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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 22 October 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Inheritance Tax Relief: Agriculture Sector

1. **Charlie Dewhurst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of changes to inheritance tax relief on Scotland's agricultural sector. [905876]

6. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of changes to inheritance tax relief on Scotland's agricultural sector. [905881]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): This Government appreciate the role of farmers and everyone involved in our agricultural sector, and I have been delighted to meet representatives of the National Farmers Union of Scotland and other stakeholders on numerous occasions. On each, I have reiterated that the Government want to strike a fair balance between supporting farmers and fixing our public finances and the public services on which our rural communities rely. As both hon. Members will be aware, the vast majority of farmers will not be affected at all. They will be able to pass the family farm down to their children, just as previous generations have always done. Only the richest estates will be asked to pay, not small family farms, and that is a policy that we on this side of the House are proud to support.

Charlie Dewhurst: I welcome the new ministerial team to the Dispatch Box, and particularly the Secretary of State, who is back as Secretary of State for Scotland after nearly 20 years. Farmers watching that response will be thinking, "What a load of tosh!" What representations have the Secretary of State and the Minister made to the Chancellor on behalf of farmers in Scotland ahead of the Budget?

Kirsty McNeill: As I mentioned, we are in regular dialogue with farming stakeholders and we regularly consider the evidence that is presented to us. I would stress that, while we will always give evidence due consideration—indeed, the Prime Minister said that from this very Dispatch Box last week at Prime Minister's

questions—we will not deviate from our policy objective, which is both to raise revenue and to introduce greater fairness to our tax system. That is exactly what this change does.

Blake Stephenson: It is clear that Scottish Labour and this Government do not care and do not understand our rural communities. If we have no farmers, there is no food. Will the Minister listen to the voices of rural Scots, NFU Scotland and communities up and down this country, and ask the Chancellor to rethink this ruinous inheritance tax reform?

Kirsty McNeill: I myself am a representative of rural Scots, as indeed is the Secretary of State for Scotland, who is meeting farmer representatives in his constituency this very week. We are in ongoing dialogue with our constituents and with farming stakeholders. I reiterate that what we say in the course of those dialogues is that we must introduce greater fairness to the system and that three quarters of farmers will not be impacted at all.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): There are many factors that make family farms viable, including the ability to work the land and carry out what is a very physically demanding job. Does the Minister agree that tackling the fundamental problems in our NHS and the growing waiting lists in Scotland must be a priority when balancing competing pressures, given that poor access to healthcare disproportionately affects those working in Scotland's farming and rural constituencies?

Kirsty McNeill: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. Since the election, the UK Government's plan for change has delivered an extra £5.2 billion to the Scottish Government—funding that can be used to improve the performance of devolved public services such as the NHS. In June, an additional £9.1 billion of funding for the Scottish Government was announced in the spending review, so rural communities like my own are right to ask when they will see improvements in their access to healthcare. I would also like to take the opportunity to commend charities such as the Farm Safety Foundation and its brilliant Yellow Wellies initiative for the work that they do to support the mental and physical health of farmers and all in our rural communities.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): The proposed changes to agricultural property relief in Scotland will ensure that, by still providing full relief for the first £1 million of assets, farmers continue to benefit from Government support far beyond that which is available to other assets. Given that 7% of claimants—117 claimants—receive two fifths of all agricultural property relief at a cost of some £219 million, does the Minister agree that this Government's reforms are essential not only for fairness but to help fund vital public services in rural Scotland?

Kirsty McNeill: Our reforms mean that the majority—almost three quarters—of those claiming the relief will not be affected. Only the richest estates will be asked to pay more. This is a fair approach that balances fixing our public finances with maintaining support for small family farms and businesses.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. It says Scotland in the title for these questions. They are not linked to Northern Ireland. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The agricultural sector is woven into the fabric of communities across Scotland. It employs thousands and contributes millions annually to the economy, but farmers across Scotland have been left in fear for their families' future and their way of life because this Government want to tax them out of existence. Despite the clear messages from the farming community, supported by the NFUS, this Government are ploughing on regardless and completely ignoring the damage they are doing. The truth is that they do not understand—and worse: because those people do not vote Labour, they do not care, do they?

Kirsty McNeill: I will reiterate it in case the shadow Secretary of State did not hear me: both myself and the Secretary of State represent semi-rural and farming constituencies. We are in ongoing dialogue with constituents. We absolutely understand the pressures they face, which is why we have said that we will support family farms and that only the very richest will be affected. Our constituents rely on public services and they require investment in those public services, and that is exactly what this tax change was designed to do: introduce fairness but also raise revenue that will benefit all our communities, including rural Scots.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): Archibald Young, a foundry in my constituency, manufactures components that are vital to our national security, yet it now faces a devastating blow from Labour's tax changes. We are hearing that food production—another cornerstone of national security—will also be decimated by these measures. This issue goes to the heart of the protection of our country. Does the Minister agree that Scottish businesses that are essential to national security must be safeguarded, and will she commit to meeting me and others with similar concerns to discuss that?

Kirsty McNeill: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady, and I welcome her to her new position. Food security is indeed national security, and national security is the No. 1 priority of this Government. We are trying to safeguard it in a number of ways, including through our commitment to food security and, indeed, energy security. I would be delighted to discuss it with her further.

Energy Security: North Sea Gas and Oil

2. **Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of North sea gas and oil to energy security. [905877]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): Oil and gas from the North sea will remain part of our energy system for decades to come. As a Government, we are strengthening our energy security, and as part of that effort, we are investing in home-grown

clean power and energy through Great British Energy. We are committed to a fair and orderly transition. Next week, I will be in Aberdeen to meet energy companies from across the north-east.

Dr Spencer: We all know that the Government's energy policy is unsustainable. It has even been reported that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is looking at authorising tiebacks to access new oil and gas wells using existing infrastructure in the North sea. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that if we want to increase energy security and reduce energy prices for households and businesses, we must expand the use of the energy resources available to us, including North sea oil and gas?

Mr Alexander: As I sought to reflect in the first answer, oil and gas will be a central part of our energy mix in the United Kingdom for decades to come, but it is also right to recognise that there is a transition that needs to be managed and there was an abject failure by the previous Government to manage it. That is why we saw tens of thousands of jobs going in the North sea without the level of investment that we are now seeing from GB energy to manage that transition effectively.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the Conservatives have got a cheek? Some 77,000 jobs drifted out of the North sea under their Government, and they did not lift a finger. This Government, along with the Scottish Government, invested £18 million in a transition fund to help oil and gas workers move into energy jobs. That will be an uneven transition, but it is an inevitable one. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is what comes from having a Government with an industrial strategy that puts workers first?

Mr Alexander: I find myself in agreement with my hon. Friend from the Western Isles. The North sea has provided decades of good jobs, not just for people from the Western Isles and across Scotland but from the whole of the United Kingdom. The last Conservative Government did not believe in industrial strategy—it is as basic as that. It is not just a difference of policy; it is a difference of philosophy. We believe in open markets and an active state. That is why we set up GB Energy, that is why there is a transition fund and that is why people can rely on Labour.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman back to the Dispatch Box as Secretary of State for Scotland after his sabbatical over the last 20 or so years. The messianic zeal of his colleague the Energy Secretary to see the destruction of our oil and gas industry is having real-life consequences. Scottish workers are being made unemployed in their thousands, while this Government ban the drilling and exploration of oil and gas in British waters, and import more gas from Norway, which gets it from the very same sea that we are prevented from exploiting. Come on, Secretary of State; it is all a little unhinged, isn't it?

Mr Alexander: Where to begin? We have a Government that have invested in GB Energy and that have a transition fund up against an Opposition that abjectly failed in

their responsibilities towards the North sea. We just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) that 77,000 jobs were lost. That is the record that they own, and we will continue to point it out.

Andrew Bowie: The Secretary of State for Energy is not the messiah. Week after week, I come to this Chamber to ask Energy Ministers and Scotland Office Ministers why they are content to sacrifice one of this country's greatest national assets and allow highly skilled workers to go on the scrap heap or go overseas. As Scotland's man at the Cabinet table, the Secretary of State knows that his job is to speak up for those people who are losing their jobs today, not to defend the Secretary of State for Energy. Will he explain that to the people of Aberdeen when he visits next week?

Mr Alexander: I gently remind the shadow Secretary of State that there is a difference between abuse and argument, and in relation to his substantive arguments, of course I am happy to be Scotland's voice at the Cabinet table. That is why only next week I will be meeting a range of energy companies based in Aberdeen and listening directly to them. That dialogue has already started. I think we can do better than his question.

Pride in Place Programme: Regeneration

3. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support regeneration in Scotland through the pride in place programme. [905878]

12. **Pamela Nash** (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carlisle) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support regeneration in Scotland through the pride in place programme. [905887]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): The Scotland Office is backing Scotland's communities with our £292 million pride in place investment. The plan will support grassroots movements that restore local people's power, boost national pride and help people get on in life. It will revitalise our high streets, create jobs and improve safety and security. More than that, it will give expression to this Government's core belief that communities are powerful and that in every corner of our country, we find millions of so-called ordinary people doing their best and doing their bit to transform the places they love for the people they love.

Douglas McAllister: The UK Government are investing more than £41 million of funding in my constituency, including the recently announced pride in place award. That will unlock the potential of my West Dunbartonshire constituency, matching the level of ambition I have to regenerate our town centres and communities and make them fit for the future. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is in stark contrast to the SNP, which has given up on our communities right across Scotland and in West Dunbartonshire?

Kirsty McNeill: I commend my hon. Friend on his ambition for his seat and his sterling advocacy for it. He is right that this funding will help revitalise our high streets, create jobs and improve safety and security in

Scotland. He is also right that the SNP is desperately out of touch with its squabbling over independence while services across Scotland are at breaking point.

Pamela Nash: Since the election last year when Labour came to power, our constituents in Scotland have seen their friends in England and Wales see real improvements in their communities and public services, while they look on and wonder what the SNP Government are squandering Scotland's share on. Does the Minister agree that key to the success of the pride in place funding and projects, including the £41.5 million coming to Lanarkshire, is that we are putting power directly in the hands of people to make decisions about investments in their own communities?

Kirsty McNeill: My hon. Friend is right that both her constituents and mine look with some envy to the other side of the border where millions of extra NHS appointments have been secured while waiting lists in Scotland go up and up. Local communities are at the heart of Scottish life, which is why we are giving them control over hundreds of millions of pounds of investment to revitalise their high streets, take ownership of important local assets and build thriving and prosperous places to work, live and visit.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Government's pride in place initiative—their equivalent of levelling up—should be great and should be felt across Scotland, but unfortunately we are feeling the opposite in north-east Scotland because of the Government's energy policies. Our high streets need regeneration after a decade of disastrous decline in the sector, whether that is from SNP or Labour policies. How will the Government act to ensure that our high streets in north-east Scotland will not be further decimated?

Kirsty McNeill: I remind the hon. Lady that, of course, her constituents benefit from a city region and growth deal—there is investment going into her area. If she has complaints about the decline of her constituency, I suggest that she looks at her colleagues and holds them accountable for 14 years of catastrophic economic mismanagement by the Conservatives.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): As long as I get any opportunity, I will continue to ask why Perth, and Perth and Kinross, is not getting one penny from the current allocation. Why has Perth and Kinross never had one single penny from any Government allocation? Why did this Labour Government take away the £5 million that we finally got from the Conservatives? Finally, when is Perth, and Perth and Kinross, going to get its fair share?

Kirsty McNeill: The allocations under the pride in place programme have been evidence led, based on data and on a formula that is progressive and puts money into the pockets of those who need it most. If the hon. Gentleman is worried about where money in Perth and Kinross has gone, I suggest he asks the First Minister of Scotland, who is from his own party and has received more than £5 billion. His constituents, like mine, will be asking, "Where's the money gone, John?"

Energy Prices

4. **Mr Angus MacDonald** (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): What steps he is taking to help ensure that people do not pay disproportionately high energy prices in Scotland. [905879]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): This Government are taking action to support vulnerable families this winter, including by expanding the warm home discount scheme, which means that more than 500,000 households now benefit from that £150 payment—one in five Scottish households.

Mr MacDonald: Will the Minister acknowledge the unfairness that my constituents in Skye, and indeed people all across rural Scotland and rural Great Britain, are paying four times as much to heat their houses using locally generated renewable electricity—often while looking at wind turbines outside their windows—than those in cities who heat their houses using imported high-carbon gas, which is largely due to the fact that the environmental tariffs fall wrongly on the renewables and not on the carbon fuel gas?

Mr Alexander: Communities can feel tangible benefits, but those community benefits are largely voluntary at the moment. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, however; that is why this Government are considering mandating the provision of community benefit funds for low-carbon energy infrastructure across the United Kingdom. We will have more to say in our plans when they are set out later this year.

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): It is estimated that more than 70,000 households in Glasgow live in fuel poverty. The UK Government's extension to the warm home discount will mean that many of those families receive money off their energy bills. Can the Secretary of State outline how people can access that support?

Mr Alexander: The good news is that those in receipt of pension credit that tops them up to a minimum weekly income will continue to receive the discount automatically. The scheme is opening again this month; anyone who thinks they may be eligible, in Glasgow or elsewhere across Scotland, should contact their energy supplier.

Scottish Independence Referendum

5. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What his policy is on holding a referendum on Scottish independence. [905880]

11. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): What his policy is on the holding of a referendum on Scottish independence. [905886]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): I was elected on a very clear manifesto, which made clear that this UK Labour Government do not support independence or another referendum. If, after 18 years, the SNP is not prepared to run on its record, that begs the question: what kind of record have they left, after 18 years in power? Behind the smokescreen

it has tried to create by talking about independence, we know the reality: one in six of us on waiting lists, rising violence and falling standards in our schools. Frankly, Scotland deserves better.

Jack Rankin: I thank the Secretary of State for his unequivocal rejection of separatism. He will always find on the Conservative side fellow colleagues who treasure this United Kingdom and want to shout about the most successful alliance in political history. What specific steps can he take to prevent more taxpayers' cash being squandered as the SNP pursues its doomed dream?

Mr Alexander: As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland made clear, we have committed £5.2 billion to the Scottish Government this year—the largest settlement in the 25 years of devolution. There is a very basic question that we Scots are asking: "Where's the money gone, John?" The reality is that our services are getting worse, not better, and we see industrial-level waste from the SNP. That is why it is time for a new direction.

Brendan O'Hara: I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his place, although it seems that his appointment has not been universally welcomed. Indeed, I hear that the *Daily Record*, having asked his Labour colleagues for their opinion, feared an asterisk shortage. One particularly caustic comrade said:

"If I had a pound for everyone who liked Douglas, I would have 50p."

But rest assured, Mr Speaker, his appointment was welcomed with open arms on the SNP Benches, and I have to admit to having a grudging admiration for him as someone who cares not about the opinion of other people. But with Labour tanking in the polls, and independence the majority view in—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr O'Hara, this is meant to be a question, not a statement.

Mr Alexander: Well, Mr Speaker, the quality of the SNP's contributions does not seem to have improved since 2007, and neither has its arguments. In the face of failing schools and hospitals, and the inability to build ferries in the hon. Gentleman's own constituency, what do we see? Once again, dreary documents about independence. The reality is that the SNP has let Scotland down, and Scotland deserves better. That is why we are up for the fight in May.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The SNP's renewed chatter on independence is understandable, because it wants to distract from its abysmal record of running down our public services. Given that its plans for defence in an independent Scotland include giving up the nuclear deterrent and replacing it with little more than a Scottish navy comprising the Waverley and the Vital Spark, does the Secretary of State agree that Vladimir Putin will be rubbing his hands with glee at the SNP's latest outbursts?

Mr Alexander: I am a great fan of Para Handy, the Vital Spark and the Waverley, but I would not want to offer them in the face of Vladimir Putin as an approach to Euro-Atlantic security. The reality is that we have student gesture politics from the Scottish National party.

I met with the major defence companies in Greenock last Friday, and they were very clear that we are forgoing industrial opportunities now. There is a real cost to the incompetence and student naiveté of the Scottish National party.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency and across Scotland need stability, certainty and opportunity. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is what they are getting from a Labour Government, which stands in stark contrast to the instability and uncertainty of the SNP and its obsession with independence?

Mr Alexander: Returning to the Dispatch Box as the Secretary of State for Scotland, I think it is striking that the SNP's answers are no better than they were in 2017, 2014 or 2021. I simply ask: what is its policy on a Scottish currency? What is its policy on foreign reserves? What is its position on a Scottish pension? It is no better at answering those questions now than it was 20 years ago.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): May I join other Opposition Members in welcoming the Secretary of State to his place? I wish him well in that job.

My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) is not the only one with a quote that might be of interest to the Secretary of State; I have another one here. Can he tell us who said this? "If there is a majority"—an SNP majority—"it has got to be looked at in Westminster." Who said that?

Mr Alexander: I sense that it might be myself. We would take seriously any SNP majority, but if the SNP is returned to office, I hope it will do better than it has done over the past 18 years. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we on the Government Benches are not anticipating defeat; we are working for victory.

Stephen Gethins: Well, this might get just a little bit awkward. The quote was not from the Secretary of State, although I welcome his contribution; it was actually from his boss, the leader of the Labour party and the current Prime Minister, who is about to turn up. That is very awkward indeed—[*Interruption.*] There he is. Will he stick to that commitment, or will we see Labour break yet another promise?

Mr Alexander: Not least because he has just turned up, let me say that I always agree with my boss. The reality is that we are clear and unequivocal that we do not want the break-up of the United Kingdom. As Scots, we made our choice in 2014, and that was for a better future within the United Kingdom.

Cost of Living

7. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on fiscal steps to reduce the cost of living in Scotland. [905882]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): This Government are working tirelessly to reduce the cost of living in Scotland. We have introduced

a national living wage, delivered a generational upgrade to workers' rights and helped the Bank of England to cut interest rates five times, putting money into people's pockets across Scotland. Furthermore, thanks to our stewardship, the International Monetary Fund forecasts the UK to be the second-fastest growing G7 economy this year.

Ben Lake: Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom where child poverty is falling, and it is also the only part of Great Britain with a non-Labour Government. I am sure the Minister agrees that the rest of the UK deserves better, so will she be calling on the Chancellor to scrap the two-child cap in the upcoming Budget?

Kirsty McNeill: A child poverty strategy is on the way and will be released in due course. I can underscore our commitment to fighting child poverty with every breath we have. That is what Labour Governments have always done, and it is what this Labour Government will do, too.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): This weekend, thousands of people will march in Edinburgh to say that Scotland demands better. We are right to do so, because the Poverty Alliance says that one in six adults in Scotland—around 1.2 million people—are living in food insecurity. What are the Scotland Office and the wider Labour Government doing to end food insecurity for Scots?

Kirsty McNeill: Our commitment to ending poverty is clear. We have had a clear focus on living standards; work is increasingly now paying; and we are focusing on ensuring that none of Scotland's children is subject to the poverty that the hon. Member so vividly describes.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I am sure that the whole House will know that this weekend the Rugby League Ashes returns for the first time since 2003. I place on the record my very best wishes to the England team, who will make the major rumble in London this weekend—the first of three matches against Australia.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [905936] **Dr Roz Savage** (South Cotswolds) (LD): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 October.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): On Sunday we unveiled Labour's plan to recruit hundreds of thousands of workers into clean energy, creating quality, well-paid jobs in every quarter of the United Kingdom. On Monday we announced the new V-level qualification, to make sure that every young person has the skills to realise their potential. On Tuesday our first ever regional investment summit in Birmingham secured £10 billion of investment. And today we are announcing tough

new penalties to end the scandal of pollution in our rivers and seas. That is national renewal with a Labour Government.

Yesterday I met Claire Throssell, who is with us in the Gallery today. Her two young sons, Paul and Jack, were murdered 11 years ago this week by her abusive ex-husband after a family court ordered that he should have unsupervised contact with them. Claire's bravery and her campaign are humbling, and today I am pleased that we can announce that we will repeal the presumption of parental involvement, putting children's safety first.

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

Dr Savage: I associate myself with the Prime Minister's sympathies extended towards Claire, and I commend her for her bravery.

I regret to inform the House that yesterday there was a very serious breach of national security, when my Prime Minister's question was photographed heading into No. 10 in a transparent folder. The nation can rest easy, as on this occasion no state secrets were revealed. However, it does make me wonder whether this Government can be trusted with a digital ID scheme that is mandatory in all but name. *[Laughter.]* I like to keep the Prime Minister on his toes. Will he reverse this misguided scheme, or will he persist with a plan that makes all of our personal data vulnerable to hacks and attacks?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for her question. The whole point of digital ID, of course, is that you cannot see it, so that should at least deal with her first concern. It is important that we make access to public services as easy as possible for people. We all know the difficulties that so many people have with accessing services, and digital ID has been shown in other countries to help. I do think this is an important step forward. I also think it is very important as part of our plan to tackle those who are entering our country illegally.

Q3. [905938] Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The number of households in Cornwall in temporary accommodation has increased by 265% in five years, so I am delighted that this Labour Government are investing £39 billion in social and affordable housing. In Cornwall we are developing a strategy to provide housing at sites such as Pydar in my constituency, which needs support from Homes England. Will the Prime Minister arrange for us to meet the Housing Minister at our Homes Cornwall launch next month, to accelerate discussions on a strategic partnership for Cornwall so that we can build the right homes in the right places for local people?

The Prime Minister: I know that the Housing Minister will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to help unlock new homes for her constituents. We are working closely with local authorities through our small sites aggregator to build new affordable homes on brownfield sites. My goal is to restore the dream of home ownership, which was stolen by the Opposition when they were in government.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): May I first pay tribute to the former Conservative MP Oliver Colvile, who has very sadly passed away after a long illness? Colleagues will remember him for his love of cricket and, of course, hedgehogs. He will be very much missed.

Four victims on the rape gangs survivors panel have resigned, and they have resigned because they have lost all confidence in the Government's inquiry, so I am giving my first question to one of them—to Fiona. She said:

"Being dismissed and contradicted by a minister when you're telling the truth takes you right back to that feeling of not being believed all over again."

Fiona's question is simple:

"what's the point in speaking up if we're just going to be called liars?"

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising that on behalf of Fiona. Let me give Fiona and the House my answer. The grooming scandal was one of the worst scandals of our time. Women and girls were abused and exploited by predatory gangs of men, and survivors have been ignored for many years, including by the state, which of course is supposed to protect them. My vow to Fiona and to them is that this national inquiry will change that.

I do acknowledge that in recent days some members, including Fiona, have decided to step away from the panel. Should they wish to return, the door will always be open, but even if they do not, we owe it to them, to Fiona and to the country to answer the concerns that they have raised. The inquiry is not and will never be watered down, its scope will not change, it will examine the ethnicity and religion of the offenders, and we will find the right person to chair it.

I can tell the House today that Dame Louise Casey will now support the work of the inquiry, and it will get to the truth. Injustice will have no place to hide.

Mrs Badenoch: I doubt that Fiona will be satisfied with that answer. The Prime Minister says that they could return to the panel if they wish to. Why would they do that? The Government have been engaged in a briefing war against survivors. Elizabeth—[HON. MEMBERS: "Shame!"] They say "Shame." Why do they not listen to what Elizabeth had to say? Elizabeth, who was abused in Rotherham from the age of 14, had this to say about the Government:

"It has created a toxic environment for survivors".

They were looking for answers from the Prime Minister, and what they have heard is Labour MPs saying "Shame" at their words.

Yesterday, the Safeguarding Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), said that Elizabeth was wrong. Who should we believe: the Prime Minister's Safeguarding Minister or Elizabeth?

The Prime Minister: Let me put on record my respect for all the survivors, who have been through the most awful ordeal, and I want to thank those who have been involved so far for their work in the process. What we are trying to do is to get this right, and to have an inquiry with survivors at its heart. As the Safeguarding Minister told the House yesterday, that is obviously not

easy. They have all come with difficult experiences. There are a wide range of views, understandably, and every survivor does bring their own painful experience to this. The survivors met the prospective chairs this week, and we want them to have the chance to engage. I want survivors to be at the heart of this. I want an inquiry that can get to the truth. These are the hard yards—I accept that—but I want to press on and get this right.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister says that he wants survivors to be at the heart of this, but in his first PMQs this year he said that we did not need a national inquiry. When he did, all of these Labour Members cheered. They were nodding their heads, including the Safeguarding Minister. They voted against the national inquiry three times. *[Interruption.]* Yes, they did. They voted against the national inquiry three times, so the victims do not believe them. They can say no as much as they like, but it is on the record. They do not like it, but it is true. Now, one of the victims has quit. Contrary to what the Prime Minister has just said and what the Home Secretary wrote this morning, the victims believe that the inquiry will downplay the racial and religious motivations behind their abuse. Are the victims not right when they call it a cover-up?

The Prime Minister: Let me reassure the victims and the House that the scope of the inquiry will not be diluted, and we will not shy away from cultural or religious issues. It was I who commissioned Baroness Casey in the first place. She gave me her recommendation in relation to a national inquiry, and we have, in the four months since then, finalised the panel and are trying to get the leadership of this inquiry right, with survivors at the heart. In that period, we have also reopened 1,200 historical closed cases. I have long argued that the criminal route, where it can be pursued, is the right route for perpetrators.

We have introduced mandatory reporting of child sex abuse, which I happen to think is a vital safeguard—I have been campaigning for that for over a decade. I asked the last Government to introduce it, and that fell on deaf ears. That mandatory reporting of child sex abuse is something that each and every Conservative Member voted against earlier this year. We have given victims and survivors the power to seek an independent review of their cases. But in relation to this inquiry, I want to go as fast as we can to get the justice that is deserved, and I want to ensure that survivors are involved in that. We are balancing the two to get this right, and I will continue to do so.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister is talking about mandatory reporting. I will remind him what Fiona asked: what is the point, if the victims are not going to be believed? What would be the point of mandatory reporting? All of this is happening now—all that he is saying—is because four of those victims resigned from the survivors panel. If they had not done that, the Government would have continued with the watering down, which we all know they were carrying out. So yes, the victims are right to be worried.

The Prime Minister also talked about looking for a chair. It has been 10 months since we first called for a national inquiry—10 months. It is shocking that the

Government still do not have a chair. One of the final two candidates has pulled out, leaving a former police officer who the victims do not want. What they do want is a judge. They deserve a judge. We are talking about the industrial-scale rape of women and girls. Unlike most of the inquiries going on, why is it that this inquiry does not deserve a judge?

The Prime Minister: Can I answer that? It is a serious point, because whether the inquiry should be judge-led was looked at by Louise Casey. She decided against that for a reason, and her reasons were twofold—I will spell them out. The first was the speed with which we could do this, and it would have been—*[Interruption.]* They asked the question. The first reason was the speed with which we could do this. The second is really important: I was absolutely determined that criminal investigations would go on at the same time as the inquiry. One of the problems that judge-led inquiries run into—I have seen and experienced this myself—is that they are often held back until the end of the criminal investigations, and I was determined that we would be able to run the two together. It is because of that that we have been able to reopen 1,200 historical cases at the same time.

The Leader of Opposition asks what is the point of the mandatory reporting that she voted against. I do not think she understands how it works. This is—*[Interruption.]* This is mandatory reporting of those who have had allegations made to them and there is clear enough evidence that they have not then passed that on. That is a fundamental problem in the system. That is why we have changed the law. The Conservatives should hang their heads in shame for having voted against that vital protection.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister should hang his head in shame for calling this a “far-right bandwagon” when we first raised this issue. The deputy leader or the future deputy leader—we all know who is going to win—called this a dog whistle.

What we need to think about right now is the victims and the survivors. I spoke to one of them yesterday. Let us remember that these are victims who waived their anonymity—an incredibly difficult thing to do—and they believe that the Safeguarding Minister has lied to them and about them. One of the survivors has said:

“Jess Phillips needs to be removed because I don’t think her conduct during this...has been acceptable for the position that she holds”.

[Interruption.] Those are not my words; those are the words of a survivor. It is a shame that Labour MPs are drowning that out. The hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley has clearly lost the confidence of the victims. Does she still have the confidence of the Prime Minister?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that, even if we are quoting somebody else, we should not quote a direct allegation against a Member of this House? I am sure that that is not what was intended.

The Prime Minister: I respect the views of all the survivors, and there are different views—I accept that—but I think the Safeguarding Minister has probably more experience than any other person in this House in dealing with violence against women and girls, and alongside her will be Louise Casey. These two individuals

have spent decades—decades—standing up for those who have been abused and sexually exploited, and I absolutely think they are the right people to take this forward.

Mrs Badenoch: The Safeguarding Minister does not have more experience than the survivors. The fact is that, just a few weeks ago, the Prime Minister was standing there telling us he had full confidence in the best friend of a convicted paedophile, so it is no surprise the people have no confidence in what he is saying. The victims have said that she should be sacked. We on this side of the House believe that she should be sacked, because this is about Labour failure. Labour never wanted this inquiry; we demanded it. It has been Labour-run councils—Trafford, Bradford, Blackpool—that have tried to suppress the truth. It is Labour Ministers attacking the victims; we are standing up for them. How is it that, whether it is rape or Chinese espionage, when the Prime Minister is in a position to do something about it, it is always someone else's fault?

The Prime Minister: My priorities are listening to and standing up for the survivors. That is why we are doing the work on the inquiry, why we have reopened the criminal cases and why we brought in mandatory reporting. I would gently remind the Conservatives that they had 14 years in office and they barely mentioned this issue, and where there were inquiries, they failed to act on them. We have done more in the time we have been in office than they did in 14 long years.

Q5. [905940] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Mental ill health affects one in four of us, and it costs this country up to £300 billion a year, so will the Prime Minister join me in thanking the staff at Maghull health park, who do a brilliant job in looking after those suffering from mental ill health? Will he wish them well with their plans to set up a world-leading research and innovation centre, which will make an enormous contribution towards this Government's stated aim of giving mental and physical healthcare equal priority?

The Prime Minister: Of course, I join in thanking the staff at Maghull health park. We are investing £15.6 billion to bring down mental health waiting lists—vital in continuing to drive down inactivity and helping people to get the care that they need. In the upcoming multi-year capital budgets, we will enable NHS trusts to accelerate decisions on local priorities, and that could include developments like the mental health digital research centre that my hon. Friend champions.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I agree with the Prime Minister's words about Claire Throssell. I agree with him that it is right that we change the law, and I hope that it is named after her sons, Jack and Paul.

Given the revelations about Royal Lodge, does the Prime Minister agree that this House needs to scrutinise the Crown Estate properly to ensure taxpayers' interests are protected? The Chancellor herself has said that the current arrangements are wrong, so will the Prime Minister

support a Select Committee inquiry so that all those involved can be called to give evidence, including the current occupant?

The Prime Minister: It is important, in relation to all Crown properties, that there is proper scrutiny. I certainly support that.

Ed Davey: I hope the House can look at that properly and that all people can be summoned to the relevant committee.

Turning to the economy, I know Labour Members are relieved—they are finally allowed to say that the Conservatives' Brexit deal is a disaster. But that cannot just be a political ruse to attack the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), however much he deserves it. Even worse, given that we still have the highest inflation in the G7, it must not be a smokescreen to raise taxes on ordinary people. It must be a call to action. Will the Prime Minister act now to repair the Brexit damage by negotiating a new UK-EU customs union to boost Britain's trade and grow our economy?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not think that is the way forward. What we have done is to have a much closer relationship with the EU, recognising the damage done by the flawed Brexit deal that the Conservative party negotiated. We have also struck deals with India and the US, secured record investment into this country and have the fastest growing economy in the G7 in the first half of this year.

Q7. [905942] Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): This summer, I visited every road across the Bexleyheath and Crayford constituency, reporting potholes to ensure that the £895,000 given by this Labour Government to the Conservative-controlled council in the London Borough of Bexley is spent. However, the Conservative council cabinet member responsible for roads wrote to our local newspaper, *News Shopper*, asking that I stop reporting potholes because it was causing work for the council. Will the Prime Minister join me in urging my Conservative council to get on and spend that money to make roads, such as Mayplace Road East, safe to drive on?

The Prime Minister: So, this is a local Conservative council telling my hon. Friend not to point out potholes in case it has to fill them! That is outrageous—just like the record of the last 14 years. We know how problematic, dangerous and costly potholes are to drivers. That is why we have delivered record investment to maintain our roads and fix potholes. That is £1.6 billion. That money has been given to councils, but it comes with strings. My message to the council to reinforce that is clear: "Use the money, fix the roads and show how you are carrying out repairs, or lose the money." It is councils that should get on with the job of fixing our roads. I will make sure the Roads Minister follows up with my hon. Friend.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Given that the TUC has calculated that the wealthiest 10% of households in the UK hold more wealth than everyone else in the country put together, does the Prime Minister agree with me that it is inequality, not immigration, that is a threat to our country?

The Prime Minister: We need to deal both with levels of immigration and with inequality, and that is what the Government are doing. As we get on with trying to boost our economy, may I gently point out that if we want more equality and if we want our economy to be stronger, the hon. Lady's party needs to start voting for some of the measures that will make it necessary?

Q10. [905945] **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): In March 2022, I gave birth to my son by emergency c-section—both my son and my life put at risk by a failing maternity service. In Nottinghamshire, we know failing maternity services far too well, with harm caused to mothers, babies and fathers—over 2,400 families involved in the Donna Ockenden inquiry. Does the Prime Minister agree that grief must be the engine of change, and that where previous Governments have failed, it is imperative that this Government transform maternity services, so that every birth is an informed birth and every birth is a safe birth?

The Prime Minister: I extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend and to all those who spoke in the baby loss debate last Monday for their powerful and moving stories. I was at the Pride of Britain awards on Monday night and very many people came forward to me, having heard some of the speeches from this House, particularly the personal testimonies, so I assure her that those stories really did have power in making the argument. We do need to fix what needs fixing, so we will fix maternity services, improve safety and make sure every mother is heard and gets high-quality care.

Q2. [905937] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My constituents have so many questions they would like to ask the Prime Minister, but I will settle for one today: can the Prime Minister define when grey belt is really grey?

The Prime Minister: Let me give the right hon. Lady a simple example. We had an example of green-belt land that was, in fact, a car park where building did not take place, and non-green-belt land that was an open playing field where building did take place. That does not make sense to me. That is why we have our policy.

Q11. [905946] **Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): Twelve-year-old Millie Blair from Oundle joins us today in the Gallery along with her mum, Gemma, her sister, Jessica, and her dad, Gordon. On Millie's 11th birthday, she was diagnosed with a rare bone cancer, which led to her leg being amputated. Millie attends Prince William school, but she cannot access the lower playing field because the slope is too steep. Her parents, the school and I have asked the East Midlands academy trust to put in a ramp, but it has refused, claiming that it is not subject to certain parts of the Equality Act 2010. Does the Prime Minister agree that the trust has an absolute moral obligation to make those adjustments to give Millie full access to all the school, so that she can play and thrive with all her friends?

The Prime Minister: I welcome Millie to the Gallery—I appreciate that Members on the Opposition Benches cannot see her, but she is looking down at us and

smiling with the courage and positivity that I know is everything to her. We absolutely salute that; we are humbled by it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I really do find it hard to understand how a school trust could make a decision like that in relation to the ramp. Rather than berate those in the trust from the Chamber, I would just implore them on behalf of everybody here and Millie in particular to look again, and hopefully, with the endorsement of the whole House, to reconsider that decision, put in that ramp and match the positivity and the courage that Millie has shown all of us. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that campaign.

Q4. [905939] **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): *The Times* has reported that local elections across the country will be delayed for a second year in a row. The leader of my local authority, Surrey county council, has had to go on the record to say that he has not called for elections to be cancelled, but other Conservatives clearly have. Can the Prime Minister give me a cast-iron guarantee that my constituents in Woking and others across the country will not lose their democratic right to vote?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows that we inherited a situation where local councils were underfunded and millions were wasted on duplication. By reforming the system, which is what we are doing, we will save money and reinvest that in improved public services. In response to the hon. Gentleman's question, we expect the elections in Surrey to be for the new unitary councils, and we will be setting out the planned timetable very shortly.

Q12. [905947] **Alan Strickland** (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): Central to growing our economy is delivering major events that drive footfall and investment. Does the Prime Minister share my disappointment that since Reform took over the running of Durham county council, it has slashed funding for Durham Pride, which brings in 20,000 people a year—[*Interruption.*] Reform Members cannot cope with accountability, Mr Speaker. Reform has also cancelled the Lumiere festival, which has brought nearly 1.5 million people into County Durham since it started. This will undermine businesses and communities. Does the Prime Minister agree that if Reform cannot run one county council, it certainly cannot run Scotland, Wales or our United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out what voters in Durham can see: what people get if they vote Reform is total chaos and broken promises. Councils have a vital role in our communities. It is not just Durham where Reform is doing this; I think four councillors in Kent have just been suspended for bringing the party into disrepute, which is quite something for a party whose Welsh leader accepts Russian bribes to spread Putin's propaganda.

Q6. [905941] **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Weston Hospicecare provides an invaluable service for constituents with a terminal illness. The hospice now faces an increased national insurance bill of £139,000 a year as a result of the Chancellor's jobs tax. The Prime Minister will know that the money he has announced for capital expenditure cannot be used for day-to-day running expenses and that the money he has announced for children's hospices

will not benefit Weston Hospicecare, so what help can he offer the hospice as it struggles under the tax burden imposed by his Government?

The Prime Minister: We are putting in the support that we can for hospices, and the money we put aside at the Budget for the NHS is absolutely crucial in relation to that. The NHS was underfunded for 14 long years. We have now put in the funding that the NHS needs to do its work.

Q14. [905949] **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): December will mark the 10th anniversary of the Storm Desmond floods that devastated my constituency and forced thousands of people from their homes. Despite promising us new flood defences, previous Conservative Governments left them unfinished. With climate-related rainfall forecast to increase in the north-west over the next decade, does the Prime Minister agree that the climate change-sceptic policies peddled by some Opposition parties are both reckless and dangerous, and will he assure the people of Carlisle that this Labour Government will defend our great border city?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that the Tories left our flood defences in their worst state on record. We are building them up again, investing over £10 billion to protect homes and businesses. We have delivered over 150 flood schemes in our first year, and I want to see even more rapid progress. My hon. Friend is a superb champion on this issue, and we have provided £300,000 to complete the feasibility study for stronger defences in her constituency.

Q8. [905943] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): As last week's urgent question highlighted, Jhoots—the pharmacy non-provider—is effectively de facto bankrupt and possibly even insolvent too. Last week we discussed at great length the impact that is having on patients securing their prescriptions. It is now becoming increasingly evident that while His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is being told by Jhoots that staff are being paid, they are not. Lana-Olivia Gulston and Blake Horwood in my constituency have not been paid since 18 July. They are resorting to the kindness of friends and the support of food banks to make ends meet.

The Minister for Care—the hon. Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock)—is doing fantastic work to try to drive forward modernisation of the regulations, but this situation is now impacting the work of the Department for Business and Trade, HMRC and the Department for Work and Pensions. Could I urge the Prime Minister to convene those three Departments alongside the Department of Health and Social Care to secure a better, fair deal for patients and for those who are currently trapped in employment—not being released by being made redundant and not being paid?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this serious issue, as he has done on a number of occasions. It affects both his constituents and others across the country. It is simply unacceptable that customers and staff have been so badly let down. I know he will be meeting the relevant Minister, but let me update him now in a couple of respects. Officials are currently reviewing whether the integrated care boards and General Pharmaceutical Council need additional powers to address

pharmacy businesses that do not play by the rules—I think that is exactly the point he raises. That could include powers for the council to go after business owners in addition to the pharmacy professionals. More detail will be provided when the hon. Member meets with the Minister, but I thought it helpful to give those two indications.

Q15. [905950] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): Well over 1,000 youth clubs have closed in this country since 2010, having a huge negative impact on our young people. This is despite the fact that youth clubs have a long positive history of helping young people to mature in a healthy fashion. In particular, Phab clubs help disabled and non-disabled people to build friendships in an inclusive environment. The Phab charity is here in Parliament later today to gain support for its work. Will the Prime Minister commend its work and consider how best to support the youth club movement to help the next generation of young people grow into well-adjusted adults?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; he is a credit to his community. I know at first hand that he has done so much hard work to help to heal, to rebuild and to look to a brighter future for Southport. I welcome the Phab charity to Parliament; it does fantastic work to help break down barriers. I am proud that Labour is backing our youth clubs with £30 million of grant funding, doubling the number of youth hubs and providing a youth guarantee with earning or learning guaranteed for our young people. Our national youth strategy will be set out in the autumn.

Q9. [905944] **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): Last week, I invited the Prime Minister to match the Conservative pledge to scrap business rates for our high streets. However, he declined. Instead, he pointed me towards the small business strategy. Since then, businesses have been in touch to tell me that the strategy will make little or no difference to their future. With 14,000 high street businesses expected to close this year alone, and with retail businesses in my constituency facing a doubling of their business rates, when will the Labour Government deliver on their commitment to reduce business rates, given that they are unprepared to accept our policy of scrapping them altogether?

The Prime Minister: Our small business plan was drawn up with small businesses. I sent the hon. Member a copy online; I hope that she shared that with the 3,000 small businesses in her constituency. That shows what we are doing. [HON. MEMBERS: “Rubbish!”] Well, Conservative Members shout “rubbish”, but this is what small businesses asked us to do. There is £1 billion of additional lending to small businesses and £3 billion extra for small businesses to scale up, and we are dealing with late payments in the biggest reform for 25 years.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): As Britain faced peril in world war two, Winston Churchill took a radical step: he changed the clocks to shift extra daylight into the evenings. As the clocks go back this weekend, will the Prime Minister take a look at the evidence on trialling Churchill time again to cut carbon,

reduce bills, improve road safety, boost the hospitality industry and be the Prime Minister who will brighten up all our lives?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We will look at the relevant material.

Q13. [905948] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Many in Glastonbury and Somerton are forced to travel hundreds of miles to see an NHS dentist or suffer in agony, fall into debt to pay for private treatment or turn to DIY dentistry, like Jennifer, who extracted two of her teeth over the weekend. They simply cannot wait for the consultation on the broken NHS contract; they deserve immediate action. Will the Prime Minister outline what measures he is taking to end the dental desert in Somerset for good?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising that. Added to the list of shocking things the last Government left us is the shocking state of NHS dentistry—broken, like everything else under the last Government. We are rolling out extra urgent care appointments. In Somerset, the integrated care board is expected to deliver over 13,000 extra dental appointments

this year; I will give her more details in due course. We are also reforming the dental contract, which will shift focus on to retaining NHS dentists.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): Ahmad Al Ibrahim was only 16 years old when he was fatally stabbed in Huddersfield. His life was cruelly taken away in what the police described as an “unprovoked” and “motiveless” attack. Following a visit to Netherhall learning campus in my constituency last week, I know how important this issue is for young people. Will the Prime Minister commit to redoubling efforts to tackle serious violence and knife crime through more visible policing, stronger prevention and investment in youth services?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that devastating case. My thoughts, and I am sure those of the whole House, are with the family and friends. Through our Crime and Policing Bill, we are increasing penalties for the illegal sale of knives and giving police new powers to seize knives likely to be used for violence or cause harm. We have also launched a coalition to tackle knife crime, to bring together campaigners and community leaders to tackle the root causes of knife crime and help protect the next generation.

Heathrow: National Airports Review

12.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

With permission, I will update the House on the steps this Government are taking to realise the benefits of expansion at Heathrow airport, having invited proposals for a third runway earlier this year.

Today I am launching a review of the airports national policy statement. Britain wants to fly, and this Government will act to meet public aspirations. Our review of the ANPS will ensure that while we unlock long-term capacity for more flights at the nation's only hub airport, we will also meet our obligations to passengers, communities and the environment. Today is a step forward for UK aviation and infrastructure, supporting growth in the economy and enabling a modern, efficient transport system that harnesses international investment, boosts connectivity and strengthens UK competitiveness.

We are committed to making a decision on a third runway at Heathrow within this Parliament, and we are clear in our ambition to see flights taking off on a new runway in 2035. We said we would get on with this, and we have. When the previous Government set up the Davies commission, it took them five years to publish the original draft ANPS. We will get to the same point in 18 months, with the process completed by the end of 2026, showing our commitment to delivering progress swiftly but robustly. When we say we back the builders, not the blockers, we mean it.

But this is not a blank cheque. Expansion at Heathrow must minimise cost for passengers and customers. The taxpayer must not be expected to foot the bill. That is why the scheme will be privately financed—both the core project and the related infrastructure improvements. Extra staff and passengers must be able to get to and from the airport without turning the M4 and M25 into Europe's largest car park. Crucially, the expansion must align with our legal, environmental and climate commitments. Starting the review of the ANPS is critical to delivering expansion and will provide the basis for decisions on any future planning applications.

The world has changed since the last ANPS review in 2018, which is when it was designated. New environmental and climate obligations have been introduced, and patterns of travel have changed. However, pretty much every UK airport saw its busiest summer on record. We could put our head in the sand and pretend this is not the case, but we would be doing a disservice to our economy and to the next generation. That is why, in carrying out this review, we will consider how any proposed scheme must meet four clear tests: that it contributes to economic growth across the country; that it meets our air quality obligations; that it is consistent with our noise commitments; and, crucially, that it aligns with our legal obligations on climate change, including net zero.

We will seek the independent opinion of the Climate Change Committee, which I will write to shortly to request this advice. While a third runway at Heathrow has been factored into carbon budget 6, it is right that we update our modelling and seek the views of the CCC. Given Heathrow's national importance, we will also consider naming the airport as critical national priority infrastructure, in line with our approach to low-carbon energy projects. We are further considering

whether to name a statutory undertaker as an appropriate person to carry out the project under the Planning Act 2008, providing additional clarity to stakeholders and the local community. It is clear that this is a large and complex programme that requires a thorough and evidence-led approach. Over the coming months, my Department will develop analysis on economic and environmental impacts of expansion. We will also undertake an appraisal of sustainability, as required by statute, alongside a habitats regulations assessment and other necessary technical work. If amendments are needed to the ANPS as a result of the review, we expect to consult on an amended policy statement by next summer. Communities will be able to have their say and we will shortly publish an updated stakeholder engagement approach to ensure transparency and fairness throughout the process.

Earlier this year, we invited potential promoters to submit proposals for delivering a third runway at Heathrow. Seven proposals were received and were considered by officials from the Department for Transport, the Treasury and expert financial and technical advisers. Following that assessment, two potential schemes remain under active consideration: a proposal from Heathrow Airport Limited and a proposal from the Aurora Group. We know that we must provide as much clarity and certainty for communities, investors and users of Heathrow as soon as possible, so we are seeking further information on the two proposed schemes with a view to reaching a final decision on a single scheme to inform the remainder of the ANPS review by the end of November.

When making that decision, we will consider: the interoperability of the proposed scheme with existing infrastructure; the plans for transport to and from the airport and associated road schemes; the land take and impact on surrounding homes and communities; the evidence that the scheme can be privately financed; and the economic benefits of the scheme. This Government are committed to moving quickly but we will also do this properly.

To deliver the scheme on time, the Government are also pressing ahead with a series of enabling reforms. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill will streamline the delivery of major infrastructure, including Heathrow. That includes faster consenting routes and more proportionate consultations. On judicial reviews, we have announced that we will work with the judiciary to cut the amount of time it takes for a review to move through the court system for national policy statements and nationally significant infrastructure projects. We are establishing the UK Airspace Design Service to deliver modernised airspace. That will initially prioritise airspace design for the London region, supporting both Heathrow and the wider network, and will also make flight paths more efficient so that planes spend less time over London. We will initiate slot reform to ensure future allocation maximises benefits of an expanded Heathrow, as well as approved growth at Gatwick and Luton for passengers, local communities and businesses.

Expanding Heathrow will be one of the largest infrastructure projects in the UK. Rigorous and effective cost control will be essential to its success, both in minimising any impact on airline charges and costs to passengers and in maintaining credibility with financial markets. The Government will therefore work with the Civil Aviation Authority to review the framework for

economic regulation for capacity expansion at Heathrow, ensuring the model provides strong incentives for cost-effective delivery. We expect the CAA to publish a working paper in November, with a view to that work completing next summer.

This is a landmark opportunity for Heathrow, for the aviation sector and for the UK economy. The Government remain fully committed to ensuring the expansion is delivered in a way that is timely, cost-efficient and environmentally responsible. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.48 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her statement and for advance sight of it.

The statement should have been brought to the House months ago. The Secretary of State surely recognises that today marks a delay and an acknowledgment of that, rather than a decisive move forward. The truth is that this whole process has come about the wrong way round. Recent announcements on Gatwick and Heathrow, rather than being any clear plan for the future of British aviation, are not driven by planned and prepared work but by a clear attempt to divert attention from the Government's growing list of crises, scandals and cover-ups. However, we on these Benches welcome the fact that this statement has finally been brought forward to the House, because both the aviation sector and passengers deserve clarity, as do the local people who will be affected, and we hope that they will see sensible mitigations to these proposals.

Can the Secretary of State confirm what assessment the Government have undertaken so far of the total cost of Heathrow expansion, given that one of the central estimates now stands at almost £50 billion, excluding an extra £10 billion for further surface access works? Those figures would quadruple Heathrow's current asset base, which is already responsible for some of the highest passenger charges in the world. If Britain is to remain competitive on the global stage, those costs must be kept down, not driven up.

Crucially, how will the Government ensure that the costs are minimised, not maximised? I am sure that, like me, the Secretary of State does not want those costs directly passed on to airlines and then to their passengers in higher fares, because affordability must be at the heart of any credible aviation strategy. Maintaining affordable flights is crucial for passengers, so can she assure the House that the Heathrow expansion will not result in significant pass-through costs, especially with the Government's rises in air passenger duty, the jobs tax and now real concerns over how business rates will affect the aviation sector?

I understand that the Chancellor has claimed a third runway will be operational by 2035—something the Secretary of State has reflected today—and that she wants to see spades in the ground during this Parliament. Of course, we welcome the reforms that will enable this to happen. Those reforms will not have any teeth, however, unless the Government commit to backing our plan to scrap the Climate Change Act 2008. Otherwise,

Heathrow expansion will face judicial review after judicial review, bogging down the process, driving up costs and delivering further delay. Even Labour's Mayor of London has said that he "wouldn't hesitate" to launch legal challenges against a third runway. Can the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that her own Labour colleagues—including those she worked for previously—and allies will not be the ones who prevent this important project from ever seeing the light of day? Can the Secretary of State also commit to ensuring that the associated road and rail links not just into London but to the south are included, so that the expansion delivers genuine economic growth and connectivity for the whole of the United Kingdom?

The Conservatives would end the constant threat of judicial review and eco-lawfare to ensure that infrastructure across the country could finally be delivered on time, on budget and in Britain's national interests. It was great to hear the Secretary of State's words on this from the Dispatch Box, but will those reforms relating to the judiciary come into force before the decisions on Heathrow and the development consent order are made, or will they be subject to the current situation we are facing?

We on these Benches recognise that greater competition is the most effective way to deliver value for money and reduce costs to consumers, and I am grateful that the Secretary of State acknowledged in her statement that Heathrow expansion must minimise costs, but the only way to achieve that is through real and genuine competition. Heathrow's current structure has the potential to create perverse incentives that reward higher spending rather than efficiency, pushing up charges for passengers and airlines. I note the commitment that the CAA's review into economic regulation will begin in November, but that review must look seriously and fundamentally at how to embed competition and reverse perverse incentives. How do the Secretary of State and the CAA intend to bring competition to the heart of delivering this project? She said that the review would be delivered in the summer of next year. Will it be before the summer recess so that the House will have time to scrutinise it?

While this Government continue to splurge cash, hike up taxes and debt and tie Britain up in eco-lawfare with their Green allies, only the Conservatives would restore confidence, break that cycle and deliver a stronger economy with world-class aviation at its heart. Sadly, under this Government, taxes have risen to historic highs. They have imposed a punishing jobs tax, and borrowing has soared to the highest levels since 2010 outside the pandemic, with £100 billion in annual debt interest payments. A third runway alone will not shield the country from the consequences of Labour's economic mismanagement, but it is a project that must be delivered correctly and responsibly and put passengers at its heart.

