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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 28 October 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to today's business, I wanted to note that on Sunday 27 October, we marked the 75th anniversary of the rebuilding of this Chamber after it was bombed during the second world war and left destroyed. The Chamber we sit in today remains a continuing symbol of resilience and renewal. On the rebuilding of the Chamber, Prime Minister Winston Churchill described the House of Commons as "the citadel of British liberty".

This House and this Chamber continue to play a vital role at the heart of our democracy today. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in marking this important anniversary. I invite Members, at 11 am tomorrow, to attend the Chamber for a commemorative photo to mark the occasion.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Sudan

1. **Charlie Maynard** (Witney) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with her counterpart in the United Arab Emirates on the situation in Sudan.

[906036]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): I join you, Mr Speaker, in marking the 75th anniversary of the rebuilding of this Chamber and the tribute to democracy.

I know many people will have concerns for family and friends in Jamaica in the face of Hurricane Melissa, and I will make a further statement on the UK's response during topical questions.

On Sudan, I strongly condemn the escalating violence in El Fasher and the very grave reports of civilian casualties and suffering. It is estimated that between 200 and 300 civilians are in the city, at grave risk of atrocities, following the advance of the Rapid Support Forces.¹ I have held meetings and discussions, including at the UN General Assembly, and since then with a series of countries including the United Arab Emirates and members of the Quad as we call for a desperately needed ceasefire.

Charlie Maynard: It has been widely reported in the press that the United Arab Emirates is arming the RSF in Sudan. The RSF is one of the two warring factions in

Sudan, and it was found by the UN to be responsible for crimes against humanity including murder, torture, enslavement, rape and sexual violence. As per UK Government export data, the UK exported nearly £750 million-worth of arms to the UAE via standard individual export licences between 2019 and 2023. If the UAE is indeed arming the RSF, the UK is breaching its arms export licensing criteria, specifically criteria 1f, 2, 4, 6 and 7. Importantly, those criteria look beyond considering whether UK-exported weapons ultimately reached Sudan, and they instead consider the UK's international obligations. Given this, what steps have the UK Government taken to verify whether the UAE is arming the RSF—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a very important subject, and other Members need to come in as well. These are meant to be questions, rather than statements. I recognise the importance of this matter, and I am sure you are going to come to the end of your question now.

Charlie Maynard: My apologies, Mr Speaker. Will the UK cease all arms shipments to the UAE until it is proven that the UAE is not arming the RSF?

Yvette Cooper: Let me make two points in response to the hon. Gentleman's question. First, as he will know, the UK has extremely strong controls on arms exports, including to prevent any diversion. That remains important, and we will continue to take that immensely seriously.

Secondly, we need all countries with influence in the region to push the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces to ensure the protection of civilians. There are real, deep concerns about atrocities in Sudan, including sexual violence and the use of rape as a weapon of war. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the new work being done through the Quad countries—the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt—which have condemned the violence and called for an end to external support for the warring parties. We are pressing for the urgent implementation of that work.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): As penholder at the UN Security Council for both Sudan and the protection of civilians, the UK has a special responsibility following the fall of El Fasher and the appalling reports to which the Foreign Secretary referred. Will she call an emergency session of the Security Council focused on the protection of terrified civilians in Darfur, given recent events? She talked about the Quad. That statement was before the appalling events of the last three days. Will she push every country in the Quad—the US, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE—to act now to prevent further massacres?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my right hon. Friend that Sudan, the escalating violence and the humanitarian crisis must be on the agenda for the Security Council. We are pressing for that meeting to take place as soon as possible, and to ensure that the protection of civilians is at its heart. There was already a humanitarian crisis in Sudan, with huge numbers of people at risk of famine even before the escalating violence. I also agree on the urgent need to press all parties to cease the violence and to ensure that humanitarian aid can get through.

1.[Official Report, 11 November 2025; Vol. 775, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The news overnight from El Fasher in Darfur is truly dreadful, with evidence of summary executions and undoubted ethnic cleansing. Given the pivotal role that Britain plays, as set out by the former Minister for Development, the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), will the Foreign Secretary urgently review everything that we are doing, in order to prevent El Fasher from becoming another Srebrenica?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the grave nature of this crisis and the seriousness of the violence taking place in El Fasher. I agree that we need to put on every possible pressure through both the United Nations and directly through the Quad. We need urgent action to get a ceasefire—the humanitarian truce called for by the Quad—as well as humanitarian aid and the crucial protection of civilians in place. He will know that the UK doubled aid for Sudan and has continued to protect that, but the aid is unable to get through as long as this terrible fighting is taking place.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): As we have heard, about a quarter of a million civilians, including 130,000 children, are trapped in the city of El Fasher, following a brutal siege that has lasted 18 months. This is a critical moment amidst the world's greatest humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan. What can the UK Government do, with our allies, to ensure that we get humanitarian exit routes out of El Fasher for those civilians?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend that getting civilian pathways out of the city to safety are urgently needed. We are urging for a ceasefire to take place. We need all sides to pull back from this escalating and incredibly dangerous violence. We are seeing the scale of atrocities at risk of taking place, but the most immediate and urgent thing is to get a safe way out of the city for civilians.

Gaza Peace Plan

2. **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support the Gaza peace plan. [906037]

7. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support the Gaza peace plan. [906043]

15. **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help secure a just and lasting peace in Gaza. [906052]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): The ceasefire agreement in Gaza, as a result of President Trump's peace initiative, is a profound moment of peace and hope, but it needs to hold and to become a lasting peace, after two years of the most horrendous suffering. Our immediate priority is ensuring that unconditional humanitarian aid is flooded into Gaza, where more action is needed, but we are also working with partners to support the implementation of phase 2 of the peace plan, including the disarming of Hamas, the establishment of a Palestinian committee as transitional government, and a pathway to two states living side by side.

Jacob Collier: We are grateful to the United States for its co-ordination. This must not be a temporary peace that fades away. As the Foreign Secretary says, the ceasefire remains fragile, with both sides accused of violations, and fighting on the occupied west bank continues. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the UK will continue to play an active role in supporting the peace plan and holding all parties to their commitments?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. Given the horrendous suffering that we have seen over the last two years, we need to ensure that the ceasefire holds. Part of that involves getting the humanitarian aid into Gaza. We are urging for more crossings to be opened and for restrictions on humanitarian aid to be lifted, and we are working on some of the crucial next steps, in conjunction with the US, Arab states and many other states that have been involved in supporting the ceasefire, including through the disarmament of Hamas and the development of new governance arrangements.

Warinder Juss: Despite the most welcome peace plan, we have already seen breaches in the form of Israeli air strikes, with the restriction of lifesaving supplies entering Gaza. What are we doing to ensure that sufficient humanitarian aid can get through to end the famine swiftly, and that the Israeli leadership is held accountable for violations of international law, so that we can finally see an end to the conflict, with no more innocent Palestinian or Israeli lives being lost?

Yvette Cooper: It is important that all sides hold to the ceasefire and implement all the steps committed to as part of President Trump's 20-point peace plan. That involves getting the humanitarian aid in place and maintaining the ceasefire. We are working with the US and other countries to support an effective monitoring arrangement so that there can be a proper process in place to ensure that all sides hold to the ceasefire and keep moving forward.

Nadia Whittome: Over two weeks into the ceasefire in Gaza, Israeli forces are still killing Palestinians. Many are being shot at as they attempt to return to their homes near a yellow line marked by Israel—a line that Israeli media are increasingly calling a new border. What will the Government do to ensure that this supposedly temporary yellow line does not become a permanent border and effectively cut Gaza in half?

Yvette Cooper: We have been clear that not only can we not divide Gaza, but that this first phase has to be part of the journey to a two-state solution that includes Gaza, east Jerusalem and the west bank. That is the only way we will get a just and lasting peace. Transition arrangements are set out as part of the 20-point plan, but it is really crucial that we not only maintain the original ceasefire agreement—the first phase—but that we keep making progress on the rest of the points in the 20-point plan and the second phase.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Thankfully, the living hostages have been returned to receive medical attention and go back to their families, but, very sadly, the bodies of the deceased hostages have not all been returned. That is a key element in this ceasefire treaty. What action is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure

that Israel is supported—and, if necessary, that the Palestinians are supported—to identify the bodies of the deceased hostages and that those bodies are returned, so that there can be closure for the families?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an immensely important point. We will all have seen the incredibly moving scenes of hostages returning after the most horrendous captivity, and being returned to their families, but there are those who have lost loved ones—those whose loved ones were taken in that barbaric terrorist attack on 7 October—and are still waiting to have their remains returned. I have spoken to families whose loved ones were lost and who have had the remains returned, but I know how difficult this is and that people need to be able to grieve and pay tribute to their loved ones. We are continuing to press for all the hostage remains to be released. We have also offered support—for example, demining capabilities, where there are concerns about ordnance that might prevent the recovery of remains.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): How will the United Kingdom help to ensure that the Gaza peace plan includes measures to restore access to clean and plentiful water? The main source of fresh water in Gaza is the coastal aquifer, which is contaminated by sea water, sewage and chemicals. Up to 97% of Gaza's tap water is unfit for human consumption. Surely the Foreign Secretary agrees that there can be no just peace amidst thirst and squalor.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to highlight water as a crucial humanitarian aid and support. I have spoken to Tom Fletcher, who is co-ordinating much of the UN support, and to the Egyptian and Israeli Foreign Ministers about the importance of ensuring that the crossings are open so that water can be provided and critical infrastructure rebuilt. That will require financing, and my hon. Friend the Middle East Minister has already been involved in looking at ways in which we can finance reconstruction for the long term.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for her responses. The peace plan can succeed only if Hamas are not part of it. Hamas need to return the dead hostages to the families, and they need to be disarmed. We also need to ensure that they are not carrying out summary executions of fellow Gazans, as they are currently doing. If we are going to have a peace plan that lasts, Hamas need to be removed from the situation—we can then have peace.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that I have always described Hamas as a barbaric terrorist organisation, and that remains the case. Crucially, we have seen the Arab League condemn and reject Hamas, and join us and other countries from across the world in being clear that Hamas can play no role in the future governance of Gaza or of Palestine. The UK has particularly been offering support on the decommissioning of weapons and the disarming of Hamas—a crucial part of the peace process—so that Palestinians and Israelis can live in peace and security.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): As the Foreign Secretary knows, Hamas continue to terrorise the people of Gaza, carrying out summary executions and depriving people

of aid. Terrorist tunnels and their infrastructure remain in place, so what role is the Foreign Secretary playing in negotiations and dialogue about the elimination of Hamas? What is the Government's view on how the international stabilisation force will operate, and will the UK be playing a role in the board of peace alongside her former leader and friend, Tony Blair?

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Foreign Secretary is right to highlight the importance of the disarmament and decommissioning of Hamas. That needs to involve the tunnels as well as weapons and the whole infrastructure of terror that was built up over many years. That is why the UK has been proposing different ways in which we can help in the process of decommissioning and disarming Hamas, using expertise that we have built up over very many years. That will be a central part of maintaining this peace process for the sake of a just and lasting peace. The shadow Foreign Secretary will also know that further discussions are under way about what the governance processes need to be for the Palestinian committee and the board of peace that were identified as part of President Trump's 20-point plan. Those further details are still being negotiated, but we are clear that whatever the arrangements, we will continue to play a crucial role in supporting this peace process.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I echo the Foreign Secretary's words about Hurricane Melissa, and our shared concern for the people of Jamaica and the British citizens on that island.

At this hopeful but fragile moment for Gaza, all sides must fulfil their ceasefire obligations. That includes Hamas, which must return the remaining hostages' bodies, and Israel, which must reopen all aid routes into the strip. We must also preserve the conditions for a two-state solution; this Gaza peace plan is not sufficient to deliver a lasting peace between two viable and secure states. Last week, the Knesset voted in favour of annexing the west bank—a move that would undermine Palestinians' right to self-determination. The strong criticism from US Secretary of State Rubio was notable and welcome, so will the Foreign Secretary work with the American Administration to bring forward a UN Security Council resolution that unreservedly condemns that vote and reaffirms the illegality of seizing territory by force?

Yvette Cooper: As I hope I have been clear, the future of Palestine needs to include the west bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza. We have always strongly condemned any proposals to annex the west bank, as well as illegal settlements in the west bank, and it is significant that not only Secretary of State Rubio but President Trump and Vice-President Vance have made clear their condemnation of the proposals for the annexation of the west bank. In order to have security and peace for Israelis alongside security and peace for Palestinians, we ultimately need to work towards that two-state solution—two states living side by side.

Ukraine

3. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support Ukraine. [906038]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): On Friday, I welcomed President Zelensky and the coalition of the willing to a meeting at the Foreign Office chaired by the Prime Minister, to demonstrate our continued support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. Since I set out in this House new, stronger sanctions against Russia's two largest oil producers, Rosneft and Lukoil, I am pleased to say that the US has followed suit, and the EU has also introduced further sanctions. We need to tighten the economic vice on Russia in order to bring Putin to the table and get a pathway to peace.

Patrick Hurley: I welcome the UK's leadership on the issue of Russian sovereign assets. What further conversations is the Foreign Secretary having with her international counterparts to accelerate that work and ensure that Russia pays for its illegal war?

Yvette Cooper: The issue of Russian sovereign assets is an extremely important one. Both I and the Chancellor have had many discussions with our counterparts, particularly in Europe but also through the G7. We want to be able to mobilise those sovereign assets in order to support Ukraine. The EU has set out proposals for reparation loans, which we think are the sensible way forward, because fundamentally, Russia needs to pay for the damage it is doing to Ukraine.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's comments about Russian frozen assets. She will possibly agree with me that the US is an increasingly unreliable partner for Ukraine. Can she tell me what discussions she has had with European counterparts about securing Ukrainians' long-range missiles with European partners so that they can better defend themselves?

Yvette Cooper: This issue was discussed as part of the coalition of the willing, where NATO was present, as well as many countries from Europe and across the world. Those discussions were about continued military support to Ukraine, as well as this crucial economic pressure. The US package of sanctions that has now been announced, which is similar to the package that we announced on Rosneft and Lukoil, is extremely important, because we need to choke off access to the market for Russian oil and gas.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I was pleased yesterday to see the Foreign Secretary writing in *The Times*:

"Now is the time for international action to use Russia's frozen sovereign assets to support Ukraine."

The trouble is that over the past three years, eight months and four days there has been a lot of talk about using these assets, and nothing has happened. I know that the Foreign Secretary knows that the last thing that Ukraine needs is warm words; we need action, particularly against a background of the Russians renewing their bombing campaign against civilians in the cities. The question is: if there is going to be a plan, when will it happen? When will this considerable sum of money be used to rearm and rebuild Ukraine?

Yvette Cooper: I echo my right hon. Friend's comments about the civilian attacks that we have seen, including the most horrendous attack on a kindergarten in Ukraine. She is right that we need to ensure that these assets are mobilised. Obviously a lot of that needs to be done in conjunction with the European Union, where many of the assets are currently held. The EU has had a series of discussions and made significant progress through the work done by the EU Commission. Many of the other individual nations are pressing to go further, and we are working closely with them to do so. We need to get this investment mobilised to support Ukraine.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The US President was willing to meet the Russian President in Budapest, in spite of the fact that we gave assurances in Budapest in that 1994 memorandum that have since been ignored. Although that meeting will not now go ahead, can the Foreign Secretary share the Government's latest thinking about future security guarantees for Ukraine?

Yvette Cooper: Security guarantees remain an important part of our support for Ukraine. One reason that the coalition of the willing was brought together was to set out what those security guarantees would be. That will continue to be the case, working with the US to do so. The most immediate issue is to ensure sufficient economic pressure, particularly on oil and gas, to bring Putin back to the table. While President Zelensky has said that he is willing to negotiate and support an immediate ceasefire, President Putin is simply escalating the war.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Russia's war in Ukraine is fuelled by oil export revenues sustained by third-country refineries in India, Turkey and China. They process and re-export Russian crude as refined products, often to sanctioned states. These countries are fuelling Putin's war chest. Last month, President Trump called on Turkey to halt Russian oil imports. Did the Prime Minister follow President Trump's approach and demand that his Turkish counterpart stops the Star refinery and Tüpraş from buying Russian oil?

Yvette Cooper: We have these discussions with countries across the world, urging them to support sanctions or to reduce their dependence on Russian oil and gas, which will reduce those imports and help us choke off the supply of Russian oil and gas from the market. That is why we have also begun to sanction designated refineries not just in Russia itself, but across the world.

China: Assessment of Threat Level

4. Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What assessment she has made of the level of threat China poses to UK interests. [906039]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): The former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), set out to Parliament earlier this year the full spectrum of threats posed by China, including espionage, cyber-attacks, transnational repression and support for Russia. We challenge China robustly in relation to all those threats. China is also our third-largest trading partner and a country that we need to work

with intensely on international issues such as climate change. We need to challenge China on security and compete and co-operate on economic and global affairs.

Jerome Mayhew: In her former role, the Foreign Secretary wrote to the Planning Inspectorate raising no objections to the Chinese super-embassy application. She did not mention any concerns about the secret basements—some people describe them as dungeons—on the application, and she raised no objection to the proximity of the application to key data cables in the City of London. In her new role, does she now regret her previous lack of action?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that the Government take action to ensure that security measures are in place, and we do so through a series of different routes. He will also know that the planning process is independent, and will follow its course.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): When it comes to the UK's relations with China, it is not a simple binary choice between national security and growth—national security must always be our non-negotiable red line—but subject to that, does the Foreign Secretary agree that when there are specific sectors where economic engagement with China promotes growth, we should be open to that?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We already have substantial trade with China, there is also investment from both the United Kingdom and China, and we have always been a trading nation that works and trades with countries across the globe, but as my hon. Friend says, national security must always be the first priority. That is why, wherever there are national security threats, we take them immensely seriously and will always challenge China on them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Speaking of challenging China, will the Foreign Secretary comment on the recent threats made by the Chinese Government towards Britain over the embassy application, the spy case and Taiwan, and will she tell the House whether there have been any meetings with the Chinese Government, British Ministers, Jonathan Powell and other officials in which they have discussed the now collapsed spy case? Has China at any point requested that the case be dropped, and will she now apologise for backing the embassy application?

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Foreign Secretary has perhaps forgotten the position that her Government have previously taken towards China on a range of issues. We have made it clear that the planning process in the UK is independent and has to involve the normal planning processes, as is appropriate. We also ensure that security measures are always taken immensely seriously, and we have a range of different ways of doing so. As for the China case to which the right hon. Lady has referred, I remain extremely frustrated about the collapse of that case, and my view remains that the kind of activity that was alleged should face the full force of the law. That is why I supported the strengthening and

updating of the law in this area, to make prosecutions easier, and it is a shame that the right hon. Lady's party took so long to do it.

Gibraltar: UK-EU Agreement

5. Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): What progress she has made on implementing the UK-EU agreement on Gibraltar. [906040]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): It was fantastic to visit Gibraltar recently for its national day, and also to meet my European Union and Spanish counterparts. The agreement reached between the UK and the EU in June was welcome and significant: it will mean jobs, investment and stability, not just for Gibraltar but for the whole region. All parties have agreed to work together to finalise the treaty text and ratify the agreement as quickly as possible, and I will update the House in due course

Dr Pinkerton: Like the Minister, I had the pleasure of being in Gibraltar in the summer at the invitation of the Government, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I saw for myself the vital necessity of this deal to secure the economy and the social fabric of Gibraltar and, in particular, the movement of 15,000 people across the Spain-Gibraltar frontier every day. Can the Minister commit himself to bringing the treaty to the House at the first possible opportunity, so that the details can be given the fullest possible scrutiny?

Stephen Doughty: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the challenges that have existed at the border. I have been stuck in those queues, Mr Speaker, and you may have been as well. This deal will mean an end to that, and a new, positive relationship. Indeed, much will be positive for the economy and for all the people of Gibraltar. We will bring the treaty to the House as soon as possible—as soon as it is finalised—and it will go through the normal processes. Parliament will, of course, be able to debate its terms if it wishes to do so.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It was an honour to welcome Gibraltar's First Minister to last week's annual general meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar. As a cross-party group, we wholeheartedly welcome the treaty, but can the Minister assure me that it will produce economic benefits for Gibraltarians and an increase in the prospects for tourism?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely can assure my hon. Friend. I thank her and the whole APPG for their work, cross-party, in support of Gibraltar. I know, of course, that this deal is firmly backed by the Chief Minister of Gibraltar and his Government and will bring important benefits for the economy, jobs and people of Gibraltar. As she mentions tourism, we might now see more flights coming into Gibraltar airport from elsewhere in Europe, which will be very positive for Gibraltar and the region.

