Refugees, a small proportion of the total migration into this country, are forced to move. The chance for them to seek asylum is a lifeline at the heart of British values and democracy.

Asylum hotels work for no one. The Government want to end their use, as they are hugely expensive. They are also completely unsuitable for men, women and children who have endured and fled unimaginable trauma. However, hotels are being used in the immediate term because the last Government deliberately created a massive backlog of destitute people when they stopped assessing asylum claims.

Successive Governments—sadly, including this one—have sought to make life needlessly difficult for people seeking sanctuary. Hotel accommodation for destitute asylum seekers is given on a no-choice basis. Rooms in hotels are often shared and cramped, with nowhere to cook and no privacy, and often leave vulnerable people isolated and depressed. Asylum seekers have no recourse to public funds, meaning that they are not eligible for mainstream benefits and, in most cases, are banned from working. They are trapped by a malfunctioning Home Office—a bloated institution that should be broken up, as recommended in a report that I commissioned a few months ago called “No Way Home”.

Turning to the proposal to deport those seeking asylum: that is immoral. We have provided sanctuary for decades under international conventions, because protecting people from torture and death reflects core British values of generosity, compassion and care—values that our grandparents fought and died for in world war two. They are values that are upheld every day in my Bristol Central constituency, where we are proud to be a city of sanctuary, where our wonderful schools welcome everyone as equal and valued members of their school communities, and where the Bristol Refugee Festival and amazing organisations such as the Bristol Hospitality Network, Moveable Feast, Aid Box Community and the Dovetail Orchestra—to name but a few—work to connect, share and celebrate together. Far-right groups do not like it, but Bristol stands firmly for dignity, inclusion and hope.

The real problem is inequality, not immigration. In billionaire Britain, 4.5 million children are growing up in poverty. Meanwhile, the top 50 richest families in the UK now hold more wealth than the poorest half of the population, which is over 34 million people. There are now over 172,000 children living in temporary accommodation, while wealth from property and inheritance has soared. It is patently not those destitute people who have fled for their lives, and who are now stuffed into inappropriate accommodation and forced to live on £9.95 a week, who are to blame for any of that.

We need fairer taxation. We need wealth taxes so that those with the broadest shoulders can pay their fair share. We need a plan to make migration actually work for all of us. I urge the Government to act on the Refugee Council’s proposal that would allow Ministers to close asylum hotels within a year. It recommends a one-off scheme to give time-limited permission to stay, subject to suitably rigorous security checks, to people from countries that make them almost certain to be recognised as refugees. The system should also provide safe and legal routes for people to seek sanctuary, so that they are not pushed into the hands of people smugglers, and we must end the ban on asylum seekers working. Let them contribute. Those are the real ways to undermine the black economy and create integrated communities.

Ending the scandal of poverty and inequality is critical, starting—please—with scrapping the awful two-child benefit cap and taxing billionaires properly. It is time to share out the great wealth that we have in this country to provide reliable and accessible public services that are run for the public good and that we can all benefit from. We must reject the politics of division and hate, and make hope normal again.

6.23 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. My contribution will focus exclusively on the asylum system and the impact that my community has seen. Falkirk has been a host community for asylum seekers over the last few years. I have met people from Ukraine, the middle east and the horn of Africa, many of whom have fled war and persecution across the globe. As many Members have said, we do not have a system that works for communities such as Falkirk, or for those who are hosted here.

The community I represent is suffering from a legacy of unfit hotel accommodation. Since 2021, the Cladhan hotel in Falkirk has been used by the Home Office. Those housed there have been helped by excellent community groups and charities that have commendably hosted initiatives to help with successful integration. Those people claiming asylum whom I have met simply want to live their lives peacefully, while contributing to the community. Despite the restrictions, they do so, but for too long—sometimes for years—they have languished on waiting lists.

However, I will not ignore the fact that concerns in my community have been heightened since a vile crime was committed in October 2023 by Sadeq Nikzad. Many in my community were unaware of the use of the Cladhan hotel. Mr Nikzad raped a 15-year-old girl. It was a revolting crime. He also, shamefully, defended himself in court by trying—and failing—to mitigate his crime on the basis that he did not understand cultural differences. That was wrong. Anyone who was disgusted by his crime or by his defence was not wrong. Everybody I have met in my community, of all cultures, was disgusted at his crime. The Government have since acted through clause 48 of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which disapplies refugee protections from those who have committed serious crimes such as his.

That said, Mr Nikzad is not representative of those fleeing persecution who live in my community, just as the criminals from Falkirk who are currently incarcerated for similarly serious sexual offences are not representative of people from Falkirk. The violence and intimidation that we have seen rise in the Falkirk community is wrong. The recent throwing of a brick through a window of the Cladhan, without regard or care for the human lives inside, is not an action of any of the people I have met who are positively contributing to the community, many of whom have expressed to me their legitimate concerns about the asylum system. Banners seen at protests encouraging people to “Kill ’em all and let God sort ’em out” are wrong and contrary to our community’s values.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), who is no longer in his place, very aptly said, it is up to us as politicians to focus on solutions to the issues that our constituents identify, and not to use our platform to inflame, misinform or omit. Community fury was recently directed at a new hotel development that, it turned out, was not and would never be permitted as asylum accommodation. That was a fact that many in the community could have chosen to publicise, and I chose to work with the company to publicise it, but others chose instead to fuel speculation.

Asylum hotels in this country will close only when processing speeds up to meet the significant demand and backlogs that built up over nearly half a decade of substantially high irregular migration. Processing had effectively stopped under the previous Government, as they opted for the unworkable Rwanda scheme and told my community that they were building a temporary asylum hotel in our community, when they were actually using it to manage their backlog and abandon people in the system and in our communities for years instead of improving processing. The dropping of the target to reach decisions within six months has preceded the saga of many people I have met being left in communities for years while they wait on an initial decision.

In stark contrast to the Opposition’s programme when they were in government, this Government have intervened on processing the number of asylum seekers—and it has fallen. The Refugee Council calculated that, thanks to this Government’s interventions, there were 59,000 fewer people in the system at the start of 2025 than there would have been had the system been left as it was under the previous Government. Processing in quarter 2 of 2025 was 116% higher for initial decisions than in quarter 2 of 2024.