Heidi Alexander: I am interested in the right hon. Gentleman's comments about our pace of delivery, and I roundly reject his criticisms on this. We are the party that is accelerating Heathrow expansion, today setting out this swift and robust review of the ANPS to help us determine applications swiftly. Previous work to get a final airports national policy statement by the last Government took more than five years. This Government will do it three years faster. We are getting on with the job and taking the important and sometimes difficult

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decisions to get Britain building. I gently remind him that when his great ally and mentor, Boris Johnson, was Prime Minister, he went to such lengths to duck decisions on this issue that he ended up in Afghanistan.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to care about consumers and cost control, and that is precisely why we are reviewing the ANPS and why we are starting the work, via the Civil Aviation Authority, on the model of economic regulation. If we fail to plan for future capacity, prices will rise and choice will shrink. This review will be integral to keeping the UK competitive and connected by ensuring sufficient capacity, sustainable growth and fair competition between global hub airports. I agree with him that consumers deserve affordable fares and greener aviation, and that is what we are working to deliver.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked about climate change, service access and our reforms to judicial reviews. On service access, I can be clear with him that we expect this project and associated infrastructure improvements to be privately financed. Through the ANPS review, we will be looking holistically at public transport requirements, be that southern rail access, western rail access or how people get to and from central London. He will recall that, in the spending review, we set out the biggest investment in London's transport for over 10 years, with £2.2 billion enabling Transport for London to buy new rolling stock on the Piccadilly line and 10 extra Elizabeth line trains. We will work closely with our colleague, the Mayor of London, and TfL to ensure that appropriate infrastructure is in place.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the changes that we are making to judicial review, and I would simply say to him that we are acting where his Government had their head in the sand. I am confident that the CAA will look carefully at competition issues in the work that it is doing. I am also confident that, ultimately, we could create 100,000 jobs through expansion at Heathrow. We could boost economic growth as well as opening up new opportunities for trade, tourism and travel. We will do this properly, and that is what we are doing by launching the ANPS review today. I look forward to answering further questions from other hon. Members.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I look forward to the work she does on this ANPS coming to our Committee in due course. A third runway at Heathrow, combined with all the other agreed—or likely to be agreed—expansions of capacity in London and south-east airports would involve an increase of 177 million passengers, which would be 70% more than the number of passengers in London and the south-east from 2024. I look forward to the Climate Change Committee's response to the proposal, because it has said that a 35% increase in capacity would be the maximum that would keep the UK compliant with our international legal commitments.

To return to the specifics of the statement, the Secretary of State said that she seeks to minimise costs for passengers and customers, but given that the cost of a third runway will be between £25 billion and £49 billion, how exactly

will that cost not be passed on to the airlines and therefore the passengers if the Treasury is not going to fund those costs, which we know it is not? On surface access, ever since the building of the fifth terminal, the local authorities all around Heathrow have been pushing for southern rail access to Heathrow. Heathrow Airport has long said—and has clarified recently—that it will not pay the cost of southern rail access, so how does she expect that to be funded? If the M25 and M4 are not to grind to a halt, and if passengers and workers from the west and south of the airport are to be able to get in and out of the airport, how is that to be achieved?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is entirely right to raise these issues. We will give very careful and thorough consideration to them in the airports national policy statement review, which will take place in the coming months. She referred to the Climate Change Committee's opinion on capacity expansion. We are making rapid progress in cleaning up the fuel that is used in planes, and we are making huge efforts to reform our airspace, so that we can have cleaner and more direct flights. The carbon intensity of flying has to come down if we are to have more planes in the air. She was also right to highlight the importance of the regulatory model. That is why we have asked the Civil Aviation Authority to do this piece of work over the coming months; it is aligned with the review in the airports national policy statement. We will say more on that in due course.

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

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, which made the Government's intent of supporting the proposed third runway at Heathrow very clear. It was good to hear her recognise the complexity of all that will be needed to deliver it, including major diversionary works on two of the country's busiest motorways. We Liberal Democrats continue to support the right infrastructure in the right place, which is why we have always supported schemes such as East West Rail and Northern Powerhouse Rail. However, we need the right infrastructure to tackle the right problems, and there are many unanswered questions about the Heathrow third runway.

The New Economics Foundation has been very clear in its analysis that the environmental impact of airport expansion will erode a lot of our carbon emission reduction plans, and many studies have questioned the economic case for Heathrow expansion. I would be interested to hear from the Secretary of State about the dangers of relying solely on the private sector to fund large schemes, as happened in the case of the channel tunnel, which remains an enormously underused asset, partly because of the costs that resulted from the decision to fund it only through the private sector.

It is welcome that the Secretary of State has made her support for Heathrow expansion subject to four tests, but I detect perhaps a slight hint of cognitive dissonance, and a contradiction in the Government setting out timelines for delivering something that they say is subject to four tests. The Secretary of State said that she would hear the independent advice of the Climate Change Committee. If the CCC decides that the preferred option for

the Heathrow third runway is incompatible with our carbon emissions and our net zero targets, will she drop her support for the third runway?

Heidi Alexander: I start by congratulating the hon. Gentleman on his appointment. He referred to New Economics Foundation research. I should be clear with him that the Government are absolutely committed to reaching net zero for the whole economy by 2050, and that we will meet our climate change obligations as set out in the Climate Change Act 2008. We have also been clear repeatedly that any airport expansion proposals will need to demonstrate that they will contribute to economic growth and can be delivered in line with the UK's legally binding climate change commitment. We will engage with the CCC in the ANPS review.

Heathrow is only one part of the process; the expansion of Heathrow, Luton, Gatwick and Bristol airports was factored into carbon budget 7, and the hon. Gentleman will know that the Government will publish our updated delivery plan for carbon budgets 4 to 6 in the coming weeks. We should not see economic growth and our climate change commitments as being inconsistent with each another. I believe we can go further, faster, on cleaner fuels and technological developments, but people want to fly, and I do not think that this Government should get on the wrong side of public aspiration.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I first of all express my sympathy for the Secretary of State: she knows from past experience that this is like watching a car crash in action, and it has been thrust upon her by the Chancellor. She knows that Heathrow has made the clear commitment that it will not pay for the infrastructure; that landing charges will go up, and passengers will pay for it; and that there is no way that we can meet our climate change targets if the expansion goes ahead. That is why I express my sympathy; she has been given an impossible task.

I have a constituency interest, as the Secretary of State will know, because Heathrow is in my constituency. She mentioned that the stakeholder engagement process will be published shortly. Could she be a bit more precise on the timescale, and on what measures will be included in that? The House needs to know that in my constituency, 4,500 homes will be demolished or rendered unliveable; 15,000 people will lose their homes; we will lose three schools; and whole communities will go. My constituents want to ask: where are they going to live? Where will their children be educated, and what will their happen to their community? We just need some certainty now—and from my point of view, it is certain that this is a white elephant. It is almost like watching High Speed 2 all over again.

Heidi Alexander: I am sure it will not come as a surprise to my right hon. Friend to hear that I reject his characterisation of the work I am doing. I see the expansion as an opportunity to improve our connectivity as a nation, to improve UK competitiveness and to ensure that we deliver for businesses and passengers all across the UK. I understand why he raised the interests of his constituents who live closest to the proposed expansion. He asked me for more detail about the consultation timeline. If we make changes to the ANPS through the review, a consultation will take place on

that next year, and we are working on a timeline that would see a new ANPS designated by the end of next year. I give him a commitment to meaningful engagement and consultation. In the document that I referred to in my statement, we will set out a new stakeholder engagement approach, so that people will be treated with fairness. We will act transparently throughout the process.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I ask colleagues to keep their questions short, so I can get everybody in.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I sympathise with the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell); my Spelthorne constituency is on the southern side of Heathrow airport, and the residents of Stanwell Moor, a village of some 520 homes, are half a mile away from the southern perimeter. They have put up with a lot, including appalling behaviour by Uber drivers, holiday parking and noise pollution. In the consultation, will the people of Stanwell Moor be engaged with directly? I also ask that we measure air and sound pollution, and use current levels as a baseline, so that we can determine the impact of the Heathrow expansion.

Heidi Alexander: In the ANPS, there will be a very thorough review of the noise requirements, and mitigations are set out in that document. I can give the hon. Gentleman a commitment that there will be meaningful engagement with his constituents.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that this is not a done deal? As part of the ANPS review process, will there be a full and independent analysis of the economic costs and benefits, the environmental effects, and demand in London and the south-east, given airport expansion elsewhere? As she says, the world has changed since 2018. Can my constituents, who will be seriously detrimentally affected by any further expansion of Heathrow, be assured that the Government have their best interests at heart?

Heidi Alexander: We will do this properly. As Secretary of State for Transport, and as the person who may ultimately be the decision maker on any future planning application, I assure my hon. Friend that I will approach this issue with an open mind and will apply the highest standards of professionalism and probity to the process that I am overseeing.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Egham in my constituency is five miles from Heathrow, and it is not the fact that it is overflowing that I want to ask about today. The shadow Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), visited the patch on Monday, and we waited 12 minutes while level crossing barriers were down in Pooley Green. The Secretary of State did not mention whether trains would be part of the consultation. Will they be within scope? If the expansion goes ahead, we will desperately need to deal with our level crossings, and we will need better rail access from Egham to Heathrow to make this work.

Heidi Alexander: I agree that we need to deal with the issue of level crossings on the rail network. We will look holistically at rail requirements in the ANPS review.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and am pleased to hear that this will be a thorough and meaningful consultation, because even though my constituency is not near the airport, my constituents in Camberwell, Stockwell and Brixton write to me regularly to say that they are suffering from air and noise pollution. The Secretary of State talked about infrastructure; a key point will be ensuring that more people use public transport to get to Heathrow. The reality is that some upgrades to the airport have not had the funding over many years, as the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), highlighted. I want to tease out more from the Secretary of State on private funding, because in a number of cases, developers commit to something, but then the viability issue comes up, and the money never seems to appear. Will she ensure that there is funding to secure the transport infrastructure that will be vital if there is any new airport runway?

Heidi Alexander: How people get to and from an airport is as important as the number of planes landing and taking off, so I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that we will look at these issues closely. I point out that Transport for London is buying a new fleet of Piccadilly line trains that have higher capacity. It is part of a larger fleet replacement programme, and 10 new Elizabeth line trains are also being built. We will look at the whole issue of how people get to and from the airport, because I agree that it is absolutely vital.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Chancellor has staked her economic credibility and growth strategy on a third runway at Heathrow. The Secretary of State said that she is committed to seeing flights take off from it in 2035, yet at the same time, she talks about taking an evidence-led approach, putting this project to her four tests, taking the advice of the Climate Change Committee and doing a thorough economic and environmental impact assessment. Could she clarify a point for the House, because I fear my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) did not get a straight answer? If the evidence shows that the environmental costs are too great and the economic benefits are too little, will she and, crucially, her Chancellor be prepared to do a U-turn and can this whole project?

Heidi Alexander: We see the huge opportunities and benefits associated with expanding capacity at Heathrow and having a third runway there. There will be a thorough process, which we are starting today by reviewing the policy framework in which any planning application will be judged. The Planning Inspectorate will look at that and consider all the issues to do with economic need, air quality, noise and carbon, and then a decision will be taken. We have an ambition to see planes taking off from the runway in 2035, but that does not mean that we will not have a thorough process. We are committed to that, and that is what I am setting out today.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is abundantly clear that air travel is here to stay; in fact, the amount of it has risen over recent years. We of course

need to take mitigation measures to tackle the noise and environmental impacts, but while we have for decades been debating ad nauseam building a third runway, dozens of runways and, indeed, airports have been built by nations across the globe. I ask my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary to safeguard the thousands of Slough households who are dependent on Heathrow to pay their bills; to boost business and trade; and to maintain our world-leading position in the aviation sector. Will she work at speed to tackle the blockages and finally help to deliver this third runway?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had decades of dither and delay on this issue, and it is right that we crack on and start the process of reviewing the airports national policy statement. He is also right to highlight the huge economic benefit of Heathrow—it is the largest single-site employer anywhere in the UK—and its effect on the livelihoods of and opportunities for his constituents. We will move at speed, but we will also do this properly.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows from her time at City Hall, Heathrow has been a planning disaster since it was accidentally sited to the west of London, forcing planes to land over millions of heads. While it might be amusing to watch her take the chainsaw to all those trees planted at Sipson by a series of Labour politicians, why she would compound that planning disaster I have no idea. More than that, if this goes ahead, she will also be compounding the Heathrow monopoly on long-haul flights. To her four rules, I suggest that she adds a fifth, which is the impact on direct connectivity to and from regional airports. There is the strong view that the expansion of Heathrow would kill connectivity from Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and elsewhere.

Heidi Alexander: I actually think the opposite could be true: an expanded Heathrow could provide greater regional connectivity. The right hon. Member is right to highlight that Heathrow is our only hub airport, and it accounts for over 70% of long-haul flights, as well as over 70% of air freight by gross value, so it is an important economic asset. I repeat what I have said to others: we will move at speed and look at economic growth impacts across the entire country. But where he sees a challenge, I see opportunity.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I welcome the mention of the four tests that will be part of the review, but it must be said that scepticism is running high in Hillingdon, where the effects are greatest, and the four tests need to be more transparent. I encourage her to publish clearly what those four tests are and the metrics against which they will be assessed. I ask her for a commitment that the data and information that will be assessed will be fully and transparently shared with communities as early as possible so that it can be interrogated. I echo colleagues' comments about the need for meaningful engagement with the communities most affected. Can she confirm that the engagement will not just be the formal consultation on the draft statement, but that there will be meaningful early engagement for the communities affected?

Heidi Alexander: We are moving at pace on this, but I do believe it is possible to have meaningful consultation opportunities as well. If through the review that we are conducting in the next couple of months it becomes apparent that we need to change the ANPS, we will consult on a new draft by the summer of next year. I will ensure that I remain in close contact with my hon. Friend, who is a fearsome advocate for his constituents, because I know that it is important that we not just address concerns about noise, air quality and carbon, but demonstrate the important economic effect that expanding Heathrow could have.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): My constituents, particularly those along the river in Molesey and Ditton, are concerned about an increase in the noise pollution that already affects us from a third runway at Heathrow. How can they be reassured that their views will be taken into account, unlike in the top-down centralised planning policies that this Government have implemented? Will the four tests be transparent, meaningful and readily available to constituents? Can I please ask again: should it be shown that the climate commitments of the UK will not be met by this expansion, will the Minister U-turn?

Heidi Alexander: This is the start, not the end, of the process. We will be transparent and clear about those four tests. We will consult on an amended ANPS if that is required following the review. A planning application would then come forward, and there would be consultation around that. There would be a public inquiry led by the planning inspector. There will be ample opportunity for people to make their views known. I refer the hon. Member to the remarks I made earlier about treating this whole process with professionalism and integrity to ensure that we make the right decision for the future of the country.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Heathrow aircraft noise has a significant detrimental impact on my Putney constituents. Similar hubs in other European countries affect far fewer people: for Schiphol it is 44,000 and for Charles de Gaulle 133,000, while for Heathrow it is more than 680,000 people who are directly impacted by the noise. Currently there are no legal noise limits. I welcome the mentions of noise in the Secretary of State's statement; will she commit to a binding noise limit within the new strategy, as well as strong environmental limits and full community consultation in the process?

Heidi Alexander: I can tell my hon. Friend that the current ANPS sets out very clear requirements on noise that any scheme would have to meet. We will review those requirements alongside any necessary mitigation requirements, and we will consult on any changes. I should also say that the rules around the operation of a night flight ban, including the exact timings of such a ban, would be defined in consultation with local communities and relevant stakeholders.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The DFT's own updated appraisal report shows that the economic benefits of a third runway are either exaggerated or misguided. The Labour Government are yet to produce their economic analysis. Meanwhile, Heathrow Airport Ltd is in more than £15 billion-worth of debt and its own proposal has

increased in cost by 50% since 2016. What makes the Secretary of State so confident that private financing will be found not just for the proposals on the table, but for all the surface transport upgrades that will be required?

Heidi Alexander: The two promoters that remain in the scheme will be responsible for securing private investment, and they have expressed to me confidence that the scheme can go forward. I also gently point out to the hon. Lady that there is huge support for this expansion among the business community: the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses and the British Chambers of Commerce all support Heathrow expansion, as do regional business groups across the UK.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Environmental Audit Committee has just completed its very detailed work on aviation expansion, which we will announce soon. One thing that came across was that the Climate Change Committee was advising demand management as one of the ways that it should be delivered, consistent with our environmental commitments. I am glad that the Secretary of State has reaffirmed that the expansion will have to be consistent with those commitments, but can she tell us whether demand management will be part of that? What assessment has she made of the aspects that will require Government policy rather than being within Heathrow's gift, such as the expansion of sustainable aviation fuel? Finally, I am glad to hear that she recognises that this is a 21st-century plan with 20th-century road links and 19th-century rail links, so can she tell us more about how she will reduce the overall carbon emissions contribution that Heathrow makes?

Heidi Alexander: There were probably three questions in one there. I say to my hon. Friend that I am not prepared to stand in the way of the public's aspiration to fly. We are not looking at demand management at the moment; our approach to aviation decarbonisation is based on the analysis suggesting that the sector can make a significant contribution to our economy-wide net zero target by 2050 by focusing on new fuels and new technologies.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I have mentioned that the naming of Heathrow as critical national priority infrastructure is vital to ending the disruption to power and systems we have seen over the summer, so I encourage the Government to go forward with that. On the plans for transport to and from the airport and associated road schemes, can the Secretary of State confirm that the costs of the southern and western rail access, the new southern access tunnel that will ease congestion on existing roads and lower emissions, and the rail access to provide reliable public transport links for passengers and staff are included in the estimates we have already seen? I implore her, as others have done, to ensure that those plans are covered as part of the project, and that it is not left to the taxpayer to pick up the bill?

Heidi Alexander: I am clear that the project will need to be privately financed. That includes both the core project and the associated infrastructure improvements. It will be for the promoter submitting a planning application to set out in that application how it is consistent with

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the reviewed ANPS. However, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the remarks I made earlier; I am clear that we must ensure that the M4 and the M25 do not turn into a car park, because that will not result in the successful operation of the airport.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows my constituency well, and she will know that my constituents are very concerned about air quality in London and worried that the expansion of Heathrow will affect air quality in the constituency, especially for future generations. Will she reassure not just me, but local organisations such as Green School Runs and the London Clean Air Initiative, which are campaigning hard to ensure that air quality is not impacted and is at the heart of the review, not ignored by the Government?

Heidi Alexander: Air quality will be one of the factors looked at through the ANPS review. Obviously, there may have been some changes in baseline conditions compared with when the ANPS was last designated back in 2018, given that the ultra low emission zone is in force now, but we do take the issue seriously and that is why it is one of the four tests.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): About an hour ago, the Prime Minister did not answer my request for a cast-iron guarantee, so I wonder whether the Secretary of State can do a bit better. My constituency is 16 minutes from Heathrow, yet it has no rail link to our country's busiest airport. Can she give me a cast-iron guarantee that, if this airport is expanded, Woking will finally get the rail link it needs?

Heidi Alexander: Far be it from me to give a different answer from the one the Prime Minister gave. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will be looking at rail in detail through the ANPS review and the public transport requirements, in order to have an expanded Heathrow with a third runway that operates successfully.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Providing jobs for 800 people and supporting a further 7,000, East Midlands airport is a fantastic example of how aviation powers regional growth. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, whether it is through Heathrow expansion or at East Midlands airport, delivering sustainable expansion in aviation is not just about flights, but about delivering jobs, apprenticeships and growth, and about securing Britain's role as a green aerospace and aviation leader?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right; I know that East Midlands airport plays a particularly important role in air freight, second only to Heathrow. That is something we do not talk about enough, given its importance to the economy, so I welcome the comments he has made.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I am and always will be a proud Yorkshireman, but I lived in west London for a number of years, so I am aware of the diverse range of views on Heathrow expansion. I certainly do not subscribe to the luddite nimbyism of the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick

(Andy Slaughter), but may I ask the Secretary of State what consideration she has given to potential Chinese investment into this critical national infrastructure?

Heidi Alexander: It will be for the promoters of any future scheme to secure financing for the development. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that national security always comes first and foremost for this Government, but we are keen to secure international investment so that we can boost UK competitiveness and improve global connectivity. That is central to everything we are trying to do.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Regarding the new airports national policy statement, can the Secretary of State clarify whether "airports" is in the plural? If so, will she be looking to change the planning process so that it can take into account the cumulative environmental impact of different airport expansions around the country?

Heidi Alexander: The review of the airports national policy statement is site-specific for Heathrow. The other applications I have dealt with for Luton and Gatwick in the past couple of months were dealt with using the "making best use of runways" policy. The ANPS is specific to Heathrow.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Britain wants to thrive, but all I can hear is this Government once again prioritising the needs of the wealthiest, most frequent flyers above those of us on the ground. Can the Secretary of State tell me what crumbs of our carbon budget will remain for the rest of us and our lives after the review is complete? After the fudge on Gatwick, if the tests say no, will she say no as well?

Heidi Alexander: I refer the hon. Lady to the remarks I have made previously about carbon budgets, but I dispute the statement that it is only the wealthiest in this country who want to fly. This may be sad, but one of the highlights of life for me is the bacon butty on an easyJet flight to a Greek island in the summer. That is an aspiration shared by many of the British public.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I reassure my right hon. Friend that many of us on the Government Benches want us to get on and build, baby, build. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you. While much of the national conversation is understandably London-centric, can she assure the House that regional airports, particularly those in the west midlands, and the communities and businesses that they support, are being considered by the Government?

Heidi Alexander: I assure my hon. Friend that this Government are ambitious for all airports across the UK, including regional airports. I was with the chief executive of Birmingham airport only yesterday, and I am really excited about the £300 million investment in that airport that they announced at the regional investment summit yesterday. Just as with the expansion of Heathrow, there is huge potential for driving economic growth through our regional airports.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): While most of the comments today have been critical, regions across the United Kingdom need a strong hub airport, and Heathrow provides that. I seek assurances from the

Secretary of State that slots at any expanded airport will be ensured for flights from regional airports. But I also warn her: given the way climate change targets have been used to stop major infrastructure projects in Northern Ireland, such as major roads, is she confident that, by sticking by the Climate Change Act 2008, we are not giving a weapon to those who are opposed to this project and will use the courts to ensure that it is stopped?

Heidi Alexander: The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the opportunity for other regional airports and the regional connections that an expanded Heathrow could provide. It has been operating at about 95% capacity for much of the past two decades, so we are taking slot reform forward. We will look closely at a range of issues to ensure that we are maximising the contribution of that process to our economy.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank the Transport Secretary for her statement and recognise the national importance of this project. As she said, we must ensure that the whole of the United Kingdom benefits from the project, should it go ahead, and I am particularly keen that firms across Staffordshire and the midlands are involved. If she approves the scheme, how will British firms play their part in this nationally significant project?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the very significant supply chain that will exist, and not just in relation to the construction of a third runway, but in terms of the expanded airport and the opportunity that presents to the aviation sector. We will review the economic impacts through the ANPS review, so more detail will be available on all that in due course.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Can the Secretary of State update the House with a bit more detail on the progress of airspace modernisation in relation to noise? Residents in my constituency who are on the flightpath for Bournemouth airport have no night-time restrictions and are seeing massive increases. In places such as Dorset, people are being disturbed in their homes and in their sleep. If regional airports will not be included, can the Secretary of State explain when we can get something further on them?

Heidi Alexander: This Government have moved with speed to set up the UK airspace design service, and we plan to have that mobilised by the end of the year. The first region we will look at is London—that is partly to do with the connection to expansion schemes in London as well. If the hon. Lady writes to me with the details of what her constituents are experiencing, I will look into the matter further.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the severe concerns that my constituents in Fulham will have about aspects of this proposal, particularly the noise? They will hence take an interest in ensuring that the four tests are properly adhered to. Can she reassure me that she has no intention of watering down the ANPS to lessen its noise commitments?

Heidi Alexander: As I said in response to a similar question from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), we will review the noise requirements set out in the current NPS and the mitigations associated

with that. As I stand here today, I have no intention of diminishing in any way those requirements, but we will look at the new technology associated with new aircraft and new places, and we will do a thorough piece of work. If any changes are made, we will consult on those before next summer.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): As far back as 2019 there was talk of manufacturing and logistics hubs for the Heathrow hub being sited in Northern Ireland. Can the Secretary of State still give a reassurance that the whole of the UK will be considered in support of the manufacture of the third runway, should it go ahead? Will sites be considered in my constituency, for example, which is critical to Belfast international airport?

Heidi Alexander: One of the four tests relates to economic growth across the whole of the UK, and when I talk about the whole of the UK, I mean the whole of the UK. I hope that provides the hon. Gentleman with sufficient reassurance.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows how ambitious I am for improving connectivity from Bracknell to Heathrow airport. Heathrow's proposals say that it is exploring the option of promoting a new rail scheme that combines the objectives of a western rail link to Heathrow and southern rail access to Heathrow, and there are similar commitments in the Aurora Group's plans. Will she ensure that the review of the ANPS helps us to hold it to account for those promises so that we can deliver the better surface access that my constituents so badly need?

Heidi Alexander: The ANPS will provide the policy framework against which any future planning application is assessed. As I have said to other hon. Members, when a planning application comes forward, a thorough consideration process will be associated with that before any decision is taken. Clear conditions will be set out on any planning decision relating to surface access.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Secretary of State's statement—her positive words are encouraging. This is an economic advantage for everyone, and I thank her for that. The fact that Heathrow's numbers look set to surpass last year's numbers, with 8 million passengers in August 2025 alone, demonstrates abundantly clearly the need for expansion. A fit-for-purpose airport can only increase revenue through tourism and connectivity for business. How can she ensure that the extension will secure regional airport connectivity and enhancement and a streamlined domestic service, as well as international increases? How can she ensure that Northern Ireland contractors can be part of the building of the new third runway?

Heidi Alexander: We are at the start of this process, and I am as ambitious for the whole UK as the hon. Gentleman is. We will look at the economic impact through the ANPS review. If a scheme comes forward and gets planning consent during this Parliament, all Government Departments and I are absolutely clear that we must make the most of this incredible economic opportunity.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, her leadership, her focus on growth and her commitment to fit this

[*Dr Scott Arthur*]

project within the Paris agreement. I welcome the four tests that it will be judged against, but I have a suggestion for a fifth test—people might not be surprised to hear that it focuses very much on my constituency. In recent years, Edinburgh South West has benefited from fantastic rail connections between Edinburgh and London, and from fantastic direct international flights from Edinburgh airport to overseas. Does she agree that if this project goes ahead, it cannot be to the detriment of places such as Edinburgh?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is a fine champion for his constituency and the fantastic city of Edinburgh. An expanded Heathrow could open up more regional connectivity to cities such as Edinburgh. Improving the rail network between our two capital cities is absolutely essential as well, and we are committed to doing that.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): We urgently need to modernise and expand British airspace—it is at capacity, and our growth depends on it. I was at Bournemouth airport last week. We are close to a bus service and a public transport interchange, but Bournemouth airport cannot easily connect with European airspace, as most traffic joins it at a single space. That is particularly problematic, given that I hope the Cherries, who are contesting for European football, get to play European teams next season. Will the Government review and modernise our airspace and back regional airports such as Bournemouth's?

Heidi Alexander: As I said in answer to a previous question, the work that the UK airspace design service will do to modernise our airspace will start with the London area. It will not be limited to the London area, but we need to make that a priority. I appreciate the case that my hon. Friend makes with respect to Bournemouth.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I draw attention to my chairship of the GMB parliamentary group. As someone who worked on this issue the last time around, I was astonished to hear the Opposition's flight of fantasy when they accused others of delay. On their watch, the airports commission was artificially delayed until after a general election, with three more years spent producing the current NPS and a further two years tied up in the courts. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that the lessons have been learned from those eight wasted years?

Heidi Alexander: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Let us be honest—it was not just eight wasted years, it was 14. I repeat what I said earlier: it comes to something that the previous Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, went to such lengths to duck these decisions that he ended up in Kabul.

Personal Statement

1.40 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a personal statement.

When I made my maiden speech over a decade ago, I said that it was the honour of my life to represent Ashton-under-Lyne in this House. Alongside serving in this historic Labour Government, it is still the honour of my life. I promised then to bring determination, commitment and my socialist values to this House while representing my constituents, and I intend to continue doing so. My title may have changed, but the strength and character of the people of my constituency have not.

First, let me address the circumstances under which I left office. The last few weeks have been incredibly tough on my family, with my personal life so much in the public eye. All of us in public life know all too well the toll that the intense scrutiny we face takes on our loved ones, but I have always believed in the highest standards of transparency and accountability—that is what the public expect, and it is the price we pay for the privilege of service. That is why I referred myself to the independent adviser and gave him access to all the information he needed.

As I set out then, parents of a disabled child with a trust who divorce and seek different properties face a complex tax position. If there is one good thing that can come out of this, I hope that other families in that situation may now be aware of that and avoid getting into the position I am now in. I am of course corresponding with HM Revenue and Customs, and it has my full co-operation. There is no excuse not to pay taxes owed, and I will do so. This was an honestly made mistake, but when you make a mistake, you take responsibility.

To serve at the highest level of Government was a privilege—not for the title or the office, but for the chance to change the lives of the people I grew up with and live alongside. Every day, I worked to serve those same working-class communities; in every decision that I made, I thought of them. I know the power of politics to change lives, because it changed my own. The last Labour Government gave me the foundation to build a better life for me and my young son: a council house to support me, Sure Start to help me raise my kids, and the security of a minimum wage. A good job and a decent, secure home is not too much to ask, but for too many it is out of reach. That is what I was determined to change, for the people who all of us on these Benches are fighting for and must keep fighting for.

That is why, despite the fierce criticism and the relentless lobbying from vested interests, I am so proud that, within weeks, our landmark Employment Rights Bill will become law. It is a game changer for millions stuck in insecure and low-paid work. It will give them the dignity and security that they deserve. There are those who say we cannot afford to deliver new rights for working people; I say we cannot afford not to deliver them. Labour is at its best when we are bold, and I have been so proud to work alongside some of the trade unionists who nurtured and supported me to deliver the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. This is a personal statement, but the trade union movement

taught me that it is not about yourself; it is about us. It is about who we are here for, and everything that I have done has been an endeavour for us—for our people, who elected us and who we serve.

As Secretary of State for Housing, it was my solemn duty to serve the Grenfell Tower inquiry. It is difficult to think of a more humbling experience—a stark reminder of what happens when we forget who we are in this place to serve. It has been a privilege to work on behalf of those families, and it is why this Government will pass a duty of candour. Make no mistake: the Hillsborough law is for the 97 and their families, but it is also for the sub-postmasters who endured the Horizon scandal, the victims of infected blood, and those who died or whose lives were changed forever in the Grenfell Tower fire. It is a line in the sand that says that the public will always come first.

I am also incredibly proud that this Labour Government provided the biggest investment in social and affordable housing in a generation. It was the foundation of a decent home that gave me the security to build my life on; now we must provide a safe and decent home to millions of people across this country. When our Renters' Rights Bill returns to the House this afternoon, we will give a generation of renters the protections, security and rights that they deserve.

From votes at 16 to historic investment in homelessness prevention, from neighbourhood renewal to fair funding for the whole country and putting power back where it belongs, in the hands of working people everywhere, I was proud to lead, but we achieved together, with my hon. Friends on these Benches and the support of our entire movement—the lifeblood of this Labour Government.

When I think back on how far I have come, I remember when at age 16, I was pregnant with my child, needing a job and a home. People wrote me off, assumed that I would be on benefits for the whole of my life, but I wanted to prove them wrong. I have carried that with

me, whether on the Back Benches, at the Dispatch Box, or representing this country abroad. The support and advice of so many friends and colleagues has kept me going.

I want to give a special mention to my excellent ministerial and parliamentary team, my hon. Friends the Members for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen), for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) and for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson); my noble Friends Lord Khan and Baroness Taylor; my superb parliamentary and political staff; and the many excellent civil servants. I want to say a special thank you to many of my constituents and the public who have made contact with me. I offer my successor and his new colleagues my congratulations and, of course, my support. I am fortunate to count so many Members as not just honourable Friends but actual friends.

I will finish by saying that in each generation it has fallen to a Labour Government to strengthen the hand of working people. In 1945, it was maternity pay, the NHS and homes for heroes out of the ruins of war; in the 1970s, it was Barbara Castle and the fight for equal pay; and in the 1990s, it was the national minimum wage. Despite the opposition, because of the work of this Labour Government, we have the opportunity to write a new chapter of justice and fairness for working people.

As tough as politics can be, it is nothing—nothing—compared to what thousands of my constituents and many more across this country face every single day. Whether we sit on the Back Benches or on the Front Bench, elected office is not about us. It is about our chance to change the lives of others. From wherever I sit on these Benches, I will fight with everything I have to do exactly that. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Points of Order

1.49 pm

Ben Obese-Jeety (Huntingdon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week I was notified by the Table Office that my Cabinet Office oral question about the £97 billion increase in failing major project spending that this Government have overseen had been selected to be answered by the Government. However, it does not appear on the list of questions to be answered during Cabinet Office oral questions tomorrow. The Cabinet Office has declined to answer, and has removed it from the list of questions, which means that it will not be asked or answered in the Chamber.

I have long suspected that the Government have been manipulating the oral question process in their favour. How can the general public have any confidence in the parliamentary process, or the holding of the Government to account, when the Government can avoid scrutiny by picking and choosing only the questions that they wish to answer? I am sure that the Government would not wish me to submit any more written questions, so what guidance can you give, Mr Speaker, on how I can best ensure that my constituents in Huntingdon get the answers that they deserve?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. The transfer of questions between Departments is a matter for the Government rather than the Chair. However, the hon. Gentleman's concerns are now on the record, and I hope that those on the Treasury Bench have noted what he has said. Let me add that there is always the expectation that Departments will inform Members of such transfers. If there is a continuation, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will not leave it there—but please, will he come and let me know?

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport told the House, in relation to the Maccabi Tel Aviv match, that the risk assessment was 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.”—[*Official Report*, 20 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 646.]

However, reports last night revealed that the decision to ban away fans was due to intelligence suggesting that the main threat came from extremist Maccabi Tel Aviv fans themselves, and that they were the likely perpetrators of trouble in Amsterdam last year.

The Ministerial Code requires Ministers to give accurate and truthful information to Parliament. If the Secretary of State had that information before her statement, she must correct the record. Can you ask her to clarify the position, Mr Speaker, and to return to the House immediately if she has breached the code that governs all parliamentarians?

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately I do not have such powers, although perhaps at times I would welcome them. I will say this, however. I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. Ministers are responsible for their words in the House, and the Ministerial Code is not a matter for the Chair, but the hon. Member has certainly put his views on the record, and I am sure that—once again—we will find that those on the Treasury Bench have been listening.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the beginning of Prime Minister's questions, I rushed in while a question was being asked, and I want to apologise. I was rushing in from celebrating Diwali and the new year from my local temple in Willesden. On Monday I was celebrating Diwali and the new year at my local temple in Neasden, the largest mandir in the United Kingdom, and the day before that I was celebrating in Kingsbury. I wish everyone who is celebrating today a happy new year and a happy Diwali.

Mr Speaker: Let me first say that that is probably the worst point of order I have heard in the form of an apology, but let me also say happy Diwali to all the temples that the hon. Lady has visited. She has certainly put that on the record, but I hope that next time she will wait at the Bar of the House until after the question.

BILL PRESENTED

REMOVAL OF TITLES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rachael Maskell, supported by Nadia Whittome, Ian Byrne, Kate Osborne, Richard Burgon, Apsana Begum, Brian Leishman, Imran Hussain, Jon Trickett, Cat Eccles, Mary Kelly Foy and Bell Ribeiro-Addy presented a Bill to give the Monarch powers to remove titles; to provide that such removals can be done by the Monarch on their own initiative, following a recommendation of a joint committee of Parliament, or at the request of the person who holds the title; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 31 October, and to be printed (Bill 317).

Perinatal Mental Health Assessments

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

1.53 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the provision of mental health assessments in NHS antenatal care for the purpose of identifying those at risk of perinatal mental health problems and making referrals to appropriate support; and for connected purposes.

We often assume that pregnancy, birth and the year after birth are a time of life to be happy, celebrating the arrival of a new baby and embarking on a new chapter in family life, and for some people that is how it pans out, but for many the reality is much tougher. I have spoken previously in the House about my brilliant friend Sophie, who took her own life after the birth of her third child, who was just 10 weeks old at the time. That was four years ago, and her death remains a huge sadness in my life and for her family, some of whom are in the Gallery today; but the shock of it still sits with me too.

I did not know—and many of us do not—that suicide is the leading cause of death for a woman in that period from six weeks to a year after giving birth, a statistic recently reconfirmed by the latest report from Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK, known as MBRRACE-UK.

Although Sophie's death is a particularly serious example, I also did not know of the scale and normality of mental illness at that time in a woman's life. One in four women experience some sort of mental health difficulties during pregnancy or after giving birth. It can be anything from depression to anxiety to obsessive-compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder, and it can be completely debilitating for mums and their families. The consequences ripple out more widely, too: the London School of Economics and the Centre for Mental Health estimate that untreated perinatal mental illness costs the country more than £8 billion a year, largely through the long-term impact on the child's health, education and future productivity.

In theory, women are asked about their mental health early in pregnancy. The guidance from NICE—the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—specifies that questions about depression and anxiety should form part of a woman's first contact with health professionals during pregnancy, including at the booking appointment, but in practice women's experiences vary enormously. Some are asked a few hurried questions between blood pressure checks, while others are not asked at all. Women with a previous history of mental illness may be given more attention, but we know that pregnancy and early motherhood can often be the first times women experience mental illness, so that is not enough. Some GPs and midwives have the training and time to offer support; others are stretched far beyond capacity. Some have established mental health services to which to refer women; some are almost afraid to ask the right questions, because they do not trust that a referral will kick in.

The result is a postcode lottery, whereby a pregnant woman's access to mental health support can depend on the NHS trust that she happens to fall under, but it is also a lottery that a woman is more likely to lose if she

is black, Asian, young, or experiencing domestic violence, poverty or other forms of deprivation. As in so many areas of healthcare, pre-existing inequalities correlate with poorer outcomes. That is why this Bill matters: every woman, regardless of age, ethnicity, background or postcode, deserves the same standard of care and the same chance to be mentally well at that time in her life.

We are not starting from scratch. In the 10-year health plan, the Government have set out their determination and their plan to reorient our health system—away from treatment towards prevention, and away from hospitals towards the community. Ensuring that pregnant and new mums are mentally well is one of the ultimate acts of prevention, setting them and their children up for a healthy, productive future.

On mental health specifically, including better support for suicidal people, the Government have also made their commitment very clear, and have matched it with action. In the last year an additional 6,700 mental health professionals have been recruited, and £120 million is being invested in dedicated mental health emergency departments, ensuring that those in crisis can get help quickly. We are rolling out best start family hubs, a transformative initiative that will give families a single route into support services, including mental health services. My Bill builds on those commitments, but it focuses the mental health support at the very start of motherhood, when women need it most.

We are not starting from scratch in our understanding of good practice either. At a roundtable that I convened here in Parliament in September—bringing together NHS England, the Maternal Mental Health Alliance, the royal colleges, parents with lived experience and other experts—the message was united and clear: professionals want to help, but they need structure, time, and training to do it properly. The Royal College of Midwives has just published a road map for perinatal mental healthcare, which sets out what this could look like and is well worth a read.

Let me now turn to the detailed proposals in the Bill. It sets out a clear, practical framework for mental health assessments, and it has four core pillars. The first is to ensure that every pregnant woman has a structured, evidence-based and compassionate mental health assessment. While mental health check-ins must continue after the birth of a baby too, the evidence shows that outcomes are better when interventions happen sooner. That is why my Bill will focus on improving support in the antenatal period first. The assessment would form part of routine antenatal care; it would not be an extra. It would use validated tools such as the Whooley questions or the Edinburgh post-natal depression scale, adapted for pregnancy, and it would be rooted in NICE guidance, although that might need updating to ensure that better practice was embedded. Crucially, it would be delivered through trauma-informed conversations, not tick-box exercises. Staff would be trained to create a safe space for disclosure, recognising that women may have histories of trauma that affect their mental health during pregnancy, or may have no history of trauma or mental illness at all.

Secondly, the Bill would improve training and supervision for all professionals involved in maternity care. GPs, midwives, obstetricians, health visitors and community mental health practitioners all need the knowledge and confidence to ask the right questions, to do so

[Laura Kyrke-Smith]

compassionately and to recognise when something is not right. This Bill calls for a national training standard that will be endorsed by NICE and the royal colleges, and delivered across NHS trusts and integrated care boards. It should include regular clinical supervision, so that staff are supported to ask questions and make decisions safely. Importantly, the training must equip professionals to recognise and respond to the specific needs of women from diverse backgrounds—understanding cultural differences in how mental health is expressed and experienced, and addressing the stigma and barriers that prevent some women from seeking help.

Thirdly, this Bill sets out the need for clear referral pathways. Although midwives, GPs and others involved in routine maternity care should be equipped and able to identify mental health risks, they should not also be delivering specialist care when it is needed, so clear referral pathways into specialist mental health services are vital. The Maternal Mental Health Alliance recommends that a specialist perinatal mental health midwife be embedded in every maternity service to ensure that risks are identified and referrals made effectively. The appropriate support will be different for every woman, but one important option is the NHS Talking Therapies programme, to which I know the Government are committed. I have seen in my own constituency of Aylesbury how helpful that can be for women, and I urge NHS Talking Therapies services to consider women in the perinatal period a priority group for support. There are also fantastic voluntary services in communities across the country, such as PANDAS and many of those under the umbrella of the Hearts and Minds Partnership, yet many women are not made aware of them through their routine antenatal care, and they should be.

Fourthly, and finally, this Bill calls for clear accountability to ensure effective delivery of perinatal mental health assessments. NHS England and integrated care boards

would be responsible for ensuring that local maternity systems introduce the single standardised assessment process, but then also, crucially, capture data through the maternity services dataset, allowing outcomes to be tracked. There must also be improved oversight of these services from the Care Quality Commission as part of its maternity inspections.

I hope my Bill's aims are clear, and I hope that the Government and colleagues in this House will look upon them favourably. I know resources are tight across the NHS, and I know there are particularly acute challenges in many of our mental health and maternity services, including the national shortage of midwives, but I also know how transformative the relatively modest measures in this Bill could be for the women at the heart of the Bill and for our society. I believe that it could have made a difference for Sophie, and it could still make a difference for the many women who are struggling with their mental health now or who will do in future.

Ultimately, this Bill is about more than mental health care for women; it is about the kind of country that we want to be. When parents are mentally well, they thrive, their children thrive and our communities become places not of fear and insecurity, but of hope and opportunity. That is the kind of country that we want to be, and improved perinatal mental health care is such an important part of it. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Laura Kyrke-Smith, Paulette Hamilton, Sojan Joseph, Dr Danny Chambers, Liz Twist, Sarah Hall, Maya Ellis, Jen Craft, Michelle Welsh, Anna Sabine, Lee Pitcher, Dr Simon Opher present the Bill.

Laura Kyrke-Smith accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 31 October, and to be printed (Bill 316).

Renters' Rights Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Clause 15

OTHER DUTIES

2.4 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I beg to move, That this House agrees with the Lords in their amendments 19B, 19C and 19D.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With this it will be convenient to consider the Government motion to agree with the Lords in their amendments 39B and 39C.

Matthew Pennycook: Today is a momentous day, because, subject to agreement from this House, the Renters' Rights Bill will have completed all its stages and will therefore shortly become law. This House last legislated to fundamentally alter the relationship between landlords and tenants in 1988—I was just six years old. In the decades since, England's private rented sector has changed beyond all recognition. It now houses not just the young and the mobile, but many older people and families with children, for whom greater security and certainty is essential to a flourishing life.

The need to overhaul the regulation of the private rented sector and, in so doing, level decisively the playing field for landlords and tenants is pressing. That is why we introduced the Bill within months of taking office. We promised that we would succeed where the previous Conservative Government had failed by legislating to transform the experience of private renting. I am delighted that we are now within touching distance of seeing the Bill become law. Before I turn to the final amendments agreed to in the other place, I want to put on the record once again my profound thanks to Baroness Taylor for so ably guiding through its House of Lords stages.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I, too, welcome the Bill becoming law. Personally, I wish that it also regulated rent levels, but my question is: how quickly will it become law to protect people? While this Bill has been winding its way through Parliament over the last year, many have faced the appalling situation of no-fault eviction. Many have lost their properties as a result, whereas they would have been protected had the Bill become law more quickly. Can the Minister give me some idea—so that I can give some comfort to my constituents who are facing no-fault eviction—of how quickly they will get protection, and will there be any retrospective element to it?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point. We want to provide both renters and landlords with certainty about how the new system will be implemented. I will say a bit more on that in the course of my remarks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am going to make a bit more progress.

As I made clear when we considered Lords amendments to the Bill on 8 September, although the Government were not prepared to accept amendments that would undermine the core principles of the Bill, we were more than willing to make sensible changes in response to the legitimate concerns that have been raised. The changes we are proposing today are firmly within the spirit of that commitment. I am delighted that we were able to reach agreement with those on the Liberal Democrat Front Bench and Lord Young of Cookham, and I thank all the noble Lords involved for their willingness to work collaboratively to strengthen the Bill.

Let me briefly set out the purpose and effect of the amendments in question, beginning with those that relate to shared owners. Lords amendments 19B, 19C and 19D exempt shared owners from the 12-month “no re-let” period in respect of new mandatory possession ground 1A, which allows a landlord to evict a tenant because they intend to sell their property. The exemption is subject to meeting set criteria, to ensure that shared owners have made a genuine attempt to sell their property. The amendments in question also include a delegated power to remove the exemption in the future—for example, once the building safety programme has been completed.

Jim Shannon: I welcome what the Minister has proposed. More and more of these issues have come to my attention in my constituency. Tenants then have to find alternative and affordable accommodation that is close to their work and close to their children's education. I know this legislation applies to England and Wales only—I understand that. But the Minister is a good Minister, and he always shares information on the legislation that is put forward with the regional assemblies—in my case, the Northern Ireland Assembly. Will he do me and this House the favour of sharing the legislation with the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that the good things in the Bill can become good things for us in Northern Ireland as well?

Matthew Pennycook: The Northern Ireland Assembly can access this legislation online, but I will certainly continue to have conversations with Ministers in all the devolved Administrations about what lessons can be learned from what we have done with this Bill, and about what they can take from it.

I once again commend Lord Young of Cookham for championing the interests of shared owners affected by the building safety crisis, and I thank him for tabling his three amendments in lieu. As I made clear when we considered Lords amendments last month, the Government recognise the plight of shared owners living in buildings that require remediation. Many are facing unaffordable costs, often with no viable exit route other than a distress sale. We also appreciate that it is often harder to secure a purchaser for a shared ownership property, and that the sales of shared ownership flats are more likely to fall through due to the additional constraints involved. As such, we have always accepted that the 12 month no re-let period would have placed many shared owners in an extremely challenging position.

The reason why the Government did not feel able to accept Lord Young's original Lords amendment 19 was that it could undermine protections for the small subset of tenants who happened to rent a sub-let home from a shared owner. I am therefore pleased to report to the

[Matthew Pennycook]

House that the amendments in lieu deliver the core aims of that original amendment, while also ensuring that three key safeguards are in place to protect tenants.

First, there is a requirement for the shared owner to have informed the assured subtenant in writing at the outset of the tenancy about the exemption and its possible use. This will ensure tenants are aware of the particular circumstances of the tenancy they are entering into and can make an informed choice about whether they wish to enter into a tenancy agreement with the shared owner in question.

Secondly, shared owners must have informed their provider of their intention to sell before obtaining possession of the property from the tenant. This is an essential first step that all shared owners must take to begin the process of selling their property. I am satisfied that it is a proportionate requirement to evidence that a shared owner is genuinely intending to sell their home.

Thirdly, a valuation must be undertaken on the property by a member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, or the shared owner must have advertised the property for sale. This can be done at any point before a property is re-let, recognising the need for flexibility in how shared owners will approach a sale.

Taken together with the protections that are already in place as a result of registered providers having to authorise sub-letting requests and having oversight of what rent levels can be charged, I am satisfied that these safeguards will reduce, if not eliminate entirely, the risk that an exemption from the 12-month no re-let period might otherwise have posed.

Lords amendments 39B and 39C will introduce a statutory requirement for annual reporting on the extent to which service family accommodation meets the decent homes standard.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Minister for listening to Liberal Democrat colleagues who have made these points, as I have along with my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), on previous occasions. It is very good that those living in military service accommodation will now have the opportunity to access the decent homes standard. Could the Minister assure me that he will work with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to ensure that all service families are aware of the decent homes standard—the standard to which they can hold their accommodation providers—so they can live in better homes in my constituency of Bicester and Woodstock and across the country?

Matthew Pennycook: We have ongoing dialogue with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence about this issue, and if the hon. Member will allow me, I will elaborate on how we think these amendments will work in practice and how they interact with what the Ministry of Defence is itself doing. First, however, I once again thank Baroness Greender, Baroness Thornhill and the hon. Members for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for their continued support and advocacy for service personnel and their families.

The Government have been clear throughout the passage of the Bill that our armed services personnel and their families must live in safe and decent homes.

We remain determined to improve the standard of service family accommodation across the entire defence estate. Alongside the commitment to drive up standards through a record investment of £1.5 billion in service family accommodation over the next five years, the Government will soon publish a defence housing strategy setting out clear renewal standards and further steps to improve the lives of those who serve our country. That standard will be published, so service families will be able to see, judge their accommodation against and interact with this new statutory duty.

As I outlined in the previous debate on Lords amendments, the Government acknowledge the need for greater transparency and accountability to ensure that the commitments we have made are honoured. The amendments in lieu will place the commitments I made to this House last month on a statutory basis. The Government believe that this, alongside the wider steps I have already set out, will help ensure service personnel and their families have the quality of homes that they deserve. The amendments also include a delegated power allowing the housing quality standards that SFA is assessed against to be updated when the current version of the decent homes standard is no longer considered appropriate—for example, when it has been replaced by a new modernised standard. The Liberal Democrats have indicated their support for these amendments, and I hope hon. Members will join me in supporting them.

To conclude, I urge the House to support the amendments put forward by the other place, and I look forward to the remainder of the debate.

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

2.15 pm

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): We are considering the Lords amendments in lieu to the Renters' Rights Bill, and I begin by recognising the work that has taken place in both Houses to improve this legislation, and by thanking their lordships for the constructive way in which they have approached this endeavour.

On the amendments themselves, the issue of shared ownership leaseholders was rightly championed in the Lords by my noble Friend Lord Young of Cookham, and I pay tribute to him for his persistence. He made a fair and compelling case for shared owners who, through no fault of their own, may be unable to sell their share and should not be penalised for re-letting in those circumstances. The Government's acceptance of that principle, although through a modified amendment, is a sensible and pragmatic improvement, which we will therefore support.

On the decent homes standard and the service family accommodation estate, the Government have placed a duty on the Secretary of State to report on the conditions of service family accommodation and provide independent oversight. Our armed forces and their families deserve and need decent, well-maintained homes, and we believe that greater transparency will strengthen service families' confidence in the system. We support this improvement, and we hope that the Government will look at our policy to create an armed forces housing association that would oversee these changes and address the declining recruitment and retention rates that, sadly, we have seen under this Government.

While we support these improvements, I fear the Bill in its current form will in some areas be counterproductive, and drive landlords from the market as well as putting up rents for tenants. Labour's own impact assessment for this Bill supports that concern, stating that

"landlords can pass through some, but not all, of their cost increases to their tenants in the form of higher rent"

due to new costs. Under the Bill, all tenancies will continue until either the tenant gives notice or the landlord obtains a court order for possession on specific grounds. The Government have committed to ending section 21 evictions, but they must also ensure matching court reform so that the system works for both tenants and responsible landlords. We need clarity about when and how these changes will be implemented, because uncertainty helps no one. Local councils must have the means to enforce the new rules effectively, and the Government should set out a clear and workable plan to that end.

The Lords amendments represent a sensible set of adjustments that I would say make this Bill slightly more workable, but sufficient challenges remain in how it will operate in practice. We recognise the value of the scrutiny that has taken place in both Houses, and the constructive way that many of the concerns have been addressed, but the uncertainty in this sector is seeing landlords leave the market at an alarming rate.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Secretary of State knows that I have a great deal of time for him as a person, but he must reflect on how all of his speech is about the rights of the landlord with absolutely nothing about the rights of tenants. In my own constituency, 600 children are in temporary accommodation, having largely been driven out of their private rented accommodation because of no-fault evictions. Does he have anything to say about the rights of tenants?

Sir James Cleverly: I can only assume that the hon. Member has been asleep through the last couple of paragraphs I have read out, in which I specifically spoke about the rights of tenants in the military estate, for example, so I reject his characterisation of our position. The simple fact is that tenants' rights are all well and good, but if accommodation for those tenants does not exist, they are no better off.