Palestinian State

6. **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): What steps she is taking to promote a Palestinian state. [906042]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): The UK's commitment to a two-state solution remains steadfast. The UK has provided £116 million of aid to the Palestinian people this year. I was proud that, on 21 September, the Prime Minister announced the UK's recognition of the state of Palestine. That was to protect the viability of the two-state solution and support a path towards lasting peace. Meanwhile, the UK Government are continuing to provide technical and financial support to the Palestinian Authority as they build a viable and effective state of Palestine. In July, we announced £7 million in technical support to strengthen governance, accountability and civic space in Palestine. I and the Foreign Secretary remain in touch with our Palestinian counterparts.

Andrew George: Slow as it was, that is welcome indeed, but will the Government go beyond suspending new trade deals and actively review existing trade deals with Israel, including both goods and services originating from the illegal settlements, to ensure that UK trade policy does not undermine the prospect of Palestinian statehood?

Mr Falconer: The Foreign Secretary has already been clear about the importance of a single, effective Palestinian state, which of course includes the west bank. The hon. Member has heard from me on a number of occasions about the different trading standards for both Israel itself and the occupied territories. We of course keep these questions under close review, but the whole House will appreciate that our focus now needs to be on ensuring that the ceasefire holds as we move into the 20-point plan and towards the two-state solution that we all want to see.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): We all welcome a ceasefire and the recognition of a Palestinian state, but we must now support the Palestinian people. The head of the United Nations humanitarian affairs team has said that driving through Gaza City is like "going through the ruins of Hiroshima".

The people of Gaza who have endured this hellish war and survived now face a humanitarian disaster. They urgently need aid, and the UK, along with many other countries, stands ready to provide it. The block to this aid, as so frequently has been the case, is the Israeli authorities. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that Israel stops blocking this urgently needed aid and humanitarian supplies, and to get them to the people who are desperately in need?

Mr Falconer: I want to update the House on this very important question. We are seeing a greater flow of aid into Gaza. That is, of course, supremely welcome, and something that we have long awaited, but it is not yet at the level we would wish to see. There are still restrictions on that aid going in, and, as the Foreign Secretary has been clear on, vital crossings remain unopened. We continue to engage with all our partners on this, and I and the Foreign Secretary will be travelling to the region this weekend to pursue that work.

Hong Kong: Human Rights Violations

8. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What assessment she has made of recent trends in the level of human rights violations in Hong Kong. [906044]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): The continued erosion of democratic rights and freedoms in Hong Kong is deeply concerning. Last week, the Foreign Secretary submitted to this House the Government's latest six-monthly report on Hong Kong, which details how national security legislation is diminishing Hong Kong's political autonomy. The Government will continue to champion the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong.

Alison Bennett: A constituent of mine, who now lives in Haywards Heath, came to the UK from Hong Kong under the British national overseas visa route after the deterioration of human rights there left her and her daughter with no choice but to seek safety. She is now deeply anxious about reports that the qualifying period for settlement and citizenship may be extended. I think the whole House can agree that the human rights violations in Hong Kong are abhorrent, so what representations has the Minister made to her Chinese counterparts, and can she explain how she will protect BNO visa holders who have made their home in the UK?

Seema Malhotra: Indeed, we agree that any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm their critics or others abroad, especially in the UK, will not be tolerated. The Government are also strengthening efforts to tackle transnational repression, including through the introduction of dedicated police training and online guidance to support victims. Indeed, we are committed to the people of Hong Kong, as exemplified by the BNO visa route. It is our historical and moral commitment, and the hon. Lady will be aware, in relation to the changes in the immigration White Paper, that the Government will bring forth more details about the consultation and work in due course.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Two pro-democracy parties in Hong Kong have disbanded recently, activist Joshua Wong was rearrested and faces further charges under the national security law, and Jimmy Lai remains in prison. Does the Minister agree that the national security law continues to be used to erode the rights and freedoms of Hongkongers, and can she confirm that the UK continues to strongly oppose it?

Seema Malhotra: I can absolutely confirm that we continue to oppose the national security law. As outlined in the report that the Foreign Secretary presented to Parliament last week, the Hong Kong authorities continue to apply national security legislation to diminish the city's political autonomy and political pluralism, including freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of information. Indeed, Hong Kong now ranks 140th out of 180 in the 2025 world press freedom index—entering the red zone for the first time. This is indeed a very serious situation.

Organised Immigration Crime

9. **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): What diplomatic steps her Department is taking with international partners to help tackle organised immigration crime. [906045]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): We know that people-smuggling gangs work across borders to operate their vile trade, so we too must work across borders to disrupt their supply chains, dismantle their networks and undermine their business model. That is why we are strengthening co-operation with other countries, including through our illegal migration sanctions regime—the first of its kind in the world—and we are targeting the leaders of people-smuggling gangs wherever they are based.

Daniel Francis: I thank the Minister for his answer; I know this is an issue of great concern to my constituents across Bexleyheath and Crayford. Following last week's west Balkans summit, could he provide an update on the measures that are being taken to reduce the number of illegal migrants being brought to the UK via the western Balkans?

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for his very important question, and he is absolutely right: tackling illegal migration is vital to our strategic relationship with the western Balkans. Last week, we announced new sanctions against gang leaders, passport forgers and illicit financiers, many of whom have ties to that region, and we are enhancing collaboration between our countries—for example, through the Border Police Chiefs' Forum, the expansion of the joint migration taskforce and the deployment of UK border security officers to the western Balkans.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that foreign nationals convicted of serious drug offences in Northern Ireland should be deported without delay? Will he ensure that his Department works with international partners and prioritises swift removal agreements to stop those involved in organised immigration and drug crime re-offending on our streets?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree with the sentiment of the hon. Lady's question. She will know that in our first year in government, we deported over 5,000 foreign national offenders—a 14% increase on the previous 12 months. We are speeding up the early removal scheme so that most foreign prisoners can be deported after serving 30%, rather than the previous 50%, of their custodial sentence.

BBC World Service

10. **Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to provide sustainable funding for the BBC World Service. [906047]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): The BBC World Service remains the world's most-trusted international news source and supports our national security, growth and development objectives. That is

why we provided a 31% increase in Government funding for the World Service this year. Funding allocations for the next three years will be announced in due course.

Sir Julian Smith: The Institute for Global Prosperity and CreativePower have produced an excellent report on the sheer impact of the World Service, which reaches 320 million people globally and is trusted by 75%. In a key market for the Government—India—75 million people listen to or watch the BBC. How will the Government maximise the opportunity of the World Service, which is one of our best soft power assets and the best way that we can have conversations with the rest of the world?

Chris Elmore: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. The Government wholeheartedly agree with him that the BBC World Service is one of our strongest areas of soft power. He will be aware that the charter review starts next year, and we think that is one of the best ways we can work towards establishing the funding streams. We are working with the BBC World Service on ways in which it can innovate to ensure that it reaches even further, as the most trusted news network on the globe.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I recently met senior journalists who have been exiled from Russia, following Putin's clampdown on any form of free, trustworthy media. Despite the huge challenges, they are still providing vital, accurate reporting for all those in the region who need it most. Will the Minister commit to sustainable funding guarantees for our soft power, and continue to support these courageous journalists, who are forced to move countries, and are often threatened by rogue states?

Chris Elmore: I agree with my hon. Friend about the work of the BBC World Service, and we are working with the BBC. I am shortly due to visit Broadcasting House to see at first hand the work it is doing, particularly its innovative work to deliver and develop its funding programmes, which will form part of the charter review. In response to Russian interference in the media around the world, I echo my hon. Friend's support for the journalists who work in the World Service, who do so much to expose what is happening globally, particularly around conflict.

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

11. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [906048]

16. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What diplomatic steps she is taking to help ensure that humanitarian aid can reach people in Gaza. [906053]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Alongside our international partners, the UK is working to get aid into Gaza on the scale needed to ease the desperate humanitarian crisis that is taking place. In recent days, the Foreign Secretary has spoken with Tom Fletcher of the United Nations, Egyptian Foreign Minister Abdelatty and Israeli Foreign Minister

Sa'ar about the importance of opening more crossings and removing all restrictions on aid. We are ready to play our full part in providing that aid. We have announced £74 million of humanitarian funding already this year, including the £20 million announced at the peace summit in Egypt.

Paul Davies: I fully support the Minister in welcoming the US-brokered ceasefire, which has enabled the delivery of much-needed humanitarian aid into Gaza. As the Minister is aware, the UN and its partners have significantly scaled up their operations providing essential supplies, such as food, water, medical aid and fuel. However, given that border closures and ongoing political tensions continue to obstruct the flow of assistance, what steps are the Government taking to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access, and to prevent aid being used as a tool of political leverage?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Following the US-led ceasefire agreement and the UN's work, more trucks are starting to cross the border, but that needs to be scaled up much more rapidly, and we need the Rafah crossing fully opened, alongside other aid routes. We need international non-governmental organisations in, and able to operate in Gaza unimpeded. Civilians in Gaza cannot wait.

Caroline Voaden: The Norwegian Refugee Council says that, between 10 and 21 October, 99 requests by international NGOs to deliver aid to Gaza were rejected by Israel on the grounds that the organisations were "not authorised" to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza, yet these trusted agencies have operated there for decades. Can the Minister tell the people of Gaza who are living in makeshift shelters, and who are hungry and thirsty, what the UK Government are actually doing to compel the Israeli authorities to immediately allow aid deliveries into Gaza?

Mr Falconer: We need to see the agreement implemented in full. The Foreign Secretary has raised this particular case with the Foreign Minister of Israel. We will continue to press for the full flow of aid that needs to go in. The hon. Member rightly asked me what I say to the people of Gaza. I say that we understand the urgency, and that the aid needs to be in there now. We will continue to press those points on the phone, and when we both go to the region this weekend.

UK-Mauritius Agreement on the Chagos Archipelago: Funding

12. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): How much and what proportion of the funding due to be allocated to Mauritius as part of the agreement concerning the Chagos archipelago will come from her Department's budget. [906049]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): We have secured a deal that will protect the operation of the UK-US base on Diego Garcia well into the next century. The payments made under the deal will be split between the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, and published in the annual accounts of each Department.

Jack Rankin: In what proportion?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said, that will be published in the annual accounts of each Department.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Last week, Labour voted against our amendment, which would have given the House of Commons a say on the Government's reckless decision to surrender £35 billion of taxpayers' hard-earned money to Mauritius for the privilege of giving away our own sovereign territory, but we still have no certainty from the Government about the fate of the vital Diego Garcia base after the 99-year period. What is stopping Mauritius demanding billions more if the UK wishes to extend the use of Diego Garcia for another 40 years? Would it not be more sensible to save the money, ditch the surrender deal and the keep the Chagos islands British?

Chris Elmore: As the hon. Gentleman knows from the many questions that I have answered on this issue, and indeed the debate we had in this place that secured the Bill's Third Reading, the cost of the agreement in today's money is £101 million, and the net present value over 99 years is £3.4 billion. However much he comes up with other fantasy figures, they are simply incorrect; these are verified by the Government Actuary's Department. If he wants to talk about spending and value, I will not apologise for spending on our national security and keeping this country and our allies safe. For comparison, he might like to reflect on the fact that the annual payment is 20% less than the cost of the festival of Brexit.

Topical Questions

T1. [906061] **James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): Hurricane Melissa is expected to make landfall in Jamaica shortly. It is potentially the most severe storm ever to hit the country. Sadly, seven people across the region have already reportedly lost their life, and thousands are in shelters as they wait for the storm's arrival. Many people will be thinking of family and friends in Jamaica and the region.

I spoke with the Jamaican Foreign Minister yesterday to offer the UK's full support and solidarity. We are prepared to mobilise resources at their request. The FCDO stands ready to help British nationals 24/7. We have set up the crisis centre in the Foreign Office, including with support from the MOD. We are also positioning specialist rapid deployment teams to provide consular assistance to British nationals in the region. Any British nationals who are there should follow our travel advice and the advice of the Jamaican authorities.

We are closely monitoring the hurricane's path. Melissa is forecast to impact Cuba next, and potentially the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Bahamas. Ministers have spoken with the Governors of the overseas territories in the region, and we hope that these islands are spared significant damage. The UK Government are also preparing to deliver humanitarian assistance to affected areas,

with a focus on meeting the immediate needs of those who are most vulnerable. We send the people of Jamaica our support and solidarity today.

James Naish: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that update on Jamaica and the diligence of the FCDO in preparing for events there.

Tomorrow I am hosting Hong Kong Watch in Parliament as it releases its latest report on the erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy. The report highlights how Beijing has increasingly sought to dismantle Hong Kong's autonomy while exploiting the privileges of Hong Kong's special status. This is increasingly having an impact on business operations in Hong Kong, and is something that is well understood by the Government, but has yet to be fully recognised, including in last week's FCDO six-monthly report. Will the UK consider additional steps to push back against these violations of China's international treaty obligations—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can you help me to help everybody else to get in? In topicals, we have to be short and punchy.

Yvette Cooper: We strongly condemn China's non-compliance with the joint declaration, as described in the latest published six-monthly report, which details the continued deterioration of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong. We have continually pressed China to uphold the rights of Hongkongers; its non-compliance is one of the reasons we remain steadfastly committed to the British national overseas visa route.

Mr Speaker: Shadow Foreign Secretary, Dame Priti Patel.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Hayat Tahrir al-Sham traces its roots back to the barbaric terrorism of al-Qaeda, which caused death and destruction, and harm to our allies. Can the Foreign Secretary explain to the House why her Government have de-proscribed HTS, and does she believe that it is no longer a terrorist threat to the world?

Yvette Cooper: Both of us know from our former role as Home Secretary that the proscription process is very detailed and considered, and it draws on a range of security expertise. That process no longer assesses HTS to be an alias of al-Qaeda, after extensive consideration and a full assessment of the available information. As the right hon. Lady knows, that was the grounds on which it was proscribed. We will ultimately, however, judge them on their actions, not their words, but the new Syrian Government have conveyed their strong commitment to working with the UK.

Priti Patel: Does the Foreign Secretary believe that this decision will lead to the destruction of all chemical weapons in Syria? She said that HTS will be judged on its actions. Will she look at putting conditions in place if it does not step up its actions, in the same way that America has done, with the sanctions that were lifted?

Yvette Cooper: The Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), has raised this issue directly with the Syrian Government, and we continue to raise these security issues with not just Syria but other parties in the region, because the right hon. Member will know the importance of regional Governments working together on the security issues

that she raises. This is about the historical terrorism threat we have faced from the region, but also the responsibility on Governments to maintain stability in Syria, and the impact that has across the region. We will continue to take these security issues immensely seriously.

T2. [906062] **Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op):** I welcome the Government sanctioning two Russian oil majors around a fortnight ago, but does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is only by increasing the economic pressure on Putin that we will force him to the negotiating table and finally bring an end to Russia's illegal war in Ukraine?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend. We need to increase the economic pressure on Putin. We need to choke off the supply of Russian oil and gas into international markets. Our package of sanctions, including on the two biggest Russian oil producers, is a substantial step forward. It is welcome that other countries, including the US, are now doing the same. It is only through international action that we will have that impact.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): In the United States, President Trump continues to use his public power to advance his private financial interests. In the UK, as well as rooting out traitors like Nathan Gill, who take funds from our enemies, we must prevent this corrosive cronyism from entering our politics. I wrote yesterday to the new Ethics and Integrity Commission, calling on it to investigate whether Department for Culture, Media and Sport officials lobbied for Trump's golf courses. I intend to bring a Bill to this place that would create enhanced protections against UK Ministers and officials lobbying for foreign powers. Will the Secretary of State commit to supporting the principle of the Bill?

Stephen Doughty: Not having seen the hon. Member's proposals, I will not comment on them at this stage, but we take all evidence of foreign interference in this country very seriously. I work closely with Ministers across Government, including the Home Office and the Security Minister, to keep these issues under regular assessment.

T3. [906064] **John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab):** I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq, and as I led a delegation there. The 2005 federal Iraqi constitution agreed in a popular vote to underpin Kurdish rights. We were told that Baghdad deliberately withholds salary payments to public employees in the region. The Foreign Secretary visited Erbil when she was Home Secretary, and knows how important this part of Iraq is to our security. Does she agree that we need our Kurdish ally to be strong and respected in a federal Iraq, and that a better relationship there would enable vital reform, for the benefit of that region and, indeed, our own country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): The relationship between Baghdad, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah is of vital importance. I continue to discuss these issues with the Iraqi Foreign Minister,

and Iraqi Kurdish politicians as well. We will continue to do so, and I look forward to visiting the region shortly.

T4. [906066] **Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): The UN Secretary General has warned that it is now inevitable that we will fail to keep global warming under 1.5°C, with the threat of devastating consequences, like the loss of the Amazon rainforest and its role in climate regulation. While the Conservatives and Reform continue to sabotage climate action, it is good to know that the Prime Minister will be going to COP30, but will the Foreign Secretary commit to making no further cuts to our international aid budget, so that we can contribute to the Tropical Forest Forever Facility fund?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member is a passionate advocate on these issues; we debated them just the other day in Westminster Hall. The UK remains committed to providing international climate finance, now and in the future, and to playing our part, alongside other developed countries and climate finance providers. We are committed to delivering £11.6 billion in international climate finance by the end of 2025-26.

T5. [906067] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Friday was World Polio Day. My constituent Anne Strike, a former Paralympian, continues to campaign for the eradication of polio. What reassurances can the Minister give me that the UK will continue to be a leading player in that aim?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): My hon. Friend is a long-standing advocate of polio eradication. The UK is a long-time supporter of the initiative and we have confirmed a £1.25 billion pledge to Gavi for 2026-30. Other spending, including on the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, is being reviewed as part of the spending review and the official development assistance allocation process, which will be decided in due course.

T6. [906068] **Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): As we speak, the Chagossians are in the High Court to try to stop the terrible Chagos surrender deal. Given this Government's passion for international human rights, and that we all agree how badly the Chagossians have been treated, will the Government finally agree to grant them a referendum on this dreadful deal?

Stephen Doughty: I am not going to comment on legal proceedings, but the hon. Gentleman knows full well that this had to be a treaty negotiated between the UK and Mauritius—that is the basis on which it is done. We absolutely recognise the historic wrongs done to the Chagossian people. I have engaged with Chagossian communities on a number of occasions and will continue to do so through our new contact group.

T8. [906070] **Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): I welcome the new package of sanctions on Russian financial institutions. Does the Minister agree that we should stand ready to expand that package to stop Russian financial institutions financing Russia's illegal war in Ukraine?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend will know that we do not comment on future sanctions designations, but we are, as the Foreign Secretary said, absolutely committed to choking off Russia's war machine and bringing Putin to the table. That is why our sanctions alongside others have denied Russia access to at least £450 billion since February 2022, which would have funded two more years of this illegal and barbarous war. We will not hesitate to act where we can and we will work with others in that endeavour.

T7. [906069] **Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): On Saturday, I joined CAFOD and my constituents Karl, Harry and Jo on a deadlift challenge. We—and yes, Mr Speaker, that includes me—collectively lifted more than 100 tonnes, the equivalent of five aid planes to Gaza. CAFOD also works in the west bank, where Palestinians are being treated as second-class citizens living under military, not civil, law. What diplomatic actions is the Department taking to ensure an end to violence against Palestinians and to improve their rights while a two-state solution is negotiated?

Mr Falconer: The initiatives that the hon. Member took with CAFOD rightly highlight the importance of rubble movement in Gaza, which is an enormous logistical challenge. That was one of the reasons I convened the Gaza reconstruction conference in Wilton Park. She rightly raises the very important question of rights in the west bank. We have contributed and will continue to contribute to efforts locally to ensure that those resident in the west bank can exercise their rights, and we will continue to raise the wider issues around annexation.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary will be aware that Hurricane Melissa is of huge concern internationally, to those who have friends and family on holiday in Jamaica and to those of us of Jamaican heritage here in Britain. Will she give an assurance that in the horrific aftermath of Melissa, we will give every possible help and support to the people of Jamaica?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my right hon. Friend the Mother of the House. There are 50,000 dual nationals who live in Jamaica and up to 8,000 British citizens who may be travelling or on holiday there. We have very strong links between our communities—between the people of Jamaica and the people of Britain. That is why I spoke to the Jamaican Foreign Minister yesterday to offer our solidarity and support. I can tell my right hon. Friend that we have not just the rapid deployment of consular staff, but humanitarian staff being pre-positioned in the Caribbean. We discussed this matter in the crisis centre this morning, including what we might be able to deploy on request from the Jamaican Government. We stand ready to help and respond.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Can the Foreign Secretary help with the context of the middle east conflict? I have been endeavouring to establish an independent verifiable number for the rocket attacks into Israel that were carried out in the 12 months before 7 October and the 12 months after 7 October to give some context to what has happened since. Is she able to assist?