The bill to the taxpayer, which has been discussed today, has also decreased. The cost of hotels is £5.77 million per day—still substantially too high, but down from £8.3 million per day last year. This Government will be the one who end asylum hotels, and they will do so through a sustainable system of processing. However, we must provide greater transparency on when this will lead to asylum hotels being closed in specific communities; I will ask a question for my hon. Friend the Minister to address when he sums up.

Getting rid of my constituents’ human rights under the European convention on human rights would not work either; as many Members have said, it would undermine the vital international agreements that we need to rebuild a coherent asylum system, as it is not working at the moment. We need a system that works so that we can properly fulfil our legal and moral obligation to those who come to this country, fleeing war and persecution, and is fulfilled in an appropriate way, with the consent and support of host communities—something that has not happened in Falkirk.

The Minister will be aware that Falkirk council and I are corresponding extensively with them regarding the concerns rising in our community. We have been raising concerns from the community that were also raised through a public engagement forum that I, Falkirk council and Police Scotland Forth Valley hosted on 19 September.

I would appreciate it if, in the Minister’s response, he could address the following points: how the ongoing programme of asylum hotel closures will be timetabled equitably across each of the regions and nations of the United Kingdom; what work he is doing to resource community cohesion efforts alongside local authorities and how effectively the Home Office public protection team and the local authority asylum liaison officers are performing and what requirements they are given to liaise with local authorities.

Can the Minister address whether consideration has been given to support local authorities in meeting broader housing need, which remains unmet for far too many of my constituents enduring Scotland’s housing crisis? If any

break clauses in contracts with operators are not taken up by the Home Office, what obligations will the Home Office put on these providers to compel them to engage with local communities? That was not done under the previous Government, and it is the stem of many of the issues we now see in Falkirk and across the country.

6.30 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on leading this important debate. I begin by declaring an interest: a previous donor to my election campaign has an interest in Stay Belvedere Hotels, a sub-contractor of Clearsprings, which is one of the three principal providers of asylum accommodation under the Home Office contract. I am also a member of the Home Affairs Committee, which recently completed an inquiry into asylum accommodation and will be issuing its report later this month. Although I will not be speaking in my capacity as a member of that Committee or revealing conclusions from the forthcoming report, I will make reference during my speech to evidence given to the Committee in open session that is already in the public domain.

As we have heard, the British taxpayer is wasting obscene amounts of money on the provision of asylum accommodation, not through generosity, but because of the incompetence and cynicism of the previous Conservative Government and the failure of the current Labour Administration, I am afraid, to address those deficiencies. The processing of applications was deliberately delayed under the Tories as they sought to make political capital from their flawed Rwanda scheme. According to the latest figures, nearly 90,000 applications are outstanding in respect of 110,000 people, with 60% having waited over six months and one third over a year. That represents a huge waste of public money, which is why my party is calling for the establishment of nightingale processing centres to clear the backlog within a year, paid for by an immediate and dramatic reduction in accommodation costs, which are far too high, particularly in respect of hotels.

Why are hotel costs so high? As I have seen, it is not as if the accommodation is luxurious, with two or three to a room in hotels that have turned into overcrowded hostels. The cost is so high because the Conservative Government agreed contracts that gave the three principal providers of asylum accommodation huge incentives to house applicants in hotels. The profit clawback clause in the contract was based on a fixed percentage of the cost of the accommodation provided. As the base cost of a hotel accommodation is up to eight times more expensive than other accommodation, providers could make up to eight times the profit before the clause kicked in. The private providers consequently had a huge disincentive to move applicants out of hotels after the pandemic ended, and that is why more than 30,000 are still in hotels. Despite what the Government say in the media, those numbers are again on the rise, with the latest figures showing an 8% increase in the number of applicants housed in hotels in the last 12 months.

The flawed accommodation contract is the reason why Clearsprings' profits rose from £6,000 per employee in 2020 to a staggering £300,000 per employee in 2024. Yet, when I asked about the profit clawback clause

during a Home Affairs Committee evidence session, it was clear that neither the Minister—not this Minister, I hasten to add, but his predecessor—nor her senior officials even knew how the profit clawback clause worked. Neither did they show any appetite for renegotiating the provision or any great enthusiasm for exiting the contracts, despite a break clause that becomes operative from next year.

In addition to the hugely inflated costs of providing accommodation, asylum seekers are an excessive drain on the public purse because, unlike in other countries, those awaiting a decision in the UK are banned from working for at least a year. In contrast, Canada allows applicants to begin working immediately, and Germany after three months. The UK stands as an absolute outlier in taking such a restrictive approach, despite evidence showing that early work boosts integration and the economy, reduces dependency, restores dignity and saves taxpayers money. The UK's current position is indefensible, which is why the Lib Dems have joined with many groups in civil society in calling for an end to the ban.

The asylum system is failing both those who seek refuge and the public who fund it. Endless delays, costly hotels and flawed contracts provide neither justice nor value for money. We need faster processing, an end to the ban and an accommodation system that does not allow the private sector to make obscene profits. Finally, I remind hon. Members that undocumented migrants became an issue only with the advent of Brexit. Under the Dublin accord, would-be applicants could be returned to their first point of entry into the EU. In answer to the point that the Tories have kept making this afternoon, it acted as a huge disincentive to crossing the channel.

While the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) fathered Brexit, his friends in the Conservative party delivered it and Labour sadly chose to be its nursemaid. They vowed to make Brexit work, but it appears today, in reports from across the Atlantic, that the Chancellor is finally seeing that that might not be possible. I asked the UK Border Security Commander at the Home Affairs Committee last week if he could give me just one example of how Brexit had secured our borders, and he was unable to do so, as can be seen on TikTok. That is why the only way to properly secure our borders is to re-engage with Europe.

6.35 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I draw the Chamber's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests and the support that my office receives from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy Project. This is a really important debate, and I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on his eloquent introduction to this difficult issue.

The previous speaker, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), alluded to the fact that the Home Affairs Committee has undertaken an inquiry into asylum accommodation and a report is coming out on Monday. I will be speaking in a personal capacity as well, but there may be some overlap in our conclusions. One thing that was patently clear to us as we undertook a 15-month inquiry into asylum accommodation was that

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it has been a complete disaster. It has been disastrous for the local communities where asylum seekers are being housed and for the local authorities that are trying to provide services. It has been disastrous for asylum seekers; we found numerous pieces of evidence of safeguarding issues. It has also been disastrous for the public purse. It has cost an unbelievable amount of money, considering the terrible externalities it has created.