We have seen an estimated 18% of new homes for sale that were previously in the private rental market estate, and in London that figure is 29%. A reduction in the private rented sector market harms, not helps, people seeking to rent in the private sector. Labour Members will say, "Well, we are going to deliver 1.5 million new houses," but no one—I doubt even their own Front Benchers—actually believes they have any chance of delivering that figure. The Office for Budget Responsibility certainly does not believe that they have any credible chance of doing it, so the housing and rental situation is likely to get worse.

I confirm that the official Opposition will support the Lords amendments, for the reasons that I have set out. We urge the Government to implement them professionally and swiftly, and to focus on delivering a fair and effective system for tenants, for the landlords that provide accommodation for those tenants, and for the wider housing market. However, there are still a number of flaws in the Bill—it does not do enough to protect

renters or ensure a stable rental market, as it will reduce supply and, perversely, push up rents—which is why, having committed to not opposing the amendments, we will hold the Government to account on the Bill's consequences.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I fully support my hon. Friend the Minister's motion to agree with Lords amendments 19 and 39, and I thank him for all his work. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for piloting this momentous legislation through the House. If I may, I add my own thanks to the noble Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, who has been a doughty champion in the other place and, of course, in my constituency of Stevenage.

Some 7,000 households rent privately in Stevenage. They fear their tenancies coming to an end for no good reason. I was knocking on doors in the ward of Roebuck last weekend. A young mother opened her door, and I noticed that the window next to the front door was broken and patched up with a wooden board. I asked whether it was a council property, and she said, "No, I rent privately. He's a good landlord." I said, "Okay, so will he fix that window?" She replied, "Oh, no. He has given me this bit of wood. I am a bit worried that if I ask, he will throw me out." That is what a "good" landlord is assumed to be. It must come to an end.

Renters like that young mother have been waiting 40 years for change. Today, should the House agree, the Bill will go for Royal Assent, and that fear will come to an end, so I support the motion. I thank the Minister.

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

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I look forward to Parliament finally passing legislation that will bring long-overdue protections to tenants. We do not believe, like the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), that tenants' rights are "all well and good". They are not all well and good. No-fault evictions are not all well and good, and the previous Government's failure to outlaw them is unacceptable. It is a good thing that this legislation will finally change that.

The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for—and stood on a manifesto that included—ending no-fault evictions of tenants, longer and more stable tenancies, a register of landlords, and decent homes for our forces families. Thanks to the Government agreeing to our proposals, all those things are to become law through the Bill and in MOD service accommodation. For too long, renters across the board have had a bad deal. It is time to redress the balance after years of Conservative government failing to deliver both on no fault evictions and on decent homes for our military families.

I warmly welcome Government amendment 39, which will make service family accommodation subject to the decent homes standard. I am glad that Ministers have listened to the calls from the Liberal Democrats and service families. I thank the Minister for doing the hard yards pragmatically in his negotiations on the Bill, and I pay tribute to my noble Friends Baroness Greener and Baroness Thornhill for their work to secure those important changes. The state of housing that service families have had to endure is a disgrace. The Defence Committee

[Gideon Amos]

heard of dire conditions, with pest infestations, black mould, damp, flooding and unreliable heating and hot water in winter. I have heard similar stories and seen the photographs from constituent service families who were forced to live in damp and mouldy accommodation declared unfit for human habitation. Our soldiers, sailors, air force personnel and Royal Marines—such as those who serve in 40 Commando at Norton Manor Camp in my constituency, the Conservative closure of which I began campaigning against in 2017—sacrifice so much for our country. The very least that they deserve is a decent home for them and their family.

This is not an isolated issue. Research we obtained earlier this year found that, on Victory in Europe Day alone, more than 400 service families were forced to apply for emergency repairs. While the country celebrated our veterans, too many forces families were struggling with housing that falls far short of the standards that we rightly expect elsewhere. Their new decent home standard—which comes a year after my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) tried and failed to get the Conservative Government to deliver it, and 18 years after Sir Menzies Campbell began the Liberal Democrat campaign for decent homes for our military—is a matter of fairness, as I hope the House will agree. This is a great first step, and I am proud that the Liberal Democrats have had a hand in securing it.

Decent homes for service families should be not just reported on but acted on. Defence Ministers have assured the House that housing standards are on an upward trajectory. We will hold the Government to account on that commitment. Can the Minister give any assurances that resources will be put in place to ensure that that happens? Nobody wants to see an annual report that leads to no progress. I also ask him to ensure that service family accommodation meets the commitments made in the Defence Infrastructure Organisation's consumer charter—most notably the requirement to complete urgent repairs within a timeline consistent with Awaab's law. That would ensure that Lords amendment 39 strengthens a Bill that already delivers vital reforms for renters and rightly includes protections for service families. It delivers broader transformation in renters' rights by ending no-fault evictions, creating more secure tenancies and raising standards across the private rented sector. Amendment 19 would also allow shared owners to re-let if a sale falls through. As such, we support it.

Of course, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture: the need to build a new generation of council and social rent homes—150,000 per year. This week shows that determination, persistence and principle can deliver real change. Our forces families will now have statutory protections for their homes, tenants across the country will gain greater rights, and every step like this brings us closer to the fairer housing system that we all want. I congratulate all those who have campaigned for this change, particularly the forces families who have contacted me. More secure homes are what private renters need, and decent homes are the least our military deserve.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Let us be clear: the Bill is the biggest uplift to renters' rights in a generation. It will make a huge difference for

so many people in my constituency. Before I come to the amendments, I place on the record my thanks to the Minister stewarding the Bill through Parliament, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for her remarks as a champion of renters and social housing in this country.

I also place on the record my anger that the Bill has taken so long to pass through Parliament. It is an absolute disgrace that it has been slowed down—bogged down in amendments—by the other place, which has delayed these vital rights reaching my constituents. Opposition parties tabled 450 amendments, so our colleagues in the other place had to sit for a very long time to get the Bill through. In that time, my constituents have been stuck in damp and mouldy housing and subject to section 21 evictions, and many children have been growing up in temporary accommodation, because of the delays to the legislation in the other place. Opposition parties whose Lords placed so many amendments should be ashamed for slowing down the legislation.

2.30 pm

This House gave the Bill its Third Reading in January. Ten months later, my constituents in Hastings and Rye are still waiting for its vital rights and protections to become law. They are not the only ones waiting: 11 million renters up and down the country need this legislation. It will make a huge difference to their lives, and we are very proud to support it, but in the 10 months that we have been waiting since Third Reading, too many people in my constituency have been stuck in damp and mouldy privately rented housing, without the rights they need. They have been unable to speak up about poor-quality accommodation because of that lack of rights, and because they are worried about being evicted under section 21. It is absolutely right that the Bill extends Awaab's law and its vital rights to private tenants, so that they can speak up when they are living in damp and mouldy accommodation.

In the last 10 months in my constituency of Hastings and Rye, hundreds of section 21 eviction notices have been issued, and many of those affected have gone on to the homeless register, and have gone to the council for housing help. Indeed, my council tells me that 30% of people in temporary accommodation are there as a result of section 21 evictions. It is shameful that that has been happening in the time it has taken for the Bill to progress.

Lords amendment 19 refers to social housing. It is vital that social tenants, as well as private tenants, get access to good-quality accommodation, and to good-quality repairs, without delay. Just as we are asking private landlords to do more to ensure that their tenants are in good-quality accommodation, it is vital that we continue to ask housing associations to step up and ensure that they are not leaving people in poor-quality accommodation.

I recently visited a new social housing development in my constituency, Holmhurst St Mary, where many social homes have been built that are 100% social rent. It was amazing to speak to residents who have gone from being on the homeless register to having a roof over their head. We need more developments like that, with 100% social rent, and I hope that we will see more. I am really pleased that the Government are putting more money into social housing, because the gratitude and

relief of those residents, who have a roof over their head for the first time, certainly outweighs a lot of the opposition that we see when we seek to build more homes.

Lords amendment 39 refers to improving the standard of armed services accommodation. I fully support the Government's efforts to improve the standard of that accommodation. It is vital to do more to help veterans. So many come out of the forces only to fall homeless. I really welcome the work that the Labour Government are doing to support veterans and ensure that they do not become homeless. I pay tribute to the East Sussex Veterans' Hub in my constituency for its work on that issue.

To conclude, my constituents cannot wait any longer for these vital protections. They need a ban on section 21 evictions, they need a right for private renters to speak up against bad landlords, and they need these long-overdue rights granted. My generation in particular, which has been stuck in private rented accommodation for so long, really needs those rights. I fully support the Renters' Rights Bill.

Jeremy Corbyn: I will be brief, because this is a time-limited debate. I welcome the Bill, although it has deficiencies, because it does not regulate the amount of rent that is charged. In my constituency, a two-bedroom flat in the private rented sector goes for about £2,000 a month, which is way above what most people can afford. There is a desperate need, in inner-city areas in particular, for rent regulation.

I am pleased that we are ending no-fault eviction, but I absolutely agree with the points made by the hon. Members for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) and for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) about the extraordinary way in which the Bill has been delayed. Thousands of tenants all over the country have lost a home that the Bill, had it become law, would have prevented them from losing. It is outrageous, the number of people who have become homeless or been forced to move to an even more expensive place. I would be grateful if the Minister could assure us that the no-fault eviction protection will come in immediately when the Bill receives Royal Assent, and that there will be no delay. Some of us are concerned that there has been too long a delay.

There are two quick points that I want to put to the Minister. The Bill requires local authorities to play a much greater role in the private rented sector, but they lack the resources to do that. Is there a guarantee that they will get the resources to ensure proper monitoring of the Bill, and proper support for tenants? In the same vein, the provision of housing advice has disappeared in many parts of the country, so the demand grows on local authorities and organisations such as Citizens Advice for advice for tenants. Many tenants are simply unaware of their rights. If they are unaware of their rights, they can be exploited by unscrupulous landlords—and sadly often are.

Matthew Pennycook: With the leave of the House, I will close this brief but thoughtful debate. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken for their contributions. In the time available, I will respond to as many of the issues raised as I can.

Let me start by saying that I welcome the broad support for the Lords amendments expressed by both shadow Front Benchers. In our view, the amendments

are reasonable and proportionate, and respond to legitimate concerns that were raised. They have the safeguards in place that we felt were needed, and we are happy that they are being incorporated into the Bill.

The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), raised the issue of supply. We acknowledge that it will take time for the sector, including build-to-rent providers but also landlords of any type, to adjust to this significant change in regulation, but we do not believe that the legislation will have a destabilising effect on the rental market, or a harmful impact on future rental supply, which, it should be noted, we are taking steps to boost, not least by providing more opportunities for investment in a growing build-to-rent sector.

According to the English housing survey, the size of the private rented sector has remained broadly stable since 2013-14. Landlords have been aware of successive Governments' plans to reform the sector since 2019. It is worth noting that a study from the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence looked at whether regulation of the PRS over the past 25 years, in the UK and internationally, had affected PRS supply. It concluded that there was no evidence to support the assertion that non-price regulation impacts supply. We will, of course, continue to work with landlords and their representative associations throughout implementation. We are committed to robustly monitoring and evaluating the private rented sector reform programme, and we will, of course, continue to monitor trends across the PRS, including the supply of properties, to understand how the market is responding to our reforms.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) raised the issue of rent controls. He knows that the Government are opposed to introducing rent controls. As I have made clear on many previous occasions, we do not support them, including rent stabilisation measures, because we believe that they could make life more difficult for private renters, both by incentivising landlords to increase rents routinely to a cap, where they might not otherwise have done so, and by pushing many landlords out of the market, thereby making it even harder for renters to find a home that they can afford.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about implementation. Following Royal Assent, we will allow time for a smooth transition to the new system. We will support tenants, landlords and agents to understand and adjust to the new rules, and ensure the sector has enough time to prepare. As he is aware, the Bill will ensure that the new tenancy system for the private rented sector is introduced in one stage. At that point, the new tenancy system will apply to all private tenancies. Existing tenancies will convert to the new system, and any new tenancy signed off on or after that date will be governed by the new rules.

As I said, I am glad that there is broad support for the Lords amendments relating to shared owners. It is worth saying that the Government will make provision during implementation to ensure that shared owner landlords with an existing tenancy will have an opportunity to provide the information in question to the tenant after the Bill comes into force. We want to take the time to get this right, and find a solution that works for shared owners. We intend to do that using the delegated powers to make transitional provision provided by clause 147.

[Matthew Pennycook]

The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), asked about various issues relating to the amendments about service family accommodation. In particular, he asked about investment. As I outlined in my opening speech, the Ministry of Defence has announced an additional £1.5 billion investment in SFA as part of a £7 billion commitment over the next five years to improving and modernising defence housing. That investment will unlock rapid work to tackle the poor state of forces housing, helping to support recruitment, retention and morale. As I mentioned, the defence housing strategy, to be published later this year, will also set out wider plans to improve service family homes.

It is also worth saying that redress is already available to service personnel, who already have a robust system in place for raising a complaint about the standard of their accommodation and receiving remedy or reimbursement. If not resolved, complaints can be escalated to a service complaint, for which there are further powers of reimbursement, charge reduction and policy redress, and ultimately to the employment tribunal in cases of potential discrimination.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) about the delays to the Bill. I served on the Bill Committee more than a year ago now, and since then, so many tenants have experienced no-fault evictions. I encourage the Minister to move as quickly as possible to implement the Bill, so that I can tell my constituents how soon their assured shorthold tenancies will become rolling tenancies, and so they can benefit from that as quickly as possible.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for that point well made, which I will respond to directly as I wind up. We know that many tenants out there want the great security, rights and protections afforded by the Bill in place as soon as possible.

We promised in our manifesto to overhaul the regulation of our country's insecure and unjust private rented sector, and this Bill delivers on that commitment. It will empower renters by providing them with greater security, rights and protections, so that they can stay in their homes for longer, build lives in their communities and avoid the risk of homelessness. It will ensure that we can drive up the quality of private rented housing, giving renters access to good-quality and safe homes as a matter of course, and it will allow us to crack down on the minority of unscrupulous landlords who exploit, mistreat or discriminate against renters. The Bill will also provide tangible benefits for responsible landlords who provide high-quality homes and a good service to

their tenants, not only improving the reputation of the sector as a whole, but ensuring that good landlords enjoy simpler regulation and clear and expanded possession grounds, so that they can regain their properties quickly when necessary.

As I have argued many times throughout the passage of the Bill, the current system for private renting is broken. In abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions and modernising the regulation of the sector, the Bill will improve the lives of England's 11 million private renters. It is a transformational piece of legislation and, if you will allow me a brief personal word, Madam Deputy Speaker, I take great pride in having developed and shepherded it through Parliament.

It would be remiss of me to conclude my remarks without thanking a number of people. I would like to express my gratitude to all hon. and right hon. Members and peers in the other place who have engaged with the Bill throughout its passage; the expertise and insight that have been brought to bear in both Houses have strengthened the Bill in a number of important respects. I particularly want to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who was and remains one of the Bill's biggest supporters. She was instrumental in ensuring that it was introduced so quickly after the formation of the Government.

I also thank all the stakeholders who have worked closely with the Government to ensure that the Bill will work for landlord and tenant alike. I cannot possibly credit them all in the time I have available, but I will put on the record my thanks to Generation Rent, Shelter, Crisis, Citizens Advice and the other members of the Renters' Reform Coalition, as well as the National Residential Landlords Association, the shared ownership network and Propertymark. I will say a final thanks to all the officials in my Department who have devoted so much time and energy to developing and progressing the Bill, particularly the Bill team, Aidan Hilton, James Kennedy, our lawyers and many more, and my private office, specifically Will Gaby and Grace Doody, who provided me with invaluable support throughout the Bill's passage.

Completing the Bill's final stage today is obviously only the beginning; once the Bill becomes law, we need to implement its provisions. In doing so, we will balance the need to act quickly, so that tenants can soon benefit from the new rights and protections introduced by the Bill, with ensuring that the sector has sufficient time to adjust and prepare for a significant change in regulation. The Government understand the need for certainty, and we will set out our implementation plans as soon as possible. I very much look forward to working with hon. and right hon. Members, as well as all stakeholders, as we take forward that progress.

Lords amendments 19B, 19C and 19D agreed to.

Lords amendments 39B and 39C agreed to.

Life Sciences Innovative Manufacturing Fund

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): If everyone is in their places, in particular Mr Anderson, who seems to have sat on every Bench in the Chamber this afternoon—

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Not the Opposition Benches.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, quite. In that case, I call the Minister to move the motion. Is this your first time at the Dispatch Box, Minister?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): Not quite.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, congratulations and welcome.

2.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): I beg to move,

That this House authorises the Secretary of State to undertake payments, by way of financial assistance under section 8 of the Industrial Development Act 1982, in excess of £30 million to any successful applicant to the Life Sciences Innovative Manufacturing Fund, launched on 30 October 2024, up to a cumulative total of £520 million.

Thank you for calling me on this none the less memorable occasion, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is the first occasion on which I seek the Chamber's authority.

The life sciences sector is a jewel in the crown of our economy—a national asset that plays a unique role in both the health and the wealth of the United Kingdom. The sector drives jobs, investment and innovation right across the country, from cutting-edge research laboratories in Cheshire to—close to my heart—advanced manufacturing sites in south Wales. Life sciences manufacturing is the critical link between our world-class research and real-world patient benefit. It ensures that scientific breakthroughs translate into tangible improvements in care, while underpinning economic growth and strengthening the resilience of our NHS.

Yet despite the UK's global leadership in many areas of life sciences manufacturing, we must acknowledge that, in recent years, growth in manufacturing sites and jobs has not kept pace with the expansion of the life sciences sector as a whole. That is why this summer the Government published the life sciences sector plan—a comprehensive strategy to ensure growth in all parts of the sector. The plan sets out the UK's ambition to secure more life sciences foreign direct investment than any other European economy by 2030, behind only the US and China globally by 2035.

Central to that ambition is boosting manufacturing through delivery of the life sciences innovative manufacturing fund, one of six headline commitments in the sector plan. Launched last October, the fund demonstrates this Government's commitment to the continued growth of our life sciences sector, with up to £520 million of funding available to support private sector capital investments until 2030.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Northern Ireland has a vibrant life sciences manufacturing sector. I am looking to the Minister for an assurance relating to article 10 of the Windsor framework, which subjects Northern Ireland to EU state aid rules. Can the Minister assure us that there is no impediment arising therein that would impede successful applications to the fund from Northern Ireland manufacturers? That could also have a knock-on effect on GB, because if the goods produced are transported to Northern Ireland, they, too, come under the state aid rules. Has the Department examined that? What assurance can the Government give us on the protection against EU state aid rules for the fund?

Kanishka Narayan: The talent and ability of people in Northern Ireland are very much at the forefront of our minds, and we want to ensure that everything we are doing to support the life sciences sector is taking a whole-UK approach. I am very happy to write to the hon. and learned Member on his questions about Northern Irish eligibility.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the Minister give way?

Kanishka Narayan: I will make some progress for now.

The life sciences innovative manufacturing fund directly supports two of the Government's key missions: to kick-start economic growth and to build an NHS fit for the future. The scheme is projected to attract nearly £4 billion in private investment, creating more than 7,000 jobs and safeguarding more than 5,000 existing ones.

However, the scheme's impact is not just economic. The pandemic proved that we cannot take our critical supply chains for granted, and supporting the onshoring of life sciences manufacturing through the fund is therefore critical to strengthening our national resilience and preparedness for future health emergencies.

Robin Swann: Will the Minister give way?

Kanishka Narayan: I will make some progress.

This week we announced the first two grant awards through the scheme, marking a major milestone in the fund's roll-out. This will unlock substantial private investment, showcasing the UK's appeal to valuable, globally mobile life sciences manufacturers. As delivery of the scheme progresses, we expect to announce more grant winners in the coming months. Each project supported through the grant will further strengthen health resilience and drive economic growth across all nations and regions in the UK.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Since the Minister has been talking about taxpayers' money, I would be grateful if he could let us know what the minimum leverage is. For every pound of taxpayers' money put in, what is the minimum that has to be put in by the private sector?

Kanishka Narayan: My understanding is that these are grant capital investments that the Government will be making, and I am sure we will be looking at the leverage at a whole-fund level. If there are particular

[Kanishka Narayan]

requirements at an individual investment level, I am happy to write to the hon. Member on that particular point.

Robin Swann: Will the Minister give way?

Kanishka Narayan: I feel that, out of parity, I must give way to the hon. Member too.

Robin Swann: Third time lucky. I welcome the Minister's announcement of the fund for life sciences with regard to the companies we have in North Antrim and South Antrim. Could the Minister also ensure that any research and development tax credits that companies can apply for are fully supported, utilised and brought forward at speed so that companies are able to utilise not just the fund but the tax credits that come through R&D as well?

Kanishka Narayan: I thank the hon. Member for his important point. I am happy to take a full look at the R&D tax credit system and how it will support our ambitions to back our private sector partners in both R&D and subsequent commercialisation.

The Government are clear that the life sciences innovative manufacturing fund is a strategic investment in our future. It is a vital step in delivering the Government's commitment to supporting the UK's life sciences sector and ensuring that our country remains at the forefront of the sector.

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

2.51 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement—or perhaps I should call him October's cover star for *The House* magazine.

The Conservatives back today's motion on the life sciences innovative manufacturing fund. It is a no-brainer, because the fund was established by us in government when my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) made £520 million available for life sciences manufacturing over five years—from 2025 to 2030. Funnily enough, it is the exact same amount that is being reheated today.

That fund built on a series of smaller, highly successful interventions that managed to attract £850 million of private investment for the £64 million of taxpayers' money that we deployed. The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry called the fund a step change in ambition and something that would strengthen our manufacturing base, addressing the weaknesses we saw during the pandemic in our supply chains. It was good for jobs, for health security, for our life sciences and for Britain. So yes, we support this fund because we designed it.

Let us be clear about what is happening here. The Minister is simply uprating for inflation the threshold at which payments must be approved by Parliament. That is fine and all very sensible, but what it is not is anything new. It is not new money. It is not Labour innovation or a sign that this Government are suddenly getting really serious about growth, and it is not the route to dealing with the crisis facing life sciences right now. It is what we were doing but in different wrapping paper. They have plonked a bow on it and called it a new strategy.

Let me tell you what I reckon has happened here, Madam Deputy Speaker. An edict has gone bouncing around Whitehall from the Treasury and No. 10 as the November Budget disaster looms, saying: "We need some growth announcements. Departments, please feed the comms grid. We need to give the markets and the OBR some confidence that we are serious about growth." It is worth reminding the House what happened yesterday. UK Government borrowing figures in September hit the highest level for the month in five years. This is truly terrifying stuff.

I think the Secretary of State has gone and asked her officials, "What have we got in the cupboard to announce?", and they have said, "Minister, we have a statutory instrument to table at some point. Do you want us to shove a bit of lipstick on it?" We have the spectacle of Ministers coming to the Chamber to tell us that a humble statutory instrument to uprate for inflation something already in the pipeline is a grand plan. In no way at all does it shift the dial on life sciences, because it is already baked in.

This is not a Government who are serious about growth. Let us look at what happened to the life sciences manufacturing fund when Labour took office. In early 2024 we used it to negotiate a £450 million vaccine manufacturing investment by AstraZeneca in Speke, Liverpool. That meant real jobs, real regional investment and greater resilience for our country. After that, AstraZeneca announced another £200 million investment in Cambridge, which meant 1,000 jobs. To drive that investment and growth, we also delivered one of the most competitive business tax regimes through policies such as full expensing.

Then the general election happened and our new Chancellor, in her infinite wisdom, put a pause on that investment—supposedly to get better value for money and fill the fantasy £22 billion black hole in the public finances. We all know what happened next. AstraZeneca pulled the £450 million investment, despite issuing private warnings to the Government that it needed certainty for business planning. But do not just take my word for it. When announcing Speke's culling, AstraZeneca said that

"the timing and reduction of the final offer compared to the previous Government's proposal"

was critical to losing that £450 million investment.

What else has happened since Labour took office? AstraZeneca paused the £200 million Cambridge investment. We lost Merck's £1 billion King's Cross R&D hub, which was cancelled after eight years in development. That is £1 billion, and the Secretary of State had nothing to say about it—diddle squat. Eli Lilly has put its £279 million research incubator in London on hold. Sanofi has said that it will not consider "any substantial investment" in UK R&D under current conditions. In fact, industry has warned that the UK is becoming uninvestable for the life sciences.

Does the Minister know how many meetings the Secretary of State has had with life sciences companies in the past month? As I understand it, the answer is very few. What has she been doing to rally colleagues across Government and make clear to the Chancellor, the Health Secretary and Prime Minister the scale of the peril? I have been looking at her statements, and it is not at all clear to me that she has been doing anything.

The fund, which we support, is a capital manufacturing fund. It helps de-risk certain projects and reduces borrowing for companies, but it does not fix the fundamental problem of the commercial environment for medicines in the UK. We all know that Labour has made the commercial environment worse in many ways, such as through national insurance rises and other tax increases, and that has also made successful people not want to base themselves here.

There are also long-standing issues that need fixing here, including drug pricing and the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access and growth—VPAG—rebate, which risks becoming a tax on innovation. But the Labour Government have screwed the public finances so badly that they have nowhere to go on these issues, not least because the NHS has had to spend a large chunk of the money that the Government have taken from our constituents. They took a lot of money from our constituents and told us that it would make this big difference to the NHS, but the money went on wage deals in the NHS and national insurance rises. *[Interruption.]* Labour likes to talk about the tough choices it has made to the NHS, but I would ask Government Members to ask their constituents whether they are really seeing a tangible difference in the NHS. The Government have taken a hell of a lot of money from everybody and it is not working.

Normally I would be glad for the ability of the NHS to use its collective bargaining power to keep drug prices low, but there is now a real risk that life sciences companies will not be bringing new medicines to market in our country. That means my constituents and your constituents not getting cutting-edge treatments. It means pain, heartache and ill health, and it means that the life sciences industry that has served us so well is ebbing away and taking the high-quality, high-value jobs with them. This is a crisis. I must ask the Minister: can this fund succeed when the wider tax environment stands as is?

The issue of medicine pricing is fast coming to a head as President Trump plays hardball on drug costs. The US Administration have alighted on the UK's low drug prices and are using them as a bargaining tool against the threat of tariffs. This Government have boasted of their special relationship with the US, and we have had endless excruciating shots of the Prime Minister prostrating himself before the President. Can the Minister tell us how that relationship is benefiting the life sciences, because I cannot see it for myself?

Can the Minister tell us whether the Secretary of State is aware that it looks as though His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has decided that companies providing medicines for clinical trials or compassionate use under the early access to medicines scheme should now be billed for VAT? That is a tax on medicines that are being provided for free. Apparently, one company has already received a bill and more are on their way for others. This could affect trials and people's access to medicine. Will the Minister please commit to looking into that urgently as Labour scrabbles around for more revenue? Will he also ask HMRC to publish guidance confirming that in fact the early access to medicines scheme falls outside the VAT deemed supply rules?

Will the Minister tell us how much of the £520 million has been spent to date? What is the current investment pipeline? How does it compare to the one he inherited?

Will he update the House on the current state of negotiations between industry and Government on the VPAG scheme and medicine pricing, and with the US on tariffs? What conversations—if the Minister knows—has the Secretary of State had personally with the Health Secretary and the Chancellor on these issues? This is an extremely perilous situation for our life sciences firms and for patients' access to new drugs.

Britain's life sciences sector is worth over £100 billion to our economy and supports about 300,000 jobs. It is massive. It is one of our defining national strengths: a source of innovation, prosperity and national pride. Of course, it is also the key to better health for our constituents and people across the world. The life sciences innovative manufacturing fund remains a Conservative achievement, but unless the Government act swiftly to restore competitiveness and rebuild investor confidence, we risk losing our place at the forefront of global life sciences. I am afraid that no amount of rebadging, repackaging or recycled announcements will change that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. A tip for Members: if the word “you” or “your” is in your speech, just cross it out. You are speaking through the Chair. I cannot repeat myself day in, day out.

I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

3.1 pm

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab):

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to speak to you on this occasion to welcome the ambition behind the life sciences innovation manufacturing fund and, indeed, the Government's positive support for life sciences, with their belief that Government can act to support industry in general; it is not simply a matter of getting out of the way. That is in sharp contrast to the last Conservative Government's approach to industry, allowing a gentle decline and deindustrialisation in our nation. To be fair, the series of Conservative Governments chopped and changed their approach to industrial strategy so often it was difficult to know exactly where they stood. Unlike them, Labour is committed to the life sciences sector.

Labour published its plan for life sciences in opposition, which included 10-year funding commitments for key research bodies aimed at putting an end to the short-termism that undermines economic growth and scientific success. Now in government, I welcome Labour's commitment to the life sciences sector plan—developed in close co-ordination with the Government's 10-year health plan—which aims to support cutting-edge research and turn that into real-world results, with new treatments, faster diagnoses and more lives saved. It is about making sure that breakthroughs happen here in this country, creating jobs, improving lives in every part of the country and driving growth.

As the Minister said, the life sciences are a strength of our country—they are often described as a jewel in the crown of the British economy—and we all know that

[*Dame Chi Onwurah*]

success in life sciences leads to positive, wide-reaching benefits across the country for the economy and our health.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): You mentioned the sector's relevance and benefit to the whole of the United Kingdom. Would you agree that Northern Ireland has a rich manufacturing and life sciences heritage and that we have a huge role to play?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Ms Eastwood, it was only at the start of the week that I had to reprimand you twice for using the word “you”, and it has come up twice again.

Sorcha Eastwood: I apologise.

Dame Chi Onwurah: Let me thank the hon. Member for that intervention, which pre-empted something I will say in a few minutes. She is absolutely right: Northern Ireland already plays an important role in the life sciences sector and life sciences manufacturing, and it will have an important role to play in the future.

It is an incredibly exciting time to be involved in life sciences. I often think that if I were a young engineer now—I studied electrical engineering—I would be fascinated by the life sciences and, in particular, synthetic biology, which offers so many potential opportunities for growth and wellbeing. It is an enabling technology across so many different sectors.

In Newcastle, including in my constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, the life sciences contribute £1.7 billion and employ over 8,000 people across more than 200 companies. We are home to the National Innovation Centre for Ageing, Newcastle Helix and The Biosphere. Our city is one star in a constellation of excellent life sciences clusters across the north of England.

I really welcome the ambition of the innovation manufacturing fund. I ask the Minister in his response for more clarity in three particular areas. First, in regard to the size of the fund, in the face of increased competition, and as the shadow Secretary of State described—this will be in less sensationalist terms—we are seeing some reduction in investment in the UK. Is £520 million enough to ensure that the UK is an attractive prospect for internationally mobile businesses? By contrast, a manufacturing plant such as Moderna's recently opened vaccine centre in Oxfordshire might cost in the region of £150 million to £200 million. Is the fund the right size?

Secondly, the Select Committee recently held a one-off session on life sciences investment, which was of such interest that we have decided to hold another one-off session next week on the same subject. We heard evidence from the pharma sector, including significant support for the life sciences sector plan and for the Government's approach, but I think it is fair to say that we were told that, although NHS pricing is not the only factor in investment decisions, it is a significant one. We heard evidence that the UK spends less proportionately on medicines than other comparable countries and that that reduces the pull-through for innovative medicines. It would clearly be a difficult decision to spend more on medicines, as that would mean spending less elsewhere in our NHS.

Does the Minister see the manufacturing fund as support in some way for investment decisions in the absence of progress on the NHS pricing discussions? Could he tell us whether the Secretary of State is involved in discussions between the Health Secretary and the pharma sector with regard to NHS pricing? I understand that discussions are ongoing, and I see the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), conferring with him. Perhaps he can confirm that those discussions are ongoing.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): When the Committee held its one-off session on investment in life sciences, did it unearth the reasons why Sanofi, Eli Lilly and Merck have recently chosen to disinvest in life sciences in the UK?

Dame Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. The Committee's work is fascinating, so I certainly recommend he read the transcript. To summarise, we were looking specifically at the reasons for investment being pulled and, as I said, we asked the question in a number of different ways. The message that came back was significant support for the life sciences sector plan and the Government approach, but lack of certainty and clarity over NHS pricing and dismay about some aspects of NHS pricing and National Institute for Health and Care Excellence decisions. The hon. Gentleman is therefore right to point out that there was concern over the current and likely future pricing of innovative medicines, but that was not the only factor in those investment decisions. I ask the Minister to give us an update on those negotiations to the extent that he is able to do so, and to say whether this manufacturing fund is seen as potential compensation for investment in medicines and pricing as part of the NHS future plan.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some interesting points about investment decisions. Has her Committee also investigated why some decisions have been made to bring investment into the UK, such as the recent decision about investment in Oxfordshire? As part of that, is there a parallel need to explore where more could be done to attract further investment through perhaps greater supply of trained workers, better transport, better access to land for development, and so on?

Dame Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. My Committee has looked at some of the reasons for investments, such as those he sets out, and it is worth emphasising the strengths of the UK, some of which I have mentioned. We have a really strong life sciences sector, and specifically skills at every stage in the UK life sciences ecosystem, together with R&D tax credits, which is another point of incentivisation, and the fact that our NHS offers a fantastic opportunity to test and trial new medicines with a population that is heterogeneous and with population data records that are second to none. So there are many reasons why pharma and life sciences companies are continuing to invest in our country, and we have a fantastic ecosystem of life sciences start-ups and scale-ups.

That brings me to the final question I want to put to the Minister, which is on the regional impact of the fund. The Minister mentioned on a number of occasions that the fund will drive investment and growth across

our country. As part of the Committee's inquiry into innovation and regional growth, we heard of significant disparities in investment, particularly in access to capital and research funding from UK Research and Innovation and in funding and investment between the regions of our country and the greater south-east, otherwise known as the golden triangle. Manufacturing is well distributed across the United Kingdom; we heard earlier about the opportunities in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister tell me whether there will be a regional dimension to how the funds are disbursed? I hope that the extent to which the funds are regionally distributed will be monitored, but does he expect that this funding will be distributed across the country to drive growth in every corner of the country as he said, and that it will not perpetuate existing regional inequalities?

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

3.14 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is my huge privilege to be the MP for South Cambridgeshire, which is home to Europe's largest biomedical campus and the UK's world-leading tech and life sciences sectors, and one of the largest contributors to the UK economy.

The Liberal Democrats have long recognised that strategic investment in life sciences manufacturing is essential to our economic future and our national health security. Central to the delivery of the life sciences sector plan as part of the wider new industrial strategy, the life sciences innovative manufacturing fund is welcome and exactly the kind of targeted intervention the research and development sector has needed for a long time. While boosting economic opportunity, the fund also aims to increase the UK's health resilience and ability to withstand and recover from health emergencies such as pandemics, long-term healthcare challenges and system shocks such as supply shock disruption.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Scientists at the Norwich research park and Quadram Institute are doing incredible work in the field of agri-science, which could transform the future of food for the better; in fact, the Quadram Institute will be visiting Parliament and briefing MPs during evidence week next month about this work. This research is perfectly located to create jobs in my constituency, both directly and in the supply chain. Does my hon. Friend agree that investment in exciting life sciences projects such as those in North Norfolk is particularly crucial to unlocking growth in the rural economy?

Pippa Heylings: Absolutely. Investment in the life science sector in the rural economy is critical, and that is why we are concerned that this motion comes at a time when our life science sector is in crisis—and, frankly, I am not hearing yet from the Minister that the Government are grasping the scale of the crisis. I have heard consistent concerns from the life science sector about this, with Novartis saying that the UK is becoming “largely uninvestable”. We have seen signs of this, and heard of it today, with the loss of planned investment by Merck MSD in life science and vaccination manufacturing facilities to the tune of £1 billion and also £450 million-worth of investment by AstraZeneca. That comes on top of AstraZeneca pausing the planned

£200 million expansion of its research centre in my constituency. This is obviously ringing alarm bells across the Chamber.

Additionally, in a report by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, “Delivering a voluntary scheme for health and growth”, life science leaders are warning that the Government growth plan will not succeed unless Ministers commit to fixing a scheme known as VPAG—the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access and growth—which unexpectedly now requires companies to pay record clawback rates of up to a quarter or even a third of their revenue from sales of branded medicines to the NHS.

The Liberal Democrats would commit to raising R&D spending to 3.5% of GDP by 2034, a decade-long commitment that gives businesses the certainty they are asking for. We would introduce proof of concept funding to help researchers develop their early-stage ideas and empower local authorities to develop regional spin-out ecosystems so innovation can drive growth and high paying jobs right across the country, as well as where I am in my constituency in the golden triangle. I therefore ask the Minister to set out, in addition to this much-awaited manufacturing fund, the status of the last-minute negotiations with companies and their investments, such as AstraZeneca and Merck MSD, and also what the Government are doing particularly on VPAG to restore confidence to pharmaceutical companies that the UK is a competitive place, attractive to investment, that values research, development and manufacturing.

3.18 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I will try to get my words correct this time, Madam Deputy Speaker—the second time.

I simply want to say, Minister, that I really do believe that we in Northern Ireland have a huge role to play—not just in Northern Ireland, but across the UK—for many, many reasons. Other Members have mentioned a number of things including R&D tax credits and the skills ecosystem, which is really relevant to all this. I am perfectly well aware that we in Northern Ireland are obviously part of a devolved settlement, but there is an opportunity to re-engage how we drive forward opportunities for skilling people for these sectors through the likes of apprenticeships and how we interface with businesses.

This might sound a bit left-field, but I genuinely believe that this sector is hugely significant in terms of national resilience, national security and national propriety of our own intellectual property within the UK. This is a huge sector and it has the potential to make sure that we are self-sustaining and that we also work with companies over a long and sustained period of time to ensure that, in an era of antimicrobial resistance for example, we have the tools at our disposal should—God forbid—anything ever come down the tracks again in terms of pandemics or challenges to our supply chain.

I know that that was probably a lot to take in. I just reiterate our potential in Northern Ireland. We have a huge heritage that goes back decades and we stand ready. Others have mentioned the headwinds coming down the line, not just in the UK but as we try and navigate our way through this global turmoil of tariffs and trade and what that means. We now have a golden opportunity to get this right.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Wonderfully done. I call Minister Narayan.

3.19 pm

Kanishka Narayan: I want to be in your good books, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will proceed at pace in answering some of the questions raised.

I first thank the Members on the shadow Front Benches and in particular the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez). I was sad that her generous welcome to me was not extended to this particular announcement. In particular, I was sad that she did not welcome the fact that out of their Tory fiscal wreckage we have managed to get £520 million for the British life sciences sector, that out of the economic damage they did to this country we have still managed to secure over £1 billion in investment from Moderna in the British life sciences sector, and that out of what we inherited from the Tory context we have managed to secure over £1 billion from BioNTech. Right across the board, there is a picture of stability, good jobs in the life sciences and broader technology sectors, optimism and, above all, an energy shared across Government, the private sector and academia.

Lincoln Jopp: Will the Minister give way?

Kanishka Narayan: I must proceed because, as I said, I need to be in Madam Deputy Speaker's good books.

A particular concern has been raised about VPAG, another part of a longer-standing legacy from a Tory Chancellor's austerity rampage for the life sciences sector in this country. The Government's position is very clear: we will always put patients and taxpayers first. This Government are open to working collaboratively with the pharmaceutical industry, which is exactly why we have put forward a generous and unprecedented offer worth approximately £1 billion over three years as part of a review of VPAG, which ultimately industry did not take a vote on.

We remain confident in the life sciences as a driver of both economic growth and better health outcomes and our door remains open to future engagement. I know that regular conversations go on and while I will not update Members on the shadow Front Benches on every single meeting the Secretary of State takes, I can assure them that she is involved in both the particular conversations around VPAG and more general engagement with the life sciences sector.

I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), whose depth of experience in engineering prior to this House and extensive experience in this House, in particular through leadership of the Science and Technology Committee, is one that I take considerable inspiration from.

Lincoln Jopp: Will the Minister give way?

Kanishka Narayan: I will make some progress for now. My hon. Friend raised a particular point around synthetic biology, which is very close to my heart because I think that Britain has a particular opportunity in the convergence of engineering, AI and life sciences, and we are keen on seizing that to its fullest extent.

On the three particular questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, foremost of which was about the size of the funding available, I will say a couple of things: first, that this is the largest fund of this nature announced in the history of the UK Government, to my understanding, with capital grants worth £520 million altogether; and secondly, that it is but one part of the overall funding package across Government if one considers the investments across Innovate UK, UKRI, the British Business Bank and beyond. I hope that some of the assurances around VPAG have answered the particular question posed there, and on regional impact, I point out that the first two grants from the scheme were made out to firms in Birmingham and Keele. I hope that is a starting indicator of my long-term hope; we will certainly monitor it.

Lincoln Jopp: On that, will he give way?

Kanishka Narayan: I am afraid I will not; I believe I have been relatively generous in welcoming contributions from across the House. On the point of regional impact, in addition to the midlands, may I join the shadow Front Benchers in welcoming—they do so with laughter and amusement—the collective efforts of our entire Northern Irish contingent? I will take away the strong point about Northern Ireland's strengths in the life sciences sector; it will be embedded on my mind.

I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) for South Cambridgeshire for talking about investments. The only thing I will say on some of the announcements is that they have to be taken in the context of the wider global context for those firms, MSD in particular.

Lincoln Jopp: On the point of global context, will he give way?

Kanishka Narayan: If the Member listens, he may feel that his point is addressed in my claims. In at least one of those cases, a pause, rather than a cancellation, was announced and in the other, there have been a series of announcements globally regarding thousands of jobs, not only in the UK but beyond. As I said, I hope that the two announcements I mentioned, by Moderna and BioNTech, will give us some assurance that the life sciences sector in the British context is firing on all cylinders with Government support.

Finally, I note with thanks the important point on national security and IP made by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood). It is top of mind for me in ensuring that we are not just powering economic growth and not just jobs and good health for people across this country, but doing the first job of Government to protect our national security.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House authorises the Secretary of State to undertake payments, by way of financial assistance under section 8 of the Industrial Development Act 1982, in excess of £30 million to any successful applicant to the Life Sciences Innovative Manufacturing Fund, launched on 30 October 2024, up to a cumulative total of £520 million.

Procurement, Slavery and Human Trafficking Regulations: NHS

3.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): I beg to move,

That the draft National Health Service (Procurement, Slavery and Human Trafficking) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 9 September, be approved.

I am here on behalf of the Minister for Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). It is an honour to represent the Government as we bring forward this important secondary legislation, and it is right that it should be given the full scrutiny of the House today.

Slavery is one of the greatest evils in human history. This Government cannot and will not accept that we could be supporting forced labour or human trafficking through our supply chains, however inadvertently. Before I continue, I acknowledge the cross-party support on this issue, both in this House and in the other place. I pay tribute to all hon. and right hon. Members and peers of the realm, such as Lord Alton, who have worked tirelessly to put modern slavery at the forefront of our national conversation.

I begin by setting out why we need the regulations. Many people are taken aback when they are told that there are more enslaved people now, in absolute terms, than at any point in human history. It is estimated that around 50 million people worldwide are living in some form of modern slavery. Globalisation has provided near-limitless opportunities for trade in goods and services, but also, unfortunately, in human beings. Though we on these isles would like to think that we are insulated from the highways of human trafficking, we are not.

In late 2023, the previous Government published a review into NHS supply chains that covered 60% of medical consumables. It accounted for £7 billion of spend across 1,300 suppliers, representing 600,000 products, and a fifth of those suppliers were deemed to be high risk. Imagine my horror when I read that some of the tools of my trade—surgical instruments, facemasks—could be contaminated by modern slavery. As someone who still practises as a surgeon, I know that I share that revulsion with my colleagues across the national health service. I ask my colleagues in this place to keep all our NHS staff in mind over the course of our proceedings.

The review also recognised the wider benefits to the NHS of a better understanding of how our supply chains work, noting how we could improve the quality of products supplied and the resilience of supply. It gave us clear recommendations for us to act on and today I am proud to come to the House with landmark modern slavery legislation to put those policies into practice. This is a first on these isles and I sincerely hope that our colleagues across the devolved Governments can follow suit soon.

I now turn to what the regulations will do. The NHS is one of the largest public sector procurers in the world, with an annual spend of £35 billion, doing business with over 80,000 suppliers. We have a duty to ensure that no products we procure could be tainted by forced labour, and an opportunity to use our immense purchasing power for global good.

The regulations we bring forward today will require all public bodies to assess modern slavery risks in their supply chains when procuring goods and services for the health service in England. They give effect to a duty established by the Health and Care Act 2022, which requires the Secretary of State to eradicate modern slavery wherever it is found in NHS procurement processes. We are asking public bodies to take reasonable steps to address and eliminate modern slavery risks, especially when designing procurement procedures, awarding and managing contracts and setting up frameworks or dynamic markets.

Reasonable steps may include enforcing robust conditions of participation in our supply chains, with assessment criteria built into every stage of that process. They may include monitoring suppliers' compliance and reassessing risk throughout the lifetime of a contract. They can also include writing terms that require immediate mitigation where instances of modern slavery are discovered. The regulations will also require public bodies to have regard to any relevant guidance issued by the Department of Health and Social Care or NHS England for consistency and accountability across the system. The updated version of the guidance has now been published by NHS England and is publicly available.

Colleagues might be worried about legislative overlap. They might ask themselves why we need new regulations when modern slavery is already illegal, but these regulations have been carefully drafted to fit with existing statute, and I can assure the House that contradictory duties have been avoided. We are building on existing measures, such as the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the Procurement Act 2023, not replacing them. We are bringing all NHS England's procurement into scope and creating a stronger legislative footing for enforcement. The point is to introduce a single, enforceable risk management approach to modern slavery across the NHS, and we will continue to review our arrangements to ensure that they remain effective for years to come.

I do not pretend that this will be easy. If there was a button somewhere in Whitehall or inside the national health service that could eliminate modern slavery at a stroke, I do not doubt that all of us would push it, but our supply chains are vast, making it difficult to fully assess the scale. Although the 2023 review was just a snapshot in time, it is likely that more than a fifth of our supply chains are still at high risk of modern slavery. Items include cotton-based products, surgical instruments and PPE gloves—all products that are vital for the day-to-day functioning of hospitals and clinics up and down the country. That is why we will back NHS organisations with clear guidance and support to root out the scourge of modern slavery wherever we find it.

There is an argument that we could procure these items on the cheap if we could just turn a blind eye, but that way of thinking is abhorrent and fundamentally un-British. We cannot simply weigh such things on the scale of a tradesman behind a counter, and we must remember our historical responsibility in eliminating slavery wherever we find it. But even if we could do that, ethical supply chains have been proven to be cost effective in the long term. There is a strong case that they help to avoid litigation and, more important, supplier collapse. Even if that were not the case, I know the will of the British people, and I have not a shred of doubt that decent people across our country will not think

[Dr Zubir Ahmed]

modern slavery a price tag worth paying. This place, the mother of Parliaments, is here to answer a call today and to send a message to all enslaved people across the world: what is happening to you is unjust, but we have not forgotten, and we will do our utmost to ensure that our money does not go to those that exploit you and keep you in chains.

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

3.32 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the draft National Health Service (Procurement, Slavery and Human Trafficking) Regulations 2025. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), for bringing forward the regulations and welcome him to his place at the Dispatch Box.

This important issue goes to the very heart of the values that underpin our national health service. It is a vast organisation—one of the largest in the world—with supply chains that reach across many sectors and many countries. With that scale comes a responsibility to ensure that the products and services we rely on to care for patients are sourced ethically, and that the health service does not, even inadvertently, contribute to exploitation or modern slavery.

As an NHS consultant, I know that the idea that any item used in the care of patients, from surgical gloves to hospital linen, could have been produced through exploitation or forced labour is abhorrent to all of us. These regulations seek to strengthen the NHS's ability to identify, prevent and address such risks—an ambition that I am sure commands support right across the House. Indeed, this work began under the last Conservative Government. The Health and Care Act 2022 passed new regulations to address the risk of modern slavery in NHS supply chains, and in December 2023 we delivered a review into those risks, supported by NHS England, which examined where the greatest risks lay and how they could be mitigated. Although we welcome the direction of travel, there are, however, some important questions about how the regulations will work in practice and how we will ensure that the regulations deliver what is intended in a fair way.

First, what demands do we expect that the regulations will place on the NHS? They apply to all public bodies procuring goods and services for the NHS in England, including NHS England, hospital trusts and integrated care boards. Will each organisation have to make its own separate risk assessment? Has an estimation been made of the time that that is expected to take? How many people are expected to be required for organisations to fulfil the requirement, and what will be the associated cost? Will any mechanisms be put in place to prevent duplication, for example, where suppliers are already reporting under the Modern Slavery Act 2015?

Secondly, I turn to implementation and support. Regulations are not enough on their own; they must be embedded in practice. What steps will NHS England take to support procurement teams in applying these rules consistently and effectively and in maintaining the

same standards across all the public sector bodies that are covered by these regulations? The regulations require NHS England to issue guidance, which is welcome, but how comprehensive will that guidance be? With NHS England being abolished, who will produce it? Will there be accompanying training and practical support for procurement teams to ensure consistency across the system? What will happen to a supplier if they are found to be non-compliant? Will the consequences be decided by NHS England centrally, or by individual trusts or ICBs? Will there be independent oversight to assess progress? With all the churn in NHS England and ICBs and the cuts to their budgets, how will they have the time and space to do that?

Next, I turn to the impact on business. The NHS relies on a wide range of suppliers, many of which are small and medium-sized businesses that bring innovation, flexibility and local expertise. Can the Minister confirm that the new requirements will not place undue burdens on suppliers or deter small businesses from bidding for NHS contracts? We must uphold the highest ethical standards, but we must also avoid creating unnecessary bureaucracy that excludes capable businesses from contributing to patient care.

Finally, I turn to the issue of co-ordination across Government. Many NHS goods are sourced internationally from complex and often opaque global supply chains. It is crucial, therefore, that our framework aligns with the broader cross-Government effort to tackle modern slavery, including at the Home Office and the Foreign Office. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined how those links are maintained in practice.

The question of co-ordination is not new. During the passage of the Great British Energy Act 2025, an amendment was introduced in the Lords to stop GB Energy from sourcing panels linked to forced labour. The Government's initial position was that existing laws already addressed that risk, but later down the road, the Government heeded those calls by introducing their own amendment to block GB Energy from using slavery-linked solar. That episode shows how important it is to have clear and joined-up action across Government when addressing the risks of modern slavery.

The NHS should be a beacon of integrity as well as excellence. Patients and the public rightly expect that the care provided in our hospitals is not, however indirectly, tainted by the exploitation of others. The regulations are a step forward in ensuring that our health service lives up to that ideal. We welcome the intent and the ambition behind the regulations, but we will continue to push to ensure that they work in practice and without unintended consequences.

Dr Ahmed: I am grateful for the comments of the Opposition health spokesperson. Proportionality is the theme of the day when it comes to anything that we implement in the NHS at a global scale. The appropriate training will be provided. As the hon. Lady well knows from her time in government, conversations across Departments, particularly on these issues, are always ongoing. We are always willing and able to flex as we learn and as we feel our way through these regulations. The hon. Lady will recognise their importance and primacy when engaging in supplier contract negotiations, and therefore businesses both small and large can feel

confident that, if they follow ethical procurement practices, their business is most welcome in the national health service.

I want to end by reminding colleagues that these regulations are not just about what we can do on these isles but what we can do to eliminate modern slavery across the globe. NHS England is one of the biggest buying organisations in the UK. We have a golden opportunity at the moment to leverage its purchasing power to influence supply chains not only in the UK and Europe but right across the world. Today, Parliament can send a clear signal to the world that we will not tolerate human rights abuses and that, if a company wants to do business with the NHS, they must get their house in order. Under this Government, there will be no compromise with the evil of slavery. I ask colleagues from all sides to help us to keep that promise, to back our NHS and its staff and to help us to keep this country's conscience clean. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft National Health Service (Procurement, Slavery and Human Trafficking) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 9 September, be approved.

Backbench Business

Devolution in Scotland

3.39 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered devolution in Scotland.

I am jolly glad I came to the Chamber when I did.
[Laughter.]

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making time available for this debate and for recognising that it is a debate that holds great significance for the whole House. I thank those Members who supported my application to the Committee for the debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), who chairs the Scottish Affairs Committee and who has been a personal friend of mine since our time together in the Scottish Parliament.

I begin by making no secret of the fact that I lead this debate as someone who believes in the strength of our family of nations and that we can make people's lives better through co-operation and partnership by pooling and sharing resources. I believe that my credentials as one of the first of my party's Members of the Scottish Parliament and now as a Scottish Member of the UK Parliament make it clear that I am a devolutionist to my core, one who will always believe in the value of the Scottish Parliament and its potential to work best for the people of Scotland when it works constructively alongside Westminster. I will not have it said here today, or anywhere or ever, that I am against devolution—I am not. I truly believe in it and also know that the Scottish Parliament is comparatively young, hence why I am here today, initiating what I hope will be a civil and valuable discussion into the successes and failures so far of our system of what one might term “multi-level governance”.