Mr Falconer: It is an important question. We have condemned rocket attacks into Israel throughout—both before and after 7 October. The nature of the rockets from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad makes it harder to have a clear and indisputable number, but I will try to assist the hon. Gentleman on some of the other rockets. I believe that Iranian attacks since 7 October have included 600 rockets, killing 29 Israelis, and that Houthi attacks, which have targeted Israeli civilians, have included 100 ballistic missiles and drones.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): I recently met the family of Davinder Singh Thandi, who died in suspicious circumstances in India. This has obviously been a distressing time for my constituents, and unfortunately they have struggled to get timely advice and support from the Foreign Office. I thank the Minister for her recent letter, but will she meet me to discuss their case and how the Department can develop a victims code to better support families like Mr Thandi's?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): I thank my hon. Friend for her letter, and I am very happy to meet her to discuss this matter.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Last week the Chancellor accepted that Brexit has caused huge damage to the economy. This week sources suggest that the Prime Minister is being advised to go further in his realignment with the European Union, as the Office for Budget Responsibility is reportedly forecasting a new black hole of around £20 billion—again showing the impact of Brexit on growth. Is the Foreign Secretary ready to admit that no matter how people try to spin it, Brexit has been an all-out disaster for Scotland and these islands?

Stephen Doughty: We have had no hesitation in exposing the impacts of the botched Brexit deal that the previous Government made. That is exactly why we have reset our relationship with the EU and achieved important agreements at the May summit. It is also why the Minister for the Cabinet Office, myself and others are working to deliver on that deal to ensure benefits for our businesses, consumers and people across this country.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Members might not be aware that the FCDO has given notice to the Insolvency Service that 1,885 jobs are at risk due to the 25% reduction in the workforce that follows the ODA cuts. This is a massive drop in staff numbers and it is bound to have a real impact, particularly on smaller departments such as conflict prevention. Will the Foreign Secretary please comment, being new in post, on how this will impact on her ability to shape the Department as she wants? The forward plan for the Department is still not finalised. How can she operate without the staff to do so?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee will know that the Government have taken the difficult decision to reduce the aid budget in order to fund the defence resources that we need at a

time when there are significant security pressures. She will also know that we are working to find different ways, including private finance and new investment, to maintain not just the multilateral investment that is so important but crucial aid programmes in areas such as Sudan and Gaza. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these details further and—

Mr Speaker: Order. I need the Foreign Secretary to help me here. Members are desperate to get their questions in, and the only way I can get them in is by speeding up. We have to get on with the Opposition day at some point.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. When I was in Ukraine last month I met senior Ukrainian figures, all of whom told me the same thing: they need more support from Europe to win this war. With that in mind, will the Foreign Secretary finally commit to seizing the £25 billion-worth of frozen Russian assets held in the UK and deploying them to Ukraine in its hour of need?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely agree that we need to get Ukraine every support that it needs. Our support is iron-clad, which is why we hosted the coalition of the willing on Thursday. Members will have heard the Foreign Secretary say that we are working closely with partners to ensure that Russia pays for the damage it has caused, and we will find the lawful and most effective ways to do that.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Karim Ennarah is an internationally recognised human rights activist who has been subjected to a travel ban by Egypt and has been stuck there since 2020. What is the Foreign Office doing—or what can it do—to ensure that he is able to come to the UK to join his wife in my constituency?

Mr Falconer: I am familiar with the case and have met the man in question and my hon. Friend's constituent. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further. I am travelling to Egypt this weekend and will continue to be in these sorts of discussions.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Cuts to spending in Afghanistan inevitably impact women and children disproportionately. They are more likely to be employed by NGOs forced to make cuts and more likely to need assistance. Does the Minister agree that we need to ringfence and protect funding to Afghanistan?

Mr Falconer: We have to be clear about who is driving the oppression of Afghan women and girls. The Taliban have put further restrictions on women and girls. They have taken further steps, including restricting the internet, that undermine the viability of Afghanistan's economy at a fundamental level. But I assure the House that we continue to allocate significant funding to Afghanistan, with £151 million this year. That is a small decrease from last year, but I assure the hon. Member, who I know remains committed to these issues, that we remain very much focused on them.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): The British public are under no illusions about the level of resources needed for humanitarian aid in Gaza and the rebuild of Gaza, and they want to play their part. Have the Government considered aid-matching each £1 of public contribution with £1 of Government money to increase the proportion of British aid and rebuilding that can happen in Gaza?

Yvette Cooper: We are looking at different ways to ensure that we can get sufficient resources into Gaza—that will require not just immediate humanitarian assistance but long-term reconstruction aid—and we are continuing to work with our allies and here in the UK on doing so.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Last week I met Nada, an Oxford plastic surgeon who told me horrific stories of the children she has been treating in Gaza. I believe that the Secretary of State has met her, too. The most concerning thing is that if these wounds do not have care, they will lead to life-changing disabilities. Medics are calling for a humanitarian corridor between Gaza and the west bank so that those Palestinian children can stay in Palestine. What discussions has she had on the matter?

Yvette Cooper: I have met the doctor to whom the hon. Member referred. Her work is inspiring, and she deals with the most terrible stories of suffering. We agree that we need to be able to get humanitarian corridors in place and to treat children, especially in the region, but, as the hon. Member will know, we are also medevacing children to the UK for treatment.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Last month, ahead of the UN General Assembly, I had the honour of welcoming Vlad, Valeriia and Roman: three young children who were injured and abducted by Russia during Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, and my hon. Friend the Minister for taking time out of your busy days to meet those children and to hear at first hand the horrors they have been through, as well as their inspiring stories. Will the Minister update the House on what discussions were held at the UN General Assembly on the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children? What further support is being provided to Ukraine to aid their recovery?

Stephen Doughty: It genuinely was an honour to meet the three young people my hon. Friend mentioned. As she said, not only were their stories shocking, but they were inspiring in their courage. I assure her that we continue to use every forum, including the United Nations, and all our discussions with partners and allies. I particularly commend the First Lady's initiatives on this issue. We want to see those young people returned—it is one of the most heinous aspects of Russia's illegal and barbarous war in Ukraine.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): The British Council is in dire financial straits. If it disappears, so will the invaluable soft power that it wields. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to meeting the chief executive of the British Council to discuss that as soon as possible?

Chris Elmore: The British Council plays a crucial role in supporting UK interests around the world, including helping people to learn English and promote the arts and culture. The Foreign Office is providing £160 million

in grant aid to the council this year, which underlines our support. I have already met the vice-chair and the deputy chief executive, and I will meet the chief executive and the chair in due course.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Mr Yaxley-Lennon, aka T. Robinson, has been fêted in Israel at the invitation of a Government Minister, while the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, aka Dr Peter Prinsley—a British Jew, a member of the Board of Deputies and a vocal supporter of the Israeli people in Parliament—has been banned. What does the Minister think can be usefully done to rectify that?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend is an incredibly thoughtful, long-standing commentator on these issues. Both he and his family have made a great contribution to UK-Israeli relations. It was an act of great foolishness to prevent him from entering Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We called on the Israeli Government at the time, as we did in previous such instances. We cannot prevent the Israeli Government from making decisions that are not in their interests, but that was clearly one of them.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Government's position seems to be that communist China can and does pose a wide range of serious threats to the United Kingdom but is not a threat itself. How can that possibly make sense?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Gentleman will have heard me set out very clearly the threats that China poses to our national security, including those of transnational repression, support for Russia and espionage. He will know that range of threats and that is why it is deeply frustrating that the prosecution has not taken place. He will also know that China is a trading partner and that we continue to have strong economic relations. It is possible for both those things to be true.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): Despite a ceasefire being in place for almost a year, Israeli forces struck UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon just this weekend. What work are the Government doing with the Lebanese Government and in particular the Lebanese armed forces to shore up our crucial ally in the region?

Mr Falconer: Lebanon is a crucial ally. I will travel there shortly and intend to go to the area affected. It is vital that Lebanon's borders, in both the east and the south, are secure. That is vital for their security, as well as for ours.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): British national Jimmy Lai is currently in solitary confinement in a prison in Hong Kong. He has been there for five years. He is 78 years of age, he is in ill health and his trial will come to an end very soon. Ahead of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit, what representations has the Foreign Secretary made to the White House to ensure that when President Trump meets President Xi, the case of Jimmy Lai will be raised, as it has been in the last 36 hours by a cross-party group of 38 US Senators?

Yvette Cooper: We continue to be deeply distressed by this case and continue to make representations, discuss the case with the US and stay in contact with Jimmy Lai's family.

Points of Order

12.46 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to apologise for not taking the direction of the Chair yesterday.

Mr Speaker: First, I thank the hon. Member for her point of order and for her apology. I would add that should any Member need any advice on the rules and conventions of the House, the Clerks are always available to assist.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. And not to apologise on this occasion—yet.

Mr Speaker: There is still time.

Stephen Flynn: I will give it a minute!

At business questions last week, I put it to the Leader of the House that he should afford time for my early-day motion in respect of Prince Andrew to be heard. He intimated that options are always available to Members to pursue that, so in due course I wrote to the Prime Minister, seeking clarity that we would get that opportunity. Since then, there have been further revelations with regard to Prince Andrew hosting not just Harvey Weinstein but the notorious paedophile Jeffrey Epstein at the Royal Lodge in Windsor. There have been suggestions that this House and this Parliament can take action on his succession and his place in line to the throne, and that we may well end up compensating Prince Andrew, should he move out of the Royal Lodge. May I have guidance from you, Mr Speaker, as to how I solicit an early response from the Prime Minister to my correspondence?

Mr Speaker: We nearly did have an apology. May I first say thank you to the right hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order? As I know he is aware, I made a statement on Thursday last week at the start of business that provided some clarification on ways in which this House can properly consider the matter. In raising this point of order, the right hon. Member has placed on record his letter to the Prime Minister and the early-day motion tabled in his name. The scheduling of time for debates is not a matter for the Chair. I know that the right hon. Member will continue to seek ways in which to pursue the issue and he has already reminded the Treasury Bench of what he wishes. I will leave it there.

Opposition Day

[11TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Stamp Duty Land Tax

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected the amendment. I call the shadow Chancellor to move the motion.

12.49 pm

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

That this House calls on the Government to reduce public expenditure to fund the abolition of stamp duty land tax on primary residences purchased by UK residents, in order to get Britain working, to grow the economy and to give people a stronger stake in their communities through the security of home ownership.

There comes a time in the careers of some in this House when they stand too close to the edge, when they play with fire and when they fly too close to the sun. To continue that astronomical metaphor, we have a Chancellor who has truly thrown herself headlong into a colossal black hole entirely of her making. The Chancellor has trashed our economy and she will blame anybody but herself: the Office for Budget Responsibility, the legacy, the Conservative party, Donald Trump, Brexit—whatever it is, as long as it is not herself.

However, we on the Conservative Benches know the clear truth. We know exactly what has happened to our economy. We know that we have a Government who, when they were in opposition, said that there was no way they would be putting up taxes left, right and centre, yet within 18 short months had done precisely that, layering up taxes on businesses and destroying growth at the same time as talking down our economy. Then there was the fictitious £22 billion black hole which, ironically, was debunked as not legitimised by the OBR at the behest of the Labour party itself. We know that Labour has borrowed colossal amounts of money and is due to spend around half a trillion pounds more than the plans it inherited.

What has been the consequence of that? It has been elevated inflation. We now have the highest inflation in the G7, and the International Monetary Fund tells us that next year we will once again have the highest inflation in the G7. The consequences of that, through monetary policy, are that interest rates will be higher for longer, bearing down on those who have mortgages and on businesses who wish to borrow. Critically, when it comes to our burgeoning national debt, which is soaring under this Government, the costs of servicing that debt are now running at £100 billion a year, rising to £130 billion across this Parliament. That is twice what we spend on defence. Indeed, if the servicing of our debt were a Department of Government, it would be the third largest in Whitehall. None of that money is going on public services. It is simply going to pay off the creditors who are owed money as a consequence of the profligacy of the Labour party.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Would the right hon. Gentleman agree that Liz Truss's disastrous mini-Budget impacted on working families up and down this country, resulting in the astronomical mortgage interest rates that they are still struggling to fund?

Sir Mel Stride: We will take no lessons from the Labour party when it comes to the mismanagement of our economy. What I have just set out has led to a Chancellor who had a Budget in October last year in which she blew all the headroom and more, rebuilt it in the spring and is now, as we all know, heading into the Budget on 26 November with a gaping black hole that she will have to fill. That is due to economic incompetence and it is causing huge uncertainty.

I speak to businesses up and down the country. None of them know what to expect. They are all fearful about the tax rises that are yet to come, and that is down to this Chancellor. The consequence is that we have the highest level of unemployment in four years. We know that every other Labour Government in history have left office with unemployment higher than that it was when they came into office. In the retail, hospitality and leisure sector alone, 90,000 jobs have been destroyed under this Government. Young people are bearing the brunt of these policies. Under the Conservatives, youth unemployment fell by around 45%. Under the last Labour Government, it rose by around the same amount, and this Government are on course to do that too. Young people are particularly affected, because the national insurance changes involve not just an increase in the rate but a reduction in the threshold. That affects young people who are desperate to get their first job and their foot on the career ladder the most.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, even in such a short period of time, this Government are showing that it is they who cannot be trusted with the economy and the future of this country? Is it not time they woke up to the reality?

Sir Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We see that in inflation, which is running at about twice the Bank of England's target and about twice the rate that this Government inherited from us on the day of the general election. Within that, we see food inflation rocketing up at over 4%, damaging and impoverishing the very people that Labour claims to want to stand up for.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we also see hypocrisy? An example would be Cabinet Ministers who say "Build, baby, build" while at the same time writing letters to the Mayor of London trying to block homes in their constituency.

Sir Mel Stride: As usual, my right hon. Friend makes a characteristically poignant point.

There is another act of damage that this Government have created: some of the most successful high net worth wealth creators in our country have simply gone; they have left. It is estimated that 16,000 have gone over the time that this Government have been in office. Socialists will say, "Who cares? Good riddance!", but they should dwell on the fact that the tax paid by those 16,000 people is probably equivalent to between a third of a million and half a million people on average earnings. Hard-working people up and down our country are paying the price of Labour's policies.

There are choices; it does not have to be like this. We can reduce taxes if we get on top of and control Government spending. At my party's conference, we set out £47 billion-worth of savings across Government, including £23 billion in savings across the welfare budget. What did the Government do when they tried to tackle the welfare budget? They showed us that this is a Dad's Army of a Government with a Captain Mainwaring of a Chancellor. They are no match even for the rabble behind them.

We know that we need to have responsible tax cuts. That means that they need to be funded and they need to lean into growth. That is why we have announced that, were we in government, we would be abolishing stamp duty on primary residences. It is one of the worst taxes in our tax system. The OBR states that a 1% increase in stamp duty would lead to a decrease of between 5% and 7% in the number of transactions, yet on this Government's watch, the stamp duty due on a home valued at £300,000 will have doubled during their time in office.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The shadow Chancellor is making a powerful speech. Is he aware that recently in the Treasury Committee we were given evidence by a range of tax specialists, all of whom endorsed abolishing stamp duty?

Sir Mel Stride: Yes, and I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent work that she has been doing on the Committee, particularly when she chaired it in the last Parliament.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Government are not only taxing young people's jobs but taxing their chances of owning a home through the increase in stamp duty and the rumoured increase on the capital gains on principal private residences?

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The reasons that we need to abolish this tax include the fact that it stands in the way of younger people getting on to the housing ladder. To use the words of Paul Johnson, it "gums up" the entire system of house purchasing in our country. He said:

"It may look like a tax on wealthy people who move house but it also acts to reduce effective supply for everyone."

That includes first-time buyers.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that stamp duty also gums up mobility, so that people are unable to move, and if they lose their job under this Labour Government it will be more expensive for them to move to another house?

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The tax does precisely that. It stops people moving to where the work is, to get better jobs and further themselves. Who wants to move to one place and pay stamp duty, and then move to another to pay more stamp duty? It does not add up.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the study by Jackson-Stops, which looked at people aged 55 and over to see how much abolishing stamp duty would help to move the market along? The study estimated that in the first year,

abolishing the tax would allow 500,000 people to downsize to free up homes for families, and in the second year, 1.4 million. Stamp duty is a real blocker. Does he agree that that study shows the power of this policy?

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The tax is a blocker on the aspirations of those who are growing their families and simply want to find a home with more bedrooms. Often, they cannot find those homes because empty nesters—those whose children have left home—are not prepared to face the huge, eyewatering stamp duty involved.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Is not the reality that people cannot find homes in England because his Government failed to build them while in power?

Sir Mel Stride: We built 2.8 million homes since 2010, and a million in the last Parliament. It remains to be seen how many homes this Government will build.

Another huge advantage of abolishing stamp duty is that it will generate more transactions, which will benefit more plumbers, electricians, builders, designers, estate agents, surveyors and conveyancers, and allow local economies to thrive. Above all, it will increase the effective supply of housing, and that means a fairer society and a stronger economy.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): The shadow Chancellor talks about the huge advantages of his proposal. Is he aware that someone who owns a home worth £2 million would benefit to the tune of £150,000? This is a tax cut for millionaires. Is that what he wants?

Sir Mel Stride: I have already apprised the hon. Gentleman of the fact that on his party's watch, 16,000 high-net-worth people have left the country, to the huge detriment of our economy. We cannot tax our way to growth. We have to abolish this tax across the piece, and that is recognised by think-tanks across the political spectrum. Indeed, the Institute of Economic Affairs says:

"Abolishing stamp duty is the single best reform any government could make to Britain's tax system."

The Resolution Foundation, which may be more to Labour Members' taste, says of stamp duty that it is "one of the most economically harmful ways of raising revenue". That is a simple fact.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor accept that the housing market is virtually stagnant? It is moribund. The houses and flats that we want in this country are not being built, and one of the barriers is that the cost of stamp duty is so high that individuals do not want to pay it.

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have already set out the estimate from the OBR that a 1% increase in stamp duty means a 5% to 7% reduction in transactions. It is a horrendous and terrible tax, and it remains to be seen whether Labour Members choose to defend it.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): The hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) talked about millionaires getting a tax cut, but we are talking about young families getting on the ladder. Does my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor agree that while Labour Members engage in the politics of envy, we will always engage in the politics of hope?

Sir Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As Paul Johnson, formerly of the Institute for Fiscal Studies—I quoted him earlier—says, this tax

"also acts to reduce effective supply for everyone"

right across every age and every section of the income scale.

If only the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell)—I see he is not in his place—who is a former director of the Resolution Foundation, could show some backbone and at least agree with his former self and the quote that I read out from the Resolution Foundation. The facts are clear: the Government should support this motion today if they believe in growth, a fairer society and a stronger economy.

As we approach the Budget, through a period of great uncertainty, the Chancellor faces a clear choice—a choice between still higher taxes, and controlling spending and getting taxes down; between continued anaemic growth and getting the size of the Government under control; between destroying jobs, and getting people off benefits and into work; and between doing the right thing for our country and simply ducking the challenge. The Opposition know what must be done, even at this late stage, to save our economy. Perhaps even the Chancellor herself knows, deep in her heart, that we are right. Yet is it not the truth that faced with the serried ranks of obstinate delusion arrayed behind her, she is just too weak to act? No plan, no backbone—no wonder that under this Government we are staring into the abyss.

1.5 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): I thank the shadow Chancellor for opening today's debate with characteristic theatricality. I know that Opposition Members are desperate to forget their time in office. They are desperate for us all to forget the damage that they caused to the economy and to public services on their watch. Surely, however, they cannot have forgotten how the Budget process works, so they will know that no Treasury Minister, particularly in the weeks immediately before a Budget, will speculate on tax changes. Any decisions on tax will be taken at the Budget by the Chancellor in the usual way—[*Interruption.*] I see surprised faces among Opposition Members, but I remind them that that is how the Budget process works. They will know that the OBR produces a forecast, and the Chancellor will take decisions in the round based on that forecast when she presents the Budget to this House on 26 November.

Notwithstanding those limitations on what I, and indeed any Minister, can say, I will seek to address some of the ideas that the Opposition have tried to raise with this motion. First, let us be honest: stamp duty is hardly a popular tax. Moving house and buying a home is a complex and often stressful process, and stamp duty must be paid at a point when most people probably feel

[James Murray]

they have enough to worry about already. If there was a cost-free way to get rid of stamp duty, I would not expect long queues of people lining up to keep it. But there is, of course, no cost-free way of doing so. Figures show that the tax raised £13.9 billion in 2024-25.