How did we end up in this situation? Asylum is not a new concept. The UK has faced asylum challenges for decades, but until six years ago we never had asylum hotels. It is clear to me, based on the 10 years for which I worked on asylum issues before coming to this House and my last 15 months on the Home Affairs Committee, that we must follow the money. The smoking gun in this scenario is the asylum contracts that the Conservative Government signed in 2019, when they handed over all responsibility and discretion to three private providers.

That has cost £7 billion of taxpayers' money, of which hundreds of millions have gone on profits, but there is no effective oversight of these contracts by the Home Office, no holding the providers to account for failure and no grip on spiralling costs. There has been poor management of where public money is spent, and, as the hon. Member for Wimbledon said, poor use has been made of clawback clauses.

The providers would argue that they have never breached the profit share that the Conservatives baked into the contract at 7%, but as costs spiralled following the pandemic and the disastrous Rwanda scheme, they had every incentive to move people into hotels and keep them there. As the clear financial incentive grew, the Conservative Government put nothing in place to stop the runaway train. One of the owners even entered *The Sunday Times* rich list. Over the weekend, *The Times* covered reports of a property owner bragging on TikTok from Dubai about how easy it is to get rich by leasing his properties to Mears, Clearsprings and Serco. We have also seen real scandals in the Clearsprings subprime supply chain, about which there still needs to be more transparency.

The asylum accommodation contracts are a public procurement failure of the highest order. They were signed in 2019 by the Conservative Government, and they are fully that Government's responsibility. The scandal is why they did nothing to derail the train when they could see it coming. The worst part is that we have nothing to show for that £7 billion of taxpayers' money. It has gone on receipts to hotels and profits for private providers. We have no buildings or new social housing; we have nothing about which the public can say, "At least we got this as we accommodated asylum seekers." I do not know about other Members, but I think about what could have been done if I had been given the share of that money for my city of Edinburgh and asked to look after asylum seekers and invest in housing stock. The things the Conservatives could have done with that money had they been able to get a more effective grip on public spending!

The Conservatives locked the country into these asylum contracts in 2019. It is a crowded field, but I think that is one of their most appalling legacies. Next year, as has been alluded to, is the break clause, where the Government have the opportunity to substantially rewrite or break

these asylum contracts at no penalty. My questions to the Minister are: what is the Home Office's assessment of how these contracts have been handled so far? What is his view of how Home Office officials have managed the contracts and their capacity to get a grip on them? Is he looking at the break clause and thinking about whether he should use it?

It may sound a bit technical and dry, on such an emotive issue, to be focusing on contracts, procurements and supply chains, but I have always believed that the role of Government is to drill down into the nuts and bolts, deal with manifest failures and make the system work. That is what I think the petitioners are asking us to do—not to posture, to grandstand or to use inflammatory rhetoric, but to solve the problem. We can do that by getting a grip on these asylum contracts.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): We now move to the wind-ups. We have plenty of time, not that that is an invitation for speeches of an undue length. Members should keep it poignant but pithy. In that spirit, I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman, Will Forster.

6.41 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is clear from both the petitions that people across the country are angry and frustrated about the state of our asylum system. The Liberal Democrats understand why people have signed the petitions. The situation has been badly mishandled for years, and in my opinion the petitioners are right to call it out. We should not have 30,000 people in asylum hotels, nor should we have a backlog of 90,000 asylum cases. We certainly should not be spending £6 million every day on asylum accommodation.

Despite the chaos in the asylum system, we know that immigration brings huge benefits to this country. Contrary to what we have heard from some Conservative and Reform Members today, people are more likely to be treated by an immigrant in the NHS than they are to be behind one in the queue for treatment. We should recognise the value that refugees have given to our country. In Woking, more than 500 refugees have settled locally in the last 10 years, whether that be from Afghanistan, Syria or Ukraine.

Among those refugees was the Shafae family, who resettled in Woking in 2021 after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. The father now works as a BBC journalist, translating world news for regional audiences. That former asylum seeker is playing his part in expanding this country's soft power, and countering fake news and misinformation from our rivals in Russia, China and other countries. Their children are doing amazingly well and excelling in education. The oldest daughter, Asma, secured a two-year scholarship to study in a sixth form that many in this Chamber would not have been bright enough to get into. Their youngest daughter, Marwa, is such an amazing art student that she has had her paintings displayed at Woking railway station. That family alone highlights the value of refugees and of us supporting them. That support has helped that family, my constituency and our country.

I am proud of the role that refugees are playing in Woking, but the system is still a mess. Why did it get like that? Because the Conservatives lost control of our borders. They deliberately slowed the claims process,

saying that that would act as a deterrent. That failed. After Brexit, both channel crossings and immigration went up, not down. The Conservatives' failure has cost taxpayers billions of pounds and increased community tensions. They spent more than £700 million on Rwanda, and that policy sent only a few refugees to the country.

In the last financial year, the Home Office spent around £4 billion on asylum support, including more than £2 billion on hotel accommodation. According to the National Audit Office, hotels accounted for more than three quarters of the total cost of asylum accommodation while housing only a third of asylum seekers. Hotel use has been appalling value for money. Under the Conservative Government, the private sector started to make a fortune out of contracts to protect our border, while clearly not delivering. Other hon. Members have talked about hotel profits, so I will move on.

According to the Refugee Council, at its height in 2022 the trade in people smuggling was worth around £230 million to the smugglers themselves, yet just one contract for border security, which lasted two years, was worth £1 billion. As a country, we have spent an inordinate amount of money compared with what the smugglers are making—even the 10th most expensive contract was worth more than £65 million. This industry is leeching off our country, and some people are going after asylum seekers and refugees while not criticising those businesses. We have effectively privatised protecting our borders, but those companies are making a shedload while not solving the problem. It is actually in their best interest not to solve the problem and still to take taxpayers' money.