I am proud to have been a founding member of the Scottish Constitutional Convention responsible for the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. I am proud to say in my own way that my name is on the historic claim of right for Scotland—I do not think that any other Member of this place can say that. Of course, I was then elected to the Scottish Parliament in the first elections in 1999, and I witnessed the way that it developed over the next 12 years. Crucially, during those first years, I became a member of the Holyrood progress group, which oversaw the building of the Parliament. People like me and others saw the Scottish Parliament as, to quote the late, great John Smith, the “settled will of the Scottish people”.

I say that to reassure the House that my thoughts come from a place, I believe, of true experience.

Let us remember that the scheme for the devolved Parliament, as enshrined in the Scotland Act 1998, was about the concept of there being no need for a second Chamber in Edinburgh because the Committees of the Scottish Parliament were intended to fill the role of holding the Executive to account. That could have entailed, where necessary, amending or initiating legislation in a fashion similar to the House of Lords today. As an example, I highlight the role of the education Committee in the first Parliament, of which I was a member, in tweaking and amending the then Scottish Government's

[*Jamie Stone*]

first education Act. Was that a reflection of the consensual attitude that many MSPs displayed during the first term of the Scottish Parliament? Very possibly—perhaps the hon. Member could comment on that.

A few initial thoughts come to mind. Although the Committees did largely fulfil some of that function during the first 12 years of the Parliament, I am bound to add that the advent of the SNP Government in 2011, which controlled not only the Chamber but all the Committees, changed that dynamic. I would argue that, after that year, the failure of some Committees to show any real teeth meant that some bad legislation came to be. I need only quote one example, and that is the ill-fated deposit return scheme—I rest my case.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Member is making a very good speech. As a fellow Member of the Scottish Parliament for 10 years, I concur completely with his comments regarding the Committee structure. There are many faults about the other place, but it is significantly better at scrutinising Government, holding Government to account and improving legislation than the Committees in the Scottish Parliament, so I agree with him.

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Member, who, like me, was an MSP all those years ago. Why, to take up his point, is the Scottish Parliament not working the way it is intended to? I think part of the answer lies in the fact that making someone the Chair of a Committee in the Scottish Parliament is in the gift of the party leaders. That can lead to Committee Chairs, particularly those in the Government party, feeling somewhat beholden to their party's leadership and being, I would suggest, sometimes rather less than willing to say boo to a goose when it comes to challenging or amending legislation.

In Westminster, Committee Chairs are chosen via a secret ballot of the whole House. I would say that the independent-mindedness of Committees and those who lead them is very much a strength. In that respect, we have in Westminster a certain safeguard against the risk of passing completely unworkable legislation. My purpose in making this assessment is not in any way to enlarge on the proposals for a second Chamber in Scotland; the Scotland Act 1998 was very clear that the Scottish Parliament would be unicameral.

Similarly, we can see that there are grounds for Westminster to learn lessons from Edinburgh. I have had the honour, as I said, of being a Member of both the Scottish and UK Parliaments. When people ask me, as they often do, how the two compare, I often say that we MPs are deeply envious of the access to Ministers that MSPs enjoy. The direct and frequent communication between the Scottish Government and their opposition strikes me as a very positive facet of Scottish democracy.

Furthermore, the fact that there are only 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament means that the Members all know each other—or at least know each other an awful lot better than would be normal here. There is recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of those 129 individuals. How should I put this, Madam Deputy Speaker? That is not necessarily something that we can perceive in Westminster, where we have a great number of Members.

In fact, I am afraid we can all think—no names, no pack-drill—of Members who somehow slip under the radar; let us just put it that way. I do not intend to be one of them.

The Scottish Parliament has become much more powerful than it was when I was there—just look at the tax and social security powers—but as an MP from the far north of Scotland, I am constantly reminded of just how centralised Scotland has become. Decisions are too often not taken close to the communities that they affect. There has been devolution from Westminster to Holyrood, but practically nothing from Holyrood down to councils or communities. In fact, when it comes to police and fire services, power has simply been grabbed by Edinburgh.

One of the most interesting academics to comment on the matter, and one of the first to scrutinise devolution, James G. Kellas, emphasised that merely establishing new institutions such as the Scottish Parliament cannot fundamentally alter the efficiency of decision-making norms. Instead, he said, we must respect the interplay between respective institutions and their political behaviours. That is what he prescribed to modernisers like me, who hoped that devolution would bring longer-term stability to British politics and give it a new lease of life. In recent years, however, we have seen just the opposite: a breakdown of constructive intergovernmental relations and a move towards polarisation that has pitted the Scottish Government against the UK Government as rivals, rather than partners. That has been clear on multiple occasions over the past decade. Scotland needs Governments in Edinburgh and London that are capable of working together, and of ironing out differences of opinion, where they exist, maturely, within proper frameworks, and without always resorting to legal action and court battles.

That leads me to the elephant in the Chamber, if I can get away with that expression. Most significantly, and perhaps least surprisingly, the chasm in our system of governance was most strongly pronounced during the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. The subsequent repeated calls for a second referendum have coloured the relationship between our two Parliaments ever since. I am a proud Scot—I always have been and I always will be—so for me these have, alas, been dark times, with too much grievance, too much aggression and too much resentment. On top of that, I humbly suggest that the people of Scotland are tired and frustrated—and they have a case. They see their household bills soaring. They have long waits to see their GP, they have the ferry fiasco, and they have a Scottish education that we all know simply is not what it used to be. Scotland deserves better, and the Scottish Parliament needs to show people that it can respond to the challenge at hand and change people's lives for the better.

I think back to what my party, when it was in coalition, delivered in its first terms in government, including free personal care, eye tests, dental checks, bus passes, the smoking ban and fair votes for local government. Indeed, it was the signature of my then party leader Jim Wallace that broke the ground on freedom of information. We collectively cared about getting the basics right, and were determined to show that devolution could deliver the change that people wanted to see. I do not suggest that that was just the attitude of the governing parties

in the coalition; there was co-operation with the Scottish National party and the Conservatives, from time to time.

I touched earlier on the works of James G. Kellas, and I return to his predictions in 2001. He warned that observers of devolution might develop an “expectations gap”, as Scots could develop resentment, feeling that the potential of the Scottish Parliament was unfulfilled, or limited by a system of multi-level governance. There could be truth in that, but we still have a chance to rectify it. With last year’s change of government in Westminster and the Holyrood elections next year, this is surely the perfect time to revise our approach to our system of multi-level governance in the UK in order to engage with those feelings of discontent and negotiate a better way forward—together, not apart.

No legislation is forever, including our beloved Scotland Act. All legislation is from time to time re-examined and amended; that is how we do things in the UK. That is surely one of the foundation stones of British democracy. To put it simply, we can come together to better understand how to make our Union more workable and acknowledge what needs to change. Governmental co-operation and multi-level governance can improve, and I strongly believe that the vision of the founding members of our devolved Governments can and does endure. There is still hope that our Parliaments can build a stronger relationship for the future, in the face of increasing uncertainty and threats from beyond the seas.

I conclude with one simple request. The UK Supreme Court ruled in 2022 that the Scottish Parliament cannot legislate for an independence referendum without Westminster consent. I touch on that issue in the hope that this debate will not be wasted, and co-opted into a debate revising and exhausting the legality of that decision. Instead, I invite all Members from every corner of the House to engage in a constructive debate about how we can improve what we do. That is essential, particularly in the face of increasing uncertainty and—let us be honest—threats from across the seas to the way in which we do things in our precious democracy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Beautifully timed, Mr Stone. I call Patricia Ferguson.

3.52 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I nearly lapsed into old habits and called you Deputy Presiding Officer, but that is a title for another place some 500 miles up the road. I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for procuring this debate, and for arriving when he did; some of us were becoming rather anxious. I do not think I have ever been more pleased to see him enter any room.

On a more serious note, 25 years ago this month, Donald Dewar—MP, MSP and the first First Minister of Scotland—died prematurely. Donald had worked hard, both in our party and beyond, to promote the idea of a Scottish Parliament. It was a huge loss when he passed away only 17 months into the life of that new Parliament, but his legacy—the Parliament he played such an important part in establishing—lives on.

Despite the disappointment of the 1979 referendum, devolution remained firmly on the agenda of the Labour party through the long years of Conservative rule.

The idea was kept alive by Donald, his great friend John Smith, Labour party and trade union members across the country, and colleagues in the Liberal Democrats and some other parties. “A Claim of Right for Scotland” in 1988 and the Scottish constitutional convention were significant markers on the long road to the successful 1997 referendum. I am pleased to recount that when Labour was returned to power in 1997, one of its first acts was to pass the Scotland Act, which paved the way for the Scottish Parliament just two years later. It is quite remarkable that a party was returned to power in May 1997, held a referendum just two or three months later on the Scottish Parliament and whether we should have devolution, and delivered that Parliament within two years.

I was proud to campaign, along with many others, for a Scottish Parliament over many years. I believe that such subsidiarity is sensible and is a democratic imperative, and as one of the first MSPs elected in 1999—alongside my colleague, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross—I was privileged to see at first hand the challenges and successes of the Labour-Liberal Executive, which steered our country through the first years of devolution. We did not call ourselves a Government then; “Executive” was good enough for us. As my colleague said, it is my conviction that co-operation between the coalition partners, and sometimes across all parties, was key to the progress of devolution, as was joint working between the Scottish and UK Governments.

Many positive initiatives were implemented during that early period, some of which the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross mentioned. I apologise to the House if I repeat one or two, but I would like to list some of the ones that come most easily to mind. They included free personal care for the elderly; free university tuition; the banning of smoking in enclosed public places, which has led to verifiable health benefits—Scotland led the way for the rest of the UK on this issue, and we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the ban this year—the repeal of the discriminatory clause 2A; bringing the Golden Jubilee hospital into the NHS; the Fresh Talent initiative; the creation of an international development fund; the creation of the National Theatre of Scotland; and submitting a successful bid for the 2014 Commonwealth games, to name but a very few.

The Scottish Parliament’s approach was modern, with family-friendly hours and a willingness to use technology to the advantage of Members and the public. Our electronic voting system and the public petitions process were seen—I think rightly—as efficient, businesslike and inclusive. I sincerely hope that the Modernisation Committee will consider those examples during its investigation—especially electronic voting, please.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I sometimes find myself watching Holyrood TV, and most of what happens after the electronic voting is endless people checking whether they have voted—wanting to clarify whether the machine has worked. Given that there are 120-odd Members in Holyrood and 650-odd Members in this place, I am not entirely sure that that is the best plan for Westminster voting.

Patricia Ferguson: My recollection of the system is that it worked very well indeed. I do not know whether standards have slipped since the days when I and other hon. Members present were Members of the Scottish Parliament.

[*Patricia Ferguson*]

What the hon. Lady describes did happen—I admit that—but very rarely. I was for some time in the Chair, announcing those decisions, and I genuinely do not remember that happening very often at all.

John Lamont: I think the recollection that the hon. Lady and I will have of our time in the Scottish Parliament was of voting physically, albeit electronically, together in the Scottish Parliament Chamber. The difference now, of course, is that some Members of the Scottish Parliament are voting in the Chamber, while others are voting at home, sitting at their kitchen table, by pressing a button. That is where the connectivity issues mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) arise, and that is why it is important that we maintain physical voting in this place.

Patricia Ferguson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. I am not in favour of voting remotely either, except perhaps in very rare and exceptional circumstances. However, please believe me that electronic voting is the way forward. Members would not have to spend some 20 minutes walking through the Lobby. Votes would be cast, and a result declared, within roughly one minute. That is definitely a better use of Members' time, and a much more efficient way to do things.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I think the hon. Lady has made a good point. She may be up against it if she is trying to talk to those on the Opposition Benches about modernisation in any fashion, but when, during the pandemic, Members were forced to go through the Lobby when they were unwell, that affected Members throughout the House. I think—and I shall say more about this later—that there are always places where legislatures can learn from each other.

Patricia Ferguson: It is undoubtedly true that we have to learn from one another, and from international examples too. If I can give one example that I would like colleagues to learn from, it is that electronic voting has a place, and a place from which I think this House could benefit greatly.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Ferguson: Before I give way, may I just say that I really did not imagine that that one line would create such a response?

David Davis: I cannot really comment on electronic voting, but I was going to make a comment in the other direction—about learning in both directions. I believe that Donald Dewar, in his heroic struggle to bring about devolution, wanted a strong Scottish Parliament, in terms of privilege, in terms of the right to summon Ministers—

Stephen Gethins: Powers?

David Davis: Powers, yes, in terms of order and the balance of power between Parliament and Government, which he wanted to be much stronger as well. Does the hon. Lady think that that would be a good thing?

Patricia Ferguson: I think we have to realise that the Parliament in Scotland is very much smaller than this Parliament, which makes a great difference to many of the ways in which it operates. As we heard from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, it is much easier to speak to a Minister there than it is here. It is a regular occurrence. There is a saying in the Scottish Parliament: you only have to sit in the Garden Lobby for half an hour, and every other parliamentarian will have passed you by at one point or another. That is a huge advantage, and it is one of the aspects of the Scottish Parliament that I personally preferred: we did have that access, not just to Ministers but to other colleagues across parties, and we could develop relationships that enabled us to work in a cross-party way very easily with them. That, I think, was a great thing. I also think that the Scottish Parliament has, perhaps, a better balance of power between Members and the Government, but we have to accept that the scale is an influencing factor at the very least.

I would not suggest for a moment that the years from 2007 onwards—when the SNP first formed a Government through a deal with the Tories, when they then formed a majority Government, and even when they were in coalition with the Greens—have been a complete failure, but there has been a great deal of wasted time and opportunity.

Stephen Gethins: Is the hon. Member aware that in that 2007 Parliament, the Labour party voted with the SNP more often than the Conservatives did?

Patricia Ferguson: The Labour party did not vote with the SNP on the Budget. The SNP needed the Tories to get Budgets through, and that was the basis on which they did a deal. Sadly, those Budgets very much reflected Tory values, and that is why Labour could not vote for them; nor could friends in other parties that are represented in this Chamber.

I have to say, though, that time has been wasted by people obsessing about the constitution and creating grievances with Westminster. We could have been in a very different place if the Scottish Government had continued to focus on the issues that mattered to people in their everyday lives, and also if they had been more constructive in their engagement with Members of the Scottish Parliament itself. My hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross cited the ill-fated deposit return scheme as an example of when there was not that cross-party working to make legislation appropriate and fit for purpose; I would cite as another example the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act, which was passed in 2012 only to be repealed in 2018. Again, I would not suggest for a minute that Scotland does not sometimes have a problem with football matches, and with some of the sectarian and offensive behaviour that goes on in connection with them, but that Act was badly thought out. People tried to say so at the time, but they were not listened to. I think it is always important for us to listen to one another and hear what others have to say.

Sadly, it has to be said that recent Scottish Governments have been found wanting when it comes to the measurements of success that they have set for themselves on NHS waiting time guarantees, climate targets or

educational attainment, and the premise of the Parliament—allowing for the delivery of Scottish solutions to Scottish problems—has fallen some way short. For a Parliament that is devolved, it has had the most centralising agenda in recent years, which has not been to Scotland's advantage. Scotland is made up of peoples, cities, towns and villages, and what works in my constituency of Glasgow West will not necessarily work in Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. It is important that those differences are reflected, and that the agencies and public organisations that support and serve our populations reflect local bias, local need and local interest. Sadly, that is no longer the case in some places.

As the Scottish Parliament progresses into its second quarter-century, we have an opportunity to look back, to mark both the successes and the shortcomings, and to recall the words of Donald Dewar at the Parliament's opening on 1 July 1999, which are as relevant today as they were then. He said that we will

“never lose sight of what brought us here—the striving to do right by the people of Scotland, to respect their priorities, to better their lot and to contribute to the common weal.”

In recalling those words, we should look forward to the future, to how the Scottish Parliament can do right by the people of Scotland, and to how we Members of this Parliament can play a constructive part in making that so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I currently have no plans to put a time limit on contributions, but Members might like to reflect on how many colleagues are here and adjust their remarks accordingly.

4.6 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Devolution is not working. Instead of two Governments working in harness, Scotland has one in Westminster with its back turned to the one in Holyrood, which daily plots to break up Britain. Labour took power convinced that they were the grown-ups who would reset relations with the SNP at Holyrood. The harsh reality is that the SNP Government have no interest in joint working, for if devolution is a success, they lose the argument that independence is a necessity. They are aided in their mission by Labour's “devolve and forget”.

This Government trolly billions of pounds north to Edinburgh via the block grant, but what happens after it disappears into the SNP black hole, where we can see what goes in but not what comes out? Well, no one on the Government Benches seems to care overmuch. The sleekit SNP is running rings around them. The Chancellor appeared in a smart video saying that she was delivering investment in Scotland. The backdrop was Lossiemouth, a key RAF base for protecting the High North, yet the SNP actively undermines British defence. There has been ludicrous talk of deploying “Scottish forces” as peacekeepers in Ukraine. There are many Scots men and women in Britain's forces, but there are no Scottish forces. Ironically, the SNP denies defence firms vital investment because of childish opposition to ordnance—the shells, bombs, bullets and missiles that keep us all safe in a dangerous world. That is pulling apart, not pulling together.

Under the previous Administration, the Scotland Office was the guardian of devolution. The then Secretary of State for Scotland, Alister Jack, adroitly deployed section 35 of the Scotland Act to prevent the unlamented Nicola Sturgeon's gender recognition reform from trampling on the rights of women and girls across the entire UK. That was not some assault on Holyrood's powers, but a judicious application of the law as it stood to prevent devolution from being abused, to prevent Scotland from becoming a different country bit by bit, and to stop devolution being used as a battering ram to smash the Union. Would that happen now?

Today's Scotland Office is, we are told, “Scotland's window on the world”. Rather than nurturing the Scotland Act, it looks increasingly like Dover House has been annexed by the Department for Business and Trade as a pop-up shop for salmon and whisky. Perhaps a bit less looking out the window and a bit more attention to what is going on at John Swinney's Bute House is in order, for Scottish Ministers seem to have more foreign breaks than Galloway Travel Service in Stranraer, in my constituency of Dumfries and Galloway. They have gone to Malawi, Zambia, Canada and Washington DC. Despite having no role in international affairs, Scottish Ministers have racked up more air miles than Biggles, at taxpayers' expense. What are they discussing, given that trade policy is reserved? Let us take China, for example: Scottish Business Minister Richard Lochhead sloped off on a low-key visit to Beijing, and I asked what occurred, but the Foreign Office did not have eyes on it, in another display of “devolve and forget”.

There are many siren voices calling for Holyrood's abolition as Supreme Court judgments on gender are ignored; its Committee system, as we have heard, is neutered so that genuine scrutiny is near impossible; and the First Minister spends more time pronouncing on Gaza and boycotting Israel—foreign affairs are outwith his bailiwick—while Scots' taxes rise with no improvement in public services.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is drawing attention to many issues that he says are the fault of the Scottish Government's creating difference between Scotland and England. What would he say about the Brexit vote in 2016 creating such difference?

John Cooper: I just gently point out that I think more Scots voted for Brexit than for anything else in the history of Scotland.

Stephen Gethins: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Cooper: Sorry, but I will not give way, because I want to make some progress.

John Swinney—not so much yesterday's man as the day before yesterday's man—is a pound-shop Parnell trying to suborn British institutions to undermine Britain. Devolution is not working, but it is not broken beyond repair. My noble Friend Lord Offord of Garvel, who sits in the other place, has challenged Holyrood to do better in a series of essays entitled “Wealthy Nation, Healthy Nation”. That is predicated on Holyrood parking its constitutional obsession to deliver what it was intended to do—to better the lives of those living in Scotland. Amen, but it will require the Scottish Government to respect democracy, not least the clearcut decision in

[John Cooper]

the 2014 independence referendum to remain part of the UK, and it will take this House finding the courage to confront what the SNP Government are up to. It is not about putting them in their place or keeping them in their lane. No, it is merely about both Governments respecting the Scotland Act.

If Holyrood is to have another 25 years, John Swinney needs to comport himself as First Minister, not “First Agitator”. The present Secretary for State for Scotland once told Harvard University of the need

“to more closely align accountability with decision-making authority.”

Hear, hear. The chink of ice in the whisky cocktails in far-flung embassies is seductive, but while the Scottish Secretary is distracted, the SNP plots, and it is our constituents who will pay the bar bill and face the hangover.

4.11 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): When the Scottish Parliament was reconvened in 1999, there was an expectation that devolution would not stop at Holyrood, but would build stronger systems of local government. Donald Dewar put it best in his first speech:

“A Scottish Parliament. Not an end: a means to greater ends.”

We should celebrate Holyrood’s achievements over the past 25 years, but we must also face a truth: devolution has stalled or even gone backwards when it comes to local government. The first phase moved power from London to Edinburgh, but the second phase—transferring power from Holyrood to our local communities—never came. Instead, powers have been stripped away. Business rates, water, further education, police, fire and local enterprise were all once local responsibilities that have now been centralised. The principle of devolution is simple: the best decisions are made closest to the people affected by those decisions, yet in Edinburgh we have a Government run by the Scottish National party, and no one could accuse it of being the Scottish local party.

Before I came here, I was the leader of Stirling council. About 80% of our budget came from a Scottish Government grant, with the rest from council tax, which is the only fiscal lever left to councils. It should be set locally, but for most of the last 18 years the SNP Government have frozen or capped it. Arguments for and against tax rises should be made in town halls, not dictated from Holyrood. For devolution to work there must be respect between different levels of government. I welcome efforts by the UK Government to reset that relationship. I only wish the Scottish Government would show the same respect to local authorities.

Meanwhile, England has raced ahead. Metro mayors and combined authorities are transforming the landscape. We have seen the next step in English devolution in recent weeks and months, with exciting reforms pushing power outwards. By contrast, a tired SNP Government are pulling power inwards through quangos and direction from the centre.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I was struck by what the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), said about the roots of the Scottish Parliament and the constitutional convention. Those of us who were part

of that movement believed that there was a better way for Scotland to be governed, but things have moved on, and now the Parliament is seen as an exercise merely in asserting national identity. Does he agree that if we got back to the Scottish Parliament being about a better delivery of Scottish services for Scottish people, the difficulties that he is identifying would very quickly be solved?

Chris Kane: I completely agree—that goes back to what I was saying. Donald Dewar said:

“A Scottish Parliament. Not an end: a means to greater ends.”

If we all remembered to think about the evolution of devolution, and strived to make it as good as it can be, we would all be doing the people of Scotland a service.

The risk of divergence between Scottish devolution and English devolution is stark. Glasgow is the UK’s fourth largest city, yet without a metro mayor or combined authority, it has no mechanism to secure trailblazer deals, as Greater Manchester and the West Midlands have. If Glasgow performed at the level of its peers, Scotland’s GDP could rise by an amount equivalent to our entire oil and gas sector—that is the real prize of real devolution. Scotland’s eight cities, including Stirling, should be able to debate what greater devolution would mean for our economies and communities.

Partnership requires honesty, however. The Verity House agreement promised “no surprises” but within months, Ministers imposed another national council tax freeze without consultation. That is not partnership; it is central direction. If we are serious about devolution, we must be serious about accountability. Audit Scotland and the National Audit Office should deepen collaboration. Joint funding streams must be scrutinised coherently. Public trust depends on transparency.

Devolution was never meant to be a one-off event. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has long warned that Scotland is now one of the most centralised countries in Europe. While England powers ahead, our councils are squeezed, our communities feel remote from decision making, and our cities risk falling behind. What Scotland needs is a new phase of devolution: more fiscal autonomy for councils, genuine partnership with national Government, more powers for communities through development trusts, community councils and other bodies, and the option of combined authorities or mayors where local people want them.

4.17 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Back in the early ’90s, I was just out of school and getting involved in politics. It was an exciting time, with a constitutional convention, excitement about a new Parliament, and decision making coming closer to home. People in Scotland had the right to decide on whether to have devolution with a Scottish Parliament or keep power at Westminster—and they chose well!

The Scottish Parliament’s early years featured some of the most well-known names in Scottish politics: Donald Dewar, Winnie Ewing, Alex Salmond, Nicola Sturgeon, Jack McConnell, Annabel Goldie, Jim Wallace and, of course, our current First Minister and SNP leader John Swinney, whose public service and commitment to Scotland remains second to none. I add to those

names George Reid, who sadly passed away recently. He was respected right across this House and the Scottish Parliament.

The formation of the Scottish Parliament marked my first employment in politics, for former MP and MSP Alasdair Morgan, who retired in 2011 after a distinguished period as Deputy Presiding Officer in the Scottish Parliament. My introduction to politics—working for an MP and MSP, as many in the Scottish Parliament were in its first couple of years—fired up my own desire to go further in politics and become an elected councillor, then a council leader and now a parliamentarian in this place. I did that because of my desire to improve the lives of the people I represent and the people right across Scotland, which is the same reason that colleagues right across the House got into politics.

The Scottish Parliament has led the way in many areas of policy. On tackling child poverty, it is the only part of the UK in which child poverty has fallen. The Scottish child payment of £27.15 a week, introduced by the SNP, has been praised by numerous highly respected charities and organisations in tackling child poverty. On social security, the formation of social security—

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but the Scottish child payment is not just praised by charities; it was their idea. The Child Poverty Action Group campaigned for it for a long time and the Scottish Government opposed it. It was parties in Opposition and charities who made it happen, so they do not just praise it. We should congratulate them on their long campaign that made it happen, and I hope he will join me in that.

Graham Leadbitter: The point made is entirely reasonable and I commend the work done by charities and third sector organisations over many years in highlighting that and a wide range of issues. I am grateful that the hon. Member acknowledges that the Scottish Government responded to those concerns and took action, demonstrating exactly the power the Scottish Parliament can have and the difference it can make.

On social security, we introduced the carer's allowance supplement. We mitigated the bedroom tax and increased the employment rate for disabled people, without resorting to cutting vital welfare support.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I am very much enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech reflecting on the many experiences of devolution that have inspired us, but on the point around employment and disabled people, will join me in saying that it is regrettable that the Scottish Government decided to cut employability funding for disability schemes in 2024-25?

Graham Leadbitter: I take the hon. Member's point, but the fact remains that the personal independence payment is currently under threat from the UK Government. That will have a devastating impact on disabled people, and many Labour Members on the Government Benches would agree with that.

On the economy and taxation, we have a more progressive income tax system. More than 50% of people working in Scotland pay less tax than they do elsewhere in the UK. I fully support that as a higher rate taxpayer.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Does he accept the fact that PIP is devolved in Scotland?

Graham Leadbitter: It is the adult disability payment in Scotland, rather than PIP. Fundamentally—I am sure the hon. Lady knows this—if the UK Government decide to cut a vast amount out of the social security system, that will have a really significant impact on the Scottish budget. Week after week, Labour Members call for more money to be spent on certain things in Scotland, but at the same time they seem to be suggesting a substantial cut to the Scottish budget with the change to the social security budget.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham Leadbitter: Can I respond to the first intervention first?

If a substantial budget cut comes through on the back of that, that will have a serious impact on what the Scottish Government can do, whatever colour that Scottish Government may be following the next elections.

Johanna Baxter: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. He talks about a budget cut to the Scottish Government, but does he not recognise that this Westminster Government have actually given the Scottish Government the largest funding settlement in the history of devolution? What has happened to the money?

Graham Leadbitter: I gently remind Labour Members that every single year should be the largest devolution budget, because inflation goes up every year. There has not been a negative inflationary year in my lifetime, so it should be going up every year. There should be a record settlement every single year. That is just inflation. That is basic economics. I know those on the Government Benches struggle with that sometimes.

On council tax and water charges, we have the lowest in the UK. We are, for over a decade, the top destination outside London for foreign investment. Since the SNP came to power in 2007, GDP per capita has grown in Scotland by 10.3% and by 6.1% for the rest of the UK.

There are things that have been done, both by the Labour and Liberal Executive in the first few years of the Parliament and by the SNP Government since 2007, that have delivered substantial benefits for the people of Scotland. On health, briefly, we have had more GPs per head than any other part of the UK for the past five years; they are also the best paid, recognising the challenge and importance of that role. Scotland's core A&Es have been the best performing in the UK for nine years, with lower average waiting times. We have abolished prescription charges and, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) referred to, we have free eye examinations as well. In addition, more than 1,000 school building projects have been completed since 2007, and 96% of our school leavers go into further training, further education or workplaces.

In his submission to the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross described this place as the parent of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, but I would describe the Scottish people as the parent of the Scottish

[*Graham Leadbitter*]

Parliament and the Scottish Government through the Scottish Constitutional Convention. I very much commend the hon. Member for his work in that role. Fundamentally, I would say that the parent of the Scottish Parliament is the Scottish people who voted for it and who continue to back it and elect it and the Government.

That brings me to my final point. The Scottish Parliament is on a journey. It was formed in 1999 and has continued on a journey.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman will have heard other people make the point about that journey and the need for it to go from the Scottish Parliament down to communities. One of the most clamant cases for that journey to continue relates to the administration of the Crown Estate. We now see Crown Estate Scotland behaving in exactly the same way that the Crown Estate did when it was answerable to the Treasury here in London. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that his colleagues in the Scottish Government should be devolving control of the Crown Estate—especially the marine estate—to communities like mine in Shetland?

Graham Leadbitter: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I think the point he is making is reasonable up to a point. We need to be very careful when talking about energy being a matter of national security—

Mr Carmichael: No, this is about the seabed.

Graham Leadbitter: Well, the seabed is very important for our energy infrastructure, so we need to be really careful about how we deal with that and how we handle that. I would not be averse to having a fuller debate and discussion about the devolution of Crown Estate assets to local communities, but we do need to be careful around the energy links to that and how that could play out to ensure that we maintain the national security of our energy and grid infrastructure.

Mr Carmichael: What the hon. Gentleman seems to be saying is that Shetland could not control our own seabed. Does he maybe think we are too wee and too poor for that?

Graham Leadbitter: I think the right hon. Gentleman is twisting what I am saying a bit. We are in the realms of getting into a debate about an entirely different subject. I agree with him to an extent—having been a council leader, I have always argued very strongly for more devolution to local government. I made that point very strongly when I attended the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leaders meeting, and I will continue to do so. I am sure there are many other internal debates within other parties over where powers should rest on particular issues, too. I will continue to make those arguments with colleagues.

I started off by saying that the people of Scotland made the decision—what I believe to be the right decision—to form the Scottish Parliament, and we are now on a journey. My colleagues in the SNP and I believe that that journey will reach independence, and that will then be a new journey with where we go from there.

Fundamentally, it is for the people of Scotland to decide. Ministers and others across the House have recognised that the people of Scotland are sovereign and that it is their right to choose and decide; what they have not set out is how they can choose and decide. That is the responsibility of the current UK Government.

4.29 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing this important debate.

Before devolution, Scotland-specific Bills in this place were few and far between—often single digits per year—even though our health, education and legal systems have been completely different for centuries. Decisions that shaped people's lives in Scotland were made elsewhere, without the understanding or accountability that they deserved. That is why so many of us, myself included, campaigned passionately for devolution. Like others in the Chamber, my belief in devolution was forged in the 90s in the run up to the '97 referendum. My memories of the campaign, polling day and result will be with me for the rest of my life. The feeling of hope that we had will also stay with me for the rest of my life.

We wanted decisions about Scotland's schools, hospitals and communities to be made by a Parliament rooted in Scotland but still part of the wider United Kingdom. It was about giving Scots a stronger voice within our Union, bringing democracy closer to the people, improving accountability and delivering better government. It was also about pooling and sharing and being grown-ups. For a time, that promise felt real. It felt good. But the promise has been squandered. Even with extra powers over the years and a record £52 billion settlement this year from the Labour Government at Westminster, the SNP Scottish Government have failed to make devolution work for the people it was created to serve.

I look at my own constituency and the evidence is stark. Many of my constituents are still languishing on NHS waiting lists. It is shocking that in NHS Lanarkshire alone, more people have waited over two years for treatment than in the entirety of England.

Seamus Logan: What I find distressing is how Labour Members are always talking down the health service in Scotland, but you avoid mentioning—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. "You" would be me.

Seamus Logan: I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member and other Labour colleagues often refer to problems in the health service in Scotland, but they never point to the fact that Scotland's waiting times for cancer from diagnosis to treatment are better than in any other part of the UK. They do not point to the fact that waiting lists in Scotland are falling while waiting lists in England are rising and have been for three months now. There are many, many other problems—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman could have chosen to contribute by making a speech.

Katrina Murray: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my life experience before coming to this place as a member of staff within the health service. I worked through the pandemic when we used the red, amber and green statuses to indicate how waiting lists were. We did not just have red, amber and green stages. We created a purple status for when there were serious capacity issues that warranted more than a red status. We then moved to black status if it got too serious for status purple. One of the reasons I am in this place is the 14 months that I worked with colleagues through that. Nobody who is trying to provide healthcare should have to do so when working in situations that go way beyond an emergency.

The situation within the health service was highlighted several weeks in a women's lowland league football match in my constituency, when a Linlithgow Rose player who was injured during a match with Cumbernauld United Ladies lay with a broken leg for five hours on a Sunday while waiting for an ambulance to be dispatched.

Melanie Ward: With reference to the previous intervention, I wonder what my hon. Friend, who knows so much about the NHS in Scotland, makes of the fact that the Scottish Government's target for cancer treatment—that 95% of patients are treated within 62 days of an urgent referral—has not been met since 2012.

Katrina Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Certainly, the experience was that the Scottish Government were good at setting targets but never good at making sure those targets were met. I see the toll of that every week, with people living in pain, losing mobility and struggling with their mental health. They look at the improving picture south of the border and ask, "How much longer do we have to wait?" What they are hearing is, "Actually, this crisis is business as usual."

NHS staff are being failed by the very system that devolution was meant to strengthen. *[Interruption.]* I heard a heckle from a sedentary position. NHS staff in Scotland pay higher rates of income tax and significantly higher rates of pension contributions, so the take-home pay of an NHS band 6 nurse in Scotland is not necessarily different from a band 6 nurse in England.

The problems do not end with health. Across Scotland, the fire and rescue service is consulting on cuts that firefighters, their unions and the public fear will cost lives. The service faces a capital backlog of £800 million. That is not just a Government asleep at the wheel but one who are failing to protect one of our most vital public services. My constituents know too well the threat that fire poses from the serious fire at Blairlinn industrial estate that injured six people and the destruction by fire of the iconic St Mungo's church: a listed building and landmark seen from across the constituency that is now gone. That is a failing of scrutiny and a failure of priorities.

The SNP Government are distracted. They are more interested in constitutional division than in fixing the problems that our communities face. The Labour Government have delivered record investment for Scotland's public services, but ask anyone on the ground—no one can see what the SNP has done with the money.

I remember the hope of 1999 when the Scottish Parliament was first elected. It was full of passion, full of debate and full of co-operation. Members disagreed—

often strongly—but they shared a common purpose to make Scotland fairer, healthier and more prosperous. They passed legislation; as we have heard, some of it was groundbreaking. That is the spirit that Scotland needs again.

The need for change is clear. Scotland is full of ambition, potential and opportunity. We have world-leading businesses, unique natural resources and global brands that command respect across the world. We are world leaders in renewable technology and home to cutting-edge scientific and tech institutions and renowned research-intensive universities. We need a Scottish Government who share the same hopes and aspirations for the future as we do on the Labour Benches to make devolution work and to take full advantage of everything Scotland has going for it. We face a clear choice: do we keep circling the constitutional cul-de-sac that the SNP have led us down or do we choose to move forward with the strongest devolution settlement and a new direction for Scotland?

4.39 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Devolution sounds like, and should be, a fantastic opportunity. It should bring decisions closer to home with policies that fit the uniqueness of local areas and communities such as mine, where accountability and impact are more closely linked. That is the theory but in practice, certainly in Scotland's case, the reality is very different. Devolution has become a fight for power—for the power, but not for the responsibility—and it has become about pushing party and personal ideology rather than what is actually best for the public and the businesses which we are meant to serve.

Since 1999, we have seen so much power, indeed more power than any other devolved nation in the world, devolved to Scotland, or more specifically, as others have mentioned, to Holyrood, because that is where in Scotland devolution ends. What we see in Scotland is a level of bureaucracy, red tape and top-down decision making that stifles any opportunity for devolution to properly trickle down to benefit all regions and communities across Scotland.

We can look at the evidence. In Scotland, 53% of planning decisions appealed to the Scottish Government are overturned by Ministers; in England, by contrast, local decisions are upheld 70% of the time. On policing, the SNP merged eight regional police forces into one nationalised central body. In doing so, it scrapped local police boards run by local councils and replaced them with a single national authority appointed by, and accountable to, Scottish Ministers. The result is that since its creation over 140 stations have closed, creating what the Scottish Police Federation has itself called policing deserts and an "almost invisible policing presence" across great parts of the country.

There are also of course endless examples of devolution putting our businesses at a disadvantage compared with others across the UK, including on business rates. Business rates are devolved and when the last Conservative Government introduced 75% rate relief for hospitality south of the border, that was not replicated in Scotland. Businesses in Scotland had to wait years for a similar relief, which, when it was finally introduced, was less generous than elsewhere.

[*Harriet Cross*]

In education we have seen years of decline in Scottish standards. In 2006, Scotland proudly had students who were the best in the UK at maths. But now, after years of the SNP curriculum for apparent excellence, our PISA score has plummeted by 35 points and we are trailing well behind England. That is a generation of young Scots being failed by the SNP. Why in Scotland, after almost 20 years in office, has the SNP seemingly been so content to let education standards slip and slip while over the past decade, when Conservatives were in government at Westminster, we saw standards and international rankings rise south of the border? Why, other than for the need to just do things differently, would we not look at the rising standards elsewhere in the UK and think for just one minute that maybe for the sake of the next generation of Scots we could learn from what is happening elsewhere in the UK?

There is also a huge amount of incoherence between different policies in devolved areas. Pensioners in Scotland with an income of £35,000 are considered to have a low enough income to be eligible for the winter fuel payment, which of course is welcome after Labour decided to balance their books on the back of our poorest pensioners, but how does this square with the SNP Government considering workers on a salary as modest as £30,000 to be wealthy enough to be taxed more than those in the rest of the UK? Was devolution really set up as a vehicle to see teachers and doctors and police officers based and working in Scotland taxed more and taking home less pay than those doing the same job in the rest of the UK?

For devolution to be considered a success, we should be able to see it and feel it, but even objectively these benefits are very hard to find. I know there have always been those saying and pointing out that we get things for free, like free prescriptions or certain bus travel or university education, but these are not free; they are taxpayer-funded—funded at the expense of something else and funded at the cost of higher taxes for people and businesses across Scotland.

The Scottish Government are receiving from the UK Government over £2,500 more per person to spend than is the case in England. Why then are our outcomes not streaks ahead of those south of the border? Why is our education system failing children? Why are universities almost at the point of collapse? Why is life expectancy lower in Scotland and our drug deaths the highest in Europe? Why are NHS capital projects being paused, including the Ellon health centre in my constituency? There is chronic underfunding and under-investment in our roads, including the A96 and the A90 in Gordon and Buchan. Scotland's employment rates are lower than those in the rest of the UK. Why are local authorities on their knees due to a lack of funding? If devolution had been made to work for Scotland, it would surely be at least equal to the rest of the UK in all those regards. If successive Scottish Governments had focused on their job and on actual devolved competences, maybe—just maybe—Scotland would have outperformed the rest of the UK, but it has not. Why? Because since devolution, successive Scottish Governments have not wanted to take the responsibility as well as the power. They have preferred to point fingers to cover their own incompetence, rather than hold themselves accountable. If what I

describe had happened, or even begun to happen, over the last 25 years, maybe devolution could be seen as a success for Scotland. Until that does happen, I struggle to accept that it has been.

4.45 pm

Kenneth Stevenson (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing this debate. As a Labour politician, I am immensely proud of my party's commitment to devolution and our delivery of the Scottish Parliament, and I will always be grateful to those who have gone before us, such as my constituency predecessor John Smith, who fought tirelessly to bring the decision-making process closer to home.

In the formative years of the Scottish Parliament, it was the Labour-Liberal coalition that delivered the smoking ban—an innovative policy that considerably improved the public health of the Scottish population and reduced the number of primary-aged children inhaling second-hand smoke by 39% within a year. The same coalition oversaw an education system that was recognised as being one of Europe's best. Indeed, in those formative years, £3 million of initial funding was set aside for international development, particularly in Malawi. That developed an already strong relationship between the people of Scotland and that country, and committed the Labour-Liberal coalition to tackling global health and wealth inequality, reducing infant mortality rates in Malawi and improving educational standards. The delivery of free personal care for the elderly was a transformative domestic policy that set Scotland on a path to being a more compassionate society, and it secured dignity for our elderly population. It was us putting the principles of devolution into action.

That was always the change that devolution was intended to make, and it is pretty telling that even though significant time has since passed, the policies I mention remain to this day some of the most significant achievements of the Scottish Parliament. The reality is that the SNP, Conservatives and now Reform UK thrive when Scotland is divided. Their record of poor delivery, incompetent governance, money wasted and vanity projects is clear to see, yet they are all as comfortable as one other in hiding behind the constitutional question.

Richard Baker: My hon. Friend has mentioned Reform UK, which is apparently a recent convert to devolution. Does it tell us all we need to know about how much it values devolution, Scotland and its future that there is not one Member from that party in the Chamber this afternoon?

Kenneth Stevenson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Devolution opened the door for the delivery of good legislation. It was an opportunity for devolved Assemblies and Parliaments, whose politicians were closer to home, to deliver positive change for the people they represented. However, for almost two decades, Scotland has been held back. Eye-watering amounts of public money have been wasted, our once-great education system has seen standards plummet, and the poverty-related attainment gap remains stubbornly wide, with the gap between pupils achieving an A to C grade at higher level sitting at 17.1 percentage points this year.

Like my Labour colleagues, I want devolution to succeed. I want the Scottish Parliament to deliver for Scottish people. I want the people of Scotland to look at their Parliament and recognise it as a place where good things get done in the interests of working people. However, under nationalist leadership, it has increasingly become a talking shop, where blame gets passed and responsibility and accountability are avoided.

It saddens me to say it, but through no fault of our public sector workforce—it is a consequence of SNP incompetence—those who live in Scotland have a one in six chance of being on an NHS waiting list. GP appointments in towns such as Shotts in my constituency are hard to come by. Rail fares are exorbitant. Those who are educators, as I was, are working with diminishing resources, and pupils from poorer backgrounds still face greater barriers to educational and vocational success. Indeed, with the opportunities now afforded to young people as a result of this Government embracing the potential of artificial intelligence, the SNP's political choice to neglect our further education and vocational sector becomes increasingly inexcusable.

This is not the Scotland we envisaged when we held the devolution referendum and the first set of Scottish parliamentary elections. This is a Scotland that has been stopped in its tracks, due to the lack of ambition shown by its SNP Government, and their unwillingness to do anything about growing the economy, increasing investment or showcasing Scotland as a proud part of the United Kingdom.

Melanie Ward: My hon. Friend rightly mentions the crucial role that further education plays, both in our communities and in our economy. Does he recognise that the reality is that, in my area, Fife colleges are receiving real-terms cuts from the SNP Scottish Government, whereas colleges in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen are receiving increases? Those areas are having their funding increased, whereas Fife is having its funding cut.

Kenneth Stevenson: The whole further education system across Scotland needs to be looked at rather rapidly. Things are moving quickly, and we are now becoming a skills economy, with skills not just in AI, but in other things. A lot of companies want to move into Scotland, and they want a good, well-funded further education college close to the place they locate to.

I am immensely proud of the investment that this Labour Government have put into Scotland. The largest financial settlement in the history of devolution is being delivered to improve the lives of working Scots in Airdrie and Shotts and beyond. This reaffirms Labour's commitment to devolution, and its pride and passion for Scotland's potential. This debate has reflected on the past and the progress of devolution, but this historic settlement could define its future. The people of Scotland will have the opportunity to elect a Scottish Labour Government next year, to invest in our NHS and to grow our economy, so that it works once again for working men and women.

4.51 pm

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for bringing forward this debate, and for the way in which he did so. This is always a

useful exercise: let me start off by being consensual. *[Interruption.]* I know that will astonish my Conservative colleagues. There is always a place for legislators learning from one another. In my time working in the European institutions, that is what we used to do, and the same goes for these islands. To be fair, the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), also touched on that point, and it was good to hear about her experiences of Holyrood, as well as those of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross; it enriched the debate.

Chris Kane *rose*—

Stephen Gethins: I have barely started. Let me make a bit of progress, and maybe I can take the hon. Gentleman's point shortly.

There is so much that we can learn, and there is always a way to learn. I know from my experiences here that there may be something that this place could learn from Holyrood. I remember taking part in seizing control of the Order Paper, simply so that Members could have a say. That is something we never have to do in Holyrood. I can remember a minority Government—only just a minority—in 2017 nearly keeling over because they were just short of a majority and yet refused to speak to the other parties, the Democratic Unionist party notwithstanding. They spoke to the DUP, but that was pretty much it. We have seen the catastrophe caused by the culture in this place, and the damage that did. Labour and the Liberal Democrats have acknowledged that.

Harriet Cross: I want to pick up on the point about working with other parties to get a majority. The first thing that comes to mind is the SNP's venture with the Scottish Greens after the last election in Scotland. Would the hon. Member reflect on how damaging that was, particularly for north-east Scotland, whether we are talking about upgrades to our roads, or the impact on our oil and gas sector?

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention.

What I find more surprising is that we have had only one majority Government during the period of devolution, yet every Government, regardless of their colour, and every party that has been a part of government—except the Conservatives, who struggle electorally in Scotland, which speaks to the wisdom of the Scottish electorate—have served their full term. In my time as an MP, we have one minority Government, led by the Conservatives. It collapsed in a heap and cost the taxpayer £40 billion a year—there was more waste emanating from this place than the Scottish Government's entire budget, and the Conservatives bear huge responsibility for that.

On accountability, we sit in a Parliament where we have to pass an Act of Parliament just to get rid of a Member of the House of Lords. I have heard Members complain about those who sit in the House of Lords, be it Peter Mandelson or Michelle Mone. Are they accountable? Are they accountable to the electorate in the way that every single Member of the Scottish Parliament is? *[Interruption.]* I will happily give way on the point

[Stephen Gethins]

about Peter Mandelson if the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) wants to come in. No? Okay.

Every single Member of the Scottish Parliament is elected, and we could learn from that enormously in this place. It is a disgrace that it needs an Act of Parliament to remove a Member of the legislature, who has got a job for life, and I would love it if Labour would at long last deliver its 115-year-old manifesto commitment, but I fear we will be waiting at least another 115 years.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross on his speech, but I beg to differ with him on one area, and today I have to agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter): I do not think we should present the idea that the parent of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government should be minding its disappointing children. I am sure that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross would agree, on reflection, that the parent of the Scottish Parliament was in fact the Scottish people in the referendum; that has been acknowledged by all sides. I am sure that he will reflect on that.

To be fair, Westminster has not been much of a parent these past few years. We saw austerity during the Labour and Conservative years; we saw Brexit; and we see that our neighbours have much more powerful legislatures at sub-state level. The Faroe Islands, the Åland Islands and Greenland are sub-state, non-independent actors that can determine their relationship with the European Union, and can even determine whether they want an independence referendum.

The Scottish Parliament is a relatively weak legislature compared with others in Europe, but despite that, child poverty is reducing, and social security is dealt with respectfully. When the Labour Government made the woeful mistake in their opening days in government of getting rid of the winter fuel payment, the Scottish Government, with their limited resources, stepped up. The Labour Government have criticised the fact that Scottish Water is in public hands; that astonishes me, but it remains in public hands because of devolution, and the move towards 100% renewables came about because of devolution.

There are some areas where we can learn from Westminster. I have served on Committees in this place, and they work well. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross will be aware that, because of the structure that was put in place, Committees are part of the legislative process. There are always things to learn, and we need to acknowledge that.

Chris Kane: The hon. Gentleman has talked about the need for different legislatures to learn from each other. After 10 years of COSLA saying to the Scottish Government that funding for local government has been stripped to the bone, libraries are closing, swimming pools are closing, schools are underfunded, our teachers are at their wits' end in the classroom, and the ones who want to be in the classroom cannot get a job because there is not enough money. What has his party learned from COSLA, after 10 years of its pleas for local government to be funded better?

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Member sounds very helpless, but there is quite a lot he could do about things, since the overwhelming majority of the Scottish Government's finances still come from Westminster and the Chancellor. He will find that Scottish local government is in a better situation than its counterpart down in England, which has seen tremendous cuts from the Conservatives, and then from the Labour party as well.

Let me conclude on this. We should learn from each other. I look at all parts of these isles to see what we can learn. I have talked about Westminster, so let me touch on Wales. Members such as the hon. Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) were right to talk about Reform. Tomorrow there is a by-election in Caerphilly, which will reflect how people feel about what happens when Labour is in control of the devolved Administration in Wales. Looking at those polls, it is not for me to tell the people of Caerphilly how they should vote, but the hon. Member is right that Reform is a threat to devolution. I hope that Plaid Cymru wins in that election tomorrow given the threat from Reform and given that the other parties—Labour included—are so uncompetitive on that.

In this family of nations, Members are right to talk about a new relationship. Taking us out of the EU against our will was a profound change in that relationship. I was grateful to hear the concessions from the Secretary of State for Scotland today around an independence referendum.

Finally, I will reflect on the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross saying that nothing is forever. Nothing is forever. This place could not be forever in its control over Scotland, so let me finally bring this up: Labour and Liberal Democrat Members mentioned the claim of right for Scotland. The claim of right—I took this from a House of Commons Library paper—acknowledges the

“sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of Government best suited to their needs”.

That is something we would call for each and every day.

5 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Hon. Members may be aware that in May the people of Scotland sent 37 Scottish Labour MPs to this place—and a diverse bunch we are. It probably ages me to note that when my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) speaks shortly, he may talk about the referendum, and he will mean the one in 2014, when he was just too young to vote, whereas when I talk about the referendum, I mean the one in 1997, for which I was just too young to vote.

Of course, that 1997 referendum asked whether there should be a Scottish Parliament and if it should have tax-varying powers. At the time, I remember feeling that if I had been old enough to do so I would have voted yes to both. It was a long-held Labour manifesto commitment to bring decision making on hugely important issues—our health, education, community safety and economy—into the hands of the Scottish people. I still remember being in the car with my mum the day after the vote, listening to the news coverage and feeling excited that the result had been “yes, yes”. It felt like such a huge opportunity for all of us.

In his speech at the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, Scotland's then First Minister, the late great Donald Dewar, said that the Scottish Parliament was

"first a hope, then a belief, then a promise. Now"

it is

"a reality."

The question today is whether the SNP Scottish Government are using the reality of those significant powers they hold, together with record levels of funding—an extra £5.2 billion this year alone—to make the greatest possible difference to the lives of our people. I believe the answer is clearly no, whether through incompetence or by design.

The Labour-led Scottish executives, as they were when the Scottish Parliament was first formed, took bold decisions: banning smoking in public places, the fresh talent initiative and action on sectarianism—something that too often is overlooked in Scotland. They took action and, crucially, delivered results, and we need far more of that in our politics in Scotland.

Today's reality for many in my constituency, and across Fife and Scotland as a whole, has been bitterly disappointing after almost two decades of SNP division, diversion and failure. One in six Scots languish in pain on NHS waiting lists—over 40,000 of them in Fife. Indeed, more people are waiting over two years for NHS treatment in Glasgow alone than they are in the whole of England. A third of ambulances wait at hospitals for more than an hour while the patients in them wait for a bed. Last winter, medics at my local hospital, the Victoria hospital in Kirkcaldy, had to set up a makeshift ward outside the hospital, because the queues of ambulances were so great. SNP Members may not think that that matters—they may think it is a record to be proud of—but that is not what my constituents feel at all.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Victoria hospital is not in my constituency, but it serves my constituents. Does the hon. Member share my concern that the proposed downgrading of the neonatal intensive care units in both Dundee and Fife will mean that our constituents will have to travel much further for critical need, and that their premature babies will be far away from home?

Melanie Ward: I thank the hon. Member; I have seen the work she has been doing on this issue. It is essential that the special intensive care treatment available for premature and sick babies at the Victoria hospital does not change in any way. I wish the Scottish Government would get on and act to put at rest the concerns that our constituents no doubt share about that.

Jamie Stone: May I offer a warning from history? During the time of the coalition Government in Edinburgh, I pled the case for maintaining consultant-led maternity services based in Wick. No sooner did the SNP Government get in than the service was downgraded. Now mums have to travel huge distances to give birth, and the grisly fact is that one mother of twins gave birth to one child in Golspie and the other in Inverness. That is intolerable in this day and age.