At this Government's first Budget, we made changes to stamp duty to help to give first-time buyers, and other people who are buying a home to live in, an advantage over those who are buying second, third or further homes. If an Opposition party proposes getting rid of a tax that raises nearly £14 billion a year, it needs a plan for doing so. Being a credible Opposition means proposing things that could actually work. Frankly, the motion exposes the current Conservative party's total lack of seriousness, and its complete failure to learn any of the lessons of its time in office.

Wendy Morton: The Chief Secretary to the Treasury indicated that if there was a plan to fund the proposal, he would back it. The shadow Chancellor has clearly set out that we do have a plan to fund it, so will the Chief Secretary back it?

James Murray: The right hon. Lady is attempting to bring some humour to the Chamber by pretending that the Opposition have some kind of a plan for their proposal. To call their motion half-baked would be not to go far enough. In fact, it shows the recklessness in their approach to the economy. It may be Halloween on Friday, but the ghost of Liz Truss is here today, because the economic recklessness that the former Prime Minister embodied is back in front of us in this Chamber. We have a half-baked motion from the Opposition, built on the wholly unworkable premise of more unfunded tax cuts. Three years on from their disastrous mini-Budget, they have learned precisely nothing.

Dr Murrison *rose—*

James Murray: I will be interested to hear the right hon. Gentleman's link.

Dr Murrison: I will be interested to hear what the Minister intends to do to un-gum the housing market. I think he will accept that it is an important part of our economy and he says that he is very keen on growth, so what will he do to un-gum it? And what does he say to those legions of tradespeople—electricians, plumbers and kitchen fitters—who are all looking to the Government to provide them with some relief in the months ahead?

James Murray: I would say to everyone who works in building homes that Labour is the party that is getting on with building: we are making changes to the planning system to get those homes build. Despite his attempt to make a link to my previous comment, I notice that the right hon. Gentleman did not address that fact that this motion is entirely half-baked. It is a genuine shame for British politics that we have an Opposition who think that they can put forward a motion like this for serious debate in the House of Commons. To be fair, the Conservative party is steeped in centuries of being in Opposition and in Government, but it has become deeply unserious by putting forward motions such as the one today. The motion simply says that the

Conservatives' plan to abolish stamp duty is "to reduce public expenditure"; that it is—that is the sum of their plan.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The Minister is right to say that the Opposition have not been clear about how they would fund this tax cut, but there are some clues. The shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), told a fringe event at the Tory party conference that we should look at the Australian system of state pensions and "essentially" a means-tested state pension. Does my right hon. Friend share my concerns that under the Tories the state pension would be under threat?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the state pension would be under threat were the Conservatives to win the next general election. He is also right to draw the House's attention to comments made by Conservative Members at their party conference. They may think that people are not listening to what they say at those conference fringe meetings, but we get the reports so we know exactly what they said.

From their recent conference, we know that they think that they can find some £47 billion through cuts to public spending, as the shadow Chancellor said, but let us look at the detail. At least half of those fantasy savings come from a welfare plan that amounts to a menu with no prices: a list of measures that the Conservatives say will raise £23 billion in total, but with no breakdown whatsoever of how. In June last year, just as they were on their way out of Downing Street, they said that they could cut £12 billion from the welfare bill. Now they have doubled that without explanation. Frankly, if the shadow Chancellor thinks that he has any credibility on this matter, he is sadly mistaken. He is far from the best person to make this argument, given that he personally oversaw the biggest increase in benefits spending in decades during his time as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Minister is in no position to lecture on reducing the size of the state, given that when Labour attempted to reduce the welfare bill, it marched all of its MPs up the hill, only to march them down again, when it buckled under the pressure from its own Back Benchers.

James Murray: As Members from both sides of the House know, we are determined to get people back into work, because that is the way to bring the welfare and benefits bills down, and to make people better off. What is not the right thing to do for this country is to follow the Conservatives' plan for £47 billion of cuts, for which they have no plans and that would represent nothing less than a return to austerity. If their £47 billion were to come from cuts to public services, that would mean 85,700 fewer nurses, cutting every police officer in the country twice and cutting the entire armed forces. Funnily enough, none of that detail is in their motion today.

To have proposed the motion is a shame for British politics, because with the Conservatives' long history, they really should know better. Were it to be the Greens, Plaid Cymru or Reform proposing policies with little regard for the consequences, I would not be surprised

because they have never had a chance to implement them, but to see the party that was in charge for 14 years acting this recklessly shows just how far it has fallen.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The Minister is always generous with his time and always has a smile, which is a welcome thing in this Chamber. Government spending this year is approaching £1,300 billion, but Ministers could not save £5 billion because of their own Back Benchers. Is it his complete failure to make even the smallest savings on that monumental budget that makes him find it impossible to believe that others would have the will to do so?

James Murray: What I find it impossible to believe from the Conservatives is that they now have a shadow Chancellor who claims to have a plan for £23 billion of welfare cuts, when he himself presided over the biggest increase in welfare spending in decades when he was the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. That is the record that gives him no credibility whatsoever in this debate.

In their motion, the Conservatives also claim that they want

“to get Britain working, to grow the economy and to give people a stronger stake in their communities”.

Yet they spend their whole time trying to claim that Britain is broken. They have joined the ranks of those who are trying to co-opt our flag for their own ends by claiming that it is in tatters. I cannot believe that so many who claim to be proud of our country are so willing to talk it down. Our country is not broken; we are a great country, filled with great people and great businesses. We are willing to roll up our sleeves and work together for a greater future. However, it is clear that many people across our country feel stuck. Under the last Government, our economy stalled, our public services were starved and opportunities dried up.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is always generous with his time—I thank him for giving way—and I am always smiling in the Chamber, as the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) will know. Conservative Members seem to be suffering from collective amnesia. Will my right hon. Friend remind me if the national debt went up or down under the last Government? [*Interruption.*]

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the Conservatives’ record. [*Interruption.*] In 2010, I think the national debt was about 67% of GDP, but it was about 100% by the time that they left office.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members on both sides of the Chamber are having their own conversations on the side. I cannot hear the Minister—and everybody wants to hear the Minister.

James Murray: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was confirming what I think everyone in the Chamber knows about how bad the previous Government’s record on the economy was. We know why that record was so bad. It was because previous Ministers failed to invest, and we know that investment is the fuel for our economic engine. That is why we are taking a different approach.

Saqib Bhatti: On helping Ministers with amnesia, does the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there was a pandemic that required a huge amount of intervention, or is he claiming that he would not have supported so many people during that period?

James Murray: Speaking of amnesia, a lot of Conservatives have forgotten Liz Truss and are not prepared to talk about the impact she had.

Sir Mel Stride: Speaking of amnesia, would the right hon. Gentleman like to remind the House what the deficit was in 2010, when we first formed a Government?

Mr Speaker: Were you born by that time, Minister?

James Murray: I had definitely been born by that time, Mr Speaker. I was doing my maths very rapidly, but I can be confident in saying that. I seem to have quite lost my way after your intervention, Mr Speaker, but let me return to the main thrust of the argument that I was making a few moments ago.

We are a serious Government who are a serious partner for the private sector, which is why we are investing in things that will get our country moving again. It is early days; the damage that the Tories did will take time to unpick and there will be more difficult decisions ahead, but since we came to power, this Government have announced £250 billion of new investment commitments, creating tens of thousands of jobs. The Bank of England has cut interest rates five times, meaning that someone on a tracker mortgage of just over £200,000 is already around £100 a month better off.

We have cut red tape and changed planning regulations so that we can deliver 1.5 million new homes over the course of this Parliament. We have acted to accelerate the construction of nearly 100,000 new homes, which were previously stuck. We were the fastest-growing G7 economy in the first half of this year. Most telling of all, since the general election real wages have risen by more than they did in the first 10 years of the Conservative Government.

The Conservatives’ answer to the nation’s challenges is always the same: austerity. They want to cut spending, increase debt and accept decline. In contrast, we will never accept austerity and we will never gamble with the public finances.

Dr Luke Evans: Another term for austerity is “living within your means”. That is what the British public understand, and that is the point we are trying to make in this debate. When the Government have needed to make difficult decisions, they have fallen short. Can the Minister explain why the Government are not living within their means?

James Murray: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Chancellor’s fiscal rules say that day-to-day spending must be paid for through tax receipts. That is the definition of living within our means. Those fiscal rules were met at the first Budget last year and at the spring statement this year. They are an iron-clad commitment, and we will continue to meet those fiscal rules next month at the autumn Budget.

[James Murray]

Those fiscal rules underpin our approach to the economy and to stronger public finances. We know that fiscal responsibility, which the previous Government abandoned, underpins a stable economy, and we need to secure our country's renewal through public and private investment. We want to secure rising wages, support for businesses, more jobs, more homes and more opportunities in every corner of our country.

The motion before this House today simply is not serious. It is an admission from Conservative Members that after years in power and countless opportunities to reflect and learn from their mistakes, all they can come up with is the same failed solution: more unfunded tax cuts, more cuts to public services, more failure to invest, more austerity and more pain for the British people. That is what will keep them on the Opposition Benches for a very long time. We reject their recklessness, we reject their lack of ambition for our country and we reject this motion.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

1.21 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Our tax system is a mess. It is complicated and unfair. It is riddled with cliff edges that distort behaviours and create inequities, and there are exemptions that have not been reviewed for years. Council tax is outdated and hated. Inheritance tax and capital gains allow the super-wealthy to exploit loopholes while the squeezed middle picks up the tab. Business rates are a tax on bricks and mortar that penalise our high streets while online giants corner more and more of the market. IR35 is a sledgehammer to crack a nut for contractors, and research and development tax credits are in such a muddle that they are triggering lots of disputes, even for legitimate claims.

When any one of those taxes is tweaked, it causes problems elsewhere. Time and again, we see that when people want to do the right thing and pay the right amount of tax or query a tax issue, they call His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, only to have the call handler hang up, or they contact the Valuation Office Agency and have to spend money on an expensive third party that specialises in disputes.

Stamp duty has all the hallmarks of a bad tax. It is a transaction tax and an extra cost that stops people from moving, when they might want to move to start a family, to take up a new job or to take on caring responsibilities. It prevents people from getting on the housing ladder, from upsizing and sometimes from downsizing. It gums up the housing market in a country where we simply cannot afford for that to happen. It disincentivises people from moving and holds back a dynamic economy.

Dr Luke Evans: The Liberal Democrat spokesperson is making some excellent points. Will she therefore support the motion?

Daisy Cooper: No—for all the reasons that I will come to. The hon. Gentleman was a fraction too early. Here's the rub: stamp duty raises a lot of money, and that is presumably why the Conservatives did not seek to scrap it at any point during all their years in power.

Stamp duty for primary residences in England and Northern Ireland raised around £4 billion in 2023-24, and it is suggested that it will raise £9 billion in 2029-30. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that the cost in 2029-30 will be around £11 billion, with the additional costs in Scotland and Wales taken into account. That means that abolishing stamp duty on primary residences would cost in the region of £36 billion to £44 billion in total over the next five years. For anybody who is not keeping up, that is almost the cost of the mini-Budget, just in slow motion.

The Conservatives say that they want all those cuts to come from public expenditure, but in this motion they do not say where those savings would come from. By my calculations, they could choose to scrap nearly the whole of the Ministry of Justice—given revelations in recent days about prisoners being let out wrongly, it feels like that may already have happened.

The Conservatives could instead decide to end all support for farmers by scrapping the entirety of the budget for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which reached £7.4 billion in 2028-29, including capital—[*Interruption.*] Well, it does not say that in the motion. Maybe they would want to do away with the cost of clearing the vast majority of the NHS maintenance backlog—a cost they would reach in a single year—or maybe they would want to scrap the £12 billion a year budget for special educational needs and disabilities. It is not clear in the official Opposition motion where the cuts would come from.

There is a strong case for looking at reforming or scrapping stamp duty all together, alongside other property tax reforms and moving to a land value tax. Indeed, some commentators suggest that scrapping stamp duty and council tax together and phasing in a land value tax over time could be one way to move ahead.

Dr Murrison: The average price of a property in St Albans is £642,000 a year. Under the proposals of the hon. Lady's party, how does she think her constituents would face paying ever more taxes, either through stamp duty land tax or the council tax reforms that she and her colleagues propose?

Daisy Cooper: As the right hon. Gentleman will understand, I am not setting out proposals; I am commenting on the proposals from his party. For the record, I was not setting out Liberal Democrat policy; I was discussing what some commentators have pointed towards. I am sure that in the next two or three years, as we get closer to the general election, the Conservatives will be very interested to read our tax plans, which are under active consideration.

Even if people cannot agree on what should replace stamp duty, they can agree on this: if we change one tax in isolation, there are knock-on negative effects. Far from giving more people the security of home ownership, this measure in isolation would put it further out of reach. How do we know that? We know it because there was a big surge in house prices during the temporary stamp duty holiday in 2020-21; it had a negative impact on house buyers.

If the Conservatives—and, indeed, the Government—are truly interested in growing the economy, surely they will agree that the best and most immediate way to do so is to reverse the damage of their terrible Brexit deal with

Europe. Analysis shows that if the Government did a better deal with the EU, within their own red lines, they would raise an additional £25 billion per year by unleashing the growth potential of our exporting British businesses.

Hon. Members: We've heard this one before!

Daisy Cooper: Well, I'll say it again. The way to grow our economy is to do away with the 2 billion pieces of paperwork that have come in since Brexit: enough paper to wrap around the world 15 times—and yet still the Conservatives groan.

Fifteen months ago, it seemed as though the Conservatives were struggling to adjust to life in opposition; now it seems that they are simply enjoying it far too much. That is precisely why the idea of abolishing stamp duty in isolation and funding it through cuts to public services alone is fantasy economics and desperate politics. The announcement at the Conservative party conference had everything to do with the Leader of the Opposition keeping herself in post until after May's elections and nothing to do with making a serious contribution to the debate on tax reform. This motion is unfunded, unserious and not worth the paper it is written on, and that is why we will not support it.

1.28 pm

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): Let us get straight to the point: what we are discussing today is a Tory plan for tax cuts for the better off, with no plan to pay for it. That is what the Tories have chosen to spend their Opposition day on.

My constituents are frustrated by the stark regional inequality in our country that means that London and the south-east are, economically speaking, another country all together. They lament the lack of public investment in transport, infrastructure and skills that this Labour Government are seeking to put right, so it is staggering that the Tories have chosen to propose tax cuts for people buying expensive homes in London and the south-east, further entrenching that regional inequality.

In the north-west, the average house price is about £200,000; in London, it is over £550,000. That means that 95% of first-time buyers in the north-west of England do not pay stamp duty, whereas 80% of them in London do. These are, let us be clear, the priorities of the same old Conservative party we have always known: the protection of wealth in the south-east above the concerns of constituents such as mine. Where would their supposed spending cuts fall? The motion does not tell us, so we can only assume that they would fall on public services in areas such as Pendle and Clitheroe.

The funny thing is that I am a strong advocate for serious property tax reform, but the Tories are not proposing to address the most unfair, regressive tax in Britain, which is council tax. Our council tax system punishes working-class people in the north precisely because they live in a poorer area. Can you believe, Madam Deputy Speaker, that someone living in a £1 million London townhouse will pay £1,000 less per year in council tax than a constituent of mine living in a house worth £250,000? It bears repeating—£1,000 less for someone who lives in a £1 million London townhouse than for someone who lives in a £250,000 house. That is outrageous, and if the Conservatives were still a serious

party, perhaps they would focus on council tax, which is so emblematic of the regional inequalities I have just mentioned. Those inequalities have condemned once-prosperous regions of the country to steady economic decline.

The Conservatives will not do so, though, because they quite literally no longer represent regions such as mine. Looking across the Chamber, I cannot see a north-west Conservative MP, but that is not surprising, because there are now only three—they are a rare species, just as Conservative MPs are in many other regions outside the south-east. The Conservatives' answer remains the same as it has always been: that growth in the south-east will lift up constituencies such as mine. "Make those with wealth wealthier and everyone else will benefit", they say, but that economic thinking has failed time and again.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Hinder: I am going to finish.

Property taxes in this country do need radical reform—on that, I hope I can find allies on all sides of this House. We need a more proportional property tax, but the Tories' hare-brained idea to scrap stamp duty—a big tax cut for the better-off in the south-east—with no plan to pay for it, while leaving the regressive council tax untouched, is just not serious.

1.32 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am very sorry to hear about the antipathy of the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) towards the south-east. I can assure him that it is not reciprocated, and no doubt the London Members who may or may not be present for this debate will have something to say to him about the wealth and welfare of their residents.

Since this Government were elected, I have often called to mind the famous aphorism uttered by Ronald Reagan about Governments' approach to the economy:

"If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it. And if it stops moving, subsidize it."

It feels to me as if, with housing in particular, we are moving into the third of those phases. I contemplate with some alarm the idea that in chasing their huge housing target—noble though it is, and shared by the Conservative party—the Government are about to pump enormous subsidies into the housing market in the Budget. That is precisely the wrong thing to do, particularly for a Government who are struggling to create growth in the economy.

What the Government seem to have failed to realise is that if we allow capitalism to function—to do what it is supposed to do—it is brilliant at creating abundance. It has been the single greatest tool for alleviating poverty across the world that humankind has ever known, yet here in this country, Governments—not just this Government but, to my alarm, previous Governments over the past 20 years or so—have not appreciated the formula of incentives required for capitalism to function. It is particularly damaging for it not to function within the housing market, and that is especially salient for the United Kingdom, whose economy is so closely tied to its domestic housing market. Looking at the correlation between the two, it is pretty much one to one: if the

[*Kit Malthouse*]

housing market is doing well, our economy is doing well, and vice versa. That points to the problem that stamp duty poses.

I want to raise a few points about this motion, as well as to say that I agreed entirely with the shadow Chancellor's excellent opening speech. First, stamp duty is not a tax on wealth, or even on property; it is a tax on decision making. It skews people's ability to conduct their life as they wish to, and it deters decisions from being made within the housing market and bungs it up so that it does not work for anybody, wherever in that market they sit and whether or not they pay stamp duty. For capitalism to work—for a market to work—there needs to be lots and lots of transactions. There needs to be fluidity and liquidity. That is what achieves a steady price and creates abundance; people know that they can take a risk in a market, because they will find a counterparty. Scarcity is what raises prices, and that is exactly the position we find ourselves in at the moment. Punitive rates of stamp duty do to the housing market precisely what none of us wants them to do, which is to reward scarcity. They push people into other forms of economic activity, with the result that they cannot fulfil the wishes and aspirations of their family.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the importance of creating abundance in the housing market. Does he therefore think it was wrong for his party and the Prime Minister at the time to come to my constituency during the general election and campaign against the new homes being built there, which this country so desperately needs?

Kit Malthouse: I was Housing Minister for 12 golden months, during which, I am pleased to say, the United Kingdom achieved its highest starts and finishes of housing for 10 years either side—not entirely due to my stewardship, but nevertheless, I will take the credit. I am with the hon. Gentleman in wanting to encourage the building of a significant number of houses, and I am very pleased that large numbers are to be built in my constituency, but they have to be built in the right places. We have to protect our landscape, our countryside and our heritage, while at the same time recognising that many of our market towns need to grow and reach a sustainable size. We can have the houses; they just have to be in the right places.

I also think that we would be able to embrace more housing if we were somehow able to breach the conspiracy of crap. Excuse my language, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is a crass word, but it is a great way of summing up the fact that we are building terribly badly designed houses. There is a conspiracy between planners and the development community to produce ersatz housing across the country, rather than to build beautifully designed houses, as generations of housebuilders did before us. It will not come as a surprise to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) that in his constituency, as in mine, the most valuable houses—irrespective of size—are often the oldest ones, dating from the Victorian era and even earlier periods. Georgian houses command huge prices, as they are seen as desirable because of their beauty. We can have the houses, as long as we put them in the right places and they look good.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): This stamp duty policy will help to lubricate the system, but my right hon. Friend is talking about putting the houses in the right places. Does he agree that this Government really do need to follow through on that? They have to prioritise brownfield sites and stop bringing in policies that will rip up the green belt, which represents the heart and lungs of areas such as mine.

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Chris Curtis: Back to scarcity again.

Kit Malthouse: No, the people best positioned to decide where houses should go are local people. That is why, for many years, I have been a strong proponent of neighbourhood planning. It has been proven time and again that neighbourhood planning produces more houses—15% to 20% more—than other forms of planning, especially local plans. If we get the design right and put power in the hands of local people, they will very often make the right choices, not just for their community but for the next generation.