It is not just the Conservatives who are responsible for this dire crisis. To the hon. Members for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) and for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin), and above all to the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), I say that their politics is causing this problem. After Brexit, we no longer have the European Union's Dublin rules, so we can no longer automatically send people back to Europe. The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford has called that the Brexit effect: asylum seekers are trying to reach the UK because they know they cannot be returned. As a result, small boat crossings have gone up significantly since the post-Brexit deal. While Reform causes problems and blames everyone else, we Liberal Democrats actually have an antidote to the problem, and we will happily vaccinate the country against the populism that Reform is spouting.

Turning to Labour, the Government need to go further and faster to reduce channel crossings and cut the cost of asylum hotels. Earlier this year, they had an opportunity to reduce the bill. We tabled an amendment to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to lift the ban on asylum seekers working. If we talked to many of our constituents, they would be frustrated that we are spending so much money on asylum hotels, yet banning asylum seekers from working.

We must be honest about the right to work. Allowing asylum seekers to work after three months would reduce the burden on taxpayers and help them to build a stake in their new society. Instead of being trapped in limbo and relying on Government support, they could be contributing to our local economies. It is common sense to let people build their own lives, not rely on a state—let alone a new state—to offer accommodation and measly benefits. If Labour, the Conservatives and Reform had

voted for the amendment, we would have lowered the burden on the taxpayer. Reform says it wants to solve the problem, but it threw in its lot with the political establishment by voting against that proposal.

In Australia, most asylum seekers have the right to work straightaway, although it is temporary. In Canada, they can apply for a work permit while their asylum application is processed. The US allows asylum seekers to work after six months. From June next year, the EU will require member states to let asylum seekers work after nine months, while some go further: Sweden allows them to work straightaway. Our one-year restriction is out of kilter with the rest of the world. The Minister was not in his position when we debated the border Bill, but will he reconsider the ban now that he is in post, or at least reduce its length so it is more comparable with those in other countries?

This problem can be tackled, and the Liberal Democrats have set out a clear five-point plan to fix the broken system. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for Horsham (John Milne), for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), for Wokingham (Clive Jones) and for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) for speaking today and highlighting some of that plan.

First, we would lead global action to stop the smuggling and trafficking gangs that profit from human misery. This is an international problem and needs international co-operation, and Britain should be leading that effort once again. Secondly, we would process applications swiftly and deport those with no right to stay. The best deterrent to dangerous crossings is an efficient and fair system that makes quick decisions and enforces them properly. Thirdly, we would crack down on modern slavery here in the UK. Trafficking gangs bring people here to exploit them with forced labour. We must get the Fair Work Agency up and running and bring those responsible for that exploitation to justice.

Fourthly, we would invest to support refugees closer to their home countries. Most people fleeing conflict want to stay near their home, but our aid budget, which would help people to do that, has been cut by both the Conservatives and Labour, who are then surprised that we have small boat crossings in such record numbers. Restoring that support—that international aid—would help to save lives and reduce those dangerous crossings across Europe, in the Mediterranean, and closer to home in the English channel.

Finally, we would allow asylum seekers to apply from outside the United Kingdom, whether at our embassies or consulates or through other initiatives, so that people can travel safely if they are granted protection, rather than risking their lives at sea. How successful has the Ukrainian visa scheme been, given we have had almost no Ukrainians make an illegal crossing? We need to have safe, legal routes.

That is what a fair deal on the asylum and immigration system would look like. It would save taxpayer money, restore public confidence and uphold Britain's proud tradition of offering sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. Reform, like many of the private sector companies that I have already highlighted, has a perverse incentive to keep the migration crisis going. It wants all attempts to stop the boats to fail so it can continue to profit politically from the crisis. It wants migrants to come

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across so that the country stays cross. The remedies it is selling would make the quacks of old blush—these snake oil salesmen are not to be trusted.

To the people of my Woking constituency and to others across the country who signed these petitions, I say this: I am sorry that Conservative mismanagement has broken our system, that Reform's Brexit tore up the Dublin rules that stopped the channel crossings in the first place, and that Labour's border Bill does not solve the problem. That is why we have come up with a plan. The Liberal Democrats have an antidote to this crisis.

6.52 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir John. I thank the Petitions Committee, my constituency neighbour, the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), for presenting these petitions, and the hundreds of thousands of people who have made their voices heard by signing them. Despite the clear wishes of the British people, successive Governments of different parties have failed to control immigration, both legal and illegal. This is a complete scandal and is probably the single biggest reason for the declining trust in our politics.

It is a particular scandal that, as an island nation, we have failed to stop people from coming to this country illegally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) rightly said. Since the small boats crisis began in 2018, nearly 200,000 people have come to Britain via that route. In 2025 alone, more than 35,000 people have made the crossing. On arrival, more than 95% of those people have claimed asylum, and having done so, they are afforded generous support, including direct cash transfers. Often, they are placed in hotels, where they can pose a risk to local people, particularly men posing a risk to women and girls. We have already heard about one such horrifying case from the hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) today, and I am sorry to say that there are many more.

Illegal migrants can stay in the asylum system for years, launching endless appeals. Increasingly, our system is approving asylum claims on the thinnest of grounds. The incentives are clear: come to Britain and be fed, housed and given full healthcare and money to spend, all funded by the British taxpayer. If the Government were really serious about ending the small boats crisis, they would put a stop to asylum support and close the hotels as these petitions request. Those who have arrived here illegally would be sent back to their home country, if it is safe for them to go, or to a third country. Those who make the crossing in future should be detained and swiftly removed. Anybody who arrives here illegally must never be able to apply for asylum.

This is a generous country, as many hon. Members have said this afternoon—remarkably so—but allowing access to Britain to tens and tens of thousands of young men who are willing to break our laws by coming here from the safety of France is not generosity. It is unfair, unaffordable, democratically illegitimate and dangerous. British taxpayers must not foot the bill for a crisis that they have voted to stop and that was created here in Westminster. We can end it, and we must.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) is right to say that Britain deserves better. Many hon. Members have mentioned that the previous Government failed to fix the crisis, which is true, but we have had a Labour Government for well over a year and it is their job to control our borders. Instead of doing any better, the situation has got worse. Will the Minister commit today to preventing those who arrive here illegally from applying for asylum? If not, will he please explain why not? Will he please commit today to a concrete timeline for the closure of asylum hotels, and to fully tracking, including in the welfare system, the lifetime costs of asylum claims?