Melanie Ward: I can feel the horror that the hon. Member feels for what his constituents have been put through because of that downgrade.

Johanna Baxter: My hon. Friend talks eloquently about the pressures on the health services in Scotland under the SNP Government. Does she share my concern about the dental deserts that now exist in Scotland? Just yesterday, a constituent contacted me to say that they had been told that their daughter would have to wait three years for an orthodontist appointment—or they could pay more than £2,000 and receive a private appointment in two weeks.

Melanie Ward: My hon. Friend makes an important point about something we see too frequently across Scotland: our people being forced to opt in to private healthcare because they cannot get treatment under the SNP's NHS. That is completely unacceptable. I know that similar waits exist for assessments for autism and for mental health support. There is a crisis across Fife and the Scottish Government are refusing to give NHS Fife the support needed to try to make a difference.

The problems do not just exist in our health system; sadly, they also exist in our education system. Our educational outcomes in Scotland worsened this year, with the gap in attainment between the richest and poorest students growing, including in Fife; that happened after Nicola Sturgeon said that eradicating that attainment gap was the priority on which she wanted her record as First Minister to be judged. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) said earlier, Scottish Government failure on the targets they set for themselves is a hallmark of their time in office. The same Nicola Sturgeon proclaims her love of literature at book festivals, yet she was part of successive Governments who have presided over the closure of almost 100 libraries in Scotland.

On skills, we saw the UK Government having to step in recently to save a welding skills centre because the SNP Government refused to do so. The SNP Government's indifference and often opposition to the highly skilled, highly paid jobs that the defence industry provides across Scotland and in constituencies such as mine has meant young workers missing out on the opportunity of a secure, highly paid job. It is also deeply irresponsible at such a dangerous time in the world, with Russian aggression in Europe right on our doorstep.

All those cuts stack up, while the bill to the taxpayer for SNP waste becomes ever more eye-watering: nearly £1 billion spent on Barlinnie prison, almost double the original cost; more than £400 million or four times the original estimate spent on two ferries, with one ferry still not in service eight years later; and let us not forget the costly shambles that was the deposit return scheme, flunked by the SNP and the Greens and described by the SNP's leader in Westminster, the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), as a "self-inflicted wound".

The purpose of devolution is supposed to be to take action in Scotland on Scotland's problems, and to help to make our nation the best it can be. Yet too often that is not the reality under this Scottish Government, as a couple of examples from my own constituency show. At the peak of summer this year, when many businesses in Kinghorn and Burntisland were looking forward to making the most of tourism season, because we are blessed by beautiful beaches, the beaches were closed because sewage spills made the water unsafe to swim.

[Melanie Ward]

Some of my constituents became physically sick because they had swum among sewage, yet the chief executive of publicly owned Scottish Water said over the summer that the concerns of my constituents “should not be overblown”. This issue has a real social and economic impact on people in my constituency, not to mention a health impact. It is the direct result of the SNP’s failure to invest in our sewerage network and in regular water-quality monitoring.

I wrote to the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy in August and received a response that began with a comparison between Scottish and English bathing waters. We are familiar with that: if we raise a problem in Scotland, we hear, “Well, it is worse in England.” Even if that were true, that is exactly why this Labour Government are taking tough measures to crack down on polluting water companies. Yet water quality is another devolved issue, creating significant problems that the SNP Scottish Government seem completely disinterested in solving.

Dr Arthur: My hon. Friend represents my home town, so it is always great to hear what is happening there. The UK Government inherited an awful situation from the Conservatives on water quality in rivers—that is beyond doubt—but in the UK we know how much sewage goes from sewerage systems into rivers. In my constituency, I have had dog owners concerned about what their dogs are eating on river banks, if I can put it politely. When I contacted Scottish Water, it could not even tell me the volume of sewage going into the rivers. Does she agree that this whole situation is unacceptable and that we have to discuss it more?

Melanie Ward: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The experience of dog owners in his seat has also been raised with me locally. In Kinghorn, some of my residents were promised action from Scottish Water five years ago, and nothing has happened. There is no justifiable explanation for that.

Another serious example is that of antisocial behaviour. Across Fife, this seems to be a growing problem. Just last week, some of my constituents were left terrified by appalling disorder involving up to 50 young people in Cowdenbeath. A police officer was assaulted, and residents in Cowdenbeath have said that they are scared to go out at night. I know my local police are doing their best to get on top of the issue and have a plan to try to deal with disorder that might take place over the Hallowe’en period, which residents are worried about. I have raised the issue with the local police inspector and discussed it with him, but the disorder was not an isolated incident. Surely it cannot be just a coincidence that this comes as police numbers across Scotland last year fell to their lowest since 2008. It is increasingly clear that more devolved action is needed in Scotland to tackle the problem of antisocial behaviour, because it makes lives miserable. We have to ask why it is not being taken seriously and why more is not being done about it by the Scottish Government.

I must say something about the number of tragic drug deaths in Scotland, which last year was the highest in Europe for the seventh year in a row. The National Records of Scotland has said that the total number of people dying from drug misuse in Scotland was more

than 10,000 over the past decade. Drug deaths in Fife last year were almost double what they were in 2010, each one of them a tragic waste of life.

I has a meeting recently with some of the residents of Linktown in Kirkcaldy, who have a particular problem with that issue. Residents are deeply worried; they told me about families in which mothers had had four children, but only one child now remained alive because of the scale of drug deaths and the problem that we have. That is one example of why it is so frustrating to hear the SNP continuing to chunter on about independence and trying to distract from the very real problems across our communities, rather than getting on and solving them.

We were told that the referendum on Scottish independence was a once-in-a-generation referendum, and the Scottish people gave their verdict very clearly. There are so many issues that the SNP’s mismanagement, neglect and under-investment have caused over the last almost two decades, yet the SNP continues to show almost no interest in fixing them and tackling the problems that it already has the powers to solve. It is long past time that the SNP took devolution seriously and used it to improve the lives of our people.

5.14 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for introducing the debate—it took us two goes to get here, but I thank him. I was inspired by his bravery in admitting that he was on the committee that oversaw the building of the Scottish Parliament, because I think it was 10 times over budget, but perhaps those are skills we can deploy to build ferries in Scotland. Perhaps they are already; I do not know.

It has now been 26 years since the Scottish Parliament was established with the promise of empowering our nation. For that to work, it has always been the case that the Government in Scotland need to have a can-do attitude. In the early years under Scottish Labour, the Government made significant progress, as we have already heard. We abolished tuition fees. We introduced a smoking ban, free personal care, and free bus passes for older people—that is one of my favourite ones—and we reintroduced the rail link to the Borders. One of the most amazing things that I read today was that during the 1999 to 2007 Parliaments, life expectancy in Scotland increased by 2.3 years. These are the wonders of a Labour Government. Of course, we also oversaw a vital expansion of social housing in Scotland, something that is needed today.

The pace of change during that era was incredible, as Scotland was finding its feet with its new Parliament, which felt like a bit of an experiment at the time but is now here to stay. In the two decades since then, however, the SNP Government have overseen a period of stagnation and decline across all of the same areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on including some positivity in his speech. Does he agree that we do not want my Gaelic brothers and cousins, the SNP Members who are sitting in front of me, to leave the Union? I want them to stay in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland forever, because we are better together. It is the money that comes centrally from Westminster that keeps the Scottish Parliament and its people going.

Something that perhaps has not been mentioned yet is that one of the advantages of devolution has been the tourism connections between Northern Ireland and Scotland—our cousins across the straits. Does the hon. Member agree that that is one of the things that is positive and good in the relationship between people from Ulster and people from Scotland? I am descended from the Stewarts of the lowlands of Scotland, so I am probably Scottish, maybe from before some people were—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Mr Shannon, I am sure we are all fascinated by from whom you are descended, but could I respectfully point out that Members who have not been in the Chamber for the bulk of this debate should not be making lengthy interventions?

Dr Arthur: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Earlier, we heard about how the Scottish child payment has cut child poverty in Scotland. That is something that we all welcome, but it has only happened because of the Barnett consequential that come to Scotland—because of those, public spending in Scotland is higher. If they were to go overnight, which some people want, Scotland as a whole would be poorer. I am convinced that Scotland will never vote to be poorer.

Getting back to the speech and my positivity, over the past year in this place, we have seen a real enthusiasm and energy about devolving powers to local democracy in England. That is something I see every single week on the Transport Committee—a lot of the powers being rolled out relate to transport—and we can see the difference that Andy Burnham is making in Manchester. It is a real shame that in Scotland, we do not see the same transfer of powers from the centre, Holyrood, into local authorities. Without a doubt, that is what is holding Scotland back.

The situation of housing in Scotland is particularly disheartening. After the Scottish Government declared a national housing emergency—one that they created through their cuts, but they did declare a housing emergency none the less—I expected to see a major and concerted effort to reverse the awful trend in the housing situation. Instead, the number of completed affordable homes fell this year by 22%, and new housing starts are also falling. There is a human cost to this. It is not just about statistics. In Scotland 10,000 children are living in temporary accommodation, and more people are living in temporary accommodation in Glasgow than in the whole of Wales. Those are incredible statistics, but we have to be careful: this is not a failure of devolution, but a failure of government.

Tourism, which was mentioned a few seconds ago, is a vital part of the Scottish economy, and a vital part of Edinburgh's economy—it must employ at least one person in every street. However, the lack of decisive action has been clear. The Scottish Government are too focused on accumulating powers rather than using them. I love Edinburgh, and I am proud that people come from all over the world to see it, but I am sometimes ashamed of what they see. The amount of tourism coming into the city does have an impact, and the city itself gains very little direct cash benefit from the tourism industry. The solution was, of course, a tourist tax—about which I know my Conservative friends have their concerns.

I was on Edinburgh council between 2017 and 2024, and throughout that time we campaigned for a tourist tax power. Indeed, I think the council campaigned for it for nearly 10 years in the run-up to that. However, for reasons unclear to me, the SNP Government opposed it. Since then, they have started to support it, and more recently they have tried to take the credit for giving Edinburgh a power for which it had fought for years. They should be apologising instead, because their dithering has cost Edinburgh millions of pounds that could have been invested in our city to make it better for its residents and for the tourists who choose to come here. The prolonged guddle around the tourist tax raises serious questions about the SNP Government's use of devolved powers.

Another fantastic example is the Scottish Government's powers relating to the use of fireworks. I accept that the powers on fireworks are divided between this place and Holyrood, but I have met police officers in Edinburgh who have lasting injuries caused by fireworks, and indeed I have met police officers and fire brigade personnel who have had fireworks fired at them. I have met someone who runs a care home that was besieged by young adults with fireworks. Nevertheless, the Scottish Government say that there is insufficient evidence for them to take action on the use of fireworks in Edinburgh. It is absolutely mind-boggling: they could act, but they choose not to do so.

However, the most concerning issue relating to the use of powers in Scotland is healthcare, which others have already mentioned. As we heard earlier, this is not about NHS staff—such as my wife—but about how the NHS has been resourced and supported. Cancer waiting times were mentioned a few minutes ago; in Scotland they have never been worse. The situation is quite incredible for people who are waiting and waiting for a diagnosis, and it should shame us all. As of June 2025, 7,800 patients in Scotland have been waiting for in-patient or day-case treatment for more than two years, and in Edinburgh the number is 979. That figure stands in sharp contrast to the NHS England figure, which I think has also been mentioned: only 161 people, in a nation of about 50 million people, have been waiting for more than two years. Is that not incredible?

Devolution was never simply about giving Scotland more powers. It was always about wielding those powers with accountability—that important word—and competence, which is another important word, to improve the lives of people in Scotland. Rather than just being held on to, the powers should be used, and should be deployed to local authorities. Talking of local authorities, another issue is council tax. One of the reasons the SNP won the election in 2007 was its pledge to scrap council tax, but we are still waiting for that to happen. “Scrap the hated council tax” is the slogan that we have seen on billboards.

The current SNP Government have demonstrated a complete inability to meet their fundamental responsibility. Another example is shipbuilding. That Government own a shipyard in Scotland, which is fantastic, but they choose to send their own shipbuilding contracts to Poland and Turkey. Meanwhile, it is left to the UK Government—and let us give credit to the great work done by the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) in this regard—to go to Norway to bring contracts to those Scottish yards. Where is the Scottish Government's priority when it comes to shipbuilding? It is non-existent.

Patricia Ferguson: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is ironic that it is only because BAE Systems won the contract with Norway that it is able to give work to Ferguson Marine, which is owned by the Scottish Government, to keep it going? At the time, the Scottish Government were saying, “We will not have anything to do with defence procurement.” The irony of that is appalling, given that people’s jobs are at stake.

Dr Arthur: Yes, I do. It is fantastic that the contracts came from Norway to the UK, and they will keep households in jobs for many years to come. It is a fantastic vote of confidence in that workforce and the whole supply chain, but the very, very quiet thank you from the Scottish Government was utterly shameful.

It is time for a new Government who will not just set ambitious targets, but deliver them and improve the lives of people in Scotland. People will not be surprised to hear that I think that new Government should be led by Anas Sarwar.

I want to make one last point. We have spoken about parent and child Parliaments, and about levels of government. There is nothing that we can do here today to improve the relationship between the Scottish Government and councils in Scotland, but when we talk about the issues in Scotland, we have to remember that there is not a hierarchy of councillors, MSPs and MPs. We are all elected by the same people, we are all equal and we are all here to serve those people. If we use that kind of language more in our constituencies, residents will come with us on the argument about empowering our councils to make a real difference in our communities. That is the devolution that Scotland needs.

5.26 pm

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I welcome this debate and thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing it. I am acutely aware that this debate is not just an opportunity for reflection on the past, but a chance to look forward.

Over the past two decades, the Scottish Parliament has grown, matured and become a symbol of Scottish life. Its importance and impact on the people of Scotland is just as relevant as the day-to-day activities in this place, and perhaps even more so. When it comes to policy on education, housing and the NHS—what people might consider bread-and-butter issues—decisions are now made in Edinburgh.

When the Labour Government passed the Scotland Act 1998, it was an opportunity for us to tailor policy and solutions to Scotland, recognising its distinct identity and character, and bringing power closer to the people as part of our Union of nations. Devolution is one of my party’s greatest achievements, and I am pleased that this Government are working to renew the settlement.

The success of devolution can be judged on two tests. The first is a technical test of its structure and principles. Devolution renews the UK constitution, rejecting an old, centralised model of politics that was and is unfit for a modern United Kingdom. On that first test, devolution has been an overwhelming success, but power for power’s sake is not enough.

The second test is very simple: what has devolution delivered? The past 25 years must be judged on whether people in constituencies like mine feel that a positive and material difference has been made to their lives. There are many success stories from the last 25 years—stories that are an argument in favour of power being shared and spread out across the UK. We were the first UK nation to ban indoor smoking and the first country in the world to legislate for the right to access free period products, as already mentioned. But although there are successes, those holding devolved power have not always used it for good.

I was a councillor in Glasgow before I took up my place in this House, and I witnessed how, year on year, the Scottish Government would centralise power and cut funding for local authorities. In this respect, resources were pulled up, not pushed down. To be clear, the outcome of the second test of delivery is not a failure of devolution, but a failure of the SNP in power.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Just to explain why Labour is not in power and we are, I will list a few things we have done for the Scottish people and see what the hon. Member thinks: free tuition, free personal care, 1,100—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. An intervention is not a list of items. What is the question? Is there a question?

Pete Wishart: Does the hon. Member recognise the over 100 SNP achievements? I could list them if she wants, but I am not going to be allowed to do so. Does she recognise the real gains and progress that we have made in Scotland? *[Interruption.]* I know Labour Members like to shout down SNP Members—they are sitting here doing their usual gurn fest—but our substantial achievements surely should be recognised by the Labour party.

Maureen Burke: I do recognise the achievements of the Labour Government. *[Interruption.]* Can I carry on, please?

When the SNP Government took power in 2007, they promised to eradicate child poverty, but child poverty rates are just as bad today as they were then. The inequality gap has widened in other areas, too. The gap in positive outcomes for school leavers from the most and the least deprived areas has grown. This is driven by a failure in our schools, where the attainment gap between the richest and the poorest pupils has also widened. A record 10,000 children, too many of whom are from my city of Glasgow, are trapped without a permanent home and are growing up in temporary accommodation as Scotland’s housing crisis deepens. One in six Scots are waiting on an NHS waiting list, with at least 100,000 waiting for over a year for treatment—disgusting! Compare that with how this Labour Government are bringing down waiting times in England.

Against a backdrop of failure, next year’s Scottish Parliament elections are crucial to Scotland’s future. The year 2026 represents a chance to ensure that the next chapter of devolution is defined by delivery.

Seamus Logan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maureen Burke: I will carry on, if the hon. Member does not mind, as I have nearly finished.

As I said at the start, the success of devolution can be judged on two tests. The first is about its structure and principles. I am pleased to say that devolution is now woven into the fabric of our nation, an achievement of which my party is very proud. However, on the second test—how devolved power has been exercised—I have concerns. That is why I am convinced that the only way to protect and enhance devolved power is for that power to be exercised by a Scottish Labour Government of vision and drive. The promise of devolution is the promise of a better Scotland, and I hope the people will vote for that next May.

5.33 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this important debate on the 25th anniversary of devolution.

My constituency of Edinburgh East and Musselburgh is home to many of Scotland's jewels. It is a privilege to represent Edinburgh castle, Holyrood palace and the Edinburgh festivals and fringe, although I think the performers are safe given some of the jokes we have heard from Opposition Members. However, the most important building in my seat—indeed, in the whole of Scotland—is at the foot of the Royal Mile. Not only is it architecturally a huge addition to Edinburgh's scenery, but it is where the Scottish political heart beats. Calling the Scottish Parliament the centre of Scottish political life may sound like a bland truism, but it is not. It is a huge achievement, and not to think so would be to underestimate the achievement of devolution. Before 1999, critics of devolution said that it would amount to an overgrown town council, cause a brain drain, or be of interest only to the political class, not ordinary Scots.

I am of the devolution generation: for as long as I can remember, devolution has simply existed. That devolution generation is now reluctantly facing middle age, but for us it has become a fact of life that the Scottish Parliament is the primary Parliament in which decisions that affect our lives are taken. The community groups and local businesses that I speak to orient themselves towards Holyrood. When they say “the Parliament,” they mean that place, not this one. That is testament to the Scottish Parliament's success in establishing itself as the fulcrum of Scottish political life.

However, we should consider a counterfactual. Imagine if devolution had been thwarted. Our health service, education and justice systems and housing policy would all receive only scraps of parliamentary time, with little scrutiny and even less reform. That would be a democratic affront even now, when the Government have 37 Scottish MPs, but it would have been an outrage over the 14 years under the last Conservative Administration, with little Scottish representation. The Scottish Parliament has its flaws, but it has undeniably remedied that democratic deficit, and in so doing, has removed one of the greatest threats to constitutional stability in Scotland.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for organising this debate—he is as much an institution as the Scottish Parliament itself. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) speaks about the Scottish Parliament being the heartbeat of

Scottish politics. Is it not time, in the next 25 years, to devolve power from Edinburgh to regions like mine and the highlands, to super-charge the Highlands and Islands Enterprise into a highland development agency, cutting out—shut your ears—those dynamos of economic activity, Inverness and the Moray firth, and to focus devolved power on transport, housing, depopulation and economic and cultural growth in rural areas of Scotland? Powers have been pulled back from them into a centralised Edinburgh.

Chris Murray: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The concentration of power in the Scottish Parliament does not work for cities, rural areas, the central belt or the highlands and islands, because it treats Scotland as one monolithic whole and does not address the differences in its communities.

That brings me to my next point. Although devolution has been successful in establishing the Scottish Parliament, we have to be honest about where it has fallen short. Many hon. Members have laid out a litany of failures: poorer health outcomes, falling schools standards that were once the envy of Europe, a housing emergency and stubbornly high poverty, and the drugs crisis, which shames us all. We once led the world in setting climate targets, but we now lead the world in ditching them. We must understand why that happened.

If we think of devolution only as the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, we get it wrong. In 1999, another institution was created—the Scottish Government, then the Scottish Executive.

Dr Arthur: I envy the jewels in my hon. Friend's constituency. The Scottish Government—and the Greens, who were complicit—really got climate targets wrong. The targets were set in law and endorsed via an election, but they dumped them overnight. Is that not one of the most shameful things to have happened in Holyrood?

Chris Murray: My hon. Friend gets exactly to the nub of the issue. We have seen good debate, gestures and discussion in Scotland, but we have not seen the concomitant focus on policy, delivery and outcomes. The Scottish Parliament has been a success; the Scottish Government have not. It is important to draw that distinction.

A highly centralised structure has concentrated decision-making in St Andrew's House, to the detriment of local communities. As we have heard, councils have had their funding and influence hollowed out. There has been a proliferation of quangos and agencies; there are now more quangos in Scotland than there are Members of the Scottish Parliament. That breeds a clientelism and elitism that shut ordinary people out of decision-making processes.

Wendy Chamberlain: The hon. Member is making a very strong and powerful point. Does he agree that, as a result of those quangos and the things he is describing, we have actually seen a loss of power to the Scottish Parliament, where MSPs are not getting the opportunity to put things forward? Often, that is because the Scottish Government are bringing forward framework Bills that do not have proper policy decisions, which is why the implementation of so many pieces of legislation ultimately fails.

Chris Murray: I think the hon. Lady may be psychic, because she makes exactly the point I am about to make. I could not agree with her more. What this breeds is a culture of gesture and tokenism. That means we side-step tough choices in Scotland. We duck the trade-offs that are required to implement policy change. We now have roundtables and co-production as substitutes for reform, and consultations and strategies as substitutes for action.

I would take that argument one step further. When Labour came to power in 1999, it set about tackling Scotland's pressing problems, as the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), referred to: free bus passes; banning smoking in public places; repealing section 28, for which I will personally be forever grateful; and pursuing radical homelessness and housing reforms. But fundamentally, that policy agenda had been developed in the 1990s and the Government set about implementing it when they got in.

When the SNP took office in 2007 with its fundamental policy goal of independence, all policy development was shaped around that objective. I have to say that the fact that independence has not been realised has become the alibi for every policy failure on its watch. What that means is that the Scottish Parliament never became the policy development hub in Scottish political life. It was denuded of its ability to form ideas and for those to be turned into action, and to do the full spectrum of policy development in Scotland, such as identifying social problems, working through how reforms would work, weighing up the trade-offs, brokering the consent among the people and then turning those ideas into tangible reality in people's lives.

I am a devolutionist not just because I believe in Scottish representation, but because I believe in the power of the state to change Scottish lives. The Scottish Parliament gave us the locus to debate that, but the Scottish Government have failed to give us the mechanism to operationalise and turn it into reality. It is my assertion that the Scottish Parliament now stands, along with Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights and the Good Friday agreement, as a firmament of the British constitutional set-up. Donald Dewar said it should be not just an end, but a means to a greater end. We have the means now, but it is lamentable that we have not used them to achieve those ends.

The last 18 years have been heavy on argument, short on policy delivery. A different direction is needed to fulfil the promise of devolution, which is the devolved Government using the power of the state not to further their own ambitions, but to materially improve the lives of Scotland's people.

5.42 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I congratulate my good friend the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this debate, which he led with the same erudition and success with which he led the victorious Scottish Parliament "University Challenge" team against our dear colleagues in the Welsh Parliament. Madam Deputy Speaker, this was an early win for Scottish devolution. I know that this debate is particularly close to his heart, as it is to the heart of my hon. Friend the

Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and to mine, as former Members of the Scottish Parliament, where we had the privilege to serve.

Today, more than 25 years after the Parliament opened in 1999, it is an appropriate point to look back over what has been accomplished through devolution. I remain proud that it was the 1997 Labour Government, through the Scotland Act, who paved the way to our Parliament. Since that principle has been established in Scotland, so many regions and cities across the UK have also embraced the principle of devolution with great success. As we look to the future of our constitutional settlement and reforms of this Parliament—independence for Scotland or further devolution is not the only constitutional debate we have—I hope we will see a greater role still for our nations and regions here, along the lines envisioned by Gordon Brown in the excellent report by his Commission on the UK's Future.

That we have seen devolution of power across the UK since the foundation of the Scottish Parliament is, I believe, a positive reflection on devolution in Scotland being the settled and tested will of the Scottish people. Since 1999, significant additional powers have been devolved to Holyrood, not least around income tax. It is so disappointing, therefore, that while the Scottish National party has been quick to demand greater devolution of powers to Scotland, it has been unable and unwilling to devolve power to local communities in Scotland. This debate is titled "Devolution in Scotland", but the sad fact is that there has been precious little devolution in Scotland under the SNP. Ministers in Edinburgh have centralised power at every turn and eviscerated the budgets of our local authorities.

What have the Scottish Government achieved with the powers they have so ruthlessly retained for themselves, instead of devolving them to local communities, and with the £5.2 billion additional funding given to the Scottish Government in the Budget this year? The SNP has presided over a rate of economic growth in Scotland that has lagged behind that in the rest of the United Kingdom, and it has failed to support our teachers and pupils. The reputation of our education system in Scotland—once the great pride of our country—has been battered because of the incompetence of SNP Ministers.

While NHS waiting lists in England are shrinking thanks to the investment secured by the Chancellor, and the successful stewardship of health services by the Secretary of State, Ministers in Scotland are squandering billions of pounds extra on our health services. In Fife, we face some of the longest waiting times for surgery anywhere in Scotland. The hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) mentioned the sorry statistics on drug deaths in Scotland. The issue is taking a tragic toll on many communities and families in my constituency. On the wider provision of health services, particularly with regard to primary care, it was frankly beyond belief to hear some of the promises made by John Swinney on walk-in appointments at GP surgeries. Lochgelly in my constituency is still waiting for any indication that work will begin on a new health centre that is badly needed by the local community. SNP Ministers first promised it more than 15 years ago.

We have also discussed the centralisation of police and fire services in Scotland. What has been its result? Certainly in my constituency, police numbers are being cut in the face of rising concerns about antisocial behaviour.

On fire and rescue services, Lochgelly faces the removal of a fire engine and a reduced number of firefighters, and another appliance is to be removed in either Glenrothes or Methil. It is no wonder that in a debate on devolution, SNP Members want only to talk about independence, given their woeful record in government under devolution.

What a contrast with what Labour Ministers in Westminster are delivering for Scotland, and what Scottish Labour offers next year—not a tired Government out of ideas, but a Government who will fix our NHS, restore our schools, close the opportunity gap, grow our economy and bring back community policing for safer communities. Labour will ensure that the record funding in public services in Scotland is not wasted, but actually results in the improvements that people expect, need and deserve. It is Labour Ministers who are actually devolving power on decision making, ensuring that communities have a real say in what will make a difference for them. Two pride in place schemes in Fife are bringing £40 million of investment into the communities where it is most needed.

In his famous address at the opening of the Scottish Parliament, Donald Dewar spoke of the

“shout of the welder in the din of the great Clyde shipyards”.

This Government have secured the future of 2,000 jobs at the Clyde shipyard with a £10 billion deal with Norway for new frigates. In my constituency, the Methil yard was saved from bankruptcy by the actions of this Government, as Ministers succeeded in ensuring that it was purchased by Navantia UK, along with Arnish in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton), saving the jobs of 200 skilled workers and apprentices in Methil, and allowing the yard to look to a bright future.

Dr Arthur: I fear that my colleague is being far too modest; he played a key role in saving those jobs. I can remember him, just after the election, pacing these corridors, fraught and worried. I pay tribute to him for all his work on this.

Richard Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those kind words. I am renowned for my modesty, as he knows. Equally modest are my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) and Labour Ministers, who did much work on these key issues for our local community.

In May, Scotland will have the chance of a bright future if it elects a new Government, who actually want devolution to work, with Anas Sarwar as First Minister. Scotland should replace a tired Scottish Government who have run out of ideas with new leadership that has already shown that it is ambitious for Scotland and ready to deliver on the promise of devolution.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): “Modesty” and “politicians” are not two words that you often hear in the same sentence. I call Brian Leishman—and I hope your cough is better.

5.50 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I appreciate it. I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing this debate.

The intense animosity that the Thatcher and Major Governments created made the prospect of more political power being based in Scotland highly attractive, but devolution has—so far, at least—been a let-down. The goal of taking meaningful decisions locally has not been realised, and that is pure political failure. Since devolution, local authorities’ ability to be vehicles for driving meaningful improvements to communities has been reduced because of underfunding. Power has been concentrated in big government in Edinburgh, and ironically the SNP has ended up repeating what happened under Thatcher and Major by diluting the influence of local councillors. Quite simply, communities need councils to be properly funded by the Scottish Government.

De-industrialisation, insecure employment, low wages and child poverty were all features of life in Scotland back in 1999, and they still are, because this year Scotland lost its oil refining capacity, meaning that hundreds of jobs are gone—and Grangemouth has pockets of the worst poverty in the country, according to statistics from the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Elsewhere, 25% of children in Clackmannanshire will go to bed tonight living in poverty. Imagine being born into poverty, and existing—not living—in poverty, unable to escape it. That is the reality of life for millions of Scots today.

Another thing that negatively impacts life chances and the possibility of social mobility in working-class communities like mine is the collapse of the Scottish further education sector under this SNP Government, which other Members have mentioned. We have seen flat cash settlements, and funding for colleges reduced by 20% over the last five years. The principal of Forth Valley college says that if funding does not change, the Alloa campus will close in 2026, with Stirling set to close in 2027, and Falkirk more than likely to close in 2028.

Living standards and life chances are plummeting in Scotland. The SNP Government have been in charge for nearly two decades. This is on them. If any nationalist dares say, “What about Wales?” or “The statistics are worse in England”, then they are showing themselves up. By using someone else’s poverty and hardship as some sort of perverse justification for the abject failure of governance in Holyrood, they show that they are not the bastions of socialism that they say they are. Socialists know that poverty is a political failure when it impacts any and every community.

The report card for the Scottish Parliament says that it must do better, but let us be honest: the fact that councils are underfunded and colleges are in crisis is ultimately not because of a failure of devolution. The failures are down to the people in charge: this SNP Government. For the sake of devolution and for the sake of Scotland, we need a change next May.

5.54 pm

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I welcome the debate, brought forward by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). As my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) pointed out, I am a member of the devolution generation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) said, some of us in that generation are still in our 20s.

[*Euan Stainbank*]

To the best of my knowledge, I am the first of Scotland's national elected representatives to be born after the founding of the Scottish Parliament. Reflections on the successes and failures of devolution over the last 25 years are critical to the devolution generation.

The constitutional settlement may still be under debate in some corners, but I hope that one thing that unites us across the House is support for a Scottish Parliament, democratically elected by the people of Scotland. The eternal words of the Scotland Act 1998—

“There shall be a Scottish Parliament”—

echo proudly; they are not just the long-won prize of campaigning by politicians from this place and across Scotland, but a definitive decision by the Scottish people that there will be an institution governing many of our priorities that is directly representative of the Scottish people.

The Scottish Parliament's existence has a far greater mandate than any individual politician or Government ever has or will have. In 1997, 80% of voters in Falkirk backed devolution. The first Scottish Parliament returned Cathy Peattie and Dennis Canavan as the two constituency MSPs for the Falkirk area—both people who have made an immense contribution to our public life. Devolution brought with it an electoral system that permitted a far preferable, if not perfect, representative voting system.

However, I say as a proud devolutionist that we cannot get caught in the trap of nostalgia, or defence of the status quo. Scotland's Parliaments and two Governments must always do better in the interests of the Scottish people. That is not only their core purpose, but an essential antidote to the enemies of democracy, especially now.

The perception of my generation, who have only ever known devolution, and have not known a world before the Scottish Parliament, is at a critical juncture. One of the most remarkable conversations I had recently was with a group of young carers in my constituency. They were buzzing with remarkable suggestions and clear, pragmatic ideas about how their community could be improved. Those included ideas for, yes, support for carers, but also for more accessible high streets, for safety for women and girls, and for public transport—all core competencies of their local council or the Scottish Parliament.

We should strongly welcome the fact that there is a burgeoning generation of young representatives and leaders in Falkirk and across Scotland, and many of them have direct life experience of the systems that the devolved legislature has governed for the last 25 years. The question for us and our colleagues in the Scottish Parliament is: how, in this next phase of devolution, will we empower that generation to lead, and to make better decisions than those who came before them?

What sticks out to me when I have these refreshing conversations with bright, young Falkirk bairns is how much young people tend to agree on the priorities; on how politicians should collaborate to deliver them; and on how Governments should do things. I see how reasonable young people are when holding politicians to account, and how much of what they want to do and see is relevant to their area. One of the greatest assets that we have in the devolution generation is a generation

who are engaged in their area, and who have the political language and skills to fight their community's corner. That is progress. Votes at 16, secured in 2016 for Scottish parliamentary elections, are now to be delivered here, under this Labour Government.

However, an element of trust in our politics is being eroded, uniquely in Scotland. The issue is structural and long-term. I have no qualms about stating that Tory austerity was a predominant factor in the decline that we have seen on various fronts in Scotland and across the UK, but my constituents see that the devolved settlement has not manoeuvred strategically or effectively to maintain an achievable rate of progress under those circumstances. The challenge faced under devolution is common to this place, too: it is a lack of delivery that my constituents can see and feel.

Over 10 years ago, the former First Minister said that she wanted to prioritise, and be judged on, closing the attainment gap, but she barely made a dent in it. That gap between rhetoric and delivery undermines the public's faith in Parliament as an institution, as does the lack of accountability afterwards, or the willingness to be held directly accountable for that failure.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): After a quarter of a century of Labour rule, child poverty in Wales is the worse than in all other nations of the UK. Is that the reason for the collapse in support for Labour in Caerphilly, and why, tomorrow, people will turn to Plaid Cymru?

Euan Stainbank: I imagine the people of Wales choose to vote in the same ways as the Scottish people do for the Scots. My hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) put it very well: simply picking a different nation in the UK to tackle our policy issues is getting exhausting, especially on the nationalist Benches.

Not all but part of the problem with the failure to close the attainment gap, as many Members have mentioned, and a broader loss of trust in our politics, were due to disproportionate budget cuts that have landed at the door of local authorities. Having been a councillor for two and a half years, I know that they are at the coalface delivering the services in which our constituents have most acutely seen the evidence of decline. Even though council tax had been frozen for 11 out of the last 17 years of budget settlements, I was completely surprised at the stunt at the 2023 SNP conference which left councils with both arms tied behind their backs. The challenges we see in social care and infrastructure are tied in with local authorities. This is where politics is most tangibly felt by our constituents and it is currently failing them. Even with a £5.2 billion increase secured by us on these Benches for Scotland, Falkirk Council was allocated only an additional £5 million in revenue funding this year from the Scottish Government. Where has the rest of the money gone, John?

Colleges in Scotland, as again my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth touched upon, are at crisis point. With years of systematic underfunding from the Scottish Government seeing a 20% real-terms cut in funding over the past five years, many colleges have now shrunk their staff numbers and offered fewer courses for working-class students at a time when the skills they provide are at their most valuable. Forth Valley college has been put in the position of being an

essential provider of training and skills, while Grangemouth undergoes an industrial crisis and requires major investment for transition. It is a hugely valuable local provider of jobs, opportunities and training, yet it is now consulting on the closure of its Alloa campus. Things are going in the wrong direction. Scotland's civic infrastructure should have been enhanced and resilient and protected by devolution, but in too many places it has not been protected.

On the situation at Alexander Dennis, when it announced its consultation on 400 jobs and closing its only site in Scotland, there was, to their credit, engagement eventually from the Scottish Government, but that was 10 months after the company initially suggested it was going to depart Scotland if something was not done about the scandalous ScotZEB 2 scheme—Scottish zero emission bus challenge fund—sending less than 20% of orders to Scotland's sole manufacturer. However, there have been improvements in how we in this place, under this Labour Government, work with the Administration in Edinburgh. As the Deputy First Minister accurately pointed out recently, the swift engagement from my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) in his time as Scottish Secretary was invaluable in ensuring that the conversation progressed quickly.

The truth is that when that sort of crisis arrives in one of our industrial assets—something we should all intrinsically value: a bus manufacturer that has existed long before the inception of the Scottish Parliament and long before any of us were around—action should have been taken much earlier, at strategic level, designing procurement through the powers the Scottish Parliament have to retain a pipeline of orders funded by taxpayer money for buses built in Scotland, not built in China.

Chris Murray: My hon. Friend is eloquently setting out a whole host of policy challenges that we face in Scotland, whether they are in industrial strategy, opportunities for the young or the provision of further education. Does he agree that when the Government of Scotland say that the answer to every single one of those challenges is independence, that shuts down any thinking on what we actually need to do to tackle the challenges and denudes Scotland of the ability to think through how we deal with the real issues that we face in our communities?

Euan Stainbank: I agree. It also undermines the message in section 1 of the Scotland Act 1998 that there shall be a Scottish Parliament with the powers to fix policy challenges. It is the reason we are proud devolutionists in this place: we want a Scottish Parliament that can address the issues under its competency. I agree that that reaction does shut down debate; it shuts down the idea that there is something better that we can achieve in all of our constituents' interests.

As I said on Alexander Dennis, we should never have been in a position where a company warned about the loss of a critical and necessary industry in Scotland, especially as we seek to achieve our net zero goals, and it took over a year for decisive action to be taken to prevent it, albeit I welcome that. A devolved Government with a serious interest in standing up for Scotland beyond its being a slogan would not and should not have let it get to that point. Across this place, in the Scottish Government and in our councils that have been hard-pressed for far too many years under a

Government who I hope get replaced next year, we must do better. Scotland demands better and Falkirk demands better.

6.4 pm

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing this important debate.

The last Labour Government had many remarkable achievements, including Sure Start, the national minimum wage and the Human Rights Act 1998, but right up there among our proudest was delivering devolution to Scotland. That was our vision, rooted in the belief that communities are best placed to make local decisions that shape their lives. I know this might age me somewhat, but I was proud to be active in the campaign for the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and campaign for a Parliament that had tax-varying powers. Indeed, I still have my "Yes-Yes" t-shirt to prove it.

We have seen the success of devolution in London, Manchester and Liverpool, with better transport, more house building and more investment in grassroots sports. When power is put in the hands of those who know their communities best, devolution delivers. Yet I fear that the obsession of the SNP Government in Holyrood with seeking to rerun referendum after referendum has paralysed Government north of the border. Their endless fixation on independence has come at the expense of delivery. They promised more homes but built a housing crisis; they pledged to strengthen our NHS but put party politics over patients; and instead of serving Scotland they have sunk to sleaze and scandal.

Councils across our country are on their knees after funding cuts year after year. Local government funding in Scotland over the last 18 years has fallen by 42%, which is less than it would have been had it kept up with inflation. In a summer interview promoting her catalogue of career failures, Nicola Sturgeon admitted that she might leave Scotland "for a wee while"—the great champion for independence now fleeing the wreck her party has created. While London, Manchester and Liverpool reap the rewards of devolution done properly, for the last 18 years Scotland has been left with a Government more interested in constitutional games than the real business of governing. Although that might be a game to some of those on the Opposition Benches, the consequences for my constituents are very real, and I will speak to one example.

While the Scottish Government have been handed the largest funding settlement in the history of devolution by this Labour Government, in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire South, the SNP-run health and social care partnership is swinging the axe on vital frontline services to plug a £19 million black hole in its budget that it created. Right now, it is holding voluntary severance talks across the partnership, cutting jobs and gutting and hollowing out services that have already been stripped to the bone.

Users of the Disability Resource Centre, which is a lifeline for people living with physical disabilities, many of whom reside in my constituency, now face a review of their fees and transport costs backdated to April. That potentially means bills of more than £1,000 hitting the doorsteps of some of the most vulnerable people in

[Johanna Baxter]

our community, driving them out the back door and slamming it shut on the vital services that they rely on across Renfrewshire.

Last year, the SNP locally was humiliated into a U-turn on a proposed merger of the Mirin and Milldale day centres after brave campaigners stood up to say no to cuts to the vital services their families rely on. Yet last month, the SNP dragged back the same cruel proposal, putting the same families through the same anguish all over again. It is cynical, it is calculated and it is downright cruel. Hon. Members need not just take my word for it. These are the words of Linda Murray, a member of the Renfrewshire Learning Disability Carers Group, who said last month:

“We knew it wasn’t a done deal last year. We basically got a stay of execution... We’re tired, we’re exhausted, it took a lot out of all of us and we expected to at least get a couple of years’ grace”.

We have seen it all before. Just like its endless independence obsession, the SNP ignores the will of the people and grinds our communities down until exhaustion delivers it the outcome it demands. That is not democracy; it is harassment of vulnerable families. The result is that the most vulnerable people in my community are robbed of the care that they rely on. That is not just a failure of leadership; it is a disgrace. The SNP lead for the local integrated joint board said:

“The IJB’s financial challenges have been well documented”.

I rarely say this of the SNP, but I happen to agree with her. Those financial challenges have been well documented, so why have the local SNP representatives not challenged their own Government in Holyrood to get them the money that they rely on, especially when the Government have been given such a generous financial settlement from this Labour Government?

In truth, it has been 18 wasted years—years of scandal, years of sleaze and years of division—while schools in my communities have been subject to decline, our hospitals struggle and our services face collapse. This is not about money, because the Scottish Government have the money. This is not about powers, because they have the powers. This is about excuses, and for the SNP Government in Holyrood, they have no excuses left. Scotland deserves better, our NHS deserves better, our local people deserve better, and next year, the people of Scotland can choose a new and fresh direction with a Scottish Labour Government led by Anas Sarwar.

6.10 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing the debate and for his thoughtful and reflective opening speech. Although the Scottish Parliament may be a place of hotly debated politics, the importance of Scottish devolution is unquestionable. It is right to refer to devolution and the Scottish Parliament as the “settled will” of the Scottish people. As predicted, it has become a cornerstone for Scottish democracy in the UK, but closing the political and social gap between the decision makers and the people those decisions impact upon cannot and should not stop at devolution from London to Edinburgh—from this place to Holyrood.

In recent years we have seen the benefits of further devolving power and funding to city regions across the UK, with the ability at local level to create and tailor policies to better serve communities. In Scotland, however, devolution appears to have stalled at Holyrood. In recent years, the SNP has followed the principle of “devolution for me and not for thee”. There seems to have been little appetite from the Scottish Government to pass power and more funding to the Glasgow city region and other communities across Scotland.

Devolution has effectively stalled. This is even though further devolution is the logical continuation of the principles of power sharing, representation and accountability that were pivotal in the creation of the Scottish Parliament in the first place. Such a continuation of devolution is important for the Glasgow metropolitan region—a city region with a well developed and established collaboration system. This includes the city deal—one of the largest in the UK—the UK Government’s shared prosperity fund and the city region innovation accelerator, to name just a few. These investments have already delivered jobs and major regeneration for areas across Glasgow city region. This is proof that the Glasgow region can handle more responsibility while also creating a case for more necessary accountability and governance.

The Glasgow city region is now at a point where the Scottish Government and the city region need to look at a range of policy areas and levers, including powers over transport, housing, skills, economic development and public service reform, and to devolve those appropriate powers to allow the Glasgow city region to tailor its policies to the needs of our communities. For our communities, this could mean better buses that turn up on time, people no longer on housing waiting lists for years and years, and more opportunities for neglected communities.

The devolution of powers and responsibilities must be based on strategic aims, providing the processes to deliver the policies to achieve those aims, and those processes must be accountable and transparent with robust governance, but all of this must be rooted in the outcomes that we want to achieve: to reduce inequality and poverty; to improve access to healthcare and improve health outcomes; and to create new jobs and opportunities.

A recent report by the Centre for Cities makes this case for further devolution, too. It estimates that if Glasgow performed in line with cities of comparable size, Scotland’s economy could be 4.6% larger. When I campaigned with so many others during the referendum in 1997 for the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, it was to devolve powers from this place as appropriate to the Scottish Parliament. It was not for those powers and responsibilities then to be hoarded by Holyrood; it was part of a wider process to devolve power down through local government and to communities and citizens.

During next year’s Scottish election, the Scottish people again have an opportunity to revitalise devolution. By electing a Scottish Labour Government with Anas Sarwar as First Minister, they can have a Government who are committed to the principle of devolution and who will deliver on the priorities of the Scottish people, instead of continuing with constitutional posturing. We can build on the successes of the Scottish Parliament and develop a stronger Scottish Parliament. It will be made stronger not by grasping on to powers but by devolving powers further. We can renew the commitment

to devolution, renew the commitment to empower communities and renew our direction—all of that in the service of the Scottish people.

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

6.15 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for bringing attention to the matter. As my colleagues have made clear, the Liberal Democrats believe in devolution. Our votes pushed it over the line in 1999, delivering a Scottish Parliament and taking decision making closer to the people.

We remain proud of that achievement, and we want that devolution to extend to councils and to communities, yet the sad reality is that the opportunities presented to Scotland by devolution have been squandered. Years of financial mismanagement, failed education reforms and endless NHS recovery plans have let Scots down. After nearly two decades in office, the SNP have proved every bit as adept at failing the people of Scotland as they have accused the Conservatives of being. We have watched the SNP divert half a billion pounds from green energy initiatives simply to plug budget gaps; through mismanagement, we have seen the squandering of another half a billion on ferries that were originally promised for less than £100 million; and worryingly, we have seen the party's own finances called into question. Conservative curtains and cupboards are clearly a no-go, but the SNP motorhomes are all right.

Despite those failures and the clear rejection of independence, the SNP continues to demand referenda. In 2014, the “time was right” and the people of Scotland said no. In 2016, the “time was right” again and the courts rejected it. In 2025, it repeats the same mantra. A vote once described as once in a generation has become once in a Parliament. Instead of working for the Scottish people, it flogs the same tired cause.

The Liberal Democrats offer a different vision: a fair deal for Scotland within a strong federal United Kingdom. We want decisions taken as close to local communities as possible, empowering them to shape their future, but co-operation at the federal level is vital to tackle the challenges we face as a nation. This is why the Liberal Democrats want a joint council of the nations to drive innovation and co-ordinated action to tackle the climate emergency. We want to secure agreement through the common frameworks and a fair dispute resolution process so that differences between Administrations are resolved maturely, not through endless political games. We want stronger joint ministerial work on issues such as the industrial strategy to ensure that every nation's voice is heard in shaping our economy.

That kind of co-operation delivers results. We should draw on the strengths of all four nations, not tear them apart and play politics with people's futures. Scotland deserves better than the uncertainty it has experienced. It deserves co-operation, certainty and a Government who listen. I look forward to the Scottish elections next year, with more Liberal Democrat MSPs entering the Scottish Parliament to work hard in the interests of Scottish people of all ages.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland.

6.19 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this debate—at the second attempt. I know how important devolution in Scotland is to him, a signatory of the claim of right and a founder Member of the Scottish Parliament, and that he wants to see it work better for the people of Scotland. I remember the day the Scottish Parliament was reconvened, in the words of Winnie Ewing. I was not quite as young as some of today's contributors, but I was still at primary school. It was a seminal moment. I am from one of those generations of Scots who cannot really remember a time before there being a Scottish Parliament. As somebody who has worked in the Scottish Parliament, it is a place for which I have great fondness.

The machinery of devolution, set in motion over a quarter of a century ago, was intended to bring decision making closer to the people, to empower communities and to enhance accountability. It was never meant to be a stepping stone to separation, nor a shield for poor governance. When we assess devolution, we must consider whether it has brought power closer to communities, whether it fosters accountability and whether it delivers essential services for Scots and across Scotland to a high standard.

Under the Scottish nationalists, the system is not delivering for Scotland. The creeping transfer of powers from communities to Holyrood undermines the core ambition of delivering power into local hands. While the civil service in Edinburgh is fed to the point of bloating, power is usurped from local authorities and delivered to centralised decision makers. In 1995, the Labour shadow Secretary of State for Scotland predicted that devolution would kill separatism “stone dead”, that delivering power to the Scottish Executive, then creating a Scottish Parliament, would satiate the separatist appetite. Sadly, that has turned out not to be the case.

In 2015, in the wake of the failed bid for independence, the Smith review was commissioned to set out provisions for greater devolution. From that experiment, we now know that it matters not how much is given; it will never be enough for the nationalists. The nationalists in Scotland bray out for more, more, more while delivering less and less and less. Today I implore the Minister, the Secretary of State and this Government to be brave and stand firm in support of our United Kingdom and move away from the “devolve and forget” mentality.

Stephen Gethins: The Labour party did some analysis that showed that Liz Truss's mini-Budget cost homeowners in the UK £336 billion—about five or six times the budget of the Scottish Parliament. What impact does the hon. Member think that had on devolution and trust in this institution?

Andrew Bowie: When the Scottish Parliament was established, and when the Scottish Executive, now Government, were created, I think the Scottish people expected it to do a bit better than continually comparing its record and role to the role of the UK Government. People are frankly fed up of, “England is doing worse,” and would like some accountability and responsibility to be held by those who have been elected to Holyrood and, indeed, hold power over vast swathes of life in Scotland.

[Andrew Bowie]

We all agree that some mistakes were made under the last Conservative Administration—some—but that does not in any way excuse the hon. Member for never once standing in this place and resiling from or showing any contrition about the litany of mistakes and the sheer disaster that has befallen some of the public services that our constituents, represented by most of the MPs in this room, have to suffer day in, day out. That includes falling standards in education and Scotland's NHS, fewer local services, libraries closing and transport infrastructure failing to meet even the level at which it was at in 1997 when the referendum was held. We acknowledge our mistakes and acknowledge that we did not get everything right over the last 14 years. It would be quite nice if one day a Scottish National party Member of Parliament was able to do the same about their Administration in Edinburgh.

Scots face the highest tax burden anywhere in the UK, with little to show for it. Under the Scottish nationalists, the standard of services—education, healthcare, policing—has taken a severe blow. Waiting lists grow longer, Police Scotland faces cuts, violence in schools is rising, and outcomes in education and health lag behind those in England. Despite more funding per child, Scottish pupils are falling behind. Despite higher per capita spending on healthcare, life expectancy is lower and more patients wait over two years for treatment. The NHS in Scotland has recovered less well from the pandemic. The challenges of rurality and deprivation are real, but they are not excuses. Under the Scottish nationalists, Scots pay more and get less.

Let us be absolutely clear: devolution is not the problem. The problem is the party in power in Edinburgh—a party that clamours for more powers, more control and more devolution, yet fails to deliver on the powers it already holds; a party that centralises, duplicates and bloats the civil service in Edinburgh while outcomes deteriorate. Just last week we heard the broken record of the SNP regurgitating plans to tear apart our United Kingdom, including reports of £10,000 of taxpayers' money spent on a pro-independence propaganda campaign. I would like to ask the Government whether they plan to get a grip on that and prevent the Scottish Government from spending UK taxpayer money on research and advertising on their obsession with independence. It is time for the SNP to focus on the priorities that matter to Scots.

Devolution of greater powers over welfare were implemented through the Scotland Act 2016, yet here we are, nearly a decade later, still seeing statutory instruments coming through Westminster to tidy up the unfinished business of devolved welfare responsibilities. The duplication, the inefficiency and the inefficacy are staggering, and that is only the beginning.

The failures of the Scottish Government under the nationalists are not a foreign concern. One of the problems that has resulted from devolution is that Scottish, Welsh and the majority of Northern Irish issues fail to be debated on the Floor of this House. School performance crashing down the international tables; rising antisocial behaviour; falling police numbers—these are not just Scottish issues, but issues for all of us in this United Kingdom.

The Conservatives will no longer accept a “devolve and forget” mentality. It has allowed the Scottish Government to evade scrutiny and accountability for far too long. My MSP colleagues, led fantastically by Russell Findlay in the Scottish Conservatives, work tirelessly in Holyrood to hold the SNP to account, but it is also our job here, in the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom, to do that.

Were it not for bold and correct decision of the Conservative Secretary of State, Alister Jack and the now Leader of the Opposition to stand up to the absurd Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, we would have biological men in women's spaces—prisons, refuges, bathrooms and changing spaces. By the way, although the Bill was implemented and brought forward by the Scottish National party, it was supported by Scottish Labour. It also appears to be supported by the Reform party, according to their justice adviser. The Labour party has since conceded it was wrong to support the Bill, which prompts the question of whether they read it at the time.

We in the Conservative party will not stand by in this place while drugs deaths ravage communities in Glasgow, while children from deprived backgrounds suffer the most from poor educational opportunities in a schooling system that was once the envy of the world, or while the concerns and safety of women and girls in prisons and protected spaces is ignored and trivialised. We will not stand idly by and allow the Scottish nationalists to fail Scots so tremendously. We refuse to devolve and forget.