A point that the shadow Chancellor has made powerfully is that we should recognise that a gummed-up housing market, which is currently stagnating, suppresses the renovation and construction supply chain. When people move house, they invest in redecoration; they invest in extensions, put a new roof on the house, build on the side, and do all sorts of things to their new house that are good, valuable, productive economic activity. At the moment, we are missing out on that activity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for what he is saying, and I commend the Opposition on bringing forward this debate. In Northern Ireland, house prices have risen by 7.7%, which is the highest in all the United Kingdom. What is happening in my constituency—I suspect other Members have had this—is that young people are coming up to me and saying, “I cannot get a mortgage.” They need help. I hope that the proposal brought forward by the Opposition can give that hope. The right hon. Gentleman refers to the aspiration, which I have as well, that every person wants to own their own house. This proposal would be a method of ensuring that young people have that opportunity.

Kit Malthouse: I understand the hon. Gentleman's hope for the next generation, and I completely agree with him. As somebody with three children, I hope they get the same housing opportunities and economic opportunities as I did. Sadly, given how the housing market has gone and is going, it does not look as if that will be the case, but he neatly makes the point that I made in opening my speech. To get young people on the housing ladder, a subsidy scheme would see us come full circle. Instead, we should think again about how we can have a deregulated free market that functions for them and allows the houses to be built that can accommodate them. Taking tax off young people and then giving it back in the form of housing subsidy is nonsensical.

To return to my point on the supply chain, thousands of small builders around the country are desperate for this kind of work and are seeing the housing market stagnating and their work reducing. Worse than that, in areas of high property value, those who do have capital

decide, instead of moving, to build down, up or out. We therefore get densification, particularly in areas such as central London, which often causes significant problems.

Moving on, this tax does not work very well for Government either. First, as Members will know, it is pro-cyclical and crashes when the Government need it most. During the 2007-08 crash, stamp duty receipts fell by 60%. We saw a surge in stamp duty receipts during the window a year or so ago, but since then, they have been falling significantly. The Chancellor, who is facing significant fiscal problems, will see that fall even further, so the tax does not work for Government on that basis.

Secondly, stamp duty is a bad tax because of its salience. Economists have this idea that taxes have a salience, which is how much people notice they are being taken. VAT has low salience, because we do not really notice it. It is in the prices that we pay. Income tax and pay-as-you-earn have low salience. Stamp duty is enormously noticeable at a moment when people are making a huge decision about their lives. They are trying to progress their families and wham, here come the Government saying, "We are going to have a slice of your wealth."

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. On salience, does he acknowledge that stamp duty has had a particularly pronounced effect in the capital, particularly for those who come to this country to invest here and create jobs? One of the prime reasons we have seen such a significant number—perhaps 16,000 people—leave this country is the incidence of that tax in the capital.

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend is completely right, and he makes a powerful point. Anybody, whether overseas or here, who comes anywhere in the country, but particularly to London and the south-east, and wants to make a significant purchase is immediately presented with a massive bill that cannot be borrowed. It comes out of any equity that they may have spare lying around or that they may have saved up for years to build towards their housing decision. For the Government to show up and take it at that moment of significance in anybody's life is extremely damaging. It is the same when the Government show up on the death of a relative and say, "We will take our slice." Such taxes have enormous salience. As a result, stamp duty and inheritance tax are easily the two most unpopular taxes in the country.

Rachel Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time and is putting forward interesting points. It surprises me that nobody on the Opposition Benches brought these points forward in the 14 years they were in power. Stamp duty land tax is not a new tax; it is a tax that went up under the last Government, yet the Conservatives had brought forward no proposals on it until this unfunded announcement at party conference a few weeks ago.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady should not assume from the outward utterances that there was not an internal conversation going on within the party about our tax strategy. Those in the Chamber who shared the Cabinet table with me will know that that was often a vigorous conversation. I will leave it at that.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Kit Malthouse: I will in a minute. The third point I want to make, which I guess is the one that might appeal most to Government Members, is that this tax is generationally unfair. Younger people move house more often, so they are more exposed to this tax. The younger someone is, the more likely they are to be building a family, to require more space, and to be moving up the ladder. Older people tend to sit still. They sit pretty on their capital, which is often in unmortgaged houses. Because of the lack of a market, they generally under-occupy the houses they own. When looking at stamp duty, we have to look at generational fairness, too.

In my constituency, hundreds and hundreds of aspirational families need more space. They would like to move up the ladder. They have worked hard and accumulated a deposit and the money that would allow them to move, but they want to spend that money on curtains, carpets, decoration and all the rest of it. They are deterred from moving by this tax. If we are to be fair to the next generation, we have to not only build the houses that they want to buy, but make it cheap for them to buy them, and that means cancelling stamp duty.

For all those reasons—to ensure fluidity and liquidity in a market that is skewed to produce artificially high prices; to ensure a market in which developers take a risk and build more houses, and landowners put land forward; but fundamentally for a generation who are being denied access to housing—we need to take seriously the idea that stamp duty is at the heart of the problem, and we need to abolish it entirely. The Liberal Democrats say that abolishing it will raise prices. It of course raises prices if we tell people that there is a window. That would result in frantic activity from those who are desperate to buy. If the abolition becomes permanent, we get a liquid market that achieves a real price, notwithstanding the initial bump.

As for those who say that the savings cannot be found, we should be able to find this amount of money, given the size of the Government's budget, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) said. I had a look this morning, and I could find 50% of the amount in the Department for Transport's budget, no problem. The other half could come from the welfare reforms on which the Labour party bottled it. We could easily find the money and do the whole country and the economy an enormous favour.

1.47 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his speech, and for his fight and campaign within his party in favour of abundance and against scarcity. I hope it is a fight that he can win, given the damage done by there not being enough of that attitude when the Conservatives were in power. Given that this debate cannot be isolated from the issue of the supply of housing, I hope that at the next election, I will not see Conservative leaflet after Conservative leaflet against building the new homes that this country so desperately needs.

I thank the Opposition for bringing forward this debate, and I will start with a few points on which I hope we can agree. Stamp duty is a dreadful tax. It

[Chris Curtis]

discourages behaviour that we should want to encourage: people moving out of homes that no longer suit them, and into properties that do. As many others have mentioned, stamp duty deters people from downsizing, which means fewer family homes become available for those who need them. In much of London and the south-east, where housing costs are already painfully high, that makes moving almost prohibitively expensive. When, for various reasons, the demand side of the housing market is struggling, stamp duty is also a barrier to building the homes that this country so desperately needs.

When it comes to the drive to campaign against stamp duty, there is a lot to agree with, and we should find a path to removing it. However, I cannot support the motion for two reasons. First, a tax cut of around £9 billion must come with an honest explanation of how it will be paid for, as has been said. If there are apparently tens of billions of pounds-worth of cuts that we could make to the state, we can only conclude that it was pretty negligent of the previous Government not to make them in their 14 years in power. When they were handing out redundancy notices to police officers, why were they not making those cuts instead? Unfunded tax cuts are either a return to Liz Truss or a return to Tory austerity.

There is a second, perhaps more important, point. I fear that the motion's focus on stamp duty alone is too narrow. As was mentioned, we need a wider conversation about property taxes. The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) was wrong in one regard. I used to work in market research, and I know that stamp duty and inheritance tax are not the most unpopular taxes; council tax is consistently the most unpopular.

Bradley Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman regret the fact that his Government have not honoured their pre-election promise to reduce council tax?

Chris Curtis: I will make some comments about the unfairness of the council tax system in a moment. We can have a conversation about tax and spend, and there is a much wider conversation to have, but today's debate focuses on a very specific cut in a very specific part of property taxation, and there is a problem with having that conversation in isolation, rather than having the bigger, bolder, politically braver conversation that I would like the Opposition to start about wider reforms of our property tax market.

Graham Stuart: I must say that I am encouraged by the hon. Gentleman's speech. For once, he is not purely engaging in the "14 years of failure" rhetoric of the Labour party. He recognises that stamp duty is a bad tax, and he says that we need a proper, joined-up and deeply-thought-through approach to getting rid of it. Is he pledging to lead such an operation in the Labour party? Given that for the next four years there will be 400-plus Labour MPs, the debate within his party is more important than the one within ours.

Chris Curtis: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has asked me to comment on the 14 years of Tory failure—years in which his party failed to grow the British economy and created a number of the problems that the country faces. While the shadow Chancellor

made many good remarks in his opening speech, there was a little bit of amnesia about the state of affairs that was left to this Government. However, we do need an honest conversation about tax reform, including reform of property taxes.

We have spoken a little about what the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, and the IFS is right. The UK essentially relies on two big but fairly broken property taxes. Council tax does not create the distortions that stamp duty creates, but it is regressive; stamp duty creates distortions, but it is at least progressive, and mitigates some of the regressive elements of council tax. If we look at only one half of the equation and simply cut stamp duty, we will tilt the system further in favour of the wealthiest households, many of them in London and the south-east, while telling lower and middle-income families elsewhere that there is nothing in the system for them.

We should consider just how unfair council tax has become. Given that the top band is capped so lightly, the bill for a modest family home in the north or the midlands can be similar to that for a multimillion-pound townhouse in London. Paul Johnson, formerly of the IFS, has already been quoted, but let me read out a tweet from him:

"Buckingham Palace, valued at around £1bn, sits in band H and is charged £1,828 by Westminster City Council, less than an average three-bedroom semi in Blackpool...46% of households in England will receive a bigger council-tax bill than the Palace."

That is clearly a broken tax system, and if we ignore that and focus solely on stamp duty, we will only make things worse.

Moreover, because successive Governments have not had the bravery to revalue, the tax bands are still based on 1991 values. In 1991, Tim Berners-Lee had just invented the world wide web, Nirvana had just released "Nevermind", Will Smith was filming the first series of "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air", and I had not been born. A lot has changed since then, yet we have still not reformed the way in which we carry out council tax valuations. So yes, I agree that we should set a path to reducing stamp duty and ultimately reform the way in which we deal with it, but that should be part of a broader package that shifts tax away from transactions and towards ongoing occupation of higher-value properties. It could include revaluation and re-banding of council tax, so that bills reflect today's values. There could be a higher rate or surcharge for the most expensive properties, and targeted reliefs to support downsizers and first-time buyers.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Curtis: Yes, go on. Last time.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is giving a brilliant speech, I must say, and given the energy that he is bringing to it, it "Smells Like Teen Spirit" to me. I agree with most of the points that he made about council tax. It is outrageous what we see when we compare the tax on a small flat in Beverley with that on a multimillion-pound apartment in Westminster. Does he recognise that the cut in business property relief will impose huge costs on businesses, such as house builders, one of which I met last week? If that business was worth £100 million, say, on the death of the owner, the tax would be £20 million, and the person inheriting the

business would have to extract £40 million in order to pay it. That house builder told me that for every £40 million taken out of the business, there would be £120 million of investment not made in housing. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that that is a real problem?

Chris Curtis: With respect, I think that I have already taken the debate a little bit away from stamp duty, and I do not want to go into the wider tax system—although, as I have said, it is important to broaden the debate and engage in a wider conversation about property taxes, as I have tried to do. If the Opposition genuinely want to remove stamp duty, I invite them to engage in that wider conversation in good faith. If we want to remove costs at the point of transaction for those buying high-value homes, it is only fair to ask them to contribute more through day-to-day charges. Such a system would be fairer, would support mobility, and would meet the objectives that I think are shared by Members on both sides of the House: a housing market that works, more building, and a tax system that is both pro-growth and fiscally responsible.

1.56 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Stamp duty is the worst kind of tax; there seems to be cross-party consensus on that point today. It stands in the way of the aspiring young couple who want to buy their first home, or move on and bring up a family. It punishes the older couple who want to downsize to a more suitable home once their family have flown the nest. It stifles growth and restricts mobility, and it has become so complex that it confuses even Deputy Prime Ministers. It is in all our interests to simplify it, and we can do that by abolishing it, so that we can get the housing market moving once again.

Members on both sides of the House have said that the market is bunged up, and it absolutely is. So many properties have been on the market for many months, not selling. That applies to houses at all points on the housing chain, not just multimillion-pound houses; but if those multimillion-pound houses do not sell, houses throughout the chain will also not sell, which has an impact on young people, families and old people throughout the country.

We have made a commitment to unshackling our housing market by abolishing stamp duty on primary residences. I was extremely pleased when that was announced at the Conservative party conference a few weeks ago. I was also pleased by the honesty of my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) when he said that this debate had been ongoing in the party for some time, and I am very pleased indeed that we have settled on this position.

In my constituency, the average house price is about £372,500. Purchasing a property at that price—if the online stamp duty calculators are accurate—would require a stamp duty outlay of £8,625. When the stamp duty land tax was introduced on land transactions by the then Labour Government in December 2003, the average house price in my constituency was £169,000, which meant a stamp duty outlay of just £1,090. When stamp duty is taken together with increasing house prices, there has been a 224% increase in the cost of buying a home; average earnings have risen by just 190% in the same period. Abolishing stamp duty will not fix that

overnight. We still need to do more to build warm, dry homes in the places where people want to live, and I am pleased that today's debate has been broadened slightly to cover the subject of house building.

I think that parties across the House want to build good-quality homes in the right places to enable young people to get on to the housing ladder. We do not seem to be at odds on that. However, those homes need to be in the right places, and I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire that their quality is incredibly important. If we improve the quality of new build homes, our communities will be much more open to accepting house building, which will increase supply and improve opportunities for young people. That is critical for all Members on both sides of the House.

In places like London, however, this Government and their Labour Mayor of London have utterly failed to tackle a severe housing crisis; there are lower targets, and there is reduced aspiration, rather than ambition. Building more houses will help to arrest the charging growth in house prices, but we know that just building is unlikely to bring prices down. Some 20% fewer 25 to 34-year-olds are homeowners today than in the year 2000. Average first-time buyers are almost a decade older today than in the 1980s. Our property market is failing our young people.

We must therefore do more to make it more affordable for people to make that next move. The Chancellor, desperate to raise more money following her economic vandalism, wants to drag more people into paying stamp duty, or into a higher rate of stamp duty, by freezing thresholds. Reform, which is reportedly about to scrap its half-baked stamp duty plans, is looking to concrete over our green belt, as it lacks any credible plans to deliver homes at all. The Conservatives are the only party with a sensible plan to unlock our housing market and give young people a stake in society and roots in their communities.

By abolishing stamp duty on primary residences, we can make it more than 2% cheaper for families to buy the average house in my constituency overnight. We can save prospective first-time buyers in London an average of £18,000—and I am sure that at least one hon. Member on the Government Benches, the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), might wish to comment on the savings that she could deliver to her constituents by supporting this motion and pushing this policy through within her party.

That is the sort of real impact that people will feel in their pockets, and that they will feel while unboxing their prized possessions in the living room of their new family home. It will enable a new generation of young people to achieve the dream of home ownership, enable families to move up the housing ladder into more suitable family homes, unlock our housing market, and knock down a barrier to social mobility, stimulating our economy and abolishing the drag on growth. That is what I got into politics to deliver: less Government red tape, fewer taxes on aspiration and mobility, and families in homes of their own.

2.1 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on stamp duty, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think there is a lot of agreement on both sides of the House that, if we could just abolish

[Dr Jeevun Sandher]

stamp duty, we would. The question is not about abolishing stamp duty, but about how that would be paid for, and what we have seen from the Conservatives' so-called costing is £23 billion of cuts to social security. That is £23 billion that they could not deliver while they were in office. Those cuts would lead to rising destitution, and not just for those who are out of work or for children, but for those who are in work as we speak.

It is worth thinking about how the social security system has changed over time and what has happened in our economy, and indeed in high-income nations across the world. Technological change has resulted in a divide between high-paid and low-paid jobs, so that some jobs—mostly done by graduates—pay enough to live on, but a lot more do not. For a two-parent household with two kids to afford just the basics, each parent needs to earn £35,000 a year. Some 40% of full-time workers earn less than that.

So that people can afford to live, we have used the social security system to top up wages. That is what we did with working tax credits, and it is what the Conservatives did when they reformed that system to become universal credit. However, they built a huge amount of cuts into the system. What did those cuts mean? They meant food banks in our nation, which we had never known previously. They meant kids going hungry. They meant parents unable to afford the basics. They meant that people across this country who worked hard and did the right thing could not afford a decent life.

Today, the Conservative party are once again suggesting £23 billion of cuts to social security. That is £23 billion out of the pockets of families, including working families. It is shocking; it should mean something to them—it should mean something to all of us. Our nation does better when every single one of us can afford a decent life. People who work hard should be able to have a decent life, yet those cuts would mean the opposite.

Blake Stephenson: The hon. Member is making a powerful argument. I just wonder whether he has reflected on the size of the welfare budget. Is he making the argument that welfare spending should not come down at all?

Dr Sandher: That is not at all the argument I am making. My argument is: how can we ensure that people live a decent life through £23 billion of social security cuts, given the huge amounts of destitution and increased unaffordability for families? I say this to the Conservatives as well: I worked in the Treasury under George Osborne, and even he would not have come up with something like this. When he tried something similar, he did not get it past this House.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): Will the hon. Member reflect on the fact that one in six people in this country on universal credit are not British citizens? How would he justify that to his constituents?

Dr Sandher: People in this country who have the right to remain and the right to work, and who have earned social security contributions, can make claims. The hon. Member will know that many people in this country have no recourse to public funds at all. That meant that during the pandemic, for example, despite paying into the system, they could not claim back out.

It is a shame to see where the Conservative party has got to on this stuff, to be honest. There was a time when the Conservatives condemned Enoch Powell, and a time when they joined us, across this House, in believing that every single person, regardless of the colour of their skin, when given the legal status to remain, has rights and responsibilities, like a British citizen. It is such a shame to see where the Conservative party has got to.

The truth is, I think the Conservatives feel ashamed. When they talk about things like cultural coherence, we can hear the dog whistle—across this country, we hear it. I will tell you why, Madam Deputy Speaker: it is because British citizenship is not just about the colour of our skin or the way we look; it is about our values, the way we act, and the way we cohere together—different communities across this nation who speak in different ways. It is a deep, deep shame—dog-whistle away.

Bradley Thomas: I call on the hon. Gentleman to reflect on the fact that, regardless of our political differences, it is the Conservative party that has delivered three female Prime Ministers and the first Prime Minister from an ethnic minority background, while his has not managed to present any other leader than a white man.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before Dr Sandher responds, I ask Members to try to keep this debate in scope.

Dr Sandher: And look how much the Conservative party has changed since last July. That is where we are.

I will come back, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the issue at hand. We have 4.5 million children in poverty and one in six children living in a household with food insecurity, struggling to make ends meet. Making £23 billion of welfare cuts would mean that families and children could not afford to eat. It would mean the most destitute becoming poorer, and working families—40% of those on universal credit are working families—seeing cuts as well. That is the outcome here: making our nation poorer. That is not what we should want; it is not what Labour wants, and I hope it is not what the Conservatives want either.

Madam Deputy Speaker: On behalf of Mr Speaker, may I say that it is an absolute joy to see the wonderful Chelsea Pensioners in their glorious red uniforms observing proceedings? No doubt it will elevate the debate. I call Graham Stuart to do so.

2.7 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, and I think the quality of contributions from both sides has been excellent—which has not always been the case over recent months.

No one in Beverley and Holderness likes paying stamp duty—not first-time buyers in Beverley and not grandparents seeking to downsize in Hedon. Of course, as we know, it is not even popular with the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner).

Stamp duty was first introduced in 1694 to fund our war against the French. While we may have our differences with our friends across the channel, when I checked this morning, I was pleased to find that we are not currently at war with France. What began as a temporary wartime measure—raising £91,206, 10 shillings and fourpence in 1702—has become a permanent tax. But it is more than

just a tax; it is a barrier to opportunity for young couples in Sproatley in my constituency, an impediment to aspiration in Aldbrough, and a block on families in Withernsea trying to climb the property ladder.

We, the Conservative party, have always been the party of opportunity, of home ownership and of family aspiration. That is why, at the next election, we will abolish this three-century-old tax. There have been welcoming signs that I did not expect to hear today: too often, colleagues on the Government Benches just slavishly repeat their speaking points, but we have heard thoughtful speeches and a recognition that stamp duty is a harmful tax. They may question our way of implementing the policy, but they recognise that.

We will abolish this three-century-old tax and unlock the housing market in Beverley and Holderness—and beyond. I encourage the Chancellor, and colleagues behind her, to follow our lead.

2.9 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Let me start by saying that I welcome a debate on how we incentivise home ownership. I am a Labour MP who wants more of my constituents in Welwyn Hatfield to have a secure home of their own and to build a life in our community, and people's ability to buy a home should not be so dependent on their access to the bank of mum and dad. The Conservatives' proposition that we are discussing today is that the abolition of stamp duty is the answer. Before we assess that claim, let us look at how we got here.

Home ownership went backwards over the 14 years of the last Conservative Government. There are 600,000 fewer homeowners in the UK than there would have been if home ownership rates had remained at the levels they were at in 2010—that is more than the population of Liverpool. Twenty years ago, 50% of people aged 25 to 34 owned their own home; by 2022, the figure had fallen to fewer than four in 10. Members from across the House will recognise that that is a record of failure. I think they will also agree that there is no panacea that will increase the level of home ownership, and that it requires a range of policy solutions.