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I call the Minister, and ask him to allow a moment or two for the mover to sum up at the end.

6.56 pm

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir John. I assure hon. Members that I will leave more than just a moment of the time remaining.

I want to start by thanking my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for introducing the debate. I have said this before, but it bears repeating: it is a very difficult job to present a petition in these debates as a member of the Petitions Committee. The Committee member is asked to speak for, in this case, hundreds of thousands of people, some of whose sentiments they share, but not all. Those people all have their different views and different takes, and the Committee member has to bring those voices into the room, although it is a speech in their own name, and to reflect the views of their constituents and their personal experience too. My hon. and learned Friend did an excellent job.

We were all struck—not least because they were mirrored in so many contributions—by the points of my hon. and learned Friend about our nation's proud history of providing shelter, with his particularly poignant reference to 1914 and his community. The issue is of great interest to the people of Folkestone and Hythe. I, too, thought of our history in this space. I have seen, as all hon. Members have and as a number of them referenced, the British public's breathtaking capacity for humanity and compassion for those who need it.

My hon. and learned Friend talked, of course, of 1914. We could echo that down the decades, but I think of recent years, too, and the Afghan and Syrian resettlement schemes, Homes for Ukraine and the support for the British national overseas visa. The British people have stepped up for people in need. That is the country that I know and love.

We know that there is anger, however, because people see too often that those who do not have the same degree of need are testing the system because they think it is in their interests to do so, or that there are those seeking to game the system. There is no doubt that that is pulling at public trust. All of us, whatever our political persuasion, see and feel that on the doorsteps and in our mailbags. It serves nobody to say that we do not or to suggest there is not something that the Government of the day need to address.

This is a challenge of public confidence in our asylum system, but that has been turbocharged in recent years by the disreputable act of stopping processing. That created a huge backlog, which means that hotels, which were never part of this nation's approach to asylum, are now a significant part of it. We must name that as the original sin, but we know what people are saying now: they want order, fairness and humanity in the system. That has been lost in recent years, which is why we see the degree of anger in these petitions, in our mailbags and beyond.

I am going to address the petitioners first, and then cover the important contributions made by hon. Members. On petition 705383 and the suggestion that support for asylum seekers should be stopped, the reality is that doing so overnight would mean that, in many cases—I dare say the vast majority—those people, including children and vulnerable people, would end up living on the street.

That is not the right way to exit hotel accommodation. A better approach is to continue to speed up the processing of asylum claims, so that those who are genuine refugees can be accepted and those who are not can have their claims rejected before being removed. Either way, we will reduce the amount of money being spent on asylum support. I am proud that, under this Government, we are already spending £1 billion less, including £500 million less on hotels. However, I know that the British public want us to go further so that the money can be invested in the British people's priorities, and rightly so.

That is why we are working so hard to turn around the backlog of tens of thousands, which we inherited, by reforming each stage of the asylum system. We have doubled decision making, as we committed to at the election, and the backlog is already down by some 18%. We are reforming the appeal system entirely. Provisions in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill will introduce a statutory timeframe for supported accommodation cases, halving the disposal time for such appeals and enabling swifter movement out of hotel accommodation. And for those who have no right to be here, there will be swifter departure from the UK.

We have a statutory obligation to continue to support those whose claims are being considered, in order to prevent destitution. We have tightened the terms and introduced tougher sanctions for those who refuse suitable accommodation without a valid reason. However, we have legal and, I would argue, moral imperatives not to create mass destitution simply by turfing them out with no support.

As a number of colleagues have said today, although it has been lost in our public discourse, it is important to recognise that the individuals we are discussing today do not have access to our welfare system. A frequent refrain from people who engage with me on this issue is that one of their frustrations is that people come here to use our welfare system, but that is not what is happening. We are meeting our obligations to prevent destitution, but that is it.

E-petition 718406 relates directly to hotels. It says explicitly that the Labour party made a commitment at the last election to close those hotels, and it says we ought to do so now that we are in power. We will make good on that pledge, as we said in our manifesto before the election that we would close the hotels during this Parliament. We are committed to that, and that is what

we are doing. We will go at the fastest pace we can, which is why we are looking at options with local partners—a number of colleagues have raised that issue, and I will cover it in a little while.

We are also looking at a range of sites, including military sites. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe talked about the work at Napier barracks. When such work is done thoughtfully, in a planned manner with the community and with civil society, it can be a really good model, and we are looking very closely at that work. We are also looking at disused industrial sites.

By processing claims, we are allowing those fleeing persecution to move out of support and rebuild their lives. For those individuals with no right to remain in the UK, we are taking the actions that are needed. We have removed from the UK more than 35,000 people who have no right to be here, which includes a 28% increase in the return of failed asylum seekers.

We are also working upstream—this was a matter of interest to colleagues—to disrupt the criminal gangs that profit from this misery and the dangerous small boat crossings, which are a significant factor behind the trends we have seen. Significantly, we are doing that by boosting funding for the National Crime Agency, so that there is more capacity, and through our innovative international agreements, such as the one with France, to return those with no right to be here.

I now turn to some of the contributions, starting with those from Conservative colleagues. I would argue that it is no coincidence that no Conservative Member of the previous Parliament contributed to today's debate. I promise that I am the last person to police colleagues' diaries, as there is nothing worse than saying, "Well, there's five of ours and eight of yours, so what does that mean?" However, that is a really important point. It was interesting to hear what the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), the Opposition spokesperson, said. As yet, there has been no acceptance or willingness to put a name on why we are in this situation. Instead, there is this rather heroic hope that the British people will believe that, in 14 months, the Conservatives have learned the lessons and now know how to fix a crisis that they created over 14 years. I gently say that that is a heroic expectation.

With characteristic charm, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) talked about the important impact of the hotel in his community. I cannot give him a date for its closure, but what I can say is that we will not have that hotel open a day longer than is needed. We have made a commitment to an ordered exit from asylum hotels. He talked about challenges in getting information from the Department. I am a new Minister, but I will always endeavour to do my utmost to get him the information he needs. It is the same for all colleagues, because we have an important role.