Twenty-five years on from the creation of the Scottish Parliament, it is time to take stock and reflect on the successes, but also on the failures, of that institution and its Government. It is time to evaluate not just the structure of devolution, but the performance of those entrusted with its powers. We remain committed to devolution, but the Conservatives will not shy away from asking whether the current settlement is delivering for Scots.

6.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): I welcome today's debate on devolution. At its heart, it is really a discussion of how we deliver better outcomes for the people of Scotland. That objective has long animated the public service of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). I am grateful to them for securing this debate, and particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West for the very moving tribute she paid to our departed friends Donald Dewar and John Smith.

I am incredibly proud that Labour is the party of devolution and that it was a Labour Government that delivered the Scottish Parliament in 1999. I do not wish to pay tribute or give thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) or for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) for their trolling about the fact that they did not, like so many of us, come of age during that devolution debate. I am proud to say that a vote in favour of a Scottish Parliament was the first ballot I ever cast, and since that time I have never wavered in my belief that Scotland's interests are well served by being part of our Union of

nations, while at the same time having a Parliament in Scotland that can reflect the distinctive interests and needs of Scotland.

Those of you who can cast your minds back to the beginning of this debate some hours ago may remember that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West made some important points about what we might be able to learn from the operations and procedures of each Parliament. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross mentioned that he would like Ministers to be more accessible, so I give the undertaking on the Floor of the House that I hope in myself and the Secretary of State you will always find Scotland Office Ministers accessible to you—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. “You” is me.

Kirsty McNeill: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope Members across this House will always find us accessible to them and willing to make their constituents’ case across Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West said she felt that we should spend less time in the Lobby. I underscore that I am delighted to be spending so much time with you all in the Lobby—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Them all!

Kirsty McNeill: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker—my mistake.

The hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) said that he would like to focus some of this debate on the state of the health service in Scotland, and we would be delighted to address that. As we have heard repeatedly on the Floor of the House today, if people live south of the border, they experience more and more appointments being available and waiting lists going down; if they live up the road, one in six of them is on a waiting list. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray), who I thank for her service in the NHS, relayed that so movingly. My hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) did likewise and spoke movingly about the experience of patients in her area.

The hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) talked about paused capital health spending in her constituency, and I am very sorry to hear that. I advise her to ask the SNP Government about the record settlement they had in the devolution area and where the money, which could have been put to good use for patients in her area, has gone.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), asked this Government to be unequivocal in our support for the United Kingdom. I am pleased to confirm that we are, but we recognise that support for this family of nations is partly dependent on the delivery of this Government in Westminster. We are resolutely focused on delivering for Scots and cleaning up the mess that his party left.

The shadow Secretary of State’s party colleague, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), accused us of focusing too much on trade promotion—

guilty as charged. We could almost taste the envy about the three trade deals secured under this Government. I am pleased to confirm that we will continue to promote Scotland’s world-class products and services to the world, and we will do so proudly and without apology.

John Cooper: The Minister will agree that the work on those trade deals was begun under the previous Administration.

Kirsty McNeill: Credit for those trade deals sits with those who got them over the line. This is a Labour Government who have delivered comprehensively for Scotland’s world-class producers and services, and we are delighted to have done so.

The hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) said that we should really be having a debate about accountability, and I agree with him. We have more quango chiefs than MSPs in Scotland, because it is actually very difficult to hold to account those who deliver public services and spend public money in Scotland. That is why Anas Sarwar is so intent on bringing back accountability to elected Members.

Stephen Gethins: On the point about accountability, in the Scottish Parliament all parliamentarians are elected. Following that, does the Minister think that all parliamentarians should be elected in this place as well?

Kirsty McNeill: We are focused on the priorities of the people of Scotland. We constantly have constitutional questions and questions about second-order concerns from the Opposition Benches, but we will resolutely focus on jobs and pay in Scotland, as we were elected to do.

My hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes), for Falkirk and for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) laid at the SNP’s door the charge, which I agree with, that the SNP is much more interested in devolution to Scotland than devolution inside Scotland. I argue that devolution is a habit of mind—one that the SNP is yet to acquire, so interested is it in centralising power in its own hands in Edinburgh.

Devolution in Scotland has always been about ensuring that our distinctive voice is heard in the United Kingdom, and this Government have continued in that vein since taking office. We have reset the relationship with the Scottish Government to be one based on delivery and partnership, but the question now is about how Scotland’s two Governments, together with our local communities, can best seize the opportunities granted by artificial intelligence, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, defence and the digital industries. Despite the insistence of Opposition Members, we cannot do that through division or constant constitutional wrangling.

We heard from Opposition Members that they would like to return to the days—the 14 years—when the SNP and the Tories had a symbiotic relationship in which each served the other’s political ends because they were locked in a dance of grievance, rather than having a focus on delivery.

Our approach as a Labour Government is different. We say that we may not agree on everything between different levels of Government, but we can and must agree on more, enough to make a difference to the people we serve. We have already seen results from having a

[Kirsty McNeill]

Labour Government with Scots at its beating heart: the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation, with a pay rise for 200,000 of the lowest-paid Scots; a new industrial strategy to ensure Scotland takes advantage of the jobs of the future; GB Energy, with investment to drive the clean energy revolution; up to 60,000 clean energy jobs in Scotland by 2030, an increase of 40,000 from 2023; £200 million secured for the industrial future of Grangemouth; a historic deal worth £10 billion to supply Norway with Type 26 frigates; a trade deal with India that is set to grow the Scottish economy by £190 million a year; the highest settlement for the Scottish Government in the devolution era; and a £292 million Pride in Place investment to regenerate Scottish communities. That is what delivery looks like.

Let us contrast that with the record of the SNP, which was so poignantly pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) and the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray). There is much about Scotland's economy to be proud of, but we on the Labour Benches are under no illusions: it has underperformed, and has particularly underperformed in the service of working people, as my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Kenneth Stevenson) and the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) pointed out so eloquently. If Scotland's growth in the past decade had even matched the sluggish growth of the UK as a whole, our economy would be nearly £10 billion larger today. That is a decade of lost opportunity, lost jobs and lost potential.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) was right that we should differentiate failures of devolution from failures that sit squarely at the SNP's door. We need a new approach, one that involves Scotland's cities and regions and local government, but the SNP's desire for highly centralised power instead of responsive and active local government in Scotland has led to the accountability crisis we have already discussed. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) have done a fantastic job of explaining the role and desires of local government.

Patricia Ferguson: It is very interesting to hear my hon. Friend outline so succinctly how Scotland could be better served if the UK Labour Government's policies were copied elsewhere. I believe that symbols can sometimes be very important, so does she agree that the fact that there are more Labour Scottish Ministers sitting on the Front Bench than there are SNP Members attending this debate says a lot about people's priorities, and about the priorities of this Government compared with those of the SNP?

Kirsty McNeill: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. At the last election, we promised to maximise Scotland's influence, and this is what that looks like.

The calls we have heard from leaders across Scotland are clear. Local government leaders are not just asking for money, but for powers—powers over skills, transport and growth—to unlock the full potential of their regions. They are really asking for genuine accountability to the

people they serve. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West and the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross have both highlighted, there are problems with accountability and scrutiny in how the Committee system in Holyrood has evolved away from the desires of those who founded the Scottish Parliament. They have warned that Committees that were intended to be the backbone of scrutiny in the Scottish Parliament are too often dominated by the governing party, and lack the independence needed to really hold the Executive to account. Their view—which, as founding Members of the Scottish Parliament, carries much weight—is that without stronger and more robust Committees, devolution cannot deliver as the architects of the Scotland Act intended.

As has been said many times this afternoon, devolution was never meant to be an end in itself. It was always supposed to be a means to improve lives, not with division, but through co-operation. If we can focus on our common purpose across this House and between all levels of Government—if we focus on stronger growth and fairer opportunities—Scotland can truly be at the heart of UK prosperity.

6.38 pm

Jamie Stone: Looking back to a much younger version of myself going to my first meeting of the Scottish constitutional convention in 1989, I never would have dreamt then that I would lead a debate of this nature in this place, but here we are. I thank from the bottom of my heart all Members who have made contributions, and I hope that from time to time, the present Scottish Government—or any Scottish Government—will look in the mirror and think, “Are we doing things right?” I hope that *Hansard* is looked at, read and thought about, because there is room for improvement.

I leave you with one last thought, Madam Deputy Speaker, which may take colleagues by surprise. There have been repeated references to someone during this debate. I remember getting into the lift in Holyrood on my first day there after my election in 1999. A tall, gangling figure was in the lift. He looked me up and down and said, “And who exactly—um—are you?” That was Donald Dewar. When I said who I was, he said, “Ah! We had had hopes of that seat, but I am sure we shall work together in a very satisfactory manner.” And we did.

I have had conversations with Labour Members about this, but I am not aware of any image of Donald Dewar in this place. Given that this was a man who made such an extraordinary contribution to the constitution of these islands, that may be something that the Art Committee might want to think about.

Patricia Ferguson: I am sure you will take this in the spirit in which it is intended, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I have to tell the hon. Member that unfortunately that request has been rejected by the Art Committee. I am not sure that I will necessarily take that lying down, as he would imagine, but it has been rejected as things stand, and I thought it important for him to know that.

Jamie Stone: Well, well, well, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know the hon. Lady well and I doubt very much that she will take it lying down, and I am sure that she will

have the support of others. Whether we see devolution as a means to an end called independence or see it, as I do, as a way of improving services in Scotland, I think we should all honour that particular man.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am not sure that it is entirely in order to correct the record, but there are, in fact, images of Donald Dewar in the parliamentary collection.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered devolution in Scotland.

Mental Health and Hoarding

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

6.41 pm

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate on a subject that, to the best of my knowledge, has never been discussed on the Floor of the House before.

I often speak of my 25 years as an NHS nurse because that experience has fundamentally shaped my understanding of the hidden struggles within our communities, and it is from that perspective that I raise the urgent and often misunderstood issue of hoarding disorder. Many years ago, as a district nurse serving the Kingstanding community—the same community that I am now proud to represent in Parliament—I entered homes where extreme clutter was not an anomaly but a visible sign of a deep, unaddressed need. Today, we have a name for it. In 2018, hoarding disorder was formally recognised in Britain as a distinct mental health condition. It is defined by persistent difficulty in discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of value, leading to cluttered living spaces and significant distress or impairment in daily life.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend speaks very effectively about hoarding disorder. As she has explained, it is a mental health condition in its own right, although it is often confused with obsessive-compulsive disorder. One of my constituents spoke to me about her husband, who has completely filled the living room with items that he just cannot discard. Does my hon. Friend agree that whether it is related to OCD or to another condition, hoarding not only disrupts the lives of the individual who goes through the anxiety and trauma of the condition, but affects others around that individual?

During Prime Minister's questions this morning, we heard that one in four of us will suffer from a mental health condition. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to increase mental health support to make it easily accessible and enable it to provide effective treatment, and that such earlier intervention can avoid the deterioration of the condition?

Paulette Hamilton: My hon. Friend raises a valuable point. I will come on to that later in my speech, but I absolutely agree that hoarding disrupts people's lives.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady for bringing forward this issue. She is a dear friend of mine, and I always look forward to her contributions to this Chamber and Westminster Hall. I often think of a TV programme on this subject. Perhaps I did not always understand the obsessive behaviour of hoarding, but that TV programme opened our eyes to it, and helped us understand it. The makers of the programme not only showed the problem, but how to bring about a solution. That is what I always loved about the programme: it started off with a problem, but ended up with a solution.

Paulette Hamilton: The hon. Member is right, but this is not just about a solution. A number of people in our society are living with a mental health condition,

[Paulette Hamilton]

and it needs to be treated. At the moment, there are no strategies in place, but I will answer his question as I go on. I thank him for his contribution.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for securing tonight's debate. I have met York's Community Bees, who have developed strategies for supporting people in the community. They dearly need money, because they are not only addressing mental health needs but de-risking a situation. Hoarding risks infection, infestations, fire and structural damage to homes, so they play a really crucial role.

Paulette Hamilton: Again, my hon. Friend raises a valuable point. The issue of financing is vital, but I will discuss that more as I go on.

Hoarding disorder is a widespread condition affecting between 2% and 5% of the population, which equates to approximately 1.2 million to 3 million people in Britain. Let me be absolutely clear: hoarding is not a lifestyle choice, or a matter of laziness. It is a complex mental health condition, deeply rooted in emotional distress and underlying trauma, often stemming from adverse childhood experiences. For hoarders, it can result in unsafe living conditions, social isolation and a diminished ability to manage day-to-day responsibilities. If left untreated, it has a huge cost for families, the NHS, housing providers and emergency services.

On top of that, hoarding is a long-term condition with few effective treatment options, meaning that behaviours are often left unresolved. My professional experience showed me the heartbreaking reality of individuals drowning in clutter, their mental health deteriorating and their relationships broken. Dealing with hoarding can be very time-consuming and expensive. Providing support falls disproportionately to ill-equipped local authorities and overstretched third-sector organisations, such as Birmingham's Clouds End CIC, led by the inspirational Heather Matuozzo.

The challenges can be broken down into four key areas. The first area is public health and safety. Hoarding does not just hurt individuals, but has knock-on effects on the entire community. The hazardous living conditions that it creates, from severe fire risks and blocked escape routes to unsanitary and unsafe housing, pose a direct danger not only to the individual, but to their neighbours and the brave professionals, firefighters, social workers and others who are called in to intervene.

The second challenge has to do with public awareness and education. We cannot combat what we do not understand. We urgently need to educate our communities, and our frontline professionals working in social care, housing, health and the emergency services, to recognise hoarding as a mental health issue, so that we can reduce stigma and promote more compassionate and effective intervention.

The third challenge has to do with mental health and support gaps. Mental health services and treatments that address hoarding specifically remain scarce and underfunded. Many people affected feel reluctant to seek help because of stigma, lack of awareness, or fear of eviction or other legal consequences. Closing this support gap is not optional; it is essential.

The final challenge concerns the legal and housing implications. Housing providers can be faced with challenging legal situations in which tenants' hoarding behaviours lead to breaches of tenancy agreements or safety policies. Unfortunately, these cases are too often handled through eviction or legal action, rather than support being provided, so that the root causes of the problem can be addressed. We need policies that balance legal responsibilities with compassionate mental health support. As a society, we have a responsibility to support those living with hoarding disorder. In Birmingham, the number of people needing support has risen exponentially since the covid pandemic, and the story is the same across the country, as Members have highlighted. The seriousness and scale of this issue demands a co-ordinated national response, led by Government. We need a national strategy to bring consistency, reduce risk and improve lives.

The current legal framework is simply not fit for purpose. The Care Act 2014 recognises that people who hoard may be considered vulnerable or entitled to advocacy. However, there are no national guidelines for the agencies that encounter hoarding in their work. Without guidance, responses to hoarding will remain inconsistent and ineffective. In the absence of national guidelines, agencies are forced to rely on outdated legislation, such as the Public Health Act 1936, which refers to "filthy or verminous premises". Under these powers, a person can be forced to clear their property, even if they own it. If they cannot afford clearance, it is undertaken on their behalf and charged to the property. This approach is deeply flawed. It treats hoarding purely as a practical or environmental issue, rather than recognising that these are vulnerable human beings in need of help. Failing to recognise hoarding as a mental health condition risks traumatising individuals, worsening hoarding behaviours and, in the most extreme cases, contributing to suicidal thoughts. The human impact should not be understated. Lack of proper support and compassion leads to further trauma, distress and a greater risk of re-accumulation.

National guidelines would provide clarity on what constitutes appropriate and effective practice, a consistent framework for agencies across the UK, a balance between addressing practical risks and meeting underlying mental health needs, and clear routes for advice, support and specialist referral.

That brings me to my central ask of Ministers. We need a co-ordinated national strategy for hoarding disorder. Although the Care Act 2014 provides a foundation by recognising vulnerability, the absence of specific national guidelines leads to a postcode lottery of care, and to inconsistent and often ineffective intervention. A national framework would provide clarity, consistency and compassion by balancing risk management with mental health support and establishing clear pathways for specialist help.

I was proud that the Labour manifesto committed to recruiting 8,500 extra mental health staff, and to delivering a transformative 10-year plan for mental health. It is essential that those welcome initiatives explicitly include and address hoarding disorder.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous with her time. Community Bees in York has helped 600 people over the past seven years. It has a lot of expertise, not just in how to sensitively support

people in decluttering, but in upcycling; it makes a positive contribution by selling things on. It has sold 7,000 books, and collected 5,323 items from landfill and passed them on. That not only helps people who have hoarded, but contributes to the future. Does she agree that that should be part of the holistic model?

Paulette Hamilton: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely brilliant point. Yes, that should be part of the holistic model, but there is no model in place at the moment. It is like the wild, wild west—everybody is just doing as they see fit. That is why I secured this debate.

I urge the Government to prioritise the development of national guidelines, in order to equip all frontline workers with the tools to identify and address hoarding compassionately and effectively; to ensure a truly integrated, multi-agency approach that brings together mental health services, social care, housing and emergency responders; and to invest in research and data collection, so we can properly understand the scale, causes and economic impact of hoarding in the UK, and ensure that our policies are evidence-based and our resources are allocated wisely. In my nursing career, we were taught that prevention is always better than cure. That holds true for hoarding. Early intervention is more humane and more cost-effective than crisis response.

This issue has remained in the shadows for too long. We have a duty to bring it into the light, to replace judgment with understanding, and to offer a hand up to the millions of our citizens who live with this devastating condition. I look forward to hearing in the Minister's response how the Government intend to lead this vital change.

6.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton), who is vice-chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, for securing this debate. I pay tribute to her for her work on that Committee, on which she has consistently championed the voices of the unheard, and for her 30 years' service in the NHS as a district nurse. As she was speaking, I recalled that, as a medical student at the University of Glasgow, I had the pleasure of spending a lot of time shadowing district nurses. I always found them to have the perfect mixture of clinical acumen and a sixth sense of something being not quite right. She displays those attributes in abundance.

My hon. Friend has been true to form in raising the issue of hoarding. This disorder is, by definition, kept from public view. Although it is often overlooked, it has a profound impact on the lives of the affected, their families and their carers, and, of course, on local services. Too many suffer in silence. I thank Hoarding UK, Clouds End and Clutterers Anonymous, to name just a few of the charities that do so much to support people up and down the country.

For too long, hoarding has been seen as something quirky, or perhaps even comical, but the disorder is neither a joke nor a rarity; it is a complex and often misunderstood condition that can have devastating consequences for people's mental and physical health. Often, it is a portent to investigating further mental wellbeing and illness.

Estimates vary, but research suggests that between 2% and 3% of the UK population, as my hon. Friend adumbrated, may be affected by hoarding behaviours. These are often associated with traumatic life experiences such as bereavement, divorce or eviction. People who hoard can experience deep emotional distress, guilt and anxiety. The clutter in their homes often represents emotional pain, memories or attempts to regain control.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Dr Ahmed: The impact of hoarding can be severe. The clutter can compromise hygiene, strain relationships and pose safety risks, so let me be clear: these people deserve compassion and support from this Government and from every corner of society.

My hon. Friend asks whether the Government will introduce a national hoarding strategy. There are no plans for a specific strategy, but we absolutely recognise that people who hoard must have access to the right support. At the moment, that requires more co-ordination than is currently in place. As she knows better than anyone as a district nurse and an independent lay manager, mental health services have been decimated over the last 14 years. This Government are doing the hard yards of rebuilding those services while transforming our mental health system, so people can access the right support at the right time and indeed the right place. Through our 10-year health plan, we have set long-term reforms to make mental health a core priority of the NHS and to move from crisis care to prevention and early intervention.

This transformation will include: investing up to £120 million to expand the number of mental health emergency departments to 85 across England; a modern service framework for severe mental illness to support consistent high-quality and high-value care; and, as my hon. Friend mentioned, recruiting 8,500 new mental health workers across the NHS to increase capacity and make sure help is available where and when needed.

We are already piloting six 24/7 neighbourhood mental health centres, which will bring together a range of professionals and imbibe that holistic concept—professionals such as psychologists, peer support workers, housing specialists and employment advisers. The pilots are testing out mechanisms that will enable that whole-team approach to capture people who otherwise remain hidden, including collaborative planning of care and treatment, communication and engagement, single patient records and shared outcome measures. This joined-up approach presents an opportunity for people, including those with hoarding disorder, to be identified and to get holistic support and treatment, and then to better join up between social services and mental health support.

We know, too, that there are people in contact with social care right now who have a suspected hoarding disorder. Digital social care records, which have been implemented by 80% of Care Quality Commission providers, are already improving that quality and safety, and that personalisation of care. We are also investing in the development of a national infrastructure for social care, which will lay the foundations for ensuring greater interoperability and integration between care

[Dr Ahmed]

and health services, so that, again, fewer people slip through the net, as is often the case with hoarding disorders.

People who hoard may be isolated, may not recognise their behaviour as a problem and may be reluctant to engage with services. That is why safeguarding plays such an important role. The Care Act 2014 and its statutory guidance make clear that self-neglect, which explicitly includes hoarding, is a safeguarding concern. Where a local authority has cause to suspect that an adult appears to be at risk of self-neglect and is unable to protect themselves as a result, that authority must carry out a safeguarding inquiry. The purpose of that inquiry is to establish what action is required and by whom, and to keep that person safe and ultimately get them the support they need. The guidance also advises that each case of self-neglect should be assessed on an individualised case-by-case basis. Professionals, whether social workers, carers, housing officers, emergency services or clinicians, have a responsibility to spot the signs, raise concerns, and support people and direct them towards help.

One of the most effective treatments of hoarding disorder is cognitive behavioural therapy, otherwise known as CBT. CBT is a form of talking therapy that helps individuals to understand the thoughts and feelings that influence their behaviour and supports them gradually to make practical changes to their living environment. Through NHS talking therapies, people with a hoarding disorder can access evidence-based psychological interventions such as CBT.

This Government are expanding access to talking therapies this year and have committed to continuing this expansion over the coming years. We aim to increase the number of people completing a course of talking therapy by 384,000 by the end of this Parliament and to increase the number of sessions someone can access, meaning that more people will be able to access timely and high-quality mental health support in their local area, and that these services can be accessed not only through their GP, but through self-referral.

We know, however, that accessing these services can be difficult for those who feel isolated or who feel shame about their condition. As advised by national charities, therefore, during National Hoarding Awareness Week, we encourage friends and family members of people suspected of having a hoarding disorder to gently encourage them to speak to their GP, who can help to assess their needs and refer them to the appropriate mental health and community support. No one should face this condition alone.

Of course, hoarding can also be associated with serious mental illnesses, including severe depression and obsessive compulsive disorder, which can require more specialist or intensive forms of support. That is why the Government are transforming services for people living with severe mental illnesses by investing in new models of integrated community care, expanding priceless support and increasing access to physical health checks and tailored interventions.

At its heart, this debate is about dignity and compassion. We are talking about members of our own communities who deserve the same compassion, care and support as anyone else with any other illness. The Vice-Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington, deserves real credit for her work on this issue. We will continue to work with her, mental health professionals, voluntary organisations and people with lived experience to smash the stigma while improving access to care.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. From listening to, meeting and engaging with those from York Community Bees, I know that their big cry is for funding. These people are specialists in the work that they do to support my residents, but they need funding. Will the Minister send a message to commissioners to ensure that they commission these support services?

Dr Ahmed: My hon. Friend brings a great deal of experience in these matters to this House. I can certainly give her an assurance that as part of this Government's 10-year health agenda, we encourage all commissioners to commission strategically on the basis of what will prevent ill health in the long term. I believe this issue is an exemplar of where we could think about commissioning mental health services differently to try to pick up the signs earlier.

For too long, people with mental health conditions, including those who hoard, have not received the understanding or support that they deserve. I want to end, however, on a note of optimism. With love from families, patience from friends and the ongoing support of charities and third sector organisations, countless people with hoarding disorder have managed to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives. We will continue to work closely with these partners, local authorities and charities to ensure that this Government are also playing our full part.

Question put and agreed to.

7.8 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 22 October 2025

[Dr RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

Financial Inclusion

11 am

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): As this is a 30-minute wonder, there will be no time for a concluding speech from Martin Rhodes. I remind other Members present that they cannot make a speech; they can only intervene, with permission from the Member who has the floor.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered financial inclusion.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. We need a financial system that removes barriers to accessing affordable financial products and services. Those on lower incomes, older people, those with health issues and people with disabilities all have unique needs that an inclusive financial system should be engineered to support. The Building Societies Association reports that 14 million people have less than £100 in savings. According to Fair4All Finance, there are certainly more than 20 million people in financially vulnerable circumstances in the UK.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. In my constituency of Southend West and Leigh, nearly 30% of people who are financially vulnerable are in the “squeezed and sliding” group—people with mortgages and rent commitments but on a low income and, most importantly, with limited savings. Does he agree that more needs to be done to encourage saving for a rainy day, perhaps including an opt-out payroll savings scheme?

Martin Rhodes: I agree that we need to do more to encourage savings, but we also need to encourage the incomes that are required for people to make those savings.

The driving reason for this level of financial exclusion has been attributed to an increase in low or unstable incomes, lack of savings and life events such as loss of work or bereavement.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. I am a firm advocate of local credit unions that provide access to affordable loans and help with learning how to save. Does he agree that financial inclusion must be available in small villages and towns through sound help and advice? Does he also agree that banks need to come back to the villages and stop the centralisation of services, which isolates people from the guidance they need?

Martin Rhodes: I agree that we need to look right across the board at the different ways in which people are excluded from financial services, including people living in smaller villages and towns. I also agree about the importance of credit unions to financial inclusion.

It has been reported that 41,500 people in Glasgow North are in financially vulnerable circumstances. That is 44% of the adult population, which is far higher than the national average of 38%. With financial exclusion increasing, the Government must take steps to mainstream inclusive policies and practices in our financial system, which is why I support the Government’s appointment of the Financial Inclusion Committee and the soon-to-be-published financial inclusion strategy.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that the publication of the Government’s financial inclusion strategy is welcome, given the urgency of the circumstances that many people face? For example, 37,000 people are affected in my constituency of Watford, and we are higher than the national average in three major metrics of need for this vulnerability.

Martin Rhodes: I agree that the financial inclusion strategy is a very welcome step in developing, co-ordinating and implementing interventions to support financial inclusion in the UK.

Subsequent policy decisions stemming from the strategy will have to work for a broad range of groups in society. Many face financial exclusion for different reasons, including older people, disabled people and young people.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important subject. In Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, 30,000 adults—40% of the population—are financially vulnerable. That is higher than the national average, and it is hitting older residents and carers especially hard. There are too many forgotten families struggling to access credit, savings and insurance. The upcoming financial inclusion strategy is a vital chance to make a change. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to work with the Government to ensure that those communities have the financial safety nets they need to thrive?

Martin Rhodes: I agree that we need to make sure that all communities have access to financial services, wherever they are and whoever they are. Everybody needs access to those services. I will welcome hearing from the Minister later about the financial inclusion strategy.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I hope that the hon. Member agrees that the Financial Conduct Authority’s work on access to cash is a useful step in the right direction. Does he also agree that provision should be widened to include face-to-face services, whereby people can see someone across the counter and receive advice?

Martin Rhodes: I certainly agree. Later in my speech, I will come on to the issues of access to cash and face-to-face financial services.

All the groups that I have mentioned face barriers, but an area of particular concern that I wish to focus on this morning is financial inclusion for disabled people. Much of my thinking on the issue has been informed by the hard work of the Advisory Group, or TAG, a Scottish charitable incorporated organisation run by and for people with disabilities and abilities. Glasgow TAG’s banking campaign steering committee came together in response to growing frustration among TAG members about how banking is excluding them, both in terms of

[*Martin Rhodes*]

access and in terms of treatment. They have highlighted to me the very real financial exclusion that they face in everyday life.

A key issue that the group has raised with me is access to cash. Many members rely on cash for daily budgeting. The shift to card-only businesses and the closure of free-to-use ATMs are leaving people unable to spend their own money. Quarriers, one of Scotland's largest social care charities, reports that 76% of people with learning disabilities rely on support with their finances, and the same proportion use bank cards to withdraw cash. In my constituency, we have seen a 22% decrease in free-to-use ATMs between 2019 and 2025. This has created cash deserts, where communities are left without access to cash machines, and those that remain often charge for withdrawals or are inside premises with closing times. I hope that the Minister will engage with the issue and acknowledge the importance of continued free access to cash for financial inclusion.

The second issue that TAG has raised is discrimination in branches. TAG members have shared experiences of being ignored in favour of support workers, denied access to their own accounts or treated with suspicion. There is a strong feeling among TAG members who have spoken to me that financial institutions are not doing enough to meet their obligations under the Equality Act 2010. Will the Government consider supporting mandatory disability awareness and equality training in banking institutions, to help prevent such incidents?

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the House this important topic, which is very close to my heart. I have had a lot of representations from disabled constituents in Hampstead and Highgate who are very worried about similar issues to those that he describes. They are also worried about the poverty premium in the insurance market, which I am sure my hon. Friend will touch on. Does he agree that any future inclusion strategy needs to address the poverty premium that exists in the insurance market, especially for our disabled constituents who have urged us to make a difference to their life?

Martin Rhodes: Yes, I agree that we need to look right across the whole range of financial services, including insurance, as well as those that we have touched on. Exclusion from one service can often lead to exclusion from another and then another. Failing to get access to one service means that people are less likely to get access to another, and the problem becomes greater.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is totally unfair that many people, including many constituents of mine, find themselves excluded from some of the best utility deals because they do not have a bank account, so they are unable to pay by direct debit? Effectively, that cuts them off from some of the best deals that are available across a range of products and services.

Martin Rhodes: I agree. Financial exclusion has a cumulative effect: if someone is excluded from one financial service because they do not have access to a bank account, they may well find themselves excluded

from others. As my hon. Friend says, they may be unable to pay for utilities or other services by direct debit, which would allow them to get the best deals. That cumulative impact is a very big issue.

The last issue that has been raised with me by TAG members is digital exclusion and branch closures. The transition to online banking is simply not accessible for many TAG members, and the closure of local branches has made it harder to get support in person. With the closure of high street banking, we are seeing the loss of the important face-to-face contact that can support people with learning disabilities with access to financial activities.

I support the Government's work with industry to roll out at least 350 banking hubs that will provide communities with critical cash and banking services. I would welcome any reflections from the Minister on what the Government are doing to ensure that digitalisation does not leave people behind and to support the role of banking hubs. I acknowledge that for many people digital access increases the ability to get services, but for others it does not. That shows the need for a range of ways to access financial services, so everybody can access them.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate and for highlighting the importance of addressing branch closures. In the market town of Halesworth in my constituency, the post office closed its doors for the final time last Saturday—I have been pressing the Post Office for a replacement facility as soon as possible—while Barclays, which is the only bank provider in the town, will cease its weekly facility at the library in the coming weeks. This reinforces his point about the importance of banking hubs as a potential solution for in-person support. Will he reiterate the importance of the Government speeding up the roll-out of banking hubs, particularly for rural communities?

Martin Rhodes: I agree that there is a need for face-to-face services. Many people rely on that face-to-face support, so access to banking services through banking hubs is important. I welcome the Government's roll-out of the hubs, and I look forward to what the Minister has to say about how the scheme will be developed.

Beyond the issues that TAG raised with me, there are many other disabled groups with particular needs, such as blind and partially sighted people. The Royal National Institute of Blind People has reported that only two in five blind and partially sighted people manage their finances independently, and over half of those who do not do so say that it is because of their sight loss. The common reasons that they cite are a lack of confidence and facilities no longer being available. Other experiences of financial exclusion that they report include information not being in an accessible format, a lack of trained bank branch staff and a lack of digital literacy for the transition to digital banking. That is just one example that shows how a truly inclusive financial system will have to be tailored and adaptable to the needs of a diverse range of people.

These are reasons why the financial inclusion strategy must be informed and shaped by the experience of people with disabilities and abilities. The Government must facilitate a proper dialogue between banks and

disability groups. Disability-sensitive staff training is needed. Access to cash needs to be protected, including with more free ATMs and inclusive banking hubs. More broadly, the Government must tackle barriers to individuals' and households' ability to access affordable and appropriate financial products and services.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): My partner, who is a financial adviser, often tells me that people come to her far too late in life, when they are in trouble. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to be more inclusive with education on finances, to gear up the next generation to support themselves, set up pensions and so on?

Martin Rhodes: I certainly acknowledge the need for financial education from an early age, so that people understand the system. One of the areas of exclusion is the fact that people just do not understand what financial services and products are. We need to ensure that people understand their options and can explore them.

Even if we addressed all the issues with financial inclusion that we have raised in this debate, there would remain fundamental issues of poverty and inequality in our economic system. The pervasiveness of loan sharks, the lack of access to affordable credit and the heightened cost of living crisis, which have eaten into many people's savings, all contribute to an exclusionary financial system. I look forward to the publication of the financial inclusion strategy, but also to the publication of the child poverty strategy, alongside action to reduce poverty, promote equitable growth and increase opportunities for all. If we get all of that right, we can build an inclusive financial system for all. I know that the Minister takes these issues seriously; I look forward to her response.

11.16 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) for securing this important debate and for giving me the opportunity to discuss a topic that is integral to the ability of his constituents, my constituents and all our constituents to participate not just in our economy, but in society as a whole. I also thank other hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. From the number of interventions that have been made, it is clear that this is a very important issue to all of us throughout the House.

I think we can agree on the importance of ensuring that everyone across the UK has access to appropriate and affordable financial products and services. I really do appreciate the strength of feeling on the issue. I know that some Members present will have had the opportunity at recent party conferences, as I did, to engage with the likes of Fair4All Finance, the Centre for Social Justice, Rooted Finance and other organisations.

I pay tribute to TAG, the charitable organisation in my hon. Friend's constituency that he mentioned, for the incredible work that it is doing to promote social inclusion for disabled people. I recognise the importance of that work and the need to go further to ensure that our financial system works for everyone; I will return to that point.

As my hon. Friend has set out, some of the statistics on financial inclusion in the UK are sobering: 900,000 people still do not have access to a bank account, 10% of adults

have no savings, and another 21% of adults have less than £1,000 to draw on in the event of an emergency. When it comes to digital inclusion, which he raised, 3.3 million people—7% of current account holders—do not bank online or use a mobile banking app. However, I believe that this Government are on the cusp of making a real difference in that regard via the publication of our national financial inclusion strategy. Through that strategy, we can open up access to the right financial services, build households' financial resilience and transform our constituents' financial wellbeing.

However, I must stress that although the Treasury will publish the financial inclusion strategy, Government alone cannot solve some of the issues that we have been discussing today. We need a joint effort across industry, regulators and the third sector. That is exactly why I, along with my immediate predecessor—my right hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds)—and my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq), have developed our financial inclusion strategy, with the support of a committee made up of consumer and industry representatives.

The committee has been considering a range of barriers faced by those who are financially excluded, as well as three important, cross-cutting themes—economic abuse, mental health and accessibility. The latter theme is particularly relevant to the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North has raised. He will appreciate that I am slightly limited in what I can say before the publication of the strategy, but I can confirm that the fact that accessibility is a cross-cutting theme has been important to the development of the strategy. It has prompted the committee to look closely at the role that inclusive design can play in improving accessibility for underserved groups. I also want to make it very clear that we will publish the strategy before the end of the year.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): A key part of financial inclusion is supporting young people to be included and ensuring that they have essential skills, including financial literacy. Has the Minister spoken with any colleagues in the Department for Education about how we can make sure that young people have the right essential skills, including financial literacy, as part of the strategy?

Lucy Rigby: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that we have had those discussions. I hope he will see the evidence of those discussions when the strategy is published, and I hope he will see them in a positive light.

I will now address the Government's position on banking hub services and branch closures, in response to some of the points that have been raised today. I will then come on to some of the other points that have been raised, particularly discrimination in branches, which we must deal with, and digital exclusion.

As one would expect, the Financial Inclusion Committee and its sub-committees' discussions reflect the fact that banking services have changed remarkably in recent years. Many people, including our vulnerable constituents, have benefited from digital innovations that have enabled them to bank more conveniently and securely at any time and from anywhere. Last year, the vast majority of current account holders—93%—used online or mobile banking services. That includes 75% of over-75s. At the

[Lucy Rigby]

same time, reliance on physical branches has declined significantly. However, the Government are clear about the importance of face-to-face banking to individuals and communities, and are committed to championing access for all. That is why we are working closely with the banks to roll out 350 banking hubs by the end of this Parliament. More than 180 have already opened across the country, offering vital access to cash and everyday banking services.

We have also worked closely with the industry to improve the services that are available at those banking hubs. That includes ensuring that customers do not have to bring their own phone or tablet to access banking support, as well as a commitment to trial the use of printers, enhancing accessibility. We are committed to continuing to work with industry to ensure that banking services in hubs deliver the support that customers require.

I receive regular correspondence about the location of hubs. Hon. Members will know that the location of hubs is set by the Financial Conduct Authority's rules, which protect access to cash. Although the Government do not have a role in that decision-making process, my predecessor and I have met with Link very regularly. Indeed, I have a meeting with John Howells coming up, and I regularly feed in hon. Members' views.¹

Turning to discrimination in branches, I will specifically address the experience of the customers shared by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North. It was, frankly, hard to hear some of those negative and no doubt damaging experiences. I want everyone to feel valued and respected in their interactions with financial services. I know we would all wish that.

As my hon. Friend knows, all service providers, including banks and building societies, are bound by the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments where necessary. In addition, under the FCA's consumer duty, firms must identify where customers or groups are not getting good outcomes, and they must understand why. Although I set out that framework, we would always encourage people to contact their bank to explore reasonable adjustments to the services they might require. It is important that people know that if that is not happening, they have a right to contact the Financial Ombudsman Service.

Earlier this year, the FCA published a report setting out areas for improvement in how financial services firms support customers in vulnerable circumstances, including those with learning disabilities in particular. The FCA highlighted in the report that most firms could not evidence how they had embedded the needs of customers in vulnerable circumstances into their product design, which is something we are determined to see change. As I have mentioned, in developing our strategy we have been looking at the role of inclusive design in developing financial inclusion. There has been really positive work to improve the way that financial services work for disabled people, so it is critical that we build on that.

I want to highlight briefly the work of Project Nemo, which was founded in 2024 to address digital accessibility and the under-representation of disabled people in financial services. Project Nemo's research demonstrates that inclusive features can support those with learning disabilities to

manage their money with greater independence and develop products that are more accessible for all. We are determined to build on the good work that has gone on previously to deal with the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North raises.

I want to address digital inclusion and the points that my hon. Friend raised in that regard. We recognise that digital exclusion can be a significant barrier in how consumers are able to access and use financial services products. That is why digital inclusion is an area of focus in the financial inclusion strategy. It has been specifically considered by its own sub-committee, alongside issues around access to banking services. The strategy, which hon. Members will be able to see in due course, will examine what more industry and Government can do to help address the problems and ensure that everyone can engage with financial services and manage their money in what we all know is an increasingly digital society.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is the lead Department for digital inclusion. Earlier this year, it published a digital inclusion action plan that focuses on digital barriers beyond financial services, including digital skills and confidence—issues raised today—and widening access to devices and connectivity, providing support through local communities.

I have addressed the matter of financial education, but I also want to touch briefly on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate about the insurance market. I can confirm to her that insurance is in the scope of the financial inclusion strategy. As she knows, there is other work going on, including via the motor insurance taskforce, which is looking at the issues she raised—specifically, the cost of motor insurance to all our constituents.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): PwC analysis has shown that one in three adults in the UK struggle to access mainstream credit, largely due to poor or just thin credit files. That is causing a huge financial inclusion problem, especially for young people trying to get a mortgage. Will the Minister meet me to discuss ways we can improve that situation in collaboration with industry, for example through the reporting of rent payments to credit reference agencies?

Lucy Rigby: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those issues. I said at the outset that the financial inclusion strategy is considering cross-cutting themes. The issue of credit rating agencies has come across my desk outside the scope of the strategy, in relation to economic abuse. As he knows, there are serious issues with people—women in particular—having their credit rating affected as one impact of economic abuse. That is something that I am extremely interested in and that we are looking at. Indeed, the committee is looking at it as part of the financial inclusion strategy.

I will close by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North for his continued championing of financial inclusion. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for raising their points today. Some raise financial inclusion with me very regularly via correspondence or via conversations in the voting Lobby and elsewhere. I very much appreciate their doing that, and I encourage them to continue to do so as we seek to address these serious issues, which affect not just our

1.[Official Report, 3 November 2025; Vol. 774, c. 5WC.](Correction)

constituents' ability to engage with financial services, but their ability to participate in societal life as a whole. I want to thank again—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Korean War: 75th Commemoration

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 75th commemoration of the Korean War.

May I say what a pleasure it is to have you invigilating our proceedings, Mr Twigg? This debate is about North Korea, but it is also specifically about the 75th commemoration of the Korean war, in which we took part. I have just discovered that this morning North Korea fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles into the East sea, just a week before President Trump's visit to South Korea for the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit. I think North Korea may well also have done so because it had heard about this debate. [*Laughter.*] I pride myself on that, rather than APEC, being almost certainly one of the greater reasons why it did so.

It is a great privilege to open this debate on the 75th anniversary of the Korean war. The world today is yet again at a crossroads between democracy and the axis of totalitarianism and authoritarianism, as we have not been since the fall of the Berlin wall. Over 81,000 British servicemen fought in the Korean war, providing the second largest military contribution to the United Nations Command after the United States, which is something that people rarely talk about. Over 1,100 of them never came home, which is more than the total British losses in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Falklands combined.

Among their most heroic stands was the battle of the Imjin river in 1951. There, 652 men of the 1st Battalion the Gloucestershire Regiment faced three Chinese divisions, numbering at least 42,000 men, in one of the most courageous defences in British military history. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) will no doubt share in detail, those brave Gloucestershire men held the UN line for three days against the overwhelming Chinese spring offensive. When the battle ended, of the 652 men who fought there for those three days, 67 walked away. The rest were killed or captured, and the name Gloster Hill was etched forever into history, although too often schools do not remind everybody of the sacrifice that they made for those who now live free.

Today, only a few veterans of the Korean war remain with us here in the United Kingdom. One of them, Mr Scott, shared a story later recounted by his son in Stockport:

"Of all the campaigns I fought in, Korea was the one that affected me the most. One night, I was called out on a reconnaissance mission I didn't want to do. But when I returned to my platoon, they had all been wiped out."

His son, Mr Steven Scott, reflected:

"My father was deeply affected by the Korean War. He had served in the Army during the Second World War and was called up from the reserves for the Korean War."

Their sacrifice, courage and service secured freedom for one half of the Korean peninsula, a freedom that the democratic world still cherishes today. The other half remains in darkness, suffering under the most brutal

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

regime on earth; it is hard to imagine the brutality of that leadership. We must ensure that their sacrifice is honoured and remembered by generations to come.

Many young people around the world today enjoy K-pop, K-dramas and the vibrant culture of modern South Korea, yet without the sacrifice of those who secured its freedom, none of that would be possible. In stark contrast, totalitarian Pyongyang denies its people access to the internet, mobile phones, YouTube or social media, and those who are caught watching anything from the south or from the outside world face imprisonment or even execution.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. It is worse than he says in North Korea. If someone is caught committing any of these minor crimes, such as listening to a memory stick from the west, it is not only they who are imprisoned; it is their entire family. That is almost invariably a slow death sentence, because they will then be worked terrifically hard without adequate food.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a shocking concept. A state like that is run for the purposes of the leader, their military chiefs and nobody else. I will come back to some of those figures.

It is worth reminding ourselves that poor Lord Alton, the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on North Korea, is languishing in hospital with a broken back as a result of an accident. I am sure that otherwise he would be watching this debate. We send him our best wishes.

Since the uneasy armistice in 1953, the Korean peninsula has stood as one of the world's most volatile and divided regions. It is a grey zone between two vastly different states. In June 2019, the world watched as President Trump shook hands with Kim Jong Un and took 20 steps into North Korea, becoming the first sitting US President to set foot in the hermit kingdom. Just a single line of concrete blocks in a heavily militarised zone separates two nations and millions of lives—a division between freedom and tyranny. That must serve as a warning, especially in light of the war in Ukraine, that we must all do what we can to ensure that history does not see another divided Korea.

In the south, a democratic and prosperous nation has arisen, which is now the world's 13th largest economy it is one of our most important allies and friends, with which we fought shoulder to shoulder during the Korean war. Our partnership was further underlined in November 2023 when His Majesty King Charles III welcomed President Yoon and the First Lady of the Republic of Korea for a state visit to the United Kingdom, celebrating 140 years of diplomatic relations. During that visit, both nations reaffirmed their collaboration in diplomacy, trade, vehicles, military co-operation and artificial intelligence. We must continue to strengthen those economic and strategic partnerships with South Korea, Japan, India, the United States and other democratic allies to ensure that our prosperity and freedoms, which we too often take for granted, are not undermined by the rising threat from the authoritarian states that I have listed: China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, to name but the key ones.

What of the north? While half of the Korean peninsula enjoys freedom, the other half remains under totalitarian rule. It continues brutally to repress its own people. In his recent book “The Dictators”, Iain Dale observes that the Kim family's dictatorship ranks among the 10 most brutal and evil in history, alongside those of Mao, Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot. That reality is consistently reflected in global human rights and religious persecution indexes. Organisations such as Open Doors UK, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Aid to the Church in Need and others continue their vital advocacy, reminding the world each year that North Korea remains the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian. It is a nation in which human rights are trampled daily and persecution remains unmatched, topping the world watch-list year after year.

Just 12 days ago, North Korea marked the 80th anniversary of its ruling Workers' party, inviting delegations from China, Russia, Vietnam and other authoritarian states to join the celebrations. For decades, the North Korean people have endured unimaginable suffering from ongoing nuclear development and security threats, starvation, brutal repression and systematic abuses, including enslavement, torture, imprisonment, forced abortions, enforced disappearances and persecution on political and religious grounds. North Korea's human rights record stands among the worst in the world.

To make matters even more harrowing, for three decades China has forcibly repatriated North Korean escapees. Many—especially pregnant women, who are highly vulnerable and are often trafficked after crossing the border—are sent back into North Korea, where they face imprisonment, torture, forced abortions if their child is of Chinese descent, or even execution. One escapee, Ms Kim Kyu-ri, now lives safely in London and testified at the all-party parliamentary group on North Korea. I was present, as the co-chair with Lord Alton, who I know is watching this debate. Tragically, Ms Kim's sister was among the 600 repatriated in 2023, and her fate remains unknown. Such acts surely represent only a fraction of the brutality and loss that exist because of the existence of North Korea.

All these issues were thoroughly investigated by the 2014 UN commission of inquiry into all the awful acts North Korea has done. The commission was led by the Australian judge Michael Kirby, who said:

“The gravity, scale, duration and nature of the unspeakable atrocities committed in the country reveal a totalitarian state that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world.”

Its recommendations included the imposition of further sanctions on the regime's illicit activities, on its nuclear programmes and on the forced production of goods by North Korean political prisoners, including textiles, wigs and fake eyelashes, which are often deceptively labelled as having been made in China. A report produced by the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, “Made in China: How Global Supply Chain Fuels Slavery in North Korean Prison Camps”, gives evidence of these shocking practices.

I want to return to the anniversary point. British soldiers, sailors and airmen were sent to Korea to fight for a people far distant. At the end of it, their bravery and determination secured, at least, freedom for half of that peninsula. Without their sacrifice, we would not be using the word “North” in front of the word “Korea”. We would be talking about the abuses of a deeply

fractured communist regime that is destroying life for those who would love to have the freedoms that we have. Their sacrifice, and their deaths, must always be remembered. There is a tendency to forget that in the aftermath of the second world war we were involved in yet another major conflict. We have the right to be proud of our soldiers, sailors and airmen. Their sacrifice secured freedom for a second time, following the second world war.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent, poignant speech. In 2013, as the then Veterans Minister, I had the great honour of going to South Korea with His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester to represent the Government at the 60th anniversary of the armistice. As my right hon. Friend knows, the South Koreans refer to this day to the countries, like ours, that sent them aid as the sending states. I was very struck by the tremendous lengths to which the South Koreans went to look after our veterans who attended the commemorations. They were treated with immense reverence. Will my right hon. Friend allow me to place on the record today my great thanks to the South Koreans for everything that they do to remember the sending states and those troops who came to defend democracy in their land?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Yes, and my right hon. Friend's comments will be recorded and available for all to see.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I completely concur with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) about the need to pay tribute to the South Koreans and their Government for their acknowledgment of the ultimate sacrifice paid by so many of our fellow countrymen in the defence of liberty and democracy in the Republic of Korea. They paid for and helped to establish a war memorial to the British fallen; that memorial now stands outside the Ministry of Defence. That point backs up what both right hon. Members have said. Will the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) reflect on what measures our country and our allies need to put in place to support South Korea in its security and to work towards a peace on the Korean peninsula?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's comments. He is right to ask that question. We should apply ourselves to everything that is needed to ensure the freedom of South Korea, its Government and its people. We did it once; we should be prepared to do it again. It is worth noting that Korea now sits next to one of the growing threats, on a scale of power and potency that we have not seen since the cold war; that is, of course, China. Its ambitions in the area are to dominate all these spheres from Taiwan to Korea.

I have been campaigning on the subject, as have many other Members in this Chamber. Some of us are sanctioned; others not yet. We have been sanctioned because we believe that unless the west stands up now to the growth of the totalitarian states—Russia, North Korea, Iran and China—we will face the loss of the freedoms that we profoundly believe necessary for democracy to flourish and for people's rights and liberties to be upheld.

This is not just a debate about Korea, north or south; it is a debate about our ability, capability and determination to recognise threats and never give in to them, wherever they lie. If there is one thing that the British Government and the British people should be proud of, it is our

unrivalled sense of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, which we have always stood up to uphold. My worry today is that we might look at China and Korea and say, "These are far and distant countries now, and therefore we have to look after only ourselves." That would be a sad and shabby day for this country. I appreciate the comments by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), but our commitment to freedom is a global commitment.

At this year's UN General Assembly, the DPRK regime spoke of "human dignity and prosperity" and claimed that it was committed to international peace and security, yet the same regime continues to conduct intercontinental ballistic missile tests—it has launched eight short and medium-range ballistic missiles this year alone—while carrying out large-scale cyber-attacks, including the recent theft of \$1.5 billion in cryptocurrency. It engages in transnational repression of human rights activists and illicit arms smuggling, and it continues to pour vast resources into weapons of mass destruction.

Only a few weeks ago, we saw the leaders of the axis of authoritarian states gathered in Beijing, arm in arm with President Xi, claiming that they would be the new world order. If people did not freeze at that sight, understanding that it is a genuine challenge, then on the 75th anniversary of the Korean war we should remind ourselves of the sacrifice of the brave British, American and other United Nations troops who stood up in the face of tyranny and managed to secure freedom—if not all of it, at least enough to give hope to those who live outside it. We are not only commemorating the 75th anniversary; we will have to relive it and remind ourselves that there is nothing more expensive than freedom. It is not free.

2.47 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing the debate and for recognising the contribution of our Glorious Glosters.

On 1 October 1950, 890 men from the Gloucestershire Regiment left England for Korea. On 25 April 1951, only a few dozen of those men made it back to UN lines, having evaded death and capture at the battle of the Imjin river. Those men became known as our Glorious Glosters. I am honoured to speak today about their heroic contribution.

Across three days in April 1951, 620 Glosters held off thousands of advancing Chinese troops as they crossed the Imjin river. They sustained heavy artillery fire, repeated assaults and frequent combat. They were heavily outnumbered and faced overwhelming odds, but they remained resolute and their courage did not falter. Fifty-nine soldiers of the Gloucestershire Regiment paid the ultimate sacrifice and were killed in action, and over 500 were taken prisoner and endured years of brutal captivity.

The impact of those three days cannot be overstated. By courageously holding off advancing enemy forces, the Glosters prevented the capture of Seoul. Their sacrifice slowed the Chinese advance and gave US and UN troops time to regroup. The battle of the Imjin river is often referred to as the battle that saved Seoul. Without the Glosters' heroism, there might not be democracy, liberty and freedom in South Korea today.

[Alex McIntyre]

That is why I believe that it is our duty, and my responsibility as the MP for the great city of Gloucester, always to honour the sacrifice and the bravery of the Glorious Glosters. There are already some great memorials to them, at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire and at Hill 235 in Paju, South Korea, where the Glosters made their famous stand, which is now known as Gloster Hill. The Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum in my constituency also has a fantastic exhibit dedicated to the Glosters, and I understand that Forest of Dean district council is working hard with partners to create another memorial. As we approach the 75th anniversary of the battle of Imjin river next year, I ask the Government to work with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop) to ensure that it is properly commemorated.