That being said, there is one fundamental truth that we need to recognise: if we do not build more homes, we will not have more homeowners. The last Government dropped mandatory housing targets, and I have lost count of how many Conservative MPs have used departmental questions, statements and even today's debate to say, "I like the idea of homes in the right place, but it doesn't happen to be in my constituency." I have to say that the Liberal Democrats have been just as guilty of that as the Conservative party.

Where the Conservatives failed, the Labour Government are acting. We are delivering the return of housing targets for every local authority, ambitious planning reform and a record £39 billion for the affordable homes programme. Do we have further to go? Yes, absolutely, but new housing starts in the first quarter of 2025 were up by 17% on the same period in 2024, when the Conservatives were still in power.

Let us look more closely at the proposition that abolishing stamp duty is the answer. First of all, who benefits most? If someone's home is worth £1.5 million, they will save £93,750 under this proposal. As I said

earlier, if someone's home is worth £2 million, they will save £150,000—that was cheered by the Conservative party, which is telling—whereas if they buy a home that is worth less than £300,000, this proposal will save them no money at all. That is the threshold at which stamp duty cuts in at the moment, and 40% of first-time buyers buy homes that are worth less than £300,000.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) said, the Conservatives' proposition is to ask ordinary taxpayers either to accept deep cuts in social security, or to pay more taxes to subsidise a tax cut for millionaires. Liz Truss would be proud. We have no Reform colleagues in the Chamber today, but I suspect that they would be pleased as well. Of course, their leader famously said at the time of the mini-Budget that it was the best Budget since 1986.

If we seriously want more homeowners, the real answer lies in building more homes of all tenures; in offering mortgage guarantees to help those who earn enough but cannot raise the deposit to get on the ladder; in continuing to support low-cost home ownership models, such as shared ownership; in planning reform; and in embracing a new generation of new towns. In the first 14 months of being in office, this Government have done more to make progress on identifying sites for the next generation of new towns than the Conservative party did in 14 years.

If our objective is to give millionaires a tax cut, abolishing stamp duty in one sweep is a good way to implement that policy. But if we are serious about helping people on to the housing ladder, we should reject the Conservatives' motion today, reject their failed approach over the last 14 years, and support a package of reforms to get Britain building again.

2.14 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is very interesting to follow the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), because I mentioned him in an earlier intervention. He knows that I fundamentally disagree with him. Abolishing stamp duty would be a tax cut for everybody, irrespective of the value of their houses. Fundamentally, we know that the housing market is gummed up, and I have serious questions about whether the Labour Government will be able to meet their housing targets. I am not sure what the housing numbers are currently—maybe he will be able to enlighten me—but this is fundamentally a tax cut that would apply to everybody.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) said earlier, the speeches from Labour Members have been very interesting, but they are slightly siloed. They slightly miss out the context of what we are talking about: the economy is stalling, and the jobs tax means that unemployment has gone up. More hard-working people are now unemployed, and more young people are now out of work, as a result of this Labour Government. They can talk down this motion—as I am sure they will, because the Whips have told them to do so—but the reality is that we are putting something on the table that is credible and funded, that will un-gum the housing market, and that will contribute £1.2 billion-worth of economic growth. At a time when the Chancellor is scrambling to fill her own black hole, we are putting credible ideas on the table that the Government should take more seriously.

Connor Naismith: The hon. Gentleman said that this tax cut would benefit everybody. Can he tell me how it would benefit people who do not currently pay it because their property is not worth enough?

Saqib Bhatti: First of all, it would increase mobility in the housing market. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) stated in an incredibly eloquent speech, it would also mean that the construction industry and all the peripheral jobs would start to mobilise. It would create economic growth—I suspect that the figure of £1.2 billion is probably a bit of an underestimate, and that abolishing stamp duty would actually create more growth. We are talking about creating jobs, making people wealthier and being aspirational for the aspirational, whereas Labour Members are talking down a credible policy that would put money on the table for some of our poorest people. Ultimately, abolishing stamp duty would mean that more and more people are able to get on to the housing ladder.

Let us face it: the Government are not going to meet their housing targets. It is already quite obvious that they are massively behind, and it will not be possible to meet their targets. They are killing off aspiration and confidence in the economy, and house builders will not want to meet the targets—unless, of course, they are met with huge subsidies. The question I have for those on the Government Benches is this: given the current economic situation, how much representation have they made to their Chancellor about introducing growth principles and cutting taxes so that people have more money in their pockets? The answer will be none, because that is not happening.

The hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) said that he was not making an argument for not cutting welfare, but he did not put a figure on the table. We know that the welfare bill is ballooning, and it started ballooning post covid. We intervened during the pandemic, which had to happen. We saved a £2 trillion economy, we saved businesses and we saved jobs. We did all those things—sometimes with the support of those on the Opposition Benches and sometimes without, I am sad to say—to save the economy. Of course, all of that comes with a cost. It is now right that we look forward to make sure that we are putting proposals on the table that help grow the economy and, by the way, help the Chancellor to get out of this mess. I want her to do better, because right now I have constituents who are struggling, who are anxious and who are worried. Her policies, backed by those on the Labour Back Benches, have contributed to higher inflation and a higher cost of living. These are all consequences that they backed by walking through the voting Lobbies.

There is a Budget coming. Although Labour Back Benchers may be talking in silos, the Government are already briefing the papers about all the taxes that will rise. They talk about “serious Government”, but they are not talking seriously about the cuts that they will have to put on the table, because the Chancellor knows that the moment she does that, it will be her Back Benchers who stab her in the back. That is her fundamental conundrum, because she also has to placate the bond market, where we have highest bond yields. I see Labour Members shaking their heads, but that is the reality of what Back Benchers are dealing with. We are putting good proposals on the table that would mean that

young families who want to get on the housing ladder—*[Interruption.]* I am happy for the hon. Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) to intervene if he wants. No? I was offering him an opportunity, because I was getting distracted by his chuntering.

The reality is that most serious economists, such as Dan Neidle and those at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, have said that stamp duty is a bad tax. In fact, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), who I hear has been instrumental in writing the Budget, has talked about stamp duty being a “bad tax”. We all agree on that, so we have put a funded policy on the table that the Chancellor is going to need. Surely this is something that we should all take seriously, because the Government will need answers. I suspect we will come back to that.

A lot has been made of the Chancellor’s fiscal rules. The Chief Secretary to Treasury said that they are “ironclad”, and I suspect they are until the next ones. We have a golden rule. In the spirit of rules, the Leader of the Opposition has created a golden rule, which is that for every £1 saved, half will go to cutting our national debt. Surely we can all get behind that. When the interest on our debt is something like £100 billion a year, surely we can get behind that. When the Chancellor is borrowing more month after month to meet everyday spending, as is obviously happening, we should get behind that rule.

The last point I want to make is about the cliff-edge argument. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire mentioned, we had the window during covid. I was one of those on the receiving end of not being able to buy a house at that time. I was looking for a house for my new family, and houses were going quickly because people were trying to beat the cliff edge at the end of the stamp duty window. This proposal is not the same, because this gets rid of such a window, and it means that more and more people will be able to buy houses.

Kit Malthouse: I am perplexed by the argument the Liberal Democrats have advanced that abolishing stamp duty will raise prices. Presumably the quid pro quo is that raising it would lower prices, so why are they not proposing that policy?

Saqib Bhatti: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, and I am sure the Liberal Democrat spokesperson will address it, but that speaks to the economic incoherence of what they have presented.

Fundamentally, we believe in property rights. We believe in the ownership of property and the rights that derive from it, which are among the freedoms—the fundamental freedoms—in this country. It was a moment of great pride when I got the keys to my first house, and I am sure it is the same for others. Cutting stamp duty is the right thing to do, and if we win the next election, that is exactly what we will do.

2.21 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): The shadow Chancellor would have us believe that the Conservatives have changed, and that the days of Liz Truss and her disastrous mini-Budget are behind them, but we can all see that nothing has changed. Once again, we see the same reckless attitude towards the public finances—cutting public expenditure to fund tax breaks for the wealthiest without being honest with the

British public about who pays the price. The shadow Chancellor tells us he can fund this Liz Truss-style tax-cutting bonanza by making £47 billion in spending cuts. I simply ask him: if these fantasy savings are so easy to find, why did the Conservatives not make them during the 14 years they were in government?

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Taylor: No, not at this point.

We have been here before with the Tories. They tell the public they can slash the state without any downsides, but the next thing we know is that our local library is being shut down, our local swimming pool goes with it and our vital services such as the NHS and schools end up in crisis. My constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth have suffered 14 years of austerity once, and they do not want to suffer it a second time. Let us look at some of the real facts about stamp duty.

Graham Stuart: Does the hon. Lady think stamp duty is a bad tax?

Rachel Taylor: I am not saying whether stamp duty is a good or a bad tax. I am saying that I do not support simply abolishing it without any thought about the impact that that will have on the poorest people in our society.

The Tories have dressed up this fantasy tax cut as standing up for first-time buyers, but as a former property solicitor, I can tell them for a fact that that argument is completely false. In my constituency, a first-time buyer purchasing a property at the average price pays no stamp duty. This tax cut would be of no benefit to them whatsoever.

Bradley Thomas: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Taylor: I will make some more progress.

The average property sale in my constituency would see buyers buying for the second or subsequent time paying between £2,000 and £3,600. That is not an insignificant amount of money for sure, but it is just a tiny fraction of the cost of buying an average home. Comparing that with the kind of house bought by, say, the average Tory party donor—perhaps a £2 million property in central London—we see that such a purchase would attract stamp duty of more than £150,000. That is who this massive Tory tax cut would be helping—not first-time buyers in my constituency, but London-based millionaires.

Let us be clear that this whopping Tory tax cut would overwhelmingly be spent on the wealthiest in our society, while sucking money out of our public services and local communities. It would do nothing to help young people to get a foot on the housing ladder, while giving a whopping tax break to some of the richest people in our society. Let us be absolutely clear that this is not a tax cut for working people; it is a tax cut for the wealthy. It would take money out of our public services and our local communities, while doing nothing to help young people get a foot on the housing ladder. The Conservatives claim that they have changed, but this latest plan shows that they have not learned a thing. It is the same failed ideology, the same unfair priorities—*austerity 2.0*—and would cause the same harm to my constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth and right across this country.

2.25 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): Stamp duty land tax is one of the most unfair and outdated taxes in our system. It punishes aspiration, locks people out of home ownership and blocks up the housing market. I have heard from constituents who are first-time buyers struggling to get a foothold on the housing ladder because of the amount of stamp duty they are expected to pay. Eastleigh's Liberal Democrat-run borough council has a strong record of building homes to meet local demand, but according to the Office for National Statistics, the average price of a house in Eastleigh is still £313,000, which is unaffordable for many.

It is simply wrong that the dream of home ownership has drifted so far out of reach of so many people. My constituent Tom and his wife are a young couple who have spent the past two years desperately trying to buy their first home. In the haste to get the purchase through before the end of the stamp duty holiday, they missed key checks and accepted extra costs just to complete the purchase. As someone who grew up in rented accommodation, with everything that goes with it, I find it so incredibly disappointing that, at a time when we should be doing everything possible to make home ownership accessible, the system instead creates obstacles for those simply trying to put down roots and start a family in a home of their own.

As we know, there is a housing crisis. The private rental market is expensive and insecure, far too few homes are available for social rent and poor-quality housing is damaging people's health. The Government must tackle the root causes by increasing the building of new homes to 380,000 a year, including 150,000 social homes a year, ensuring that every community has access to secure and genuinely affordable housing.

The entire system of property taxation from council tax to stamp duty is wholly unfit for purpose. Reforms must be fair, comprehensive and forward looking. That means setting out a clear plan, not an uncoded headline or a short-term Treasury grab. I hope the Government will replace this outdated, unfair tax with a modern, more efficient system that supports social mobility and economic growth, and that reignites the dream of home ownership for all generations, but I am afraid I will not be supporting this ill-thought-out and uncoded motion.

2.27 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Like many in this House and many of my constituents in Dartford, I have had the dubious pleasure of paying stamp duty. I can testify to the fact that doing so when buying a home is not a pleasant experience. That is one small reason why I am sympathetic to the case for reform of property taxation in this country when properly thought through, as others have said. However, this proposal, from the party that brought us the former right hon. Member for South West Norfolk as Prime Minister, is simply not a serious one.

At the Conservative party conference in Manchester, the Leader of the Opposition, who previously was going to spend three years thinking through her party's new policy platform—no doubt looking at all the alternatives and thinking through what the effects might be—produced a proposal, like a rabbit out of a hat, to abolish stamp duty on the purchase of main homes.

[Jim Dickson]

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reckons that, if that decision were implemented after the 2029 general election, it would cost the country or the Exchequer about £11 billion a year in lost revenue. Surprisingly, or perhaps unsurprisingly given the fiscal situation left by the Conservative party last July, there is no serious proposal to replace the revenue. Instead, we have a promise that this policy would be paid for by taking the axe once more to spending on public services, with a promise of £47 billion in savings—a proposal to return this country to the austerity that was so roundly rejected by our constituents a little more than a year ago. Indeed, the £47 billion includes a saving, as others have said, of £23 billion on welfare—a figure vastly in excess of anything the previous Government even approached during their 14 years in office, and in fact welfare spending went up during that time. So to attempt to make such a saving on the timescale they are suggesting would inevitably mean a big increase in the number of families in our country living in poverty.

I take a moment to remind the House of the state of the public services and public finances at the end of the 14 years of Conservative Government—a plethora of unfunded spending commitments, and departmental spending plans that were so out of touch with reality that they left, as has been said many times, a huge black hole which this Government have had to try to fill.

Now Opposition Members are proposing to cut public services even further. This is not a serious plan to improve those public services or invest in or grow our economy. Clearly, stamp duty is a far from perfect tax and we should have a sensible debate on property tax reform, but this just isn't it. In the short term, for instance, it would be possible to increase the number of council tax bands to capture the higher-value properties in some parts of the country and redistribute some of that income elsewhere. In the longer term, a wider reform of council tax and other property taxes could provide a fairer way of taxing property so that those with broadest shoulders bear the greatest burden. Instead, as a former adviser to the party opposite when in government, Tim Leunig, said, this would be

“a very, very big tax cut for rich people”

and would have the effect of pushing house prices further out of the reach of first-time buyers.

The motion is disappointing. It is fantasy economics from what used to be a serious political party. I hope that the House will reject its motion today.

2.31 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): They say an Englishman's home is his castle—the place he feels safe and has control of, a place with a sense of permanence. In today's world, though, we have younger people stuck at the gatehouse, renting, unable to break through into property ownership; and we have older generations locked inside the castle towers, unable to downsize easily and get out, and last winter being cold with the sudden changes in the winter fuel allowance. They are also facing a Government armed with a trebuchet, flinging economic misery at the castle walls, destroying prospects and the foundations.

There is a reason why people like programmes such as “Escape to the Country” and “Homes Under the Hammer”—other daytime programmes are available. They are really popular because they embody the aspiration of the British public to earn, and to purchase and make a true home. The policy in the motion does so much to unlock the potential that we have. Abolishing stamp duty on a primary residence could save young families, especially in London, up to £18,000 on their first home. I am really disappointed to hear Labour Members, particularly the hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder), say they do not believe it is fair to do that. It feels like the politics of envy: given that house prices are so much higher in London and the south-east, this policy is only fair. If that is combined with our announcement of the first jobs bonus, where the first £5,000 of national insurance paid by any British citizen starting their first job will be placed in a personal savings account earmarked for a first home deposit or future savings, it would be transformational.

Stamp duty is, as has been echoed across the Chamber, a terrible tax. I am sure certain Labour Members will tend to agree. It is an additional tax that distorts the market and often stops people moving. We all agree it is complicated—its calculation, the exemptions. I was a commercial property lawyer, and I actually had to complete stamp duty forms. They are an absolute nightmare; they slow down and stifle the market. Particularly for young couples and families who find that dream home that they want to move into, the stamp duty alone is enough to stop them. That should not be happening in this day and age. We need to unlock true aspiration and opportunity, and I fail to see why Labour Members would reject such a policy, which has been welcomed by so many, including their own constituents.

Rachel Taylor: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Bool: I will make some progress.

Labour Members sneer when we talk about living within their means. That is something that every single constituent of ours has to do. They have to make those tough decisions not to spend at certain points, or to save, or to work harder, but this Government do not even follow the principles that they ask their own constituents to adhere to.

Blake Stephenson: Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful if the Government were much more ambitious in finding the savings in their Budget, in order to deliver this ambitious policy that would support young people up and down our country?

Sarah Bool: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point and I really wish that the Government would be able to find that, but unfortunately, given the current Chancellor, I do not think that will be a possibility.

The Government should be creating an environment for people to thrive; they should not be fixing people in an environment. Stamp duty is one of those taxes that literally locks people in place. We must learn that we need to be able to trust individuals, give them those opportunities and see true growth. So I fully support, as I hope everyone would, this motion on stamp duty land tax.

2.35 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I start by acknowledging a point that many Members across the House have made. Many of us would not defend the principle of stamp duty; indeed, if it did not already exist, it is hard to believe that we would invent it. However, that is not the question before us today. If we are to decide to abolish stamp duty, we must say how we will pay for it, and we have to justify that decision as a priority above all the other decisions that we might make on what to do with that money.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): We Liberal Democrats accept that property taxes must be reformed—arguably, radically so—but I struggle with the Conservatives, who governed for years without substantial reform, now promising to abolish stamp duty with no credible plans to pay for it. Where is the money coming from? Is the magic money tree being re-rooted?

Connor Naismith: The hon. Member is right to point out that the Conservatives had 14 years in government. Now they are in opposition, they want to talk about all the magical savings that they could make. Why did they not do it when they were in government? It is too little, too late. As I was saying, if you decide that you want to do this, you have to tell us how you will pay for it, and justify that priority over all the other priorities.

Rachel Taylor: Does my hon. Friend agree that what has locked young people out of the housing market over the last 14 years is not the existence of stamp duty, but the astronomical rise in house prices? They have gone from being around three times a first-time buyer's income to more like 10 times in constituencies like mine and his.

Connor Naismith: I completely agree. The most common reason I hear from my constituents for their inability to get on the housing ladder is that astronomical rise in house prices.

Saqib Bhatti: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Connor Naismith: I will make some progress. The motion tells us everything we need to know about the priorities of the Conservative party today. In the context of the vast majority of options that we could choose to pursue, this is a regressive tax cut, funded once again by cuts—cuts that they will not be brave enough to specify with any credibility. Reckless with our public finances, reckless with our public services, and utterly out of touch with the realities facing working families in constituencies like mine in Crewe and Nantwich.

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Member uses the word reckless. Has he heard the news that the OBR has said the Chancellor will have to find another £7 billion to £9 billion due to the fall in productivity? Therefore her black hole has just got bigger.

Connor Naismith: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. Look, we will await the Budget to see the OBR's forecasts, but I will take no lessons from the party opposite on economic credibility. They are the party of Liz Truss, which dragged this country into the economic abyss.

We know that Tory austerity and a lack of investment in our country's infrastructure are part of the story of why our economic growth and productivity have never recovered since the financial crash in 2008. It seems like the Conservatives want to take us right back to the beginning of that 14 years of chaos, failure and decline. I think my constituents would say no, frankly. What is worse, the Conservatives cannot even tell us with any credibility where the cuts would fall. We have seen this playbook before. They have no credible plan to pay for their promises, just vague talk of savings from the very services that our communities rely on—our schools, NHS and local infrastructure. The Tories have some cheek to come here and talk about home ownership when they manifestly failed to build the homes that our country needs because they presided over a broken planning system that they did nothing to reform.

As I mentioned earlier, my constituents have not forgotten what Liz Truss's mini-Budget did to their mortgage payments. During the election campaign, I spoke directly with families in Crewe and Nantwich who had seen their monthly costs soar overnight. I distinctly remember speaking to a man who told me that his mortgage payments had risen by £1,000 a month and that he had been forced to sell his home as a result. If we want to examine the reality beyond the rhetoric of the modern day Conservative party's record on home ownership, it is that: failure to deliver, soaring prices and broken dreams.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): The hon. Member talks about broken dreams, but no Government Member has spoken about the hard-working families in the middle—not the ones struggling to buy their first home and not the so-called rich people at the top who in the Government's world this will benefit, but the hard-working families, who he has no doubt spoken to, who cannot buy a property with an additional bedroom for their growing family because of stamp duty. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) referenced, that stamp duty is the difference between the price of the home they wish to buy and the dream of actually succeeding in doing so.