Multiple times a week, people, including those in positions of responsibility—less often Members of Parliament, but certainly people in local government—feed on those rumours: "I've seen this online. What does this mean?". They create a buzz and a bubble of activity around rumours with no foundation. It is better, and in our interests, for colleagues to have the best information possible so that we can be the leaders we need to be. I know that colleagues would want to do it in that way.

[Alex Norris]

The hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) asked about the progress on taking on organised crime. I am pleased to tell him that we have made 350 disruptions of people-smuggling operations, which is a 40% increase on last year. We are serious about going after them, and we will leave no stone unturned in doing so.

Sir Ashley Fox: If the hon. Gentleman has been so successful, why is the number of boat crossings up 50% on this time last year? And why are there 3,000 more people in asylum hotels than before he came to office?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that these journeys take a very long time, so those are lagging indicators. He also knows that the number of people in hotels currently sits at 32,000, compared with 56,000 in September '23. The journey is in the right direction. Of course, there are bobbles along the way, but we will deliver on the commitment that we have made.

Sir Ashley Fox: Yes, the number was 56,000 in 2023, but the previous Government brought it down to 29,500 in June 2024. The reduction that the hon. Gentleman mentions was all under the previous Conservative Government. The number has gone up by 3,000 since he took office.

Alex Norris: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's heroism in asking for regards and laurels for housing merely 30,000 people in hotels as opposed to 56,000, but I do not think that will wash. The reality is that we will be the ones who end hotel use.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned deterrence. Conservative colleagues cannot really believe that a scheme that sent four volunteers for £700 million formed a meaningful deterrent. We want to have a deterrent, and returns agreements are good deterrents, which is why we innovated one with France. Indeed, the shadow Home Secretary was very keen on them, but was unable to deliver. We delivered it. That is exactly why we proceeded in that way.

The hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) talked about how hotels and the housing waiting lists are dreadful. He talked about how dreadful homelessness is and the pressure on public services. He is going to be very angry when he meets the people who did that. The sad thing is that they are on his Front Bench, not ours. He talked about a future Tory Government, which will remain a long way off until the Conservatives come properly to terms with their legacy in this area and across public services, the economy and beyond.

The hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) talked about how fed up her constituents are. That is a point of agreement with me, but perhaps the end of such agreement. Many people who signed this petition, who may have voted Reform in the previous county council elections or who are thinking about voting Reform in a general election, will be watching this debate. I say to them that I believe her contribution is exactly why they cannot and should not vote for Reform. She said that she agreed with the petitioners. She said that no money should be spent on this cohort of people, and within the next sentence she spent tens of billions of pounds on her solution to the problem. Those are not serious answers.

Similarly, the hon. Lady said that the past offered no solutions. Within 10 minutes, the former leader, and now deputy leader, of her party, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), who is not in his place, contradicted that by asking why we could not just go back to how things were 20 years ago. The reality is that Reform will argue each end of any argument if it thinks that doing so will receive political support. The last thing Reform wants is for the Government of the day to solve this problem. I am afraid that we will disappoint Reform on that, because we are very much going to do so.

The right to work was a major feature of the debate. A number of colleagues talked about that, including my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), and the hon. Members for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer), for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) and for Woking (Mr Forster)—I would be a good train announcer, and I suspect it would be quite a journey. I appreciate why there is a degree of enthusiasm for the right to work. As a member of the Labour party, I believe that work gives people dignity and purpose, and it should always make people better off. It is certainly better than being on welfare or, as in this case, in asylum accommodation.

The reality is that this country is already attractive. People take the breathtaking risk, which should never happen, of entering the channel in a precarious small boat because this is an attractive country. The right to work would create greater attraction and greater reason to take that risk, and I cannot support that.

Carla Denyer: I have previously asked Home Office Ministers, and staff supporting them, whether they have any evidence for the claim that allowing asylum seekers to work while waiting for a decision would act as a pull factor. That evidence was not provided to me. Can the Minister provide it?

Alex Norris: Counterfactual cases can be challenging, but we see that already: it is well reported, well documented and well evidenced that work in the illicit economy already acts as a significant pull factor. That is why, through provisions of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, we are seeking to make that work harder, particularly in the gig economy. We know that the ability merely to work illegally is already attractive; imagine what it would be like if that was a condoned and supported approach. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Woking, talked about timeliness. We do have the backstop that if someone's claim has been delayed for 12 months and it is not their fault, they will be allowed to work. I have to say I would never want that to be used, because we do not want claims to last that long, but there is at least that backstop.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe and my hon. Friends the Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) and for York Outer (Mr Charters) made important points about local authorities. There is absolutely no doubt that the Home Office under the previous Government did not treat local authorities as equal partners, or even as partners at all, in this process. Hon. Members will know that my previous role in the Government was in the

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The reality is that local authorities know their communities—they have the most intimate connection to them—and we are committed to better information, better engagement and better work with local authorities. We have made up to £500 million available as a pilot to do as colleagues have suggested: allow local authorities to buy up the stock themselves and keep it. When the demand is not there in the future, that stock could be part of tackling ongoing housing challenges.

That is an important upcoming piece of work, but I want to give a note of caution on dispersed accommodation. Dispersed accommodation will always be part of the solution. It is something that all local authorities provide to some degree, whether for people fleeing domestic abuse, people with substance abuse issues or people with homelessness issues. Dispersed accommodation is a part of all communities, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) said, when certain communities see vast swathes of their streets bought up, it ceases to be dispersed accommodation. I urge colleagues to be very cautious of thinking that that alone could be the panacea. That is why we are looking at bigger sites alongside dispersed accommodation; otherwise, we will merely test the public's confidence on that point as well, and I do not think that is the right thing to do.

My hon. Friends the Members for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) and for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) also talked about local authorities in the context of exit strategies. Again, I am committed to full engagement and full transparency. It will be done in an orderly way, but it may not be done simultaneously, and of course confidence needs to be built into the process. I can give that assurance.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray), who serve, as I used to, on the Home Affairs Committee, have a very important report coming out. I commit to them that I will look at it very closely. We are concerned about quality, and about profiteering in the sector. As they said, we inherited a 2019 contract that has a break point in 2026 and ends in 2029. We are looking to get the best value. I hope that the work we are doing with local government shows our interest in alternative models. We want to get the very best. I think of the horror stories that my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer talked about—we are very conscious of those. However, Ministers will not hide behind criticism of third parties, if they are acting in delivery of Government policy. It is for us to make sure that those providers are operating in the right way and that, when they are not, the issues are tackled swiftly. That is my commitment.