We must never forget the bravery of those selfless heroes. Their courage protected liberty and democracy in South Korea. Generations have grown up in Paju, Seoul and across South Korea in freedom, thanks in part to the unwavering courage of the Glorious Glosters. The Glosters did not seek to be heroes, but that is how their bravery defines them today. For this, they must always be honoured.

2.49 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, and to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I think this will be a consensual debate, in which we come together to show our solidarity with South Korea and, above all, our respect and gratitude to British servicemen who gave their lives to defend freedom and democracy all those years ago.

We should remember what was happening in our country at that time. We were recovering from the devastation of the second world war. Families had made huge sacrifices, but we were prepared to make further sacrifices. In that context, it was an even greater achievement, as the hon. Member for Gloucester just outlined. It is important to remember that, and I urge colleagues to go and spend a moment looking at the war memorial outside the Ministry of Defence.

I have the pleasure to represent many Koreans. Half of the 40,000 Koreans in the UK live in south-west London, mainly in my constituency and Wimbledon. Indeed, New Malden in my constituency is known as Little Seoul; it has some fine Korean restaurants, should hon. Members wish to partake. I am also proud to be the chair of the APPG on the Republic of Korea. We are particularly grateful to the embassy staff for their support in engaging with our Korean friends.

South Korea is a fantastic country. The democracy that was won through that sacrifice has given back multiple times over to its own people, to south-east Asia and to the world, including our country. We should all be proud to say that our country is a friend of South Korea. We are able to enjoy their wonderful culture, with the K-wave—Korean wave—going across the world. I, for one, have BTS and Blackpink on my phone.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Show us!

Ed Davey: I could show and play them, Mr Twigg, but that might be out of order. I also have a DVD at home of the film “Parasite”, which won many awards, showing that Korean culture goes way beyond music. I am a particular fan of kimchi, and proud that the royal borough of Kingston is the first place in our country to celebrate International Kimchi Day, when we eat lots of that wonderful food.

More seriously, the relationship between our country and Korea is strategic, and it is critical: critical for our economy, for our defence and for the geopolitical response that our country has to make. I will deal first with the economy, not least because the APPG wants to take evidence on the trade agreement that is being bashed out by trade negotiators. I was proud to be a trade Minister when we pushed for the EU-Korea free trade agreement, which was extremely effective. We published all the opportunities available to British companies in Korea as a result of that free trade agreement. I hope the agreement currently under discussion can build on that, so that we and Korean firms can benefit mutually, in the way that free trade allows.

I flag up in particular the relationship we can have on technology, with AI and beyond. In my constituency, we are developing relationships with Korean schools and universities, so that their knowledge of AI can be shared with our schools and university. It is important that we work with trusted allies such as our Korean friends to push out the boat on those new technologies. Beyond the economy, the energy relationship is important in all spheres, whether renewables or nuclear. The Republic of Korea is very much signed up to efforts to reduce its carbon emissions, and it is a trusted partner in the battle for climate action.

On our defence and security relationship with South Korea, under the Government of the previous Conservative Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), a very important deal was done, and signed at No. 10, to strengthen defence co-operation in a way that we have not seen before. For all the reasons mentioned by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, strengthening that relationship could not be more important. Yes, there is the threat from North Korea, but above all there is the geopolitical threat that China represents not just to South Korea, but more broadly. President Lee Jae Myung, who took power after the recent elections, needs huge support. It is a difficult time in the politics of Korea, but he is showing real leadership, and we need to get behind his Government and their attempts to keep the peace on the peninsula through strength and diplomacy.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As we mark the 75th anniversary of the Korean war and the colossal loss of life—2.5 million lives were sadly lost—we must appreciate the huge strides that South Korea has made as a democracy and a close and trusted ally, which the right hon. Gentleman has remarked on. Does he agree that while we commemorate the contribution of our brave British service personnel who served during that time, we must ensure as a nation that we are a beacon of security and stability internationally and strengthen our alliance with our South Korean partners?

Ed Davey: I could not agree more. I think that is a cross-party view, and all the stronger for it. It is important on the occasions that we agree on foreign policy to send

out that message, because it is heard in other parts of the world. They know that together, as a country, we support our friends in South Korea.

Returning to the commemoration, I will concentrate my final remarks on the threat from North Korea, because it is a real one. We have seen how North Korean troops are supporting Russia in its illegal war against Ukraine. No doubt it is sending its technology. I am not on top of all the details of the things it is sending, but I know that it will be sending ammunition and missiles. That shows us that we need to be on our marks against North Korea today; it is a threat to the world order today.

Although I am no great fan of President Trump, I hope that he can succeed in any talks that he has with the North Koreans. It is essential that they are brought to their senses. That is a very difficult task, as he found the last time he attempted it, which did not go terribly well. *[Interruption.]* As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green says from a sedentary position, President Trump christened the President of North Korea “Rocket man”.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: “Little rocket man”.

Ed Davey: “Little rocket man”—as always, a double-edged sword.

Let us hope that President Trump is more successful this time. There are many ways he and our Government can take that forward. I have spoken with US politicians, and in particular Congressman Brad Sherman, who has put forward the idea of trying to move on from the armistice—let us remember that the war has not actually finished—to a formal peace treaty. I think that is an interesting concept. Arguing for a formal peace treaty, difficult though it may be with the current Government in North Korea, who are shocking and appalling in all the ways that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned, could show that we want to engage. It would be a difficult and tricky route, but trying to establish a peace treaty is one way that we could commemorate the 75th anniversary of the start of the war and, more importantly, commemorate and strengthen the peace that there has been so that people on the whole peninsula can live in peace.

2.59 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this important debate to mark the 75th anniversary of the Korean war, and on his excellent opening speech.

It is a great privilege to represent my constituency of North Cotswolds. It is an area that I have had the honour of representing, in some guise, since 1992, and it includes the largest geographical chunk of Gloucestershire, where undoubtedly members of the Gloucestershire Regiment’s families still live. As we commemorate this important anniversary, let me start as others have by paying tribute to the courage and sacrifice of the Gloucestershire Regiment during the battle of the Imjin river in April 1951. Like my right hon. Friend, I acknowledge that, of course, not only the Gloucestershire Regiment but all our other airmen, naval men and soldiers were part of that operation.

In the face of a powerful force of 42,000 Chinese soldiers, the 1st battalion—the Glorious Glosters—held their position alone for three days. In the end there were 662 casualties. Fifty-six were killed, and 522 were taken prisoner—and many of them had already endured German and Japanese prisoner of war camps in world war two, as has been said.

It was because of my connection with the Glosters that I chaired the APPG on North Korea for many years. I was very pleased that it was taken over from me by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green. On behalf of all the families, and the relatives who live elsewhere, I would like to pay tribute to the Glosters.

According to General James Van Fleet, commander of the United Nations forces in Korea, the Glosters’ stand at Imjin was

“the most outstanding example of unit bravery in modern warfare.”

Their heroic defence plugged a large gap in the allied line and, ultimately, as my right hon. Friend said, it prevented the North Korean forces from capturing Seoul—where I have visited on several occasions—and helped to pave the way for the establishment of a free, prosperous South Korea. The courage and sacrifice of the Glosters secured freedom for one half of the Korean peninsula—even as the other half continues to suffer badly today under the repressive yoke of one of the most brutal regimes with the worst human rights record in the world.

For their actions during the battle, the Glosters were awarded the US Presidential Unit Citation, a rare honour for non-American armed forces. Two of the men from the regiment were also posthumously rewarded the Victoria Cross, the British empire’s highest military decoration for valour. They included Lieutenant Philip Curtis for leading a counter-attack on the Chinese position at Castle Hill, buying time for his comrades. There were also two awards of the Distinguished Service Order, six Military Crosses, two Distinguished Conduct Medals and 10 Military Medals. The actions of the Glosters at Imjin remains one of the British Army’s finest hours.

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend highlights the fact that the Glorious Glosters were awarded a US Presidential Unit Citation, which is extremely rare for a non-American unit. Another link is that the Korean war memorial in Washington has a very brief inscription that reads simply, “Freedom is not free.” Does my hon. Friend agree that the defence of Gloster Hill by the Glorious Glosters, and the casualties they suffered, are a living embodiment of that great motto?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend is entirely right: freedom is not free, and nor is it enduring. We cannot assume that we will always be free; we have to continuously fight and believe in it. That is why we want to support Ukraine and other countries that are being unjustly penalised in an illegal war, to make sure that they can remain free, just as we in this country have freedoms that we often take for granted. We must never take those freedoms for granted.

I come now to a slightly sad bit in my speech. The bodies of many of the Glorious Glosters who were killed in North Korea still remain there. As many of my colleagues will be aware, I have previously been involved in efforts to try to return their remains to Britain. While noting the current geopolitical climate, I would like to

[*Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

ask whether the Minister will work with me to ensure that the remaining Glosters are brought home, so that their families can finally give them a dignified burial. There is precedent for this: the last time there was a little bit of rapprochement, around the time of President Trump's meetings with the President of North Korea, some of the American bodies were brought home. If there is an opportunity in the next rapprochement, and if the Minister supports me in pushing for this, I could arrange for the bodies to be categorised and returned to the families in a dignified way, so that they can lay them to rest.

As we mark the 75th anniversary of the Korean war, let us turn our attention to the situation in the peninsula today. Anyone who looks at a satellite photo will see that half, the south, is lit up with bright lights—the lights of a free, prosperous, democratic society. The other half, the north, remains in darkness—a darkness of cruelty, repression and poverty. As has been mentioned, those who are brave enough to try to escape from North Korea very often end up in China. China uses facial and other recognition technology to make sure those people are returned, certainly to torture and most likely to their death.

We are very honoured—I have his permission to mention this—to have Timothy Cho in the Gallery today. He is one of those who tried to escape from North Korea. He failed on the first occasion, and he has huge scars all over his body from the torture that he went through when he was recaptured. But he was even braver, and wanted to escape for a second time, when mercifully he succeeded. We are very proud to have him here in Britain.

In 2013, the United Nations established a commission of inquiry, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, to investigate the human rights situation in North Korea. A distinguished Australian judge, Justice Michael Kirby, was appointed to chair it. Together with the experienced Serbian human rights campaigner Sonja Biserko and the UN special rapporteur for human rights in North Korea at the time, the former Indonesian Attorney General Marzuki Darusman, he conducted a comprehensive set of hearings, gathering witness testimony and first-hand evidence. As has been quoted today, their conclusion was:

“The gravity, scale and nature of these violations”

—this is the important bit—

“reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world.”

Having been chairman of the North Korea group, I can tell the House that some of the stories that I have heard are just unbelievable. It is a harrowing catalogue of crimes against humanity, including extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape and forced abortions, among the other atrocities that people there have to endure, as well as severe religious persecution, enforced disappearance and starvation. The inquiry recommended that this should lead to a referral to the International Criminal Court. More than a decade later, I ask the Minister: what is the status of the UN commission of inquiry? What plans do the Government have to

revisit the human rights and humanitarian crisis in North Korea at the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council?

Seventy-five years on from the war on the Korean peninsula, North Korea, together with China, is a major facilitator of President Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, providing Russia with weapons, munitions and men. While we remember that 75 years ago our brave soldiers were on the Korean peninsula defending freedom, North Korean troops today are on the continent of Europe, on our doorstep, reminding us that independence and liberty cannot be taken for granted. What steps are the Government taking to hold North Korea to account for this act of aggression?

We live in an increasingly turbulent and uncertain world. That should remind us how imperative it is for democracies to stand together to defend freedom against tyranny and totalitarianism. Nowhere is there a clearer example that shows why that is needed than on the Korean peninsula. Imagine what Korea would be like today if the Glosters had not taken such a heroic stance. All of us in this House should pay tribute to their courage and selfless actions.

3.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I commend the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this debate. I always come along to support him because his heart is always in the subject matter. Today he illustrated that incredibly well.

Seventy-five years ago, British and Commonwealth servicemen and women joined a United Nations coalition to defend the Korean peninsula from aggression. It was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the 20th century; it is estimated to have claimed about 3 million lives, most of them civilians. The scars of that division remain visible to this day. More than 1,000 British servicemen were killed, and several thousand more were wounded or taken prisoner. They fought with extraordinary bravery in the harshest of conditions, from the battle of the Imjin river to the defence of Seoul. Their courage stands as a lasting testament to our nation's commitment to freedom and peace in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I am ever mindful of my constituent Colonel Robin Charley. He was born in 1924 and died in 2019 aged 95. He was a magnificent soldier who showed incredible courage and bravery. I remember his medal, because it always intrigued me—the Queen's Korea medal—and he wore it with pride. I was not quite sure what it was; I asked him one day and he told me some of the stories of Korea and what had happened. He has passed away now, but his daughter, Catherine Champion, is a vice lord lieutenant of County Down. He passed on to his children that commitment to duty and doing one's best; he did that wonderfully well.

I am also reminded of another gentleman who has passed away: Mr Milligan from Loughries outside Newtownards, who also lived to a ripe old age. He fought in that war and carried the scars of Korea each and every day.

The war ended not with peace, but with an armistice—a fragile ceasefire that still divides one people into two nations. The south rebuilt and flourished as a democracy;

the north closed itself off inwardly under totalitarian rule. What did the Korean war leave us with for Christians and people of faith? Seventy-five years on, we honour the legacy best by standing for those who are still denied the freedoms for which our soldiers fought all those years ago.

I am grateful to the all-party parliamentary group on North Korea—we have representatives here today—for its continued commitment

“to promote and support human rights, including religious freedom, humanitarian needs, democracy and...international security”.

This debate is very much about the international security that people fought for 75 years ago and fight for today. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, that fight has not finished.

I am also grateful to the North Korean exile community for the immense courage that it takes to share their stories. Ten years ago, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry described the “gravity, scale and nature” of the Kim regime’s crimes as having no

“parallel in the contemporary world.”

A decade later, little has changed. There is no parallel in the contemporary world. North Korea is top of the tree when it comes to persecution, denying human rights and murdering its own people.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I care deeply about promoting freedom in North Korea and around the globe. Religious freedom is effectively non-existent in North Korea. According to non-governmental organisation and United Nations estimates, between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are believed to be detained in political camps solely because of their faith—some for owning a Bible, others for praying in secret. Some of us pray every day and carry our Bible. In North Korea, people cannot do that, because the punishment is death.

Broader estimates suggest there might be 400,000 underground Christians across the country, worshipping quietly and at constant risk of discovery. These are not just statistics; these are people. Defectors have testified that people have been beaten, starved and executed simply for believing in God. One mother was reportedly forced to watch her sons shot for possessing Christian literature. Such cruelty is part of a deliberate campaign to eradicate faith and enforce absolute devotion to the ruling family.

Those who try to flee face grave danger. There are credible reports of a shoot-to-kill policy at the border. Those who reach China are often forcibly repatriated, as others have said, in violation of international law and the principle of non-refoulement. Human Rights Watch and other organisations report that hundreds of North Koreans have been returned from China in recent years to face imprisonment and torture, especially if they are suspected of contact with Christians or missionaries. How wrong it seems to be, to North Korea’s regime, to be a Christian, to have a faith, and to have independent thought.

One voice that brings that horror into focus is that of Jinhye Jo, a North Korean defector who has spoken with remarkable courage. Fleeing to China with her mother and sister, she found God in a small countryside church—a glimmer of grace amid fear. For that faith, she was forcibly repatriated four times, and was each time beaten and interrogated by the Bowibu, the secret

police, who demanded to know whether she had attended church or had social engagements with Christians. That courageous lady said this:

“All these methods of severe and cruel punishment were to try to find out...whether we had attended church or come into contact with Christians”.

She went on to say:

“God saved me so that I would be able to tell the world the plight of the North Korean people’s unfair suffering and the worst modern-day evil that is going on right now.”

Jinhye Jo’s testimony is not only a cry of pain, but a call to conscience. Today, we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters facing persecution in North Korea. As Jeremiah 22:3 reminds us, we must do what is just and right always, and rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland must continue to press for justice and accountability for crimes against humanity, urge China to end forced repatriations and support those documenting evidence for future prosecutions. A day of reckoning will come, and we want to ensure that that day is in this world, although of course they will get their day of reckoning in the next.

Seventy-five years after our forebears fought for the freedom of Korea, let their courage inspire us to defend freedom again, until the day comes when every person in North Korea can live in peace, dignity and hope.

3.17 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I am reminded that it was only last month that we heard him pay tribute to the courage of his father in the battle of Britain. It is in the same spirit that we reflect on the Korean war, 75 years ago.

Seventy-five years on from the outbreak of the Korean war, we commemorate a conflict that is sometimes called the forgotten war. It is probably called that because it is in the shadow of world war two, which of course was so far-reaching that it affects everybody’s memory—it is very much in our memory today and will be next month, as we go into the period of remembrance. However, the Korean war is never forgotten by families who lost loved ones or by communities like those I represent, who sent their family members to serve.

Today’s debate marks the anniversary of the service of British forces who fought under the UN flag from 1950 to 1953. We remember it in particular because it was one of the first occasions when the newly constituted United Nations deployed a force under chapter 7 of the UN charter, which states that the UN can respond to

“any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression”.

It was the absence of the Soviet Union at the UN Security Council that made it possible to deploy a force under the UN flag, consistent with the intention of the authors of the UN charter. What a pity it is that we now have a representative of Russia on the UN Security Council vetoing the rational motions that the UK seeks to pass.

For east Devon, the history of this conflict is personal. In Sidmouth, there is a plaque at St Giles and St Nicholas church that remembers Private David Hamson, who fell in Korea aged just 20. His name anchors that distant

[Richard Foord]

war in Sidmouth's own story, given that the plaque stands alongside those of fallen soldiers from the first and second world wars. David Hamson was born in Sidmouth in 1932. He was called up for national service and joined the Devonshire Regiment, which was first deployed in Malaya to combat the communist insurgency that was taking place there in the 1950s.

Soon afterwards, volunteers were sought to reinforce the British operation in Korea, and David stepped forward. He was transferred to the Gloucestershire Regiment. In April 1951, his battalion took up positions in the hills outside Seoul, in the battle that has been reflected on several times this afternoon. He was facing China's 63rd army, about 27,000 strong, as it sought to capture the South Korean capital. The Glosters, numbering just 652 men, held their ground for four days and nights, buying crucial time for the defence of Seoul. One can only imagine what that experience must have been like.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the extraordinary bravery of British and international forces in the Korean war, as other right hon. and hon. Members have. Will he join me in also paying tribute to the extraordinary journalists who bravely sought to bring news of Korea to international and, indeed, Korean audiences? They include René Cutforth, for the BBC overseas services, who was one of the last journalists to leave Seoul in 1950, and Marguerite Higgins, an American journalist who won a Pulitzer prize—the first woman ever to do so—for the courage of her journalism in the Korean war. Will he also join me in paying tribute to the continuing work of the BBC World Service, which continues to broadcast in Korean to North Korean audiences today?

Richard Foord: We absolutely must pay tribute to journalists who continue to report in some of the most dangerous circumstances. Even this year, hundreds of journalists have lost their lives in conflict.

Private Hamson was among those who did not return from the famous battle of Imjin river. His courage and sacrifice embody the spirit of the Devonshire Regiment and the Glorious Glosters, to which he was transferred. His name is inscribed at the UN memorial cemetery at Busan, in South Korea.

In July 2023, a short service was held at St Giles and St Nicholas church to remember the Korean war. The Royal British Legion president, Ralph Hickman, and the Sidmouth Royal Naval Old Comrades association chair, Peter O'Brien, made speeches about the sacrifices made in a war that today has slipped from collective memory for some, perhaps, but not for us, and not for Sidmouth.

Ray Collins from Woolbrook, near Sidmouth, was present at that service two summers ago. A year after the 1953 armistice, he found himself in Korea with the Dorset Regiment. For nearly a year, his battalion was based along the 38th parallel—the tense frontier established at the truce. He says that there were occasional shoot-outs and a constant round of provocations from the north, but he said that it was the freezing conditions that proved the real enemy. When his national service ended,

Ray became a leader of the Sidmouth army cadets, and served as its respected warrant officer for more than 30 years. His dedication and leadership earned him the British empire medal—a lifetime of service rooted in what he learned serving in Korea.

In total, 1,108 British servicemen lost their lives in Korea. Commemoration should sharpen our sense of the world that we face today. The Korean war was the first hot war of the cold war—a brutal struggle that asked whether free nations would stand firm against oppression and aggression, driven by a Soviet system prepared to gamble with lives while seeking to challenge democracy and liberty. Today, the Russian Federation is waging the largest land war in Europe since 1945. Its full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shattered peace on our continent. We cannot ignore the rhyme of history, with an authoritarian power once again testing the resolve of free nations. In remembering the Korean war, we honour those who fell, but we also reaffirm a simple truth: democratic nations must stand together against tyranny.

3.24 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important debate on the 75th anniversary of the Korean war. The Liberal Democrats pay tribute to the tens of thousands of British veterans who served in the Korean war, and who ensured the survival of a free and democratic South Korea.

Many veterans of Korea are now in their 90s, and so, just as the second world war is passing from living memory, we should remember that the Korean war is about to do the same. With just under 1,100 British casualties, many war memorials across the country include a small number of names from Korea, which adds to the idea of what is often unfairly called the forgotten war. In my constituency, the war memorial in the small coastal village of Mortehoe bears only a single name from Korea—that of Mr W. J. Yeo—added to one side of the stone, almost like an afterthought. Forgetting Mr Yeo, however, and many like him, would be a disservice to the remarkable achievement of all those veterans who served, many of whom were doing national service at the time.

Earlier this year, the South Korean ambassador to the UK again praised the bravery of British troops, who not only risked their lives but defended a distant land and the freedom of a people they had never met. Today, South Korea is not only a democratic society, but a resolute British ally in the far east, and a global economic success story. In July 1950, that future hung in the balance. Communist forces controlled nearly all the Korean peninsula, and only a determined counter-offensive by the US, Britain and our allies secured a future for South Korea as an independent nation.

The lesson is so clear, because north of the demilitarised zone, we can now see an alternative version of history that might have played out. North Korea remains a deeply repressive dictatorship and an economically backward rogue state. Amnesty International describes its militaristic regime as

“violating every conceivable human right.”

It allows torture and starvation. It does not allow

“any organised political opposition, independent media, free trade unions, civil society organisations, or religious freedom.”

The north continues to align with Russia and Iran, violating international sanctions and heightening nuclear tensions. It threatens democratic neighbours such as South Korea and Japan, and even provides military aid to Russia’s war against Ukraine. As we reach this anniversary, that stark contrast between north and south should strengthen the UK’s resolve.

Many Members will have seen those astonishing satellite photographs of the Korean peninsula, which show the bright lights of South Korea and near-total darkness across the north. It is in no small part thanks to courageous British efforts that the lights did not go out entirely, and 75 years on, we must never forget.

3.29 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I welcome the Minister to his new position. This is the first time we have—I will not say sparred, because it is not the sort of debate for that—worked together since we served as Whips a number of years ago.

Let me begin by congratulating my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this important marking the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean war. He brings, as ever, such knowledge and sincerity to the House, and at times—in the right way and at the right time—a little humour, as he did at the very start of the debate. Not only that, but he enables us to demonstrate that the role of this place often goes way beyond debating legislation. It can rightly provide an opportunity for us to come together as a House and a space to commemorate and reflect.

Sitting here, I was reminded of the day when, as a Foreign Minister, I had the honour of being invited to lay a wreath at the Korean war memorial on Victoria Embankment in 2020 to mark the 67th anniversary of the Korean war armistice agreement. I thank my right hon. Friend for providing the space for us today, because it provides a moment for reflection and gratitude. The Korean war, as we have heard, is often called the forgotten war, but it must never be forgotten. It was a defining struggle of the early cold war—one that tested the unity of the free world and reaffirmed the principles of collective security that remain vital today.

On 25 June 1950, North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel, triggering three years of brutal conflict. More than 2.5 million people lost their lives, but Britain answered the call of the United Nations, sending more than 81,000 service personnel—the second largest contribution after that of the United States. As we have heard, 1,129 British servicemen made the ultimate sacrifice. Over 1,000 were taken prisoner, and around 300 remain missing. We remember them and their families, who bore the quiet burden of that service.

Among those who fought were young men from my own region—the west midlands, including the Black Country—many of whom served with proud regiments such as the Duke of Wellington’s Regiment and the Black Watch, both of which saw fierce action in Korea. Across the Commonwealth, too, the bonds of sacrifice run deep. More than 26,000 Canadians, 18,000 Australians, 4,700 New Zealanders and thousands more from India,

South Africa and elsewhere stood beside us. Their shared service is part of the living fabric of the Commonwealth family and the global defence of democracy.

Commemoration is not just about looking back. It is also about understanding why the legacy of the Korean war still matters today. The Republic of Korea—South Korea—has emerged from the devastation of war as a vibrant democracy, a major economy and a valued strategic partner of the UK. Our modern partnership rests on the same values our forebears fought for: freedom, prosperity and the rule of law. That partnership was reaffirmed under the last Government, in November 2023, through the Downing Street accord, a global strategic partnership between our two nations. Under that accord, we are working together on defence, cyber-security, clean energy, semiconductors and resilient supply chains. We established a new ministerial dialogue to align foreign and defence policy, and expanded co-operation on naval training, defence exports and regional stability. This partnership matters to both nations: it strengthens our ability to deter aggression, uphold freedom of navigation, and shape the future of technology and trade on fair and open terms.

We cannot commemorate this anniversary without acknowledging the continuing threats in the region. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea—North Korea—remains a source of instability and danger, not only to its neighbours but to global security. Its relentless pursuit of nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, its disregard for UN Security Council resolutions, and its growing ties to other authoritarian regimes, including Russia and China, all demand our vigilance and resolve. The regime’s leader continues to endanger his own people and the peace of the region. Therefore, we must remain firm in condemning these provocations, united in enforcing sanctions and clear that such behaviour will not be rewarded with legitimacy.

The Korean war taught us that alliances matter and that when free nations stand together, they can resist aggression and preserve peace. Those lessons are as vital today as they were in 1950, but this anniversary is also an opportunity to celebrate the enduring success of our friendship with the Republic of Korea and to reaffirm the United Kingdom’s commitment to upholding peace and security in the Indo-Pacific and around the world.

In that spirit, may I ask the Minister three brief questions? First, what further steps are the Government taking to support the work of the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre in investigating historical cases of missing British personnel from the Korean war? Secondly, how is the UK implementing the Downing Street accord, particularly in strengthening our defence, security and cyber partnerships with the Republic of Korea? Thirdly, what assessment have the Government made of the evolving security threat posed by North Korea, and how is the UK working with allies to respond effectively, including through a review of the effectiveness of existing UN sanctions, to ensure that they are having the maximum possible impact on Kim Jong Un’s regime?

In Busan, the British memorial bears this inscription:

“Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met”.

[Wendy Morton]

Those words speak of duty, courage and the enduring belief that freedom anywhere is worth defending everywhere. Seventy-five years on, we remember them with gratitude and renewed purpose.

3.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): Mr Twigg, it is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, although I have never done so as a Minister, so it is nice to be in this slightly different role.

I pay sincere tribute to the right hon. and gallant Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I know from having been in the House for almost a decade that when he speaks, many Members across the House listen. He always does so with great dignity. If I may say so, with genuine affection, he gives us a huge history lesson on the conflicts around the globe, which come with real authority. I mean that most sincerely, and I know that many Members across the House respect the work that he has done over the decades he has served in it. I also pay tribute to his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on North Korea, and to the work of Lord Alton. I am sorry to hear that Lord Alton is currently in hospital; I do hope that there are ways in which our wonderful NHS can provide support to him as he recovers from his broken back.

The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who is responsible for the Indo-Pacific, would have been delighted to take the debate today, but she is travelling on ministerial duties, so it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of His Majesty's Government.

I thank the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). I am not sure we have ever sparred on any subject, including in our years of me shadowing her when I was in the Whips Office in opposition. I hope we can continue that friendly relationship as we start this new relationship as Minister and shadow Minister.

I am grateful for the many poignant contributions by Members from across the House, and I will try my best to respond to all the points raised. I make a commitment at this point that if I miss something, I will be more than happy to ensure that right hon. and hon. Members receive written responses, because I appreciate that this debate has cross-party consensus in the House, and it is our job as Members of Parliament to show that it is at its best when we are trying to find resolutions to some of the most difficult events, including those that took place 75 years ago.

Seventy-five years ago, the United Kingdom stood shoulder to shoulder with the Republic of Korea and the United Nations, defending freedom and democracy in what became the Korean war. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), had the privilege of visiting the national memorial to this conflict in Washington, where the words "Freedom is not free" are etched in granite. As has been said, it is a powerful reminder of the price that so many paid.

From this war-scarred island 75 years ago, more than 80,000 British troops crossed the seas to fight in the Korean war, standing with a community of nations committed to freedom for the Korean people. More than 1,000 never returned. Their lives were given in the cause of liberty. Many more were wounded or taken prisoner.

A short distance from here, a beautiful bronze statue, crafted by Philip Jackson, stands—on a base of Welsh slate, I should tell Members—in Victoria Embankment Gardens. That memorial, a gift from the Republic of Korea, is a lasting tribute to those who served. When it was unveiled, veterans spoke of their sacrifice finally being recognised. Today, this House stands united in honouring that sacrifice, which must never be forgotten.

I also pay tribute to those who continue to serve and support the UN Command in supporting peace on the Korean peninsula. Twenty-two nations joined together in the Korean war, and it was our collective effort that secured an armistice, enabling South Korea to flourish. Today, the Republic of Korea is an important and valued partner, and our relationship spans defence, security, trade, climate action and far more. Sadly, the same cannot be said for North Korea.

Today, global risks are evolving and tensions are rising, but our commitment remains firm to peace and prosperity across the Korean peninsula, stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and supporting a peaceful, secure and prosperous future for the people of the Indo-Pacific.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Members for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) for their deeply moving contributions on the Gloucestershire Regiment. We could never do the brave men who served our country justice, but we stand united in thanking them and indeed, as the shadow Minister referenced, their families, who still talk, I am sure, about the sacrifice of their relatives.

The hon. Member for North Cotswolds asked about the repatriation of bodies, and I appreciate that this is a huge piece of work for him. The Ministry of Defence, along with partners, continues to identify the remains of those who fell during the war. If the opportunity arises, it will look to support efforts to repatriate the remains of those soldiers, so I encourage him to keep doing that work and to work with MOD Ministers to ensure that we do all we can to bring those remaining men home.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful for the Minister's words, but what I was really trying to ask in my speech was whether the British Government would work with the Americans. It is only through the Americans that we will get the political buy-in from the North Koreans to allow these things to take place.

Chris Elmore: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, we do huge amounts of work bilaterally with the Americans. I will ensure that Ministry of Defence colleagues come back to him in a substantive way and that he gets an answer.

The UK Government's long-standing position remains the same: we believe that diplomacy and negotiation are the best way to secure peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. That is not straightforward and progress is

slow, but to honour the values our armed forces fought for, we will continue to work with our friends and allies in the region and across the globe towards peace and a better life for the people of North Korea.

However, the UK is clear about the threat the regime continues to pose to international security. We continue to condemn the DPRK's illegal nuclear and ballistic missile programmes in the strongest terms, alongside our allies. Over the past year, North Korea has continued testing, launching one intermediate-range and six short-range ballistic missiles. As the right hon. and gallant Member for Chingford and Woodford Green referenced—as has been said, in good humour, although I am not sure that this was timed to coincide with the debate—the short-range missiles launched this morning are a brazen violation of multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

The launches show that the DPRK continues to advance its illegal ballistic weapons programmes, posing a clear threat to regional stability. It continues to destabilise the peace and security of the peninsula. We call again on the DPRK to refrain from illegal launches and return to dialogue with the international community. As the G7 made clear in our joint statement at Charlevoix in March, these launches are a clear breach of UN Security Council resolutions. Today's launches are no different. We will continue to call them out and work with partners across the region and beyond to uphold international law and protect global security.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has already been mentioned and we condemn in the strongest possible terms the DPRK's active support for Russia's illegal war. The partnership between the DPRK and Russia poses grave risks to global security. Over the past year, Pyongyang has grown bolder, deploying 11,000 troops to Kursk. Our assessment is that there have been 4,000 North Korean casualties, including 1,000 fatalities. That is why in February the UK imposed sanctions on the DPRK, including sanctions against DPRK officials directly involved in supporting Russian military action against Ukraine. Alongside our partners, we will continue to impose costs on Russia and DPRK for this dangerous expansion of the war.

This year, we have stepped up our focus on cyber-space, working closely with partners. Today, I can inform the House that the UK, alongside key allies in the multilateral sanctions monitoring team, is publishing a report that exposes the DPRK's malicious cyber-activity and use of overseas IT workers. Its cyber-activity includes theft of cyber-currency, fraudulent IT contracts and cyber-espionage. North Korea is using these tactics to bypass UN sanctions and fund its illegal weapons programmes. The report is available today on gov.uk; I commend it to right hon. and hon. Members.

While we continue to address the threat that North Korea poses to international peace and security, we have not lost sight of the fact that ordinary North Koreans are suffering. The DPRK's regime prioritises weapons and illicit activity over the wellbeing of its people, whom we seek to support. We want a stable and prosperous DPRK. That is why we continue to highlight ongoing, widespread and systematic human rights abuses, and call them out. Last year marked 10 years since the UN's Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and in June our permanent representatives at the UN Security Council said that the perpetrators of human rights abuses remain

unaccountable and the people continue to suffer. Last month, the UN high commissioner's report confirmed that, if anything, the situation has worsened since 2014.

We continue to call on the DPRK to address its appalling record. In April, the UK co-sponsored a Human Rights Council resolution renewing the special rapporteur's mandate and calling for stronger accountability. The isolation of the DPRK regime is a major barrier to progress; we urge the DPRK to engage with the international community and to take steps to improve its human rights record. We also continue to press for the reopening of our embassy in Pyongyang and for the return of humanitarian agencies.

In response to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a passionate advocate for freedom of religion or belief, I cannot stress enough that we consider it unacceptable that the people of DPRK face surveillance, imprisonment or even death because of their religion or belief. The House should be utterly united in the belief that people should have the ability to practise their religion, whether that is reading the Bible or anything else. We raise the issue of the lack of freedom of religion within the DPRK directly with the authorities there, and at the UN, including at the Human Rights Council. Freedom of religion remains an absolute priority for the British Government.

To continue this theme, we are also deeply concerned by reports from Human Rights Watch that, as many Members have already mentioned, China has forcibly returned over 400 North Koreans since last year, despite UN warnings of torture, imprisonment, sexual violence, forced labour and, tragically, execution. In May, the UK raised the issue at the UN General Assembly, calling on all states to respect the principle of non-refoulement and to ensure that refugees from North Korea are not sent back there.

We must also remember that the Korean war has never officially ended. The 1953 armistice still holds, yet the DPRK continues to claim that the US, South Korea and their partners are hostile. We are not aligned with the DPRK, but we do not seek its destabilisation or to harm its people. Our aim is clear: to limit the DPRK's weapons programmes, to prevent proliferation and to urge the regime to prioritise its people over its nuclear ambitions. Our approach is one of critical engagement—we hold the DPRK to account, but we also seek dialogue. We want to reduce strategic risk and encourage a return to international co-operation. We hope that our embassy in North Korea can reopen, so that we can once again understand the lives of the North Korean people from the ground up.

I have almost reached my conclusion, Mr Twigg. In response to a question from the hon. Member for North Cotswolds, I should say that I touched on the work that we were still doing from the 2014 report until last year. I reassure him that we are continuing that work; we will continue to try always to have constructive dialogue with North Korea, while also making sure that it is held to account for human rights abuses.

Finally, I come to the shadow Minister's questions and those from Members across the House. Building on the Downing Street accord, we are developing an enhanced shared agenda through the UK-Korea joint growth mission, aligning UK priorities on economic growth,

[Chris Elmore]

clean energy leadership and security with President Lee's priorities, including growth, defence industry exports, AI and climate action.

Later this year, we plan to convene the first UK-Korea high-level forum, bringing together industry leaders, politicians, academics and civil society to deepen collaboration in defence, AI and soft power. As was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), we are looking forward to concluding negotiations on our enhanced UK-Republic of Korea free trade agreement by the end of this year, as agreed by the Prime Minister and the President over the summer. Both sides will hold a series of talks in October and November to finalise the remaining areas of the negotiation.

Let me end by reiterating that the Government remain firmly committed to peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. We continue to believe that diplomacy and dialogue are the best path forward. We urge the DPRK to show restraint, engage meaningfully and choose peace. Over 75 years, we have seen what collective action and shared purpose can achieve. We have also seen the cost of isolation. It is our hope that the DPRK will reconsider its duty to its people and reconnect with the world, and that all Korean people will one day know freedom.

3.51 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: This has been a remarkable debate, Mr Twigg. We have demonstrated the best of politics in Westminster, as we can when we choose to. We have come together to commemorate and celebrate the actions of our forebears and the results in the present. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part, because they all brought something unique and special. Some spoke for those honoured in their

constituencies who never came home. Others, such as myself, honour the memory of the sacrifice that our forebears made, its purposes and reasons.

We recognise and commemorate today the fact that 75 years ago British troops fought for Korean freedom, in a country and for a people far, far away, about which many if not all those troops knew next to nothing. Ordinary men—some who had fought in world war two, others who were young and inexperienced—fought for a concept of freedom, esoteric in some senses perhaps. As Gladstone once said, during the dispute over Moldavia and Wallachia in the late 19th century, there is no greater bulwark against tyranny than the breasts of free men and women. He was right, for that concept has made South Korea prosperous and democratic, giving its people the right to live in freedom—a right that their families and colleagues in the north do not have. It is surely for us to recognise and pick up that torch of freedom, and stand today with those around the world who yearn for freedom, not least those in North Korea.

I finish with this thought. While we watch the despotism of North Korea carry on unabated, what do we say to those British troops and others of the United Nations force—the Glosters and the other brave men who died? What do we say to those who did not come home? Was it all in vain? The answer is no. For them and their spirit, all I will say is “Southward, look, the land is free.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 75th commemoration of the Korean War.

3.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Trade Union Workplace Access

4 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered trade union access to workplaces.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in relation to support from trade unions.

It is important to open with some stark context. The 14 years of austerity between 2010 and 2024 forced down real wages in the UK, a setback from which many working families are still recovering. That came atop a 40-year structural decline in the share of national wealth going to labour, coinciding with the erosion of trade union rights and with declining membership and falling union density. Against that backdrop, the most urgent task of the Labour Government is clear: raising living standards. Trade unions are central to that mission. They are the vehicle through which better pay, safer working conditions and fairer workplaces can be achieved. Equipping them effectively is fundamental to restoring balance.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. I want to tell a short story very quickly, for the record. When as a 20-year-old I went to work for Henry Denny in Belfast, the guy says to me, "You have to be a member of the union." I said, "I'm not so sure whether I want to be or not." He said, "It's compulsory." What I learned then was that trade unions protect the workers. They ensure workers get their wages, and if workers have any problems with management, they are always there. Being a member of a trade union? I would recommend it.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly right. It may have been compulsory, but it is certainly one of the better decisions that he has ever made.

The problem of trade union access to workplaces is long-standing. Employers have often restricted union representatives from entering their sites, particularly in high-profile industrial settings. The GMB's attempt to access Amazon's Coventry warehouse during its 2024 recognition ballot was met with resistance, highlighting the barriers that unions face even when legally seeking to organise.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I hugely thank my hon. Friend for the work, effort and determination that he put into seeing the Employment Rights Bill through the Commons—absolutely outstanding work. On access to the workplace, does he agree that any individual who wants to speak to a trade union or union representative in the workplace, or perhaps even digitally, should have the opportunity to do so, and that it is only bad employers who have something to fear?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I thank him for his kind comments. I will return to the issue of digital access shortly.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I draw attention to my chairship of the GMB parliamentary group. I am glad that he mentioned GMB's frustrations with Amazon. Another sector in which that union and other unions have been frustrated is social care, which has been fragmented for three decades now. Does he agree that having a strong general statutory right of access must be complemented with an enhanced right of access under the forthcoming fair pay agreement in social care?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The fair pay agreement architecture gives us a real opportunity to enhance the provisions.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House. I commend the University and College Union, which was incredibly supportive to me and my colleagues in my former life as an academic. It was only because our employer was decent that it was able to have access to our campus site. I join the hon. Gentleman in condemning those organisations who refuse access for the vital work of unions.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's timely intervention. We know that in schools, the National Education Union and the NASUWT union face obstacles from multi-academy trusts such as the Harris Federation, where access is often limited to outside working hours, when staff are rushing home to pick up children, curtailing union engagement.

Under the responsibility of the Cabinet Office, the MyCSP civil service pension provider refuses to recognise the Public and Commercial Services union or allow it into workplaces to meet members. That dispute is now in its 15th week. The lack of recognition is a situation that must end under a new wave of insourcing and public interest-led procurement. On Teesworks, union access has been blocked by local employers, with tragic health and safety incidents underscoring the consequences of absent oversight.

Until now, UK law has offered no guaranteed legal right of access, relying instead on voluntary agreements or ad hoc arrangements. Even if a Central Arbitration Committee decision is issued, compliance by employers is not guaranteed. Historical parallels include the Information and Consultation of Employees Regulations 2004, which quickly became ineffective because of weak penalties and no means of compelling employer compliance. The lack of a legally binding enforcement mechanism creates a scenario in which unions may abandon attempts to secure access, undermining workers' rights and collective representation.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does he agree that in sectors such as social care, which are facing recruitment and retention crises, better trade union access would improve working conditions and staff retention, which ultimately is only for the better for good employers?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes an apposite point. We hear constantly about the crises of recruitment and retention in our core public services, among others.

[*Andy McDonald*]

Only by strengthening workers' access to trade union representation will we ever conquer the rolling crisis across our economy. It is an important point.

I very much welcome the Employment Rights Bill for establishing statutory procedures for union access. It was an important part of our discussions when we formulated the new deal for working people, ably aided and abetted by the Minister, for which I am eternally grateful. Clause 63 will allow unions and employers to negotiate access agreements, permitting union representatives to enter workplaces for recruitment, organisation, the support of members and potentially collective bargaining. The Bill will require employers to respond within a defined negotiation period, with the CAC empowered to determine access terms where agreement cannot be reached.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this really important debate; I refer Members to my entry in the register of interests. Does he agree that trade union access will increase collective bargaining, which drives up pay and conditions for our constituents?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The decline in trade union penetration of the economy is consistent with the stagnation in wages. If we are to turn the issue around, these recognitions and collective bargaining processes have to be given their full voice.

The Bill also acknowledges the need for facility time for union representatives, providing paid time for duties. The Business and Trade Committee welcomed the statutory right of access, but urged that it explicitly include digital channels. It also endorsed the GMB's call for template agreements to speed up negotiations.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): I am grateful to my hon. Friend not only for his incredible work to advance employment rights, but for securing today's debate; I refer to my entry in the register of interests, having spent many an hour on street corners trying to get information to workers about trade unions. Does my hon. Friend agree that digital access needs to be directly with the worker—not via the employer, who could oversee it—and that any reciprocal communication with the union needs to be free from the scrutiny of employers?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am sure that she has in mind the Amazon debacle in Coventry, where that issue was at play. I thank her and all my hon. Friends for their consistent application to this agenda over many years. It is now bearing fruit.

Concerns remain about the enforceability of access, as some employers may refuse to comply with CAC decisions, creating incentives to disrupt legitimate access. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has called for the CAC to be adequately resourced. Labour pledged to act to ensure that union members and workers are able to access a union at work. In a written ministerial statement in March 2025, the Government said that they would implement

“a fast-track route for achieving an ‘off-the-shelf’ access agreement where certain conditions are met, alongside a mechanism to ensure there are robust penalties in place for non-compliance.”

Access rights will mostly be detailed in secondary legislation.

Future regulations must genuinely deliver the Government's promise of a meaningful right of access. That includes ensuring that the right is enforceable, as union-busting employers and their lawyers will exploit any gaps. Unions want to ensure that provisions are as strong as possible. Face-to-face communication remains the most effective way for unions to recruit and organise. Robust penalties are needed so that employers cannot price refusal in. Far too often, we have seen employers pricing in the breach of provisions as simply the cost of doing business. We cannot permit that.

Debates in Committee and wider parliamentary discussions have reiterated those points. Witnesses stressed the importance of digital access, reasonable notice, clarity over dwellings and enforceable CAC determinations. Amendments clarified that only independent trade unions certified by the certification officer could exercise statutory access rights, preventing employers from using non-independent sweetheart unions. The CAC is empowered to adjudicate disputes, but unions still bear the cost of pursuing penalties through the employment appeal tribunals, and fines are payable to the Government, rather than the union. That creates a risk that enforcement will remain weak.

Trade union experiences illustrate the stakes. The GMB's efforts to engage with Amazon, Harris Federation schools and Teesworks highlight the fact that lack of access can hinder collective bargaining, prevent timely health and safety oversight, and reduce wages and protections. Access to care homes will be critical as fair pay agreements are rolled out to ensure that low-paid workers gain union representation and negotiate fair terms.

I tabled a new clause to amend the Bill on Report to address enforcement and clarify gaps. It would have established a clear statutory right of access for independent trade unions. It would have broadened the Bill's purpose to include recruitment, representation and bargaining. It would also have set reasonable notice requirements, with provision for urgent cases, and defined access conditions guided by Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service codes.

The new clause would have clarified access to dwellings by allowing suitable alternative arrangements. It would have introduced a genuine enforcement mechanism by allowing CAC orders to be enforceable as High Court injunctions, and it would have established transparent penalty-setting criteria based on the gravity and duration of non-compliance. Finally, it would have integrated the new rights with existing law and ACAS guidance. Had it been adopted, it would have significantly strengthened the Bill and created a practically enforceable framework. I urge the Government to adopt similar measures to ensure that statutory access rights are truly effective across sectors.

It is very welcome that Matthew Taylor has been appointed to chair the Fair Work Agency. His knowledge of workplace relations informed the new deal for working people. We must ensure that the agency is adequately resourced and empowered to monitor, oversee and enforce union access effectively. Without sufficient funding and staffing, statutory provisions risk becoming symbolic rather than operational.

Historical international context underlines the stakes. In 2006 and 2008, the International Labour Organisation's committee of experts noted that the UK did not consistently

uphold convention 87, the global standard that protects workers' freedom to form and join trade unions of their choosing, and that ensures unions can run their affairs freely. A constant theme of this debate is just how far removed the United Kingdom has been from its ILO obligations. I trust that this Government will not overlook them in the way that previous Governments have.

Union officials cannot always access workplaces to support members in disciplinary or grievance hearings, and recognition ballots offer only limited access. The Employment Rights Bill attempts to remedy that by granting broader statutory rights but, as the Bill is drafted, an employer can still veto entry, leaving unions and workers without recourse. ILO recommendation 143 makes it clear that union representatives who do not work for a particular company should still be allowed to enter the workplace to meet and represent union members. Those messages have to be communicated to employers who seem to want to resist that on occasion.

The only effective way to honour the commitment in the new deal for working people would be a free-standing right of entry, underpinned by injunctive relief to secure entry in cases of unreasonable refusal. Where that is not possible, CAC orders should at least be enforceable as High Court injunctions, and penalties should accrue to the union—I cannot stress enough the importance of that happening. Such measures would align the UK with international labour standards and strengthen the practical impact of statutory access.

The Employment Rights Bill is an important milestone, but it must be part of a wider strategy to raise living standards and restore labour's share of wealth. Trade unions are central to that mission, providing the infrastructure through which workers can secure better pay, safer workplaces and a stronger voice. The Bill's success depends on ensuring that access rights are clear, enforceable and adaptable to modern workplaces. By empowering unions with enforceable rights, reasonable conditions and clear penalties, the Government can equip the trade union movement to deliver real improvements. This is not simply procedural; it is a question of economic justice and social equity.

As we look forward, the Labour Government's task is to reverse decades of declining real wages, expand union influence and ensure workers share in the benefits of productivity and growth. Statutory access is not an end in itself; it is a tool for delivering broader goals. With proper enforcement, digital provisions and resourcing, unions can represent members effectively, negotiate fair pay and improve conditions across all sectors. By doing so, we will ensure the recovery from austerity and the reversal of the erosion of labour's share of wealth in a way that is meaningful and sustained.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) for securing today's important debate—I know we say it a lot that debates are important, but this one truly is. It is close to my heart, as I know it is to my hon. Friend's.

I thank my hon. Friend for his contributions to debates during the passage of the Employment Rights Bill, including on this specific issue. It was always a

pleasure to work with him on this topic in my previous life working for a trade union for many years—in fact, I declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a proud trade union member. The amendments that my hon. Friend tabled on Report, which he alluded to in his speech, demonstrate his interest in this area, and I welcome his continued commitment to a productive discussion on the topic today. I thank all other members here for their contributions and interest in this topic—not just hon. Members, but proud trade unionists and friends.

As my hon. Friend will know, the Government's plan to make work pay and our Employment Rights Bill represent the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. Taken together, they support our plan for change by ensuring that employment rights are fit for a modern economy, empowering working people and contributing to economic growth.

The Employment Rights Bill creates a modern, fairer labour market where workers are better protected, more empowered and supported through every stage of working life. It is pro-worker and pro-business, and it supports the Government's objective of boosting growth and improving living standards across the country. As part of that, the Government are strengthening collective bargaining rights and trade union recognition—I want to take a moment to say how proud I am to be saying that from the Front Bench. After many years of the previous Government, who sought to weaken workers' voices and trade union rights, we are rebuilding a culture of respect and co-operation with trade unions.

I know that my hon. Friend will agree that trade unions are essential to tackling issues of insecurity, inequality, discrimination, enforcement and low pay across the economy. The Employment Rights Bill will modernise trade union legislation, giving trade unions greater freedom to organise, represent and negotiate on behalf of their members. Strong trade unions are key partners in building a stronger, fairer economy.

A key part of our reforms in this area is the introduction of a new trade union right of access. Under existing legislation, trade unions do not have a general right of access to workplaces and can exercise their functions only through individual trade union members in the workplace or through access that has been agreed on a voluntary basis with the employer. In situations in which membership is limited and no voluntary agreement is in place, there is limited scope for trade unions to exercise their core functions within the workplace. Although the Government want employers and unions to continue to agree and use those voluntary access arrangements where possible, the Bill introduces a new right for trade unions to access the workplace in a responsible and regulated manner. That will provide certainty and clarity to all parties involved.

It is worth explaining briefly how the new right of access will work in practice, which will hopefully answer lots of my hon. Friend's questions. Under the new right of access, an independent union can provide an employer with a request for access. That could be a request for physical access to a building or virtual access to a group of workers—such as via a Teams call—or both. My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about the importance of digital access as part of our consideration of the legislation.

If both parties agree on the terms of access between themselves, they will notify the Central Arbitration Committee to record the terms of the access agreement

[Kate Dearden]

and proceed with the access as agreed. If no agreement can be reached within a set timeframe, the union or employer can refer the case to the CAC for a determination on whether access should be granted under the terms requested.

The CAC will make its determination on whether access should be granted in line with factors set out in secondary legislation. If the access application meets certain conditions, it will qualify for a potentially expedited route through the CAC process. The CAC will also enforce access agreements once they are in place, hearing complaints about breaches of those agreements by any party, with the power to issue fines for non-compliance.

This debate is timely, because the Government will shortly be launching a public consultation on the details of the new trade union right of access policy, including the matters that the CAC must have regard to when deciding whether access should take place and the level of fines for non-compliance with access agreements. We want to see a fair and workable access framework, so the Government strongly encourage unions and employers of all types and sizes to share their views. As I say, the Government are committed to strengthening collective bargaining rights and trade union recognition, and we see the new right of access as a key part of that.

In that light, when the CAC takes decisions on access, it will be guided by the access principles provided for in the Employment Rights Bill. Those principles set out that trade unions should be provided access to workplaces “in any manner that does not unreasonably interfere with the employer’s business”

and that the employer

“should take reasonable steps to facilitate”

that access. They also set out that

“access should be refused entirely only where it is reasonable in all the circumstances to do so.”

The principles provide a default in favour of access, but the Government are aware that some employers may find it more difficult than others to facilitate access arrangements, and that there may be circumstances where it would not be appropriate for access to take place. That is why we will consult on the factors that the CAC should take into account when deciding on access, and consult on what the value of fines should be for non-compliance.

Ian Lavery: Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely essential that lawbreakers and bad employers are not allowed to price in any breaking of the law to the detriment of people in the workplace?

Kate Dearden: I agree with my hon. Friend, and enforcement will be really key to that. I encourage him to get involved in the consultation and to share his views on exactly that point.