Connor Naismith: It was those families in the middle who suffered most at the hands of Liz Truss's mini-Budget, so I would expect Conservative Members to apologise to those families in my constituency for their record on the economy over the past 14 years.

Compare all that with what Labour is delivering in government. We are getting Britain building, and not just the homes we need. In Crewe and Nantwich, we are getting a new hospital at Leighton, the new youth zone in Crewe town centre, a new history centre and many more things that our community will benefit from. The choice ahead at the Budget is clear: stick with Labour's plan for national renewal or return to the chaos and cuts of the past, whatever shade of blue that comes in. Labour chooses a fairer economy, one that works for working people and rewards them. That is what we are building in Crewe and Nantwich and across Britain. The people of Crewe and Nantwich deserve better than unfunded tax cuts and economic instability. They deserve a Government that invest in the future, protect their services and build a Britain for all.

2.43 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Today the state of our economy is laid bare: growth has flatlined at just 0.1% in August; inflation remains at almost twice the Bank of England's target; and long-term borrowing costs are at their highest since 1998. When we left office back in July 2024, we had the fastest growing economy in the G7. A year later, unemployment is up, debt is at its highest since the 1960s, and the UK is sliding backwards. It is hardly surprising from a Government with more experience in the trade union movement than in business. Only the Conservatives are serious about the economy.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Gregory Stafford: I have literally only been speaking for 30 seconds, so I think the hon. Member can bear with me for a minute or two.

The Government's inexperience shows in the policies that they pursue—policies that make it harder for businesses, homeowners and first-time buyers to thrive. Now, just weeks before the Chancellor's Budget, comes the most destructive raid on homeowners in living memory, if we are to believe the leaked reports coming out of the Treasury.

Charlie Maynard: Under the Conservatives' watch, the national debt grew by nearly £1 trillion. They drove our economy through a hard Brexit into the ground, and yet they masquerade as the party of good sense in the economy. I do not understand how that makes sense. Will the hon. Member explain?

Gregory Stafford: There have been a lot of comments about when people were born and what they remember. I hope the hon. Member does not take offence, but I am sure he was born before covid and the war in Ukraine and so he knows why we had to increase the national debt as a result. He is being entirely disingenuous if he believes those things did not have an impact on the economy. If he had been in power, what would he have done? Would he have not supported those small businesses, employers and hard-working people?

Charlie Maynard *rose—*

Gregory Stafford: No, I have already heard enough from the hon. Member, so I will not give way for the moment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Just to be clear, good language is appropriate, and I am not sure "disingenuous" is the best language to use. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will find an alternative word.

Is the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) finished wandering around the Chamber? Are you comfortable now? Fabulous.

Gregory Stafford: I misspoke, and I withdraw the comment. But I find it strange that Liberal Democrat Members seem to have a collective amnesia on what happened over the past few years.

Returning to the substance of the debate, families across my constituency are bracing for new taxes on homes, capital gains tax on family houses and even potentially a land value tax. This is not reform; it is a sledgehammer aimed at aspiration, mobility and stability. As I have said before, in Farnham, where the average home now costs £660,000, families could face bills of £5,000 a year on top of their mortgage and energy costs. In Haslemere, Liphook and Bordon, already stretched households will be hit again, and pensioners in Grayshott or Tilford face the grotesque prospect of capital gains on the homes they have worked a lifetime to own. Everyone—pensioners, farmers, small business owners—is treated by this Government as a cash cow. A tax on the family home is a tax on aspiration. It traps people in their properties, dries up supply and breaks housing chains. The very people Labour claims to champion—first-time buyers—will be frozen out altogether. The Government claim this is about fairness—we have heard that from a number of Government Members—but there is nothing fair about a pensioner in Greatham being forced to sell their home to pay the taxman, or a young family in Lindford choosing between childcare and a new annual levy. That is not fairness; it is a regional punishment for those of us who just happen to live in the south and south-east.

That is why I back our clear Conservative plan to abolish stamp duty on primary residences. Owning a home gives people a real stake in their community and their country. Our policy would make the economy stronger and help families achieve the dream of home ownership once again.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): The hon. Member says that owning a home gives people a stake in their community, and I agree with him. Why then does his party oppose this Government's moves to help build 1.5 million homes and reform the planning system?

Gregory Stafford: The simple answer is we do not—I cannot add more than that. As the hon. Member has drawn me on this, our problem is that we do not think that is deliverable because the Government have not met any of their targets thus far. From a parochial point of view, in Waverley and East Hampshire my constituents face the doubling of housing targets, whereas in London, where the infrastructure is already in place, the targets are being reduced. That is not joined-up thinking; that is a Government who are spraying their house targets all over the country without thinking about how they will actually deliver them.

As I said, the average price of a family home in Farnham is £660,000, which would mean paying £23,000 in stamp duty. If we can get our proposal through, that would be an enormous cut. Most important, it is fully funded—part of that £47 billion savings plan—and consistent with our golden rule that every pound saved is split between reducing the deficit and growing the economy. The Institute for Fiscal Studies calls stamp duty the

"most economically damaging tax in the UK".

The London School of Economics found that it "cuts mobility and investment". The Centre for Policy Studies calls it a "tax on... aspiration". They are all right. Our plan would save first-time buyers up to £18,000 in London and £4,000 in the south-east. As my hon.

Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) said, combined with our first jobs bonus, a couple could save £28,000—enough to get on the ladder and build a future.

We have heard a number of hon. Members across the House claiming that they support the principle of removing the stamp duty land tax, with the notable exceptions of the hon. Members for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder), for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) and for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor). What those three Members forget is that people buying a house are almost always part of a chain. Just because someone at the top of the market might be buying a £2 million house—I think they are overreaching a little with £2 million, but even if that were the case—everybody else down that chain would benefit. As soon as we can get the market moving, we will allow people to buy and sell and will give the youngest people, those buying their first home or those trying to upsize because they are starting a family the ability to actually buy. It is not just the people who are technically covered by the tax—it is everybody within the whole chain.

In contrast, Labour froze the thresholds, dragging more families into higher bands. The Housing Secretary even tried to block 237 homes in his constituency. “Build, baby, build”—I think not, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I said, a number of Members across the House, especially on the Labour Benches, have expressed sympathy for the principle of the policy, but they seem entirely unwilling to make the tough decisions necessary to get there. We saw that with Labour’s total inability to cut the welfare bill by a tiny amount earlier this year. Even if they were not willing to take those decisions, though, as every Member of this House knows, this motion is not binding on the Government, so Labour Members could happily support it to show that they would, in principle, like to see this tax cut. I suspect, though, that their principles will be overridden by the decisions of the Whips Office. The Liberal Democrats were characteristically fence-sitting—so much so that I think the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) must have left the Chamber to remove the splinters.

The reality is that this Conservative Opposition is the only party with serious thinking about how to get the housing market moving again. Our alternative is clear: we will abolish stamp duty on main homes, scrap business rates for hospitality, leisure and retail and give high streets the breathing space to grow again. That is the difference—we listen to people who build, hire, own and aspire.

The choice before the House is stark: a Labour party that punishes aspiration, or a Conservative party that rewards it. Do we want a Government who trap people where they are, or one who set them free to move, work and grow? Only the Conservatives have a serious plan to get Britain working, grow the economy and give every person a real stake in their community through the security of home ownership.

2.52 pm

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Here we go again, Madam Deputy Speaker—always the promise of tax cuts to come, never the proper plans to ensure it is affordable. This motion tells us everything we need to know about the modern Conservative party; once again, its first recourse is to reach for the austerity button

instead of making a serious plan to invest, grow the economy and strengthen our public services. Reckless with the public finances and reckless with our public services, the Conservatives are not a serious party.

I was going to make this point specifically for the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), but I see that he is not in his place, so everyone else can enjoy it instead. Yes, it is time for the greatest hits of austerity—the 14 years in which the Conservatives talked and did this country down, when day-to-day spending on public services fell by nearly 17%, stripping away nearly £46 billion every year from the services our residents rely on. Members should remember that figure as I talk about austerity, because the Conservatives would fund the tax cut we are talking about today with £47 billion—a larger number than that figure from the austerity years. Look at the back-of-a-fag-packet plans that they have to make it add up.

Let us remember what austerity did to our country. It left our NHS with a £10 billion repairs backlog. It left nine in 10 of our schools in urgent need of repair, with more than 230 schools with Swiss cheese for roofs, including reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in the roof of Wood Green school in my constituency. Those pupils deserve so much better; they deserve a decent place to learn. We will make that happen—the Conservatives did not.

When the pandemic struck, our public services were critically understaffed and had received critical under-investment. The result, thanks to the Conservatives’ austerity and cuts, was more than 170,000 excess deaths, putting the UK among the worst in the developed world.

In that period, our precious public sector workers who give their all—nurses, teachers, carers—had their pay frozen or capped for years, leaving the average nurse more than £4,000 worse off than in 2010. The Conservatives left one in 10 workers in insecure employment, including the better part of a million on zero-hours contracts.

The Conservatives’ cuts to social security pushed more families into poverty, which has resulted in 50% of children in my constituency living below the poverty line. That is every second kid—every second door when I walk around the estates that I have the honour to represent. Some 117,000 people are now living in temporary accommodation because of the money the Conservatives took out of the affordable housing building fund that today they seem so very pleased to speak in favour of.

Gregory Stafford: I just wondered if the hon. Lady had any views on stamp duty land tax.

Antonia Bance: I am speaking today about the other part of the motion before us—the part about the unspecified cuts that would pay for the tax cut—and the implications of that. As the hon. Gentleman would expect of a responsible member of my party, I am not going to speculate with plans about how we fund things for which there is no plan.

Going back to the record of austerity—remembering that austerity cost and took out of our economy less than the Conservatives propose taking out in their motion today—it left the bottom fifth of households £517 poorer, while the top fifth gained £174. Austerity did not just deepen inequality; it entrenched it. It led to

[*Antonia Bance*]

the longest pay squeeze in 200 years, with growth anaemic, productivity absolutely flatlined and public investment slashed.

My friends at the TUC have worked out—[*Interruption.*] Yes, they are my friends. I was proud to represent millions of working people. Conservative Members speak about those working people with disdain, but it was an honour to represent them in their workplace and negotiate for better wages on their behalf. Good Conservatives in the past used to understand social partnership and the importance of responsibility and working with workers and bosses to get the best outcome; it is a shame those lessons have been forgotten, with the baying calls of the mob at the mention of trade unions. My friends at the TUC have worked out that if wages had risen in the past decade by the amount by which they rose between 1997 and 2010, the average worker in my constituency would be £93 a week better off—that is nearly five grand a year more in people's pockets. Instead, we got the longest pay squeeze in 200 years.

Rebecca Smith: I am just perplexed as to where the hon. Lady is going with this. Ultimately, the statistics that she has just quoted would have saved her constituents £5,000, but if the Government do not scrap stamp duty, anybody who aspired to buy a slightly bigger house with that increased income would not be able to afford to do so.

Antonia Bance: To be clear, the point that I am making is about the unspecified cuts referenced in the motion. I am talking about the implications from the last time the Conservatives made cuts of that magnitude. While it may be the case that getting rid of stamp duty would save some money for people in my constituency, where there is an average house price of £190,000, it would by no means have the impact that it would for people in richer constituencies in other parts of the country. The cuts that the Conservatives intend to make to pay for it would, however, hit people in my ends.

Despite all the pain of those years of austerity, it failed to reduce public debt in any meaningful way. That is why our public services were on their knees and we face a mountain of debt that has built up over 14 long years.

Now compare that to our Labour Government, who are steadily and slowly delivering the change that this country needs. We are creating 5 million extra NHS appointments, and the number of people in my area waiting more than a year for the operation that they need is down 45%. Thanks to the investment from our Heath Secretary, crack teams are going into Dudley, Wolverhampton and Sandwell NHS trusts.

We secured three major trade deals in the first 10 months of our Government, and wages went up by more than they did in the first 10 years of the Conservative Government. We are putting in place funding for communities that are hit the hardest, such as Friar Park in my constituency, and £39 billion of affordable housing funding is going to fund new social and affordable homes—the largest amount in a generation. I hope that 600 of those will be in my constituency.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The hon. Lady referred to the trade deals—so many more than were achieved under the Conservative Government,

she says—but the reality is that those trade deals could not have been made had we not had the Brexit deal that we achieved when in government. What is more, the Labour party opposed that deal. We could not do those trade deals before 2016.

Antonia Bance: One of the key achievements in the first 15 months of this Labour Government has been that we are starting to fix some of the mess from the dreadful agreement that the Conservatives made with the European Union, which undermined this country. We are filling some of the holes, and making it easier to do trade with the European Union and sell brilliant British products abroad. I would have thought that would be something that the Conservatives would welcome.

In summation, we choose national renewal—a Britain built for everyone. We choose a fair economy that rewards working people, invests in our public services, restores dignity to work and rebuilds this brilliant country for every single one of our kids.

3.1 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Ask any economist, or indeed most Members in the Chamber today, and they would say that stamp duty is a bad tax. It creates friction in the market, whether we are talking about someone in a one-bedroom flat who is trying to take the step up to a family home, but who finds that their savings goal is now that much more, or whether we are talking about someone whose kids have flown the nest, and who is considering downsizing but finds the bill a disincentive.

It is important that we do not overstate what abolishing stamp duty will do. There have been lots of claims about how it will help millions of young people on to the ladder. For most people, this would not be the case. There is an exemption for first-time buyers of properties worth up to £300,000, and a further discount all the way up to half a million. It is important that we recognise that the proposal would not make a difference for huge numbers of people, including young people. I appreciate the points made about the fluidity of the market as well, but that is not the critical point.

The central problem in the housing market is the disparity between people's wages and house prices. People have said to me, "I had to save hard to get my home," and "You should have seen the interest rates back in the day." I have no doubt that it has always been hard and a struggle to save up to buy a property, but the extent to which it has become out of reach today is not properly understood. Around the time I was born—1990, if Members are interested—the difference between the average wage and the average house price was about three times a person's income, but today that average difference is eight times a person's income. I represent a London constituency, and for people in London, that difference is 15 times the average income. That means that people in the top 10% of earners in the capital cannot afford the average home. It is an absolute disgrace that we have allowed ourselves to get to this situation.

Blake Stephenson: The hon. Member is making a powerful point in support of our motion. Does he intend to support it this afternoon?

Bobby Dean: Surprise, surprise, I do not. I will come on to the reasons why.

Mortgage companies will lend around four times someone's income, so we can see how big the problem is. A couple may stand a chance of getting a mortgage; someone on their own has no chance. The other problem with house prices accelerating away from wages so much is that the 10% deposit that people often need to raise is completely out of reach. To put this in context, in 1990 the average wage was around £8,000 a year, and a person might have needed to save about £2,000 for a deposit. Today, a person on the average wage of £33,000 would have to try to save £28,000. People simply cannot do it unless they have the support of their mum or dad, or others in their family.

This is the death of meritocracy in our country. We now live in a society where a person's family wealth, not their work or talent, defines their future financial security. We are back to Victorian-era levels of social mobility. That is absolutely abhorrent, and no amount of tinkering around the edges is sufficient to fix it.

Scrapping stamp duty will not be a silver bullet. In fact, on its own, it might represent a bit of a giveaway to those who are already faring better than most in society. If we are serious about fixing the housing crisis in our country, we need a generational change in the level of house building, and a holistic approach to redesigning the property tax system.

Jack Rankin: I agree with the hon. Member wholeheartedly, and he is making an excellent speech, but I would gently say that lots of us in the shires who face Liberal Democrats in our constituencies get leaflets from his colleagues that oppose building almost anywhere, ever. What would he say about that to some of his colleagues?

Bobby Dean: I think the hon. Member will find that across the country there will be opposition politicians opposing developments. In Sutton council in my borough, where we are in control, we are outstripping all of London in house building, and I am very proud of that record.

In order to fix the housing crisis, we need sustained wage growth, so that wages come up against the increase in house prices. I do not hear that on offer from the Conservative party today. I am sorry to say that we have a Trussite proposal on the table: an unfunded tax cut that lacks real credibility.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the shadow Chancellor, he would have heard him say that half the £47 billion in savings will come from reducing welfare spend. Another significant proportion will come from reducing the civil service to the size it was back in 2016. The proposal is fully funded, and he does himself no favours by inventing other facts.

Bobby Dean: I thank the hon. Member for bringing me on to my next point early. I want to address this proposed £47 billion in public spending cuts. If the Conservatives were to hand over that proposal in its current form to the Office for Budget Responsibility, it would laugh them out of the front door. Those cuts are not credible at all. Over half of that figure is based on

welfare cuts—a welfare bill, by the way, that rose on the watch of the Conservative Government, not least because of the defunding of the NHS, which caused people to be in ill health in the first place.

The Conservatives are also talking about reducing the size of the civil service. Can any Member hazard a guess as to why the civil service has grown since 2016? It is because we have in-housed a lot of bureaucracy that we used to outsource to Brussels. One of the primary reasons why the civil service has grown is the number of services that we now have to deliver in this country.

Sir Ashley Fox: The hon. Gentleman has not mentioned covid, which is the largest single contributor to the increase in the size of the state. He also did not mention the £5 billion reduction in welfare spending proposed by the Government; the Conservative party supported that, but the Government just gave in on it. There is plenty of money to be saved.

Bobby Dean: When the hon. Gentleman refers to covid, I think he is referring to total debt, which has increased. We are talking specifically about why the civil service has increased in size. A lot of that can be attributed to the new functions that the UK Government have had to take on.

On the welfare budget, yes, the Government struggled to get through their welfare reforms, but so did the previous Conservative Government. That is why the proposal that half of the £47 billion will come from welfare cuts lacks credibility.

Daisy Cooper: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. It really does irk me that the Conservatives keep talking about the welfare bill going up when they blew a hole in the public health budget, eroded primary and community care, and did nothing to fix social care—and NHS dentistry has been hollowed out. Is it any wonder that when people cannot get the care that they need when they need it, we end up firefighting and spending loads of money on welfare and the NHS further down the line? We should be investing to save.

Bobby Dean: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I made the point earlier that the welfare bill went up on the Conservative Government's watch, not least because they cut back NHS funding.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Bobby Dean: I will make some progress; I have been intervened on quite a few times. In the Chamber, we may agree on the analysis of stamp duty's failings, but the Liberal Democrats cannot support the motion, because it is not a credible plan. Also, if a stamp duty cut were made in isolation, it might not deliver what Conservative Members say it would. It might just gum up the housing market further for the next generation.

It is high time that we had a serious debate about property tax reform. Some of that has happened in the Chamber today, but the motion does not reflect that serious debate, so I will not support it.

3.10 pm

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to speak in the debate. In a spirit of cross-party unity, I congratulate His Majesty's Opposition on their valiant and brave attempts to dress up a political tax cut as a meaningful intervention in the housing market. I have been looking at every single Conservative Member who has spoken and thinking about whether they really believe that such a tax cut would actually make a difference.

Bradley Thomas: Will the hon. Member give way?

Rachel Blake: I would like to develop my argument a little bit further, and then I look forward to hearing from the hon. Member. I read the Opposition's proposals with interest, and have been looking to see exactly how they intend to fund their proposed tax cut. I am struck by the fact that the Conservatives want to bring forward even more unfunded proposals. They are not satisfied with their devastation of public services after their attempts at austerity; with crashing the economy, driving up mortgage costs and rents, and driving down the supply of new homes and overall rates of home ownership; or with their botched Brexit deal, which, through its impact on the economy, has wrecked many people's chance to buy a home. No, they propose yet more ill-thought-through tax cuts.

In the likely event that the Opposition's ill-thought-through proposals for funding this tax cut are undeliverable, I wonder whether they would cut £14 billion from Labour's £39 billion investment in genuinely affordable homes. Would they cut £14 billion from the £23 billion that the Government invested in the National Wealth Fund to get our economy going? Would they take money out of our £3.8 billion homelessness fund? The truth is that the Conservative Government's interventions in the housing market resulted in temporary accommodation use, rough sleeping, mortgage rates and rents going up, and home ownership going down. The Tories pretend to be the party of home ownership, but it is Labour that is absolutely determined to get homes built. It is Labour that is coming forward with proposals to get homes built, and Labour, I believe, that will deliver on that.

Bradley Thomas: Does the hon. Member accept that over the last 30 years, the four years with the highest levels of new housing delivery occurred since 2018, under Conservative Governments? She is trying to make the point that stamp duty abolition is a tax cut dressed up as an intervention in the housing market. What on earth is wrong with giving a tax cut to aspirational people who work hard and want to move up the housing ladder?

Rachel Blake: For the last two hours, the proposal has been presented by Opposition Members as a meaningful housing market intervention because of their supposed commitment to aspiration. The Labour party has always been the party of aspiration, and it has been the driving force behind social mobility throughout the last century. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members know that, and that is why they are chuntering so much.