The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) asked why there is so much focus on this group, and I will use that as a bridge into a more general point. First, this issue is important because the public are aghast when they see people entering the channel and coming to the country in that way; they lose all confidence the system is orderly. We have to address that if we are going to build any public confidence in the system. I do not refer to the hon. Gentleman in particular in saying this, but for colleagues who believe in the system and want to improve it or make it even more generous, there is a danger in defending a broken status quo. They ought not do so.

Richard Foord: I think the Minister is either misunderstanding or mischaracterising my contribution, but will he please comment on the potential return hubs for failed asylum seekers?

Alex Norris: I would certainly never seek to mischaracterise the hon. Gentleman. I cannot commit to never misunderstanding him, but I certainly would never mischaracterise him. I understood that he had asked why there is so much focus on this cohort within the wider migration figures. If I am wrong, I apologise without reservation. On return hubs, he will have seen what the Prime Minister said, and that is the Government's position on that matter.

Any system that involves multiple tens of thousands of people entering the channel and making an incredibly dangerous journey, any system in which tens of thousands of people are living in hotels, any system that leads net migration in this country to reach 900,000, any system in which people must wait and wait for a letter about their future—I have had conversations with people in that situation, and they are often people who have left the most desperate situations—is a broken system. Of course the Government of the day, whether in the borders Bill or the immigration White Paper, will seek to tackle those things. We must not defend a status quo that works for neither the British people nor the individuals who are reliant on it for sanctuary and safety.

This has been a robust and very important debate. I hope that those who signed the petitions in considerable numbers will have had the chance to watch the debate and seen that Parliament has taken their views seriously and had a thoughtful and constructive debate on them. This is a hugely important issue for the Government of the day. We have been working in overdrive since the general election to fix the chronic problems that we inherited. We will keep doing so, and along the way we will end the use of hotels once and for all.

7.17 pm

Tony Vaughan: I thank the Minister for his response, and I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. It is extremely important for everyone who signed the petitions to see that we are listening, and that we are considering and debating these very important issues.

I am not sure I heard anyone dispute the proposition that asylum hotels need to close. They are inappropriate for people seeking asylum, as was said by my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer (Mr Charters) and for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy). They are extortionate, as we have all heard, and they contribute to the sense of unfairness in our communities, as my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) and for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) said; the latter pointed out that an accommodation provider appeared on the *Sunday Times* rich list thanks to public funds. The current situation is utterly acceptable.

I am happy to be corrected, but I also did not hear anyone specifically argue that support should be removed from people seeking asylum. However, I did hear some hon. Members—the hon. Members for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) and for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford)—arguing against the very principle of an asylum system. That is not actually what the creators of these two petitions believe. I spoke to one of them and

[Tony Vaughan]

received quite a detailed briefing note from the other, and the way they talked to me about their concerns very much chimed with what my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool said earlier. There are concerns here, and they need to be listened to very carefully. Ultimately, they are about the communities that the petitioners live in. They have the compassion to accept that we should grant sanctuary to those fleeing persecution—I genuinely think that that is where the vast majority of British people are on this issue—but the question, of course, is how we have compassion and how we have control over our asylum system.

As the Minister said, Labour is getting on with the job of closing hotels, speeding up decision making and removing those who have no right to be here. I fully accept the challenges, but it does not lie in the mouth of the Conservative party to criticise the measures that this Government are taking to clear up the mess that the Conservatives helped to create. Brexit caused us to lose our returns agreement with the EU—I accept that it was underutilised, but nevertheless it was an agreement—the pausing of asylum decisions massively increased the application backlog, and the pressure on the asylum and accommodation system then increased massively.

The idea that we could just junk our international obligations and deport everyone if we withdrew from the treaties is complete fantasy. As I said, we need the ECHR to solve the irregular migration issue. Had we not been in the convention, the UK-France deal would

not have been signed, nor would we have had the credibility to work with international partners such as Bulgaria, Germany and France on the upstream issues. We would also jeopardise peace in Northern Ireland without those measures. The truth is that the common law has set its face against torture for centuries, so I am afraid the idea that without the refugee convention and the ECHR we would be free to send a person back to torture is legal nonsense and morally repugnant, and it would make the UK an international pariah. It would also run contrary to our British values of fairness and decency.

We do need to consider innovative solutions to address the asylum support and accommodation challenges: increasing asylum decision-making capacity; providing early access to legal aid and identifying claims as early as possible; deciding appeals more quickly; expanding our housing stock and applying break clauses to accommodation contracts. We must do all those things, and we must do them more quickly. I support the Government's approach, which the Minister set out. He knows better than anyone that winning back public confidence in our asylum system is essential. I wish him luck in that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 705383 and 718406 relating to support and accommodation for asylum seekers.

7.21 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Monday 20 October 2025

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Clean Energy Jobs Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Chris McDonald): Britain's drive to home-grown clean energy is creating a new generation of good jobs around the country, and clean energy industries are booming. The action we have taken has already delivered more than £50 billion of clean energy investment announcements since July 2024. This represents the biggest investment in home-grown clean energy in the UK's history, and is allowing us to take back control from petrostates and dictators and to bring down bills for good.

Our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower is not just about energy security; it is the best opportunity we have had in a generation to deliver economic security for workers and their communities—creating hundreds of thousands of secure, well-paid jobs with strong trade unions, as we roll out clean energy infrastructure, upgrade millions of homes and build our domestic supply chains.

That is why on 19 October, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero published the clean energy jobs plan. It sets out how the Government will work in partnership with industry and trade unions to help workers in all parts of the country to benefit from these opportunities—supporting our existing workforce to find new opportunities, training up the next generation, and helping our young people to get good, unionised jobs.

Our analysis for the jobs plan estimates that we will need to see the clean energy workforce double from around 440,000 in 2023 to over 860,000 jobs supported across clean energy sectors and their supply chains by 2030. These opportunities will be distributed nationwide, encompassing all nations and regions, while some regions have high concentrations of particular clean energy sectors.