The Government will review responses to those two consultation questions with interest, as we will the responses to the consultation as a whole. The consultation matters, because it is important that the implementation of the right of access works in practice, not just on paper. That is why the Government have committed to support businesses throughout the implementation of the Bill, and why we will produce a new code of practice for the policy. That will contain practical guidance on how access should take place in practice to help support employers and businesses to manage the process smoothly and effectively. The Government will consult on that code next year before the new right comes into force in October 2026.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East also mentioned enforcement, and I welcome his support for the Fair Work Agency and its newly appointed chair, Matthew Taylor. Strengthening our labour market, compliance and enforcement is absolutely key to this issue, and to our wider Employment Rights Bill.

Andy McDonald: Does the Minister agree that there are many good employers across our economy who actively engage and encourage trade union access and recognition? They could be of great service in the process that she describes for supporting other businesses as the regulations are implemented.

Kate Dearden: I could not agree more. There is brilliant practice across the country and across workplaces, with good employers and unions working together in the better interests of the workforce. That is why the Employment Rights Bill, which the Government are proud to be implementing, is such a positive step forward for workers, employers and our wider economy.

The new right of access will deliver for everybody, recognising the needs of unions and employers. Building on the good work that already exists across this country, it will deliver on our make work pay commitment to ensure access is responsible and regulated. It will also provide the opportunity for many workers to understand their rights and access trade unions, which are such a vital part of our economy.

I look forward to working closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East and with all other hon. Members present, on both sides of the House, to deliver this positive change for the British economy. I thank my hon. Friend again for securing the debate, and I thank all other hon. Members who have contributed to it. I look forward to working with them as part of this agenda.

Question put and agreed to.

Coal Tip Safety and New Extraction Licences

4.30 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered coal tip safety and the prohibition of new coal extraction licences.

Diolch yn fawr, Gadeirydd. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

Just as coal ran in rich veins beneath the Welsh valleys and mountains, it also runs deep through the history of the people of Wales. Around this industry, thriving and vibrant communities developed all across the south Wales valleys. Miners' institutes, public libraries, trade unions and public healthcare all bloomed in the Welsh coalfields. Those institutions were founded and funded by miners, laying the foundation for the modern welfare state. Despite this dynamism, we should not forget that those communities were exploited, with vast amounts of wealth from coal profiting Westminster, not Wales. Mining was also dangerous work and took a terrible toll on the health of far too many men and young boys.

When Margaret Thatcher began closing the mines in the 1980s without replacing those jobs, she destroyed livelihoods and left communities that once powered the world bearing economic and social scars that would pass on through generations. Thatcher's decision to kick-start deindustrialisation in Wales—and the acceptance of this decline by both Labour and Conservative Governments—means that west Wales and the valleys are now among the poorest parts of Europe.

The economic legacy is compounded by a physical one, too. The valleys are now littered with coal tips—black monuments from the past that cast long shadows over the present. Also known as spoil tips or slag heaps, these are the waste materials removed from the mines and left abandoned above ground. Today, over 50% of all coal tips in the UK are in Wales, despite our nation making up just 8.5% of the UK's total land mass.

Of the 2,590 coal tips, many are considered dangerous to the public. There is a risk that a significant number may collapse due to increasingly extreme weather, and that is not hypothetical, as history has shown us. Today's debate is taking place just a day after the 59th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster, which involved the collapse of a colliery spoil tip in 1966, killing 28 adults and 116 children.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Yesterday was the anniversary of the Aberfan disaster; it is the same day as the anniversary of the flooding of Capel Celyn. Both were terrible reminders to communities in Wales of how little say they had over the fate of their communities, and of how little effect Westminster had, naturally, on amelioration and making people's lives better. Those terrible incidents—the terrible deaths in Aberfan, as well as the flooding of Capel Celyn—reminded people where they stood, sadly.

Ann Davies: That is true. It is ironic that the two incidents happened on exactly the same date—a few years apart, but on 21 October. We must never forget either.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am old enough to remember the Aberfan disaster, unfortunately—all the things that happened and the lives that were lost. Northern Ireland has some coal tips, primarily from

historical operations at Ballycastle and Coalisland. They have not been active for some years, but does the hon. Lady agree that, although the mining legacy in Northern Ireland is not as prevalent as it is in Wales, there must still be regulatory oversight where sources are less advanced, to ensure that our people have the same protection as those in Wales?

Ann Davies: Absolutely. This is an issue for the whole of the United Kingdom.

The disaster brought about the Mines and Quarries (Tips) Act 1969, which came into force to improve coal tips' stability and safety. However, it did not go far enough. Aberfan should have been a moment to address the dangerous legacy of all coal tips once and for all, but the job remains unfinished. Now, because of increasingly violent storms caused by climate change, we have experienced further coal tip slips. There was a major landslide above Tylorstown in Rhondda Fach in 2020, and then in November 2024, in Cwmillery, a slip was caused by heavy rainfall from Storm Bert. That led to a slurry and debris slide that forced the evacuation of homes.

Plaid Cymru has long warned that the safety of our coal tips is not a matter for tomorrow; it must be addressed urgently. No family should go to bed fearing a landslide on the hillside above them. No community should be left to foot the bill for the negligence of past Governments. The Senedd recently passed the Disused Mine and Quarry Tips (Wales) Act 2025, which will establish the Disused Tips Authority for Wales, the powers of which will include requiring landowners to ensure that coal tips located on their land are stable. We must, however, not forget that the issue of coal tips predates the dawn of devolution. It is an historic injustice that the cost of making these tips safe has not been fully funded by Westminster, and that the people of Wales are now expected to foot a large part of this bill.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I welcome this debate, but I would like the hon. Member to acknowledge the fact that the UK Government have given £140 million towards making these coal tips safe, which is absolutely vital. I know that bigger figures have been bandied about, but would she agree that there is a limit to how much we can do in any one or two years, and that that was the amount asked for by the Welsh Government? It does not preclude opportunities in the future to ask for more, when more plans are ready.

Ann Davies: Absolutely, but we need £600 million to make these tips safe. The Government responded to my written question in June that the Labour Welsh Government had not asked for the full amount of the estimated £600 million needed to make all tips in Wales safe. Plaid Cymru believes it is a grave injustice to the people of the valleys that the full cost is not covered by Westminster. I reiterate our call on the Government to fully fund remediation work to make coal tips safe in Wales.

Without full funding from Westminster, it leaves the door open to a new generation of mining companies waiting to mine these coal tips under the guise of remediation. That is because the new Welsh Disused Tips Authority will require landowners to make the coal tips safe, and they will likely seek to avoid that extra cost. There is a real risk that mining companies

[Ann Davies]

will offer to carry out remediation work on behalf of landowners for free, in return for the commercial rights of any coal that they extract. These companies have proven to us that they cannot be trusted with the stewardship of our environment.

The local authority area of Carmarthenshire has 170 coal tips. My constituency borders some of the largest tips in Wales, one of which is the waste from the East Pit open-cast coalmine, a prime example of where a company has betrayed the trust of the community. In that instance, the company, Celtic Energy, continued to mine coal from the site beyond the expiry of its planning permission. It then failed to restore the coalmine and remediate the local coal tip, abandoning the site and the community with the task incomplete. We cannot allow this to become a pattern by letting the coalmining industry of Wales's past return to carve open our countryside once again. Making coal tips safe for our communities should be the priority, whether that is through flattening, removing or reprofiling them.

The UK Government have pledged to ban new coalmining licences, but they have confirmed their belief that re-mining coal from the tips does not require a licence, meaning that such activity falls outside the scope of the proposed ban. Although the Welsh Government believe that their own planning policies will prevent re-mining, a loophole allowing coal extraction in "wholly exceptional circumstances" has raised concern among campaigners such as the Coal Action Network. I thank Anthony, who is here today, for his help in preparing for this debate. I also congratulate him on his wedding anniversary—when he should be home, he has come to support us here.

The loophole can be resolved by amending the Coal Industry Act 1994 to require licensing for the re-mining of coal tips, and ensuring that that is included in a UK-wide ban. We must prevent a new industry of commercial coal tip mining from taking root and perpetuating fossil fuel pollution. I urge the Government to extend their coal licence ban to cover the re-mining of coal tips.

Tomorrow is the Senedd by-election in Caerphilly—a local authority area with 207 coal tips, 56 of which are deemed a clear threat to public safety. As we know, voters will get to choose between two different visions for the future of Caerphilly. The vision of Reform and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is one of reopening the coalmines in Wales. He wants to send our people back down underground to slave away in the dark for hours, developing pneumoconiosis from inhaling toxic dust—all to exploit the people of Wales yet again.

Liz Saville Roberts: My hon. Friend is being kind with her time in giving way. She draws attention to the policies of another party. It is striking that Reform Members are conspicuous by their absence. They once again took part in Prime Minister's questions only from the Gallery, and when they could be talking about coal and the future of communities blighted by the remains of the coal industry, they are not here to stand up for the communities of Wales. I am sure that a number of hon. Members will join us in our dismay at their lack of presence.

Ann Davies: We all know that the hon. Member for Clacton supports coalmining companies that have left our communities vulnerable, in the same way that he supports privatising our precious national health service.

We will continue to campaign to make all coal tips safe and ensure that Westminster rights the wrongs of the past by paying in full to do so. The failure to replace coalmining with an economic alternative has left communities in decline. Many people are now without hope and are angry at Governments in both London and Cardiff for not listening or caring. Other parties want to blame these problems on others in society, rather than on the politicians and private companies that have caused them.

This debate is about justice and dignity. It is about ensuring that the people of Wales are not left to carry the cost, financial or emotional, of decisions made generations ago. Let us act now, not when the next storm hits or when the next landslide slips. Let us act because it is right and just, and because our communities deserve nothing less. This Government must revisit their approach to coal tip safety in Wales to fully support the communities who, after decades since the last coal was hewn from our valleys, still bear the burden of its legacy. Diolch, Gadeirydd.

4.43 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on securing the debate.

As the hon. Lady outlined, the debate comes the day after the 59th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster in my constituency—an event that illustrates, more than any other, the need to ensure the safety of coal tips. As I joined community members and civic leaders in Aberfan yesterday, it was heartbreaking and humbling to see at first hand, yet again, the true price of coal in our communities.

For many years, coal extraction built wealth right across the UK. It powered the Welsh and UK economies for decades. However, the previous UK Government failed to support any costs associated with the remediation of coal tips, owing to the fact that it is a devolved area. This Labour Government recognise that the legacy of coal and coal tip safety is very much a shared responsibility, and I welcome the £25 million that the Government provided in the first Labour Budget in 14 years last October. They then built upon that with a further £118 million in the spending review to support the vital work to keep our coal tips safe.

The hon. Member for Caerfyrddin mentioned calls for further investment, at a full cost of £600 million. Perhaps, in her reflections, she could be clear on how much less money would be available for public services in Wales if her party ever pushed its Welsh independence fantasy, which could cost every adult in Wales something like £11,000 per year.

Liz Saville Roberts: It has now been shown that the £11,000 is based on the present state of the economy, and not the potential if Wales were to be independent. It is very important that we use statistics and figures with some care and show their sources.

Gerald Jones: Perhaps the right hon. Lady and her party could be clear on what the true cost would be. We know that those costs are significant. It is something that Plaid Cymru has never really wanted to talk about, so perhaps going forward they could be clear on what the costs of their pipe dream would mean for communities and individuals right across Wales.

But back to the point: the safety of our communities is our first responsibility. The funding represents all that Welsh Government requested to fund the safety works for the rest of this Parliament. With a significant number of category D tips across Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf, this investment is hugely important for my constituents.

This is a Government determined to act where Tory inaction left communities unsafe. The funding announcement, along with significant investment from the Welsh Government, shows the impact of two Labour Governments working together for Wales after years of Tory failure.

I welcome the fact that the Welsh Government's Disused Mine and Quarry Tips (Wales) Act 2025 received Royal Assent last month, which paves the way for the establishment of the disused tips authority for Wales, a dedicated public body responsible for assessing, registering, monitoring and managing disused tips. That authority would be the first of its kind in the UK and would be world-leading in developing a robust system for the safety of disused tip.

The new authority is due to be operational from April 2027, and will take over the work that is currently done by the Mining Remediation Authority. As we have heard, there are more than 2,500 disused coal tips in Wales, predominantly in the south Wales valleys. We have almost 100 category C and 44 category D across Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf. The changing climate, our industrial past and the landscape mean that we must act to keep our communities safe.

The House will also be aware that my constituency is home to Ffos-y-Fran, the last major open-cast mine in the UK, which shut down in November 2023. The scheme has certainly had its difficulties and caused much concern over the years. When it first opened, the company running the mine, Merthyr (South Wales) Ltd, pledged to fully restore the site after it finished operations. I call on it to honour that pledge.

Local residents have put up with a lot in terms of nuisance and inconvenience since the open-cast began. I sincerely hope that this is recognised and that the developer ensures that local residents are at the forefront when completing the restoration. Current restoration costs are estimated at between £50 million and £120 million, and there has been much uncertainty in the community.

Merthyr Tydfil residents are understandably concerned, given how long this has gone on and the need for remediation work to provide a lasting solution to ensure that the area is, above all, safe and returned to natural countryside. It is essential that progress be made soon and that remedial work be completed, so that local residents can once more enjoy their local surroundings.

Dame Nia Griffith: Would my hon. Friend strongly advise constituents in areas like mine to look very carefully at any applications? Luckily, we have no category C or D tips, although we do have A and B tips, and we had

an application for Pentremawr, near Pont Henri—luckily, we managed to send it packing. Would he therefore advise our constituents to be ultra-vigilant and not to let things slip through without the full detail?

Gerald Jones: I agree that communities need to be vigilant, and also fully involved in these projects going forward—hopefully, we have seen the last of them.

I am aware that Merthyr Tydfil county borough council is working hard on finding a resolution to the restoration, and I am pleased that the Welsh Government are working with the local authority and other regulators as part of a technical working group, to ensure that the best possible outcome is achieved for local people.

The people in my constituency and across Wales have paid an historic price for coal, which has helped to fuel our country and our economy. It is now time they were allowed to enjoy their green and pleasant valleys once again.

4.50 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) for securing this important debate. Our constituencies meet around a former coalmine, so it is fitting that we are working on this issue together.

The legacy of the coal industry is still all around us in Wales. Coal built our modern nation, but it also left deep marks on our land and our communities. Yesterday marked 59 years since the Aberfan disaster, when 144 lives were lost, including those of 116 children. Aberfan reminds us of what happens when safety is overlooked. We owe it to Aberfan and to every mining community to ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated.

Yet almost 60 years on, the dangerous legacy of coal still hangs over Wales. There are more than 2,000 disused coal tips across Wales, and several of the highest-risk sites are in my constituency. They stand as a stark reminder that the danger has not disappeared; it has simply been neglected. What that means for local residents is that each spell of heavy rain brings renewed fear. Recent landslips in Cwmtillery show that this risk is real, and it is growing as wetter weather destabilises former pits.

No community should have to live in fear every time it rains. That is why the UK Government must commit the £600 million needed to make our former coal tips safe. This is a problem that predates devolution, and the cost should not fall on the Welsh Government alone. These communities in Wales powered Britain's wealth, and the responsibility for their safety must be shared by Britain as a whole.

The legacy of coal is written across the open scars on our hills. Across south Wales, open-cast sites have been left in limbo after operators walked away, leaving vast holes in the landscape and leaving the taxpayer to foot the bill. In my constituency, the East Pit mine between Tairgwaith and Cwmllynfell is a clear example. It was never restored because no proper restoration bond was put in place, and it is now a deep chasm filled with millions of tonnes of water—a monument to failure and neglect. That must change. We need stronger legislation so that open-cast mines are properly regulated and fully restored, with enforceable bonds to ensure that no company can ever again abandon a community.

[David Chadwick]

Despite such injustices, what matters now is investment and delivery. We must look forward. Communities across south Wales deserve real progress and not more broken promises. The proposals from Reform UK to issue new coal licences are not a credible plan for our future in south Wales; they are a retreat into the past. To suggest that the answer for the valleys lies in reopening mines is not only wrong; it is deeply patronising. I come from a Welsh mining family and I am very proud of my roots in Maesteg, but I certainly do not want to undertake the same work that my great-grandfathers had to do, because I remember how they ended up.

Our young people do not want to be sent back down the pits. They want secure, well-paid jobs in clean energy and modern industries. The communities of the valleys are resilient, proud and determined, but that resilience should not be taken for granted. Promises of investment, which too often have been made and too often broken, must finally be delivered for south Wales. The people of the south Wales valleys have given more than enough, and we are still waiting for our new south Wales to emerge. We deserve safety, fairness and a future built on renewal, not nostalgia. Let us honour our past by investing in the future.

4.54 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg.

I thank the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) for securing this important debate to ensure that the Government's proposed ban on new coal licences stays true to its legislative aim, while putting the safety of our constituents over profit-making opportunities for private sector companies.

At present, the Government's planned coal licence ban does not definitively include coal tips, which means that there is a real possibility that private companies could apply to mine for commercial gain even after the ban is in place. Wales is home to more than half all the coal tips in the United Kingdom—2,590 out of 5,000. Therefore, any legal ambiguity would raise concerns for my constituents, especially those living near the Bersham colliery in Rhostyllen, in my constituency—the final coalmine to close in north Wales, in 1986—and no doubt among those of many colleagues here today.

Contained in these tips are tens of millions of tonnes of coal. They are increasingly a real and present public safety risk. Landslides, leaching and pollution are all growing threats, made worse by extreme weather and heavy rainfall, which climate change is making more frequent. Extracting that coal would only make the situation worse, hence the need for coal tip safety measures that exclude coal extraction for commercial purposes.

In Wales, we know all too well the danger that coal tips can pose. We carry the memory of Aberfan—the tragic disaster of 1966, in which 116 children, mostly between the ages of seven and 10, along with 28 adults, lost their lives when a coal tip collapsed on their school. It happened on the last day before half-term. Yesterday was 59 years since it happened. The devastation of the grief still hangs heavy in our national memory. We must honour that memory by ensuring that such a tragedy can never happen again.

In 2020 in Tylorstown, following Storm Dennis, we saw 60,000 tonnes of spoil collapse from a former tip; and just last year in Cwmtillery, 40 homes had to be evacuated after a similar event. Those are stark warnings.

Mining companies offering to remove coal tips in return for commercial access to coal is an easy answer to a difficult question, which we cannot allow, so I ask the Minister this. If the Government truly believe that the Welsh Government's coal policy and England's and Scotland's planning policies are robust enough to prevent coal extraction, why do investors think otherwise? ERI Reclamation is actively seeking to extract 468,000 tonnes of coal from tips in Bedwas, Caerphilly. It clearly believes that the law allows that, and it is putting serious capital behind the belief. If this is approved—it is an “if”—it could set a dangerous precedent, whereby private profits determine which coal tips are removed and others, with less content, are left. It would be a precedent categorising coal tips by their value rather than their potential impact on public safety. Could we see landowners, burdened by maintenance costs, encouraged to sell access to these sites?

We cannot and must not rely on the private sector to make coal tips safe. That duty falls on us. The Government's coal licensing ban must be strengthened to include coal tip mining. The short-term and long-term safety and welfare of our communities must come first. Diolch yn fawr, Mr Twigg.

4.58 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on securing this important debate, which brings together two deeply interconnected issues: the safety of coal tips and the prohibition of new coal extraction licences. Both go to the heart of how we reckon with our industrial past, protect our communities in the present and deliver on our climate responsibilities for the future.

In September last year, we hailed the historic moment that the UK closed its last coal-fired power station and we became the first country in the G7 to phase out coal power generation, fulfilling the pledge that we made alongside other countries at COP26. That was a key milestone in our climate targets and our efforts to reduce polluting emissions. At the same time, we paid tribute to the men and women who had worked in terrible conditions in our coalmines and coal-fired power stations for many years while they kept our lights on and powered our industries and economy.

That now leaves, across the United Kingdom, about 5,000 disused coal tips, more than half of which are in Wales. Many of them sit close to the communities that once powered our country: the valleys, towns and villages built around the coal industry. As we have heard, as climate change accelerates, and rainfall and extreme weather events become more frequent, the danger the tips pose is growing. This is not a risk for some point in the future; it is happening now.

This week we remember the tragedy in Aberfan in 1966, when 144 people, including 116 children, died. Just last year, 40 homes in Cwmtillery were evacuated when a tip collapse sent tonnes of slurry and debris through the village. These incidents are a reminder that

this is not simply a historical concern, but a very real and present danger for communities today. Such tragedies should not be allowed to happen again.

The Government's commitment of £118 million over three years for coal tip safety, together with the Welsh Government's £100 million investment, is of course welcome, but the Welsh Affairs Committee heard clearly that the funding only scratches the surface. The cost of long-term remediation and monitoring is so much higher, and the risks are increasing as the climate changes. Though the funding is welcome, it is reactive and not strategic.

What we need is a strategic long-term plan—a proper partnership between the UK and Welsh Governments—with sustainable funding for the disused tips authority, which is due to be established in 2027. That body will succeed only if it has the skills, resources and the authority it needs from day one. As the Liberal Democrats have consistently said, we have to view this not just as a safety issue but as a climate resilience issue. Climate change is causing ground instability, which means that, as we have heard, living at the foot of a coal tip is becoming even more dangerous, year by year and day by day. The response must be integrated with the UK's broader climate adaptation strategy.

At the same time, we need to ensure we have truly confronted the unfinished business of coal itself. Liberal Democrats welcomed the Government's announcement last November that they would prohibit new coal extraction licences, but that has to be a watertight ban. As it stands, there is a loophole that allows coal to be commercially extracted from disused tips, as we have just heard so powerfully.

In practice, extracting coal from a tip is no different from open-cast mining. The method is the same, the disruption is the same, the risks are the same and the emissions are the same. The contradiction can be easily resolved. Leading environmental lawyers, working with the Coal Action Network, have proposed an amendment to the Coal Industry Act 1994 to clarify that the mining of coal from coal tips also requires a licence. That small change would ensure that the Government's coal ban is comprehensive and future-proof.

Future-proofing is vital, as changes in our political landscape could put all this at risk. There are political parties that would seek a very different route. Rather than invest in the new green jobs of the future, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), the leader of Reform UK, has demanded—I repeat, demanded—the reopening of coalmines in Wales. He argued that Welsh people would happily return to work down the pits—and, I assume, also have slurry tipped over the beautiful Welsh countryside. There is no vision for jobs of the future, only a return to the jobs of the past, and no concern for the planet that our children and future generations will inherit.

Reform UK opposes green renewable energy. Instead, it wants to reopen coalmines and frack stupid frack, ripping apart our beautiful countryside by digging deep, with the threat of earth tremors, polluted water and devastation to our precious nature and wildlife.

Dame Nia Griffith: Does the hon. Lady acknowledge the leadership of the Welsh Government, who have used their planning powers to become the first part of the UK to completely ban fracking?

Pippa Heylings: I definitely welcome that, and I hope that the Minister will ensure that we have the same powers in planning and all other legislation to follow that here in England.

Reform UK, in true Trump style, would destroy our green and pleasant land—and for whom? It would make oil and gas giants richer while keeping our households and businesses stuck on volatile, skyrocketing energy bills and sending our young people back down the pits. The Liberal Democrats have been clear that there must be no new onshore fossil fuel extraction anywhere in the UK. This is the decisive moment to leave coal behind once and for all.

We must have a just transition, with new investment, new skills and new opportunities rooted in the very same communities. That is why we are calling for an independent just transition commission to hold Government and industry to account, ensure that jobs in clean energy and green manufacturing reach the regions that need them most, and give workers the certainty that they deserve as industries evolve. I ask the Minister to agree with us that we should close the loophole and there should be no more new onshore fossil fuel extraction in the country.

5.6 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on securing the debate.

The themes of the debate are at the centre of Britain's industrial sanity. The Government's approach to our own resources, making us more dependent on dirtier foreign imports of materials rather than producing them at home, is not climate policy; it is economic vandalism dressed up as the same old virtue-signalling that we have come to expect from the incumbent Secretary of State.

It is fair to say that this country's methods of energy production have changed dramatically since the industry peaked in the 20th century, particularly after the second world war. But what we are witnessing from this shambolic Labour Government is an accelerating obsession with shutting down productive, strategic British industries in the name of ideology. The Government seem determined to pursue a hollow version of net zero, not as a plan for environmental stewardship, but for the purpose of political point scoring and making this country economically neutered and directionless.

As the Leader of the Opposition has rightly stated, the Conservatives remain committed to maximising the responsible extraction of our own natural resources, particularly at a time when ordinary working people are grappling with astronomical energy bills, which are now among the highest in the developed world, and our steel industry is on its knees. Yet rather than backing British industry and jobs, the Government continue their relentless campaign to strangle domestic industry in the name of tackling climate change, when they could be looking towards places such as the North sea to bring in tens of billions of pounds in tax revenue, skilled, well-paid jobs, and inward investment.

When the Secretary of State decided not to challenge the court's blocking of the proposed Cumbrian coking coalmine, he sabotaged an opportunity for investment and skilled employment. British Steel executives made

[Greg Smith]

it clear that UK-mined coal could power their blast furnaces efficiently and cleanly, cutting import costs and emissions alike. We all know where that ended. It makes no sense to make ourselves more reliant on other countries for things that we could produce ourselves here in the United Kingdom just because they do not count towards our climate targets.

Pippa Heylings: It was the leader of the Conservative party who made the pledge at COP26 to phase out coal extraction. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the Conservatives would do a complete U-turn and restart coal extraction?

Greg Smith: The ending of coal-fired power stations was incredibly welcome, but the reality of the transition is that just turning things off overnight does not work. In the example of the steel industry, had we opened the coalmine in Cumbria and delivered cheaper, less carbon-emitting coal from our own shores into the blast furnaces operated by British Steel, the Government may not have had to nationalise it. We now see an industry that will only have electric blast furnaces that cannot produce virgin steel, leaving us incredibly vulnerable, particularly on domestic security and defence infrastructure.

Liz Saville Roberts: Surely the hon. Gentleman would agree that it is time for the UK to follow in the footsteps of nations such as Norway that are looking at alternative technologies, such as hydrogen, for the blast production of steel, and that we should be directing our energy there rather than resorting to fossil fuel, which is only temporary.

Greg Smith: I do not think that the right hon. Lady and I are a million miles apart on this. I am suggesting that those great technological innovations that are coming on board but are not ready right here, right now in 2025 need time to develop and become commercially viable, and that in the transition we will still need coal for certain functions. Simply turning it all off overnight is not the responsible thing to do.

Coal tip safety is an incredibly serious issue and deserves resource, engineering expertise and local accountability. Communities across Wales and England in particular live with the physical remnants of our industrial past. Those sites must be monitored and maintained responsibly. When tips are abandoned and left unmanaged, they become dangerous, as we have seen in past tragedies.

Cutting off the licensing regime entirely risks creating more orphan sites with no responsible operators to maintain them. We should be modernising the licensing system, not abolishing it. A well-regulated extraction framework would provide both the revenue and the oversight needed to ensure tip safety for generations to come. By banning new coal extraction licences, the Government have not reduced demand for coal; they have simply exported that demand abroad. That is exactly what we have seen with the approach to the North sea and to British industry more generally.

The Times recently reported comments from the industrialist Sir Jim Ratcliffe, who warned that the UK faces a “chemical breakdown” if Ministers continue ignoring the realities of domestic energy and feedstock production. His message was blunt: if we keep shutting

down energy-intensive industries here, we will just import the same materials from countries with far higher emissions, fewer safeguards and lower labour standards.

The Government are just lost. To give an example, even the GMB’s general secretary, Gary Smith—no relation—rightly called this strategy “catastrophic” for not just jobs, but the environment. He warned that importing coal, gas and manufactured products from overseas is far more carbon intensive than producing them domestically. He went further, saying that the Government’s net zero drive is “bonkers”—his word—because it undermines the workers who will be essential to any genuine green transition. When even the trade unions are pleading for common sense, it is a clear sign that Labour has lost touch with not just the science, but the people they apparently represent.

Dame Nia Griffith: Does the shadow Minister accept that his party’s ban on onshore wind in England, plus no experimental hydrogen stations, has contributed to the slowness of the transition? The way he is talking now is a bit rich.

Greg Smith: I understand that the point that the hon. Lady is trying to make, but I will never apologise for trying to protect the British countryside.

The Labour Government are closing industries at home, patting themselves on the back for imaginary environmental victories and then importing the same resources from halfway across the world, racking up shipping emissions, losing domestic expertise and devastating industrial communities. That is not a green policy; it is economic negligence. It is bad for the economy, disastrous for security and utterly self-defeating for the climate. Let us be honest: Britain cannot reach meaningful environmental goals by eroding its industrial base. Real sustainability comes from innovation, not prohibition.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this matter, because it allows me to acknowledge what responsible governance should be about: balancing progress with protection. The Government’s policies will harm our communities, hollow out industry and do nothing measurable for the global climate. Let us have the courage to revisit them and stand up for common sense, working people and British industry. If we continue down the path of ideological self-harm, we will soon find that the only thing we have truly exported is our prosperity, and the only thing we have imported is decline.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Will the Minister please leave a minute or two for the hon. Member who secured the debate to wind up?

5.15 pm

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I thank most hon. Members for the tone of the debate. I will return to the shadow Minister’s remarks later.

I thank the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) for securing the debate, and for recognising the context that it sits in. Several hon. Members have done the same. I wish to reflect first, as she did, on the fact that 59 years ago, 116 children and 28 adults lost their lives in Aberfan. I, too, am an MP for a constituency with a legacy of coalmining. In Lanarkshire in Scotland, we know that the hon. Member’s point about coal running through the legacy of people and communities is important. Even generations on from the coalmines in my constituency,

I still see the impacts and the outcomes for people right across my community. I entirely understand the point, which is well made.

I thank hon. Members for grounding their remarks in that legacy and for recognising, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) did, how far we have come as a country in phasing out coal, and the importance of the consensus that got us to that point, while paying tribute to those workers, as I pay tribute to the workers in the oil and gas industry who powered the country for 60 years. Recognising the incredibly important role that they played in powering our country is important, but it is equally important to recognise that we have made progress since those days. We should recognise with pride the role that they played, and recognise with pride how good it is that we have moved away from having to put people down coalmines to power our country. I thank hon. Members for that recognition.

The debate had two key themes that I will try to focus on: first, disused coal tips and the funding for them, on which I will reflect, and secondly, the future extraction of coal. The disused coal tips right across Wales are the enduring legacy that people see and experience. Coal tip disasters have left deep scars on many Welsh communities. As many hon. Members have said in this debate, the risks—particularly of climate change and worsening weather conditions leading to incidents in future—are significant. That is partly why we should redouble our efforts to tackle climate change, and there is broad consensus on that, although not from everywhere. It is also why we should do everything that we possibly can to maintain the safety of those coal tips.

We take the situation very seriously. That is why just a few months ago, the Chancellor and the First Minister of Wales visited a coal tip site on the banks of the River Afan near Port Talbot in the historic industrial heart of Wales to see the work that is being done to stabilise a former coal tip. The UK Government and the Welsh Government are working together in partnership to secure coal tip sites, including by providing the funding to which hon. Members have referred.

In the spending review, we announced £118 million of funding to protect Welsh communities, in addition to the £25 million from last year's autumn Budget. Combined with funding from the Welsh Government, that figure of £143 million increases to £220 million. Some points were made about whether more funding is necessary. We will obviously keep those questions under review, but the suggestion does not always follow that a figure is the way to deliver the necessary work. Yes, we want to be ambitious about we can achieve with this programme. The funding that we have put in place—the £220 million—is what can actually deliver work on the ground at the moment. If there is future ambition in that programme, of course we will look at that. But giving a bigger figure that the Welsh Government, who are on the ground dealing with this, have not asked for, because they do not have capacity to move any quicker on some of these projects, is not an answer to the question. The £220 million has been given to deal with the issue at hand and to move forward with a programme in the fastest way possible, in partnership with others. We will, of course, continue to look at these questions in future.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Given the challenges of having that specific figure in mind, if a future Welsh Government were to ask for the entire cost to be financed

by the UK Government, given their historical and moral duty to do so, would the UK Government accept that request?

Michael Shanks: First, I should say that I am not the Chancellor. Such questions are rightly for the Chancellor at Budgets and spending reviews. However, I will say, as the Minister responsible for the Coal Authority, that we will look at this. The £600 million figure that was given was a provisional estimate, not a programmed budget. It was based on the very limited information that was available in 2020. A considerable amount of work, particularly on the mapping of these sites, has been done subsequently, and £180 million was given as the realistic amount of funding that could be used to protect communities now.

This needs to be based on evidence. Bandyng around bigger figures does not necessarily improve the quality of the programme. The figure at the moment gives a signal of how seriously we take it, but also of the practical funding on the ground, to deliver what we think, based on more detailed information, the actual programme that is necessary. But of course we will always look at requests.

I want to reflect on some other things that have been established. The Disused Tips Authority for Wales will prevent unstable disused tips from threatening welfare. That is an important step forward, and will bring together some key people to deal with the matter. The Mining Remediation Authority, formerly known as the Coal Authority, is one of my Department's partner bodies and is also playing an active role—in working partnership with the Welsh Government, in an advisory role—to ensure that a risk-based inspection and monitoring programme is in place, which has not been the case in the past.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): The Minister mentions the Mining Remediation Authority. I commend it for the work that it has commenced to address another hazard of our mining legacy: that of metal mines and lead pollution in particular. Does the Minister think that the work we are doing on coal might serve as a template for dealing with the historic legacy and problem of lead mines? Sadly, many of them are located in my constituency.

Michael Shanks: That is a very interesting point. I am sure that the Mining Remediation Authority, which I think I am meeting next week, will be delighted to hear the hon. Member's praise, although perhaps it is also listening to this debate and wondering slightly how it is going to deliver another piece of work. The hon. Member's point is useful, and I will take it back to colleagues. To date, the MRA has carried out 3,500 inspections, with the higher-rated category D and C tips continuing to be inspected on a six-monthly or annual basis.

Let me turn to the question of licensing. The Mining Remediation Authority currently serves as the licensor for most coal extraction in Great Britain. It is the owner of the UK's unworked coal reserves. Our manifesto was very clear that we would not grant new coal licences, so we will amend the MRA's licensing duties. The MRA takes the view that removing coal from tips that are made up of coalmining waste does not fall under the licensable activities defined in its legislation.

[*Michael Shanks*]

Extracting coal from tips does, however, require planning consent, which has to address all the environmental impacts individually. Most coal tips are owned by local authorities or private individuals, who under current legislation are responsible for maintaining their safety and stability. Local authorities have the primary responsibility for tip washing and reclamation schemes, through their planning and enforcement powers. We acknowledge the suggestion to make this type of coal extraction a licensable activity under the MRA, which would allow for a licensing prohibition, but our view is that the current planning policies around the regulations set by devolved Governments already provide robust frameworks.

We are a Government who believe in devolution. We created devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland because we believe in devolving power to those authorities, so they are closer to people and to individual circumstances. It is right that we take their lead on these questions. Their firm view is that they can bring into effect the aim of the Welsh Government and the UK Government to make sure that extraction of coal is a thing of the past. Their view is that their existing powers do that.

Ann Davies *rose—*

Michael Shanks: I will not question that process today, but I suspect that the hon. Lady will.

Ann Davies: Not at all; I would just like some clarification. The Government announced their intention in November 2024—nearly a year ago now—to introduce a Bill to ban new coalmining licences. Can the Minister tell us exactly when the Government will bring that legislation forward in Parliament?

Michael Shanks: I cannot give an exact date, I am afraid, partly because bringing forward legislation is not in the gift of any one Minister, but I can say that it is entirely still our aim to bring forward that ban. To pick up a point made by a couple of other hon. Members, it is also our aim to bring forward a ban on fracking across the country; we will do so as soon as we are able to introduce legislation. We had a Bill in the King's Speech, and we still intend to bring forward that legislation as soon as possible, but that is dependent on parliamentary time.

I will conclude by addressing the wider context. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire made the point about phasing out coal; the shadow Minister reflected on the same point. To me, one of the great sadnesses of the past year is that we have moved away from a consensus that was so incredibly important for this country. We were a leader on tackling climate change under different Governments, and that was reflected across the world in some of the strongest possible ways, by driving other countries towards ambitious targets of their own.

In September last year, I was at the closure of Ratcliffe-on-Soar, the last coal-fired power station in Britain. I had the privilege of being in the control room with the workforce who had been there for decades, as they were switching off coal for the last time. It was a huge achievement, under Labour Governments, Conservative Governments and, briefly, the Liberal Democrat and

Conservative Government. That consensus allowed us to move forward as a country, recognising that the future of our planet is important. It saddens me greatly that that consensus does not now exist. We now have a script that is, frankly, one of climate denialism. It also misses the point about the economic opportunity that our country faces.

A few weeks ago, for the first time ever, we powered this country without any fossil fuels at all. That is a huge milestone for us. It is an example of how we can be climate leaders, but also build legacies and communities right across Wales and the UK with good, sustainable jobs—the jobs of the future, not a harking back to a bygone era. It is about securing jobs; as the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) said, it is about renewal, not nostalgia. That is an incredibly important point about building the economic system of the future.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I must come to an end, so that the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin has some time to wind up.

We will deliver on our manifesto commitment not to grant new coal licences. We will continue to build the energy system of the future. We will create good, well-paid jobs across the country. We will be forward-looking—not just delivering for people now and dealing with the legacy of what we built in past decades, but ensuring that we can pass our country and our world to future generations. We need to be safe for the future, with an economic and energy system that is built for the future as well.

All those things come together in our clean power mission and in what we are trying to do. Those who oppose that should recognise that they are against the economic opportunity of the century and against the climate action that is necessary now, not in the future. Together, we can rebuild this consensus. I look forward to working with hon. Members across the House on how we deal with this specific issue, but also on how we rebuild the wider consensus on the future of our planet.

5.28 pm

Ann Davies: I thank everybody for contributing today. I am delighted to see my fellow Welsh MPs here, across the parties. I am delighted that, for the vast majority of the debate, we have had consensus that we do not want to send our men, women and young people back down to the pits and the life they had 50 or 60 years ago. The way is forward.

I am terribly disappointed with the shadow Minister—[*Interruption.*] No, I really am, because this is not the way forward. Sending people back down to extract coal is not the way forward for us in Wales. The subject of this debate was coal tips and extraction licences, and I am sorry to say that we heard very little from the hon. Gentleman on that matter. But I thank the Minister for his response, and I look forward to moving forward together. Diolch.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered coal tip safety and the prohibition of new coal extraction licences.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 22 October 2025

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Sector Penalties Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The Government are pleased to announce that today we have launched a consultation on strengthening the Environment Agency's tools for enforcing against offences committed by water companies.

Currently, the Environment Agency has to be satisfied "beyond reasonable doubt"—the criminal standard of proof—that an offence has been committed to issue monetary penalties. We are proposing changes that would allow the Environment Agency to impose penalties to the civil standard of proof "on the balance of probabilities". This will enable minor to moderate offences to be enforced more quickly, cost effectively and proportionately.

We are also consulting on the introduction of automatic penalties. These fixed penalties would be triggered in specific circumstances including late reporting of significant pollution incidents, failure to report monitoring data for storm and emergency overflows monthly, and where there is not accurate and reliable monitoring in place to measure water abstraction. Automatic penalties are designed to streamline the penalty process for offences that can be identified and evidenced quickly.

These changes will deliver a clear, transparent and robust enforcement regime that drives real change. The penalties will act as a proportionate deterrent, incentivising water companies to improve their performance and restoring public trust.

The new penalties will sit alongside and complement the existing enforcement options, including prosecution and unlimited penalties to the criminal standard of proof, that will continue to be used to enforce more serious offences.

We encourage everyone with an interest in the performance of the water sector to share their views and help shape the future of enforcement.

[HCWS976]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Pandemic Agreement: Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing Negotiations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): The Minister for Public Health and Prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), last updated the House in May on the adoption of the World Health Organisation pandemic agreement. I would now like to update the House regarding the follow-up

negotiations to the agreement, to develop and agree a new pathogen access and benefit sharing system, including its operational details, in the form of an annex to the agreement. The PABS system will be a new, voluntary system for life sciences companies to sign up to in order to gain faster access, with less red tape, to the pathogens they need to create new vaccines, treatments and tests in the event of a pandemic. A member state-led intergovernmental working group has been established to facilitate these negotiations.

The IGWG has met three times since the group was established in May. Member states have elected a bureau to oversee negotiations, including agreeing that the bureau will be co-chaired by representatives from the UK and Brazil. Discussions so far have primarily focused on the technical details of the PABS system. These discussions will continue in the next round of formal negotiations taking place in November. We were pleased that technical experts were invited to participate in some of the informal discussions in October, and we will continue to advocate for their input into the process.

Member states have agreed to report on the outcome of negotiations by the next World Health Assembly in May 2026. Only once the negotiations on the PABS annex have concluded, and the annex has been adopted by the WHA, will the pandemic agreement, including the PABS annex, be open for signature and ratification by member states. This Government would only agree to a pandemic agreement and PABS annex that is in the national interest.

The IGWG will convene regularly until May 2026, and I will update the House at important and relevant junctures over the course of negotiations.

[HCWS980]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Deproscription of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): After careful consideration and following extensive consultation across Government and with operational partners, the Government have decided to remove Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from the list of organisations proscribed under section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000. This decision reflects our unwavering support for British interests and commitment to the security of the United Kingdom.

HTS was first proscribed in 2017, having emerged as the principal Islamist militant group in north-west Syria, and was identified as an alias of the proscribed organisation al-Qaeda. Since then, significant developments have taken place in Syria.

In December 2024, forces led by Ahmed Al Sharaa—the former leader of HTS and now President of Syria—toppled former President Assad's regime, which had been responsible for countless crimes against his own people.

The change in Syria's Government has clear implications for UK foreign policy and national security objectives.

Despite the defeat of Daesh's so-called caliphate in 2019 and its continued suppression through the actions of the global coalition against Daesh, the group maintains

a significant presence in Syria and continues to pose one of the most serious terrorist threats to the UK, our people and our interests abroad.

The decision to de-proscribe HTS will support our continued efforts to counter Daesh in Syria and reduce the risk to the UK. We welcome the swift and robust response of the Syrian Government, since taking power, to terrorist attacks, including the attack on the Mar Elias church in Damascus in June, and their clear condemnation of such acts.

Strengthening our relationship with the Syrian Government will also help secure our borders by enabling a dialogue to reduce irregular migration from Syria.

A concerning legacy of the Assad regime is the existence of an operational chemical weapons programme in Syria. The de-proscription of HTS will allow the UK to work more closely with the Syrian Government to ensure the declaration and destruction of these weapons. The Syrian Government have committed to protecting chemical weapons sites and ensuring that such weapons are never used again.

While we will ultimately judge them on their actions and not their words, the new Syrian Government have conveyed their strong commitment to working with the UK on shared priorities. President Al Sharaa has made it clear that his focus is on rebuilding a stable, safe and prosperous Syria for all Syrians.

Decisions on de-proscription are not taken lightly. This Government will always put the safety and security of the British people first. This decision is consistent with the Government plan for change and mirrors the decision taken by the United States earlier this year to de-list HTS as a foreign terrorist organisation.

The decision to de-proscribe HTS was supported by a thorough assessment of the cross-Government proscription review group. The group concluded that HTS's designation as an alias of al-Qaeda is no longer accurate and that de-proscription serves the national interest. Following its de-proscription, the offences relating to proscribed organisations under the Terrorism Act, including those concerning membership and support, will no longer apply to HTS. After this decision is implemented, 83 organisations remain proscribed in the UK.

The Home Secretary reserves the right to review proscription decisions in response to evolving threats. The Government will always act swiftly and decisively in the interests of national security.

This Government's commitment to the security of the United Kingdom and the safety of its citizens is steadfast.

[HCWS977]

Proceeds of Crime Act Consultation: Extension of Accredited Financial Investigation Powers

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Today the Government are launching a consultation document relating to the granting of accredited financial investigator powers under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to an additional three agencies, increasing our capacity to pursue asset recovery and further combat serious and organised crime.

The following public bodies have sought access to accredited financial investigator powers:

The Forestry Commission.

The Intellectual Property Office.

The Immigration Advice Authority.

The Government have assessed the value of extending the powers to each agency and concluded that we should seek to grant the powers to all three. However, to enhance transparency and foster effective decision making, the Government intend to seek the views of the wider public on this before laying the order in Parliament.

Additionally, the Intellectual Property Office will have its previous part 8 POCA powers restored—powers that it held while formally under the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy but were lost during departmental restructuring.

As such, this consultation will be launched for 12 weeks to seek to establish the views from the public on whether these organisations should be granted the financial investigator powers.

A copy of the consultation document will be placed in the libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS978]

JUSTICE

Family Justice: Better Protections for Children

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Baroness Levitt KC), has today made the following statement:

"I am pleased to announce today that the Government will repeal the presumption of parental involvement when Parliamentary time allows.

Section 1(1) of the Children Act 1989 states that the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration when determining questions relating to the upbringing of a child. The presumption of parental involvement was brought into legislation by the Children and Families Act 2014, which amended section 1 of the Children Act 1989. It states that, in certain private law proceedings relating to a child, the court should presume that involvement of a parent will further a child's welfare, unless there is evidence to the contrary. It does not apply in cases in which there is evidence that the involvement of a parent places the child at risk of suffering harm.

Although the legislation explicitly states that the presumption is rebuttable and that it does not apply in cases where a parent presents a risk of harm to the child, I recognise that it has faced criticism for appearing to reinforce a "pro-contact" culture that prioritises the involvement of both parents in a child's life over the child's individual welfare. The 2020 Ministry of Justice report assessing risk of harm to children and parents in private law cases—known as the harm panel report—includes substantial evidence demonstrating the existence of a "pro-contact" culture in the family court.

The harm panel also recommended that the Ministry of Justice undertake a review of the presumption of parental involvement. This review has now been completed and has been published today in full with its findings alongside this written ministerial statement. One of the key findings of the review is that unsupervised and face-to-face involvement is the most likely outcome for child arrangements applications, including in cases which involve allegations or findings of domestic abuse or harm. Such decisions can be detrimental

to child welfare. The presumption of parental involvement, while not the main driving force, was identified as one of a number of factors contributing to the pro-contact culture that drove these decisions.

The repeal of the presumption will form part of a package of family court reforms designed to better protect children in private law cases in the family courts. We know that abuse during childhood can have a serious impact on the rest of a child's life, and that children who experience abuse during childhood are more likely to drop out of education, enter the criminal justice system and suffer unemployment and poor health outcomes. We hope that this wider package of reforms—

of which the repeal of the presumption will play a key part—will contribute to improved children's education and employment outcomes as well as reducing costs to the health and justice systems.

When coupled with other ongoing work to reform the family courts, we believe that repealing the presumption of parental involvement reflects our commitment to ensuring that the welfare of children remains paramount.

I will ensure that a copy of the review and accompanying research reports are deposited in the House Library.”

[HCWS979]

Petition

Wednesday 22 October 2025

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Clarion Housing management services

The petition of the residents of the constituency of Ealing Central and Acton,

Declares that numerous constituents residing in homes which are managed by the housing association Clarion including Pankhurst house and neighbouring blocks are seriously concerned with the poor level of service and delayed responses they have been provided regarding repairs, for example, a broken window for years on end; further declares that residents are unsatisfied with transparency around how service charges are calculated; further declares that residents are displeased with the allocations policy by which residents are assigned which they fear is leading to it becoming a “dumping ground” for undesirables when the original nucleus of the estate was women’s keyworker accommodation.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the council to compel Clarion to ensure that concerns are listened to and actioned in a timely manner, that more transparency is enacted with service charges, to commit to working with the council for improvements in the system of allocating residents so that existing tenants have a say in who their neighbours are, to provide a better balance of tenant and reverse the current system which is cumulative and having a detrimental effect on the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Rupa Huq, *Official Report*, 09 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 1085.]

[P003084]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

Social housing tenants deserve to live in safe and decent homes, to be treated with fairness and respect, and to have their problems quickly resolved. Alongside our commitment to delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation, the Government are determined to drive a transformational and lasting change in the safety and quality of social housing.

All registered providers of social housing, including large housing associations like Clarion, must deliver the outcomes of the regulatory standards set by the independent regulator of social housing. These include ensuring that their homes meet the decent homes standard, which is a technical standard specifying minimum criteria that social landlords must meet to ensure their properties are decent. Registered providers must also provide a repairs, maintenance and planned improvements service that is effective and timely.

The regulator’s transparency, influence and accountability standard requires registered providers to communicate openly with their tenants and provide them with the necessary information to understand what to expect from their landlord and hold them to account. Providers

must also give tenants a wide range of meaningful opportunities to influence and scrutinise their landlord’s strategies, policies and services.

Under the new consumer regime introduced in April 2024, the regulator will inspect all large landlords over a four-year cycle. As a large landlord, Clarion is in scope of this inspections regime. Following inspection, the regulator will issue the landlord with a regulatory judgement, which will set out its view of whether the landlord is meeting the standards and will include a consumer grading.

Service charges are financial contributions requested by a landlord for the costs of day-to-day management, maintenance, and sometimes improvement of leasehold properties. They present a significant financial outlay for many leaseholders and tenants. At a time when costs are rising, they need assurance that the money is well spent, as well as fair access to redress when things go wrong. The way service charges are organised, including what services are paid for, individual contributions, and payment schedules, are set out in individual leases or tenancy agreements. By law, variable service charges must be reasonable, and the works or services must be of a reasonable standard. Leaseholders and housing association tenants may contest the reasonableness of their service charges by applying to the first-tier tribunal, or leasehold valuation tribunal in Wales. Service charges, administration charges and other management matters in the property tribunal can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/service-and-administration-charges-and-management-matters-t541/service-charges-administration-charges-and-other-management-matters-in-the-property-tribunal>

The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 includes measures designed to drive up the transparency of service charges and to make them more easily challengeable if leaseholders consider them to be unreasonable. On 4 July, the Government published a consultation on strengthening leaseholder protections for charges and services. The consultation closed on 26 September, and responses are currently being analysed.

All social housing tenants in England should be supplied with clear information on how service charges are set. When new or extended services are introduced, registered providers are expected to consult with tenants. The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 gives the regulator of social housing new standard-setting powers relating to the provision of information by private registered providers (PRPs) to tenants in England. On 30 October 2025, the Government directed the regulator of social housing to introduce new social tenant access to information requirements (STAIRs) that will enable tenants of PRPs to access information held by their landlords about the management of their homes.

At present, with over 1.3 million households on social housing waiting lists, and 165,000 children in temporary accommodation, demand for social housing is greatly outstripping supply. This demand impacts allocations, as landlords must balance maintaining sustainable communities with ensuring that social housing is made available to those most in need. Registered providers allocate their properties directly to tenants via direct lets or nomination agreements with local housing authorities who refer tenants from their housing register.

In relation to individual complaints, the housing ombudsman can investigate and determine individual cases from residents against their landlord which cannot be resolved locally. The ombudsman's complaint handling code sets out requirements for member landlords to respond to complaints effectively and fairly. The Social Housing Regulation Act put the code on a statutory footing and gave the housing

ombudsman powers to also issue orders to landlords that seek to prevent the recurrence of issues identified during an investigation.

If the authors have complaints that are unresolved following the completion of the landlord's process, they can escalate these with the housing ombudsman which can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/housing-ombudsman>

Written Corrections

Wednesday 22 October 2025

Ministerial Correction

WORK AND PENSIONS

World Menopause Day

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on World Menopause Day on 16 October 2025.

Dame Diana Johnson:... I am pleased that my first debate in Parliament as the new Minister for employment is about menopause. Women make up 51% of the workplace, and every woman will go through menopause. [Official Report, 16 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 219WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson):

Dame Diana Johnson:... I am pleased that my first debate in Parliament as the new Minister for employment is about menopause. Women make up **48%** of the workplace, and every woman will go through menopause.

Other Corrections

JEREMY CORBYN

Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill

The following extract is from the Committee of the whole House on the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill on 20 October 2025.

Jeremy Corbyn:...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.”

[Official Report, 20 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 723.]

Written correction submitted by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn):

Jeremy Corbyn:...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:

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JIM MCMAHON

Co-operative Sector: Government Support

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Co-operative Sector: Government Support on 21 October 2025.

Jim McMahon:...The roots of our movement run deep, back to 1844 and the Rochdale pioneers: 27 working people who, through solidarity, challenged exploitation and built something that was lasting.

[Official Report, 21 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 330WH.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon):

Jim McMahon:...The roots of our movement run deep, back to 1844 and the Rochdale pioneers: **28 working people** who, through solidarity, challenged exploitation and built something that was lasting.

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**not later than
Wednesday 29 October 2025**

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