The jobs plan

The jobs plan sets out how we are taking action to address key challenges in delivering the skilled workforce our clean energy sector will need.

To deliver the pipeline of skilled workers, we will align the skills system and employment support to our industrial strategy sectors, including clean energy industries. The Government are providing an additional £1.2 billion per year to support skills development over the course of the Parliament, including funding for 1.3 million 16 to 19-year-olds to access training, supporting an additional 65,000 learners per year. We will also establish five clean energy technical excellence colleges to specialise in training skilled clean energy workforces for local and national businesses, in addition to the 10 construction TECs already confirmed.

To harness the potential of the UK workforce, we will: provide up to £20 million of funding from UK and Scottish Government to aid the transition of North sea workers into clean energy sectors; deliver £3.6 million of funding across 2025-26 to support innovative regional skills interventions in Aberdeenshire, Cheshire, Lincolnshire and Pembrokeshire to pilot support for up to 2,000 workers; support RenewableUK and Offshore Energies UK, in collaboration with the Scottish Government, to expand the energy skills passport; and develop and promote new employment pathways and career opportunities for veterans into the clean energy sector.

To deliver not just jobs, but good jobs, we will support greater trade union recognition and promote collective bargaining across the clean energy sector as a mechanism to facilitate engagement with industry, improve job quality, secure fair work and build a resilient workforce. We will also embed trade union representation across DESNZ governance, and close loopholes in legislation to extend to the clean energy sector employment protections, including the national minimum wage, enjoyed by offshore oil and gas workers working beyond UK territorial seas. We will leverage additional private investment into skills and strengthen workforce protections, through introducing workforce criteria across relevant Department for Energy Security and Net Zero grants and procurements, including in the clean industry bonus. We will develop a fair work charter with the wind sector and trade unions, which outlines a sector-wide commitment to provide high-quality employment through the CIB, and we will improve the inclusivity and visibility of clean energy job opportunities through a new social inclusion forum and an industry-led public awareness campaign.

To ensure benefits for every nation and region, we will: work with local areas to develop our regional mapping of clean energy jobs; establish a skills forum and a net zero network to bring together representatives of industrial strategy zones across the UK; work closely with local growth plans; and utilise the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero's local net zero delivery group and ministerial-led mayoral roundtables to identify opportunities for collaboration and alignment between central and regional Government.

[HCWS972]

Petition

Monday 20 October 2025

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Bank facilities in Moffat

The petition of users of the Bank of Scotland Moffat Branch,

Declares that residents of Moffat and Upper Annandale and visitors to the area will be left without banking services and access to cash by the proposed closure of the local Bank of Scotland branch in Moffat, thereby causing significant concern and worry for the local community, particularly the elderly and vulnerable, and local businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry, who rely on this these banking services; Further that the petition organised locally by Evelyn Atkins calling on the Bank of Scotland to reverse the closure decision that has garnered over 3,000 signatures from the local community and visitors to the town.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to call on the Bank of Scotland to keep its Moffat Branch open and to ensure that the residents of Moffat and Upper Annandale, with proper access to cash and banking facilities.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Mundell, *Official Report*, 01 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 114.]

[P003104]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

The Government thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell MP) for submitting the petition on behalf of his constituents regarding access to cash and banking facilities in Moffat. I am sorry to hear of his constituents' concerns at the upcoming closure of the Bank of Scotland branch in Moffat and the challenges that his constituents are facing in accessing cash and banking services.

The Government understand the importance of face-to-face banking to communities and high streets, including those in rural areas such as Dumfriesshire, and are committed to championing sufficient access for all as a priority. This is why the Government are working closely with industry to roll out 350 banking hubs across the UK. The UK banking sector has committed to deliver these hubs by the end of this Parliament. Over 180 hubs are open and delivering vital cash and in-person banking services, and over 240 have been recommended by LINK.

Regarding the specific closure of the Bank of Scotland in Moffat, Financial Conduct Authority guidance expects firms to carefully consider the impact of planned branch closures on their customers everyday banking and cash access needs and put in place alternatives where reasonable. This seeks to ensure that branch closures are implemented in a way that treats customers fairly. Where firms fall short of expectations, the FCA may ask for closures to be paused or other options to be put in place.

The Government also recognise that cash continues to be used by millions of people across the UK, including those in vulnerable groups, and are committed to protecting access to cash for individuals and businesses.

The Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 established the FCA as the lead regulator for access to cash. The FCA introduced regulatory rules for access to cash in September 2024.

These rules require the UK's largest banks and building societies to assess the impact of a closure or material alteration of a relevant cash withdrawal or deposit facility, and put in place a new service if necessary.

When receiving a community request or notification of a branch closure, LINK will first assess what will be left in a community after a change to the cash services on a high street. Then LINK undertakes an assessment of the impact on the local community, looking at the proximity to the nearest branch; size of the community (population and number of SMEs); and the extent of community vulnerability, old age and digital skills. LINK also assesses local needs via an in-person visit. This gives the opportunity for LINK to take into account specific aspects of the local area such as a steep hill or poor transport links.

LINK publishes the outcomes of its assessments on its website. If, as a result of an assessment, LINK has not recommended a banking hub or additional cash service, the decision can be appealed within 28 days of the assessment. More information on the appeals process is available on its website.

Everyday in-person banking services can also be accessed via a post office. The Post Office banking framework allows personal and business customers to withdraw and deposit cash, check their balance, pay bills and cash cheques at 11,500 post office branches across the UK.

The Government understand that LINK have recommended enhancements to the post office in Moffat to enable it to better serve individuals and businesses with their cash needs. The Government understand that Bank of Scotland will separately provide a community banker to Moffat once to the branch is closed, similar to the community banker currently operating in Sanquhar council offices following another Bank of Scotland closure in May. Bank of Scotland community bankers can help support customers with various account services, including payments and transfers, managing their card and pin, viewing and ordering statements, and help with online banking or money management.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 20 October 2025

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WRITTEN STATEMENT

Monday 20 October 2025

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ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	53WS	
Clean Energy Jobs Plan	53WS	

PETITION

Monday 20 October 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	11P
Bank facilities in Moffat	11P

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**not later than
Monday 27 October 2025**

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