Rachel Gilmour: I wanted to speak earlier on social mobility, which the hon. Lady mentioned. If anybody wants to see what happens to social mobility under the Conservatives, all they need do is come to Minehead in

my constituency, which is ranked 324th out of 324 for social mobility in the entire country, having had a Conservative Member of Parliament for 23 years who did nothing.

Rachel Blake: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, which speaks for itself.

There is a stark contrast with what the Labour Government are doing, and their meaningful interventions in the housing market. The Renters Rights Act 2025, which has received Royal Assent, is stabilising life for renters, making sure that they no longer live in fear of no-fault evictions. We have also defeated a judicial review against vested interests and freeholders, so that we can move forward with our leasehold proposals. Those are both significant interventions that the Opposition failed to deliver after 14 years, five of which they spent trying to deliver reform for renters and leaseholders that would have meaningfully stabilised the housing market. We have not heard anything about all the people stuck in their homes because of the last Government's complete failure to tackle the cladding crisis or leasehold. We have just had political dressing-up of an unfunded proposed tax cut.

The other thing that the Labour Government have done is made sure that we are stabilising the economy. As the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) told us, people who want to save up to join the housing market need a stable economy. We have seen interest rates come down five times, which we think is saving mortgage payers about £100 a month. They are better off because of the stability that our Chancellor and this Labour Government are beginning to deliver.

Gregory Stafford: The hon. Lady is being generous with interventions; I thank her for that. To bring her back to stamp duty land tax, the average house price in her constituency is over £1 million. *[Interruption.]* I have not quite finished. Her constituents are the precise people who would benefit from this saving. Does she not think that they would welcome the abolition of this tax?

Rachel Blake: I am interested in how much the hon. Member knows about my constituency. He may know that nearly half of my constituents are private renters, and only about 15% can afford to own their own home in my constituency because of the record failures of the previous Government to do something about the cladding crisis, the supply of new genuinely affordable homes and the delivery of low-cost home ownership, which would have really made a difference. Rather than the Conservatives' ill-thought-through proposals, Westminster city council under its Labour leadership is able to deliver more genuinely affordable homes, and this Labour Government are taking the challenge seriously.

We have seen His Majesty's Opposition make a valiant attempt to dress up a politically motivated tax cut as a meaningful housing intervention. Serious thinking, this is not. I am pleased that the House will vote against their ill-thought-through proposal and that we will carry on with delivering meaningful intervention in the housing market and making sure that our publicly funded services are stable into the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Rebecca Paul.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

3.17 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I thank my colleagues for their enthusiasm. It is a great pleasure to contribute to this really important debate. So many people—particularly young people—are desperate to get their foot on the housing ladder, but they feel—

Rachel Blake: Will the hon. Member give way?

Rebecca Paul: I gently say to the hon. Member that I have not really got into the flow of my speech yet, either. I will finish the first sentence before I take any interventions. People feel that that vital first rung is utterly out of their reach.

I remember when I bought my first property. It was the most amazing feeling in the world when I first walked through that door, with those keys. It was really hard to earn enough to secure the mortgage that I needed and to save up the money for the stamp duty and the deposit. I managed to do it, but I would have been able to do it sooner without that stamp duty cost. That is why I am delighted that the Conservatives have come forward with a clear, coherent and aspirational plan to abolish stamp duty land tax on the purchase of primary residences and to open up the dream of home ownership to the next generation.

Rebecca Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree that when the policy was announced at our party conference in October, it was the first solid political idea to have come forward from any political party since the last election that genuinely offers aspiration for hard-working families? We are talking about not just hard-working families who need to get on the housing ladder in the first place, but those in constituencies like hers and mine who are desperate to expand their families and continue contributing to the society we all live in.

Rebecca Paul: I thank my hon. Friend for that pertinent point. This is proper Conservative policy. This is the kind of thing everyone in this country is clamouring for—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] This party is delivering that under our new leadership. For too long, stamp duty has been a dead weight on the housing market, a tax on aspiration and a barrier to the kind of home ownership that gives people a genuine stake in their community. It is time that we abolished it on primary residences.

Surely we can all agree that our housing market is not working as it should. Far too many young people feel locked out, priced out and increasingly disillusioned. The average age of a first-time buyer in England is now 34, up by nearly a decade from where it was 40 years ago. In London, it is even higher, and across the country 20% fewer 25 to 34-year-olds own a home today than was the case in 2000.

I have skin in the game: I have three children and I want them to be able to buy a house without coming to mummy and daddy to help them out.

Jack Rankin: I bet my hon. Friend does—she should declare an interest!

Rebecca Paul: Yes, I should declare that interest.

This amounts to an economic failure, but also to a social failure. Home ownership gives people stability, autonomy and long-term security. It encourages saving, it strengthens families and it fosters pride and a sense of genuine community in our towns and villages. Abolishing stamp duty will save families thousands of pounds and put the many benefits of home ownership back into reach for the next generation.

Sir Ashley Fox: Does my hon. Friend agree that cutting stamp duty will not only benefit young people aspiring to home ownership, but act as an incentive for older people to downsize, freeing up larger family homes and making them available for families that need to increase the size of the house they own?

Rebecca Paul: I will make that exact same point later in my speech, and I completely agree that that is a relevant change that will come from this policy.

I clearly see in my constituency the way in which stamp duty chokes and distorts the market as it penalises those who move, creates a disincentive for older people to downsize and deters growing families from upsizing into more suitable family homes. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has put it, in a crowded field, stamp duty land tax is

“the most economically damaging tax in the UK.”

I cannot disagree with that.

My constituents feel that acutely. Stamp duty is all the more painful in an area where the average house price is now above £490,000. The young families I speak to, who have made the move out of London and settled in towns such as Redhill or Reigate, have been hit with eye-watering up-front costs that made those moves extremely challenging. Many more will have found it impossible. That is why our policy matters.

We intend to strip away one of the fundamental barriers to family life in this country. Eliminating stamp duty will save the average first-time buyer in the south-east around £4,000 and as much as £18,000 in London. Unlike the Labour party, we will not punish those looking to move further up the ladder with frozen thresholds and stealth tax hikes.

I would, of course, be expected to paint a suitably positive view of the proposal, but what do the experts think? Zoopla’s Richard Donnell has rightly said,

“More home moves would support economic growth and the ambition to build more homes.”

The Institute of Economic Affairs went further, calling this

“the single best reform any government could make to Britain’s tax system.”

Indeed, the case seems so strong that one has to wonder why the Government oppose us on this.

The truth is that Labour has always been the party of higher taxes on homes. It reversed the Conservative policy that raised the first-time buyer threshold to £425,000. It is freezing stamp duty thresholds in real terms, dragging more and more people into paying this punitive tax each year. While it talks endlessly about house building, its actions tell a different story. Not only is it on track to miss its self-imposed housing targets, but the Housing Secretary tried to block 237 new homes in his constituency

[Rebecca Paul]

despite promising to “build, baby, build”. By contrast, the Conservatives have delivered 2.8 million homes over the past 14 years, including nearly 750,000 affordable homes, and we pledge to go further.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I represent a rural constituency where young people are constantly forced to move away from the villages they grew up in. Will the hon. Lady explain to me where in rural Britain those affordable homes were located, where young people could move to and make a family life? For 14 years, they were shut out of the communities they grew up in.

Rebecca Paul: The hon. Member raises an important point. We have this situation where a lot of young people are forced to go elsewhere; indeed, the area where I live is very expensive and I am worried that my children will be forced to look elsewhere. That is why it is so important that we now focus on the future.

Gregory Stafford: Is that not the fundamental point, and why the comments made earlier about downsizing are so important? This tax stops people downsizing, which means that people are not moving out and not freeing up the houses that young people could and should be moving into.

Rebecca Paul: My hon. Friend makes the point very well. Going back to the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), we need to take this seriously. We can either look back the whole time, or we can look forward and think about what policies are right for the people of this country and deliver for the people of this country.

Mr Snowden: That point shows the complexity of the issue. Painting it with “14 years this” and “14 years that” does not represent what is happening. In Fylde, we have seen the largest amount of house building taking place in the villages and small towns, because developers know that they can get planning permission there and sell the houses for a lot more than they could 5 or 10 miles in a different direction. In some areas, there has been significant overdevelopment on the green belt, and we should not use individual examples as a reason to redefine vast chunks of the green belt as grey belt simply in order to concrete over our countryside.

Rebecca Paul: My hon. Friend’s excellent point is pertinent to my constituency as well, which is full of amazing and beautiful green-belt land. We are suffering from what this Government have done on housing targets, which have doubled in Reigate and Banstead while going down in London. That means that we are building more homes, but not for local people and not for the children the hon. Member for Hexham mentioned, who want to stay close to home. It is for people living in London who then move out to Reigate and Banstead.

Sir Ashley Fox: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that in the south-west of England, the Government have reduced the building target for Bristol city council, which has a lot of Labour members, and have instead increased the building target for rural Somerset, where

there are few Labour members, by 40%? Does she share my concern that Labour is fiddling the housing targets for political advantage?

Rebecca Paul: I thank my hon. Friend for yet another relevant and important point. I urge the Government to think logically about what they are trying to achieve. We all support the ambition to build more homes and recognise the problem that needs to be solved. However, the way we do it is really important, and it is important that we have those homes in the right places and that we set the targets in a logical and meaningful way. With this policy, and others like it, we are offering the public a clear choice between a party that wants to unlock aspiration and reward the hard work of our young people and a party that clings to economically damaging taxes because its own Back Benchers refuse to make even the smallest concessions on out-of-control spending.

We on the Conservative Benches are clear that any significant change to tax policy must be properly costed. The public finances are in a challenging place, and reckless commitments only add to the prevailing sense of uncertainty. That is why it is so important to emphasise that our intention to scrap stamp duty on primary residences is costed, fully funded and fully paid for through our £47 billion savings package. Our plan is clear: it is costed and it is rooted in a belief that home ownership should be within reach of the next generation, just as it was for our own.

3.28 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): This debate captures the key difference between Conservatives and the Labour party, because we on the Conservative Benches believe in people. We believe in their talent, their drive, their hopes and their aspirations. By contrast, the Labour party likes to box people in, to restrict, to regulate and to let the state determine every aspect of their lives. We on this side of the House believe in setting people free to work hard, to achieve and to build their own future. Let us unleash the power of individual freedom. Let us unleash the energy of the maker and of enterprise. Above all, let us unleash the unstoppable force of aspiration across every part of the UK. The word “aspiration” runs through the very DNA of the Conservative party. It is who we are, from delivering educational reforms and promoting social mobility to delivering a property-owning democracy.

Rachel Blake: I would be grateful if the hon. Member would expand on how that driving value of aspiration came into the Conservative Government when they were completely failing to address the urgent need for leasehold reform over the past five years, when so many people have been suffering and unable to sell their leasehold homes because of the cladding on those homes. Where was the aspiration then?

Mr Bedford: I will give the hon. Member an example of Conservative aspiration. My family never owned their own homes—my grandparents did not own their own home—but Margaret Thatcher gave them the opportunity to do so. She gave many people like my grandparents the opportunity to aspire, to achieve and to own their own homes. That is the aspiration we need

to get back to as a country. Every generation of Conservatives has understood this ambition. It is not our background that shapes our future. This is equality of opportunity in action, not the equality of outcome that the Labour party desire so much.

We cannot talk about aspiration without celebrating the Prime Minister who understood it best. Mrs Thatcher gave people the freedom to own their own future. She rewarded hard work through lower taxes, turned millions of people into shareholders through privatisation and made dreams of home ownership a reality for many across the country with her right-to-buy scheme. Mrs Thatcher just got it; she understood human nature. She understood that people are ambitious and she knew that when we trust individuals and not the state, Britain succeeds.

Mr Snowden: Going back to what a former fantastic, great Prime Minister did—and comparing it with the policy on stamp duty—we know that it was hated by Labour Members, because it took away the choking role of the state and freed people up to have that aspiration and that social mobility. It proved that allowing people to buy their own homes and removing the state from their lives created social mobility in the same way that removing that tax and allowing people the aspiration to smash those ceilings is important. Labour Members hate it because it would reduce the size of the state, the dependency on the state and the hold that they have over people's lives.

Mr Bedford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Unfortunately, Labour Members tend to have the mantra: what I cannot have, you shall not have. We on the Conservative Benches want everyone to succeed.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I am still smarting from my hon. Friend's reluctance to squash the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), who alleged that there had been no leasehold reform. Such was the extent of leasehold reform under Conservative Governments that the Duke of Westminster resigned from the party in indignation.

Mr Bedford: I thank my right hon. Friend for putting that on record.

I am not confident that this Labour Government understand aspiration, because they simply cannot comprehend the politics of people wanting to better themselves, their families and their communities. Sadly, they actually fear aspiration, and that is why this Labour Government are the most anti-aspirational Government in living memory. They have strangled the jobs market and they have sent unemployment rates soaring. That is the direct result of their punishing employer national insurance hikes, and their reckless unemployment rights Bill is striking fear into businesses up and down the country as they question whether to take a punt on recruiting new people, particularly young people.

The Government have caved in to the hard left on much-needed reforms to the welfare system—a system that should reward hard work and not entrench state dependency. As is always the case with a Labour Government, they invariably side with the shirkers and not with the strivers. Sadly, they have driven our economy into a full-blown doom loop: a cycle of ever-increasing

taxes, rising inflation and net zero growth. Every hard-working family in Mid Leicestershire is paying the price for this Government's failure, but what is most damaging of all is not the economic damage; it is the lack of a can-do attitude that they are instilling in our young people.

Gregory Stafford: What has surprised me about this debate is that several Labour Members have seemed to agree that this stamp duty proposal would be a good thing to do, and, as far as I can tell, every commentator on the property market and economics has said the same thing, and yet the Government just do not seem to want to do it.

Mr Bedford: My hon. Friend puts the case very clearly, and he is absolutely right. Labour Members talk about intergenerational unfairness, but they do nothing about it. We Conservatives believe in encouraging young people to determine their own futures.

Rebecca Smith: My hon. Friend speaks of intergenerational fairness. Does he agree that the status quo hinders older householders who may be asset-rich and cash-poor, because the value of their property has increased—fortunately for them—but not necessarily their income? Stopping this policy in its tracks would stop older people who may be desperate to downsize, knowing that to do so would be to play their part in providing homes for other families, but who simply cannot afford to because the stamp duty on more expensive properties is unpayable.

Mr Bedford: I thank my hon. Friend for making an excellent point. Many people come to my surgeries and make that point month in, month out.

That is why this Conservative motion matters. By abolishing stamp duty, we would be empowering young people to aspire to own their own homes and invest in their own futures. That is what a responsible Government do, giving people the tools to achieve their ambitions. This policy will not only transform lives, but boost the economy, stimulate growth in the property market and add an incredible £17 billion to our GDP over 10 years. We saw the results when the last Conservative Government cut stamp duty in 2021. People took the opportunity to invest in their own futures.

This is the Conservative way: lower taxes, greater ownership and rediscovered aspiration. I will be voting for this aspirational motion tabled by the Leader of the Opposition, who understands that it is not just a question of economics, but a question of values. We should choose freedom over control, ambition over dependency and aspiration over stagnation. That is the Conservative vision for Britain, and it is one that I know my constituents in Mid Leicestershire—particularly the young people—will get behind.

3.37 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Access to home ownership has never been harder. Fewer and fewer people can afford to buy a home of their own, and 12,000 households in my county of Somerset are languishing on the waiting list unable to get a home at a decent rent. We have heard a lot about Mrs Thatcher, but since the sell-off of council houses began, 2.3 million were never replaced. The Conservatives broke that promise

[Gideon Amos]

over and over again, so although our population has increased by five times that amount, we have had a massive loss of homes for social and council rent; several Conservative Governments never replaced them.

By taxing transactions, stamp duty land tax is unfair on buyers. It needs to be reformed, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) has said, as part of a full review of property taxes. The vast majority of first-time buyers would be completely unaffected by the Opposition's proposals, because they already pay no stamp duty land tax. It seems clear that, by triggering a big increase in house prices, the policy would mostly benefit those who are selling homes at high prices, and probably only those right at the beginning of the chain.

More importantly, wiping out tax revenue without wider tax reform or any serious proposals for the resulting massive hole in public finances would be another Liz Truss Budget in the making. Perhaps she planted the magic money tree, but this autumn we are seeing the fruits of it in more mad Conservative tax proposals. It seems clear that the Conservatives have learned nothing from the Truss Budget's rocketing of inflation and increasing of mortgage rates, which affected everyone in my constituency.

Mr Snowden: The interest rates on the bond market are now higher than they were after that mini-Budget. Constantly harking back to that, when we are in a worse position now than we were then, makes the point that the Lib Dems are on everybody's and nobody's side.

Gideon Amos: I understand why Conservative Members keep asking us to look forward not backwards: their own Government's experience with the Truss Budget is one that they do not want to remember and would like to forget, but unfortunately its effects were long, far-reaching and serious for all of our constituents.

Adam Jodge (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I followed him when I gave my maiden speech and it is good to see him in his place. Does it not say everything that Conservative Members are now defending the Truss Budget and all the damage that it did to communities like mine and his?

Gideon Amos: Absolutely. They have no recollection of the past, they are blind to the experience of their own Government, and they are only asking, urging and pleading us to look forward, not back at their own record.

In Taunton and Wellington, there are countless examples of folk who are unable to afford a home of their own. Rosanna, a qualified solicitor, has been living with her parents for over six years because she is unable to afford a new home. What is needed is a far bigger focus on building the council and social rent homes that are needed by our country. The Liberal Democrats propose to raise the number from the Government's target of 20,000 per year to 150,000 per year. There should be less reliance on a few big house builder developers, whose interest, perfectly reasonably, is in increasing profits and the value of their land, rather

than in making their products cheaper—why would they?—or in necessarily increasing the amount of housing supply.

Less reliance on the big developers and more council and social rent homes delivered by public funding would mean that there would be no need for the Government to cut the affordable housing requirements in London, as they did last week. Our manifesto provided £6 billion a year over five years to begin to achieve not just the 90,000 social rent homes that Shelter and the National Housing Federation say that we need, but our manifesto target of 150,000 homes. A decent home should not be for just the most vulnerable and excluded; all working people should be able to have a home with a decent rent. Coupled with that, we need new routes to be available for people to get on to the home ownership ladder and a new generation of rent-to-own homes, where renters can gain ownership over 30 years.

Rebecca Smith: The hon. Member is making a powerful speech, as he always does. However, there is a gaping hole in his argument when it comes to people who are looking not for their first home, but for a bigger home, which may be a new property or a property that already exists. What would he say to his Taunton constituents who are in that middle bracket, given that he will be voting not to scrap stamp duty? That land tax will hinder them from taking a step up the ladder, whether by buying one of the many new homes that he admirably wants delivered in his constituency or by buying a home that already exists.

Gideon Amos: I would point my constituents to the comments made by Lucian Cook, the head of research at Savills, who has said that the proposed SDLT giveaway would simply pass straight into house prices. It would have very little, if any, effect on people's ability to buy homes, whether they are downsizing or not.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. I may have misheard, so will he clarify for the benefit of the House? At the beginning of his remarks, I thought that he said that this was a very bad tax and that it was harmful, but then, as only a Lib Dem could, he proceeded to argue strongly in its favour. Will he help me out, because I am not following the line of his argument?

Gideon Amos: The right hon. Member, for whom I usually have respect, was clearly not listening to what I said. It is possible for there to be several features to a change in tax policy. Our argument, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans pointed out, is that we need a comprehensive review of property taxes. The effect of the stamp duty holiday was to increase house prices. It may, none the less, be a valuable policy, because it may free up transactions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) argued. My observation is that these are not the policies that will help people who are struggling to afford a home to rent and to get on the housing ladder in the first place. They may be valuable for other reasons, but they will not address that problem. As I say, coupled with that we need a big investment in rent-to-own housing. Since 2015—this is the big point, which would be unaffected by the Conservative proposal—the multiple of income

needed to get a mortgage, as my hon. Friends have pointed out, has risen from four-and-a-half to six-and-a-half times their income.

Without more genuinely affordable homes in significant numbers and wider tax reform, this cut is unfunded. It will leave first-time buyers with nothing new and transfer funds to the wealthiest. That is simply not enough to help my constituents. We need a much more ambitious renaissance in the building of council and social rent homes, and we need new measures to help people to get on to the housing ladder.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I am glad that my hon. Friend is calling out the consequence of Thatcherite policies. Does he agree that no country has suffered more from Thatcherite policies than Wales?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion of his constituency in Wales and has experienced the effects of the reduction in and dwindling of council and social rent homes around the country in Wales, as in other parts of the country, including in my own constituency. We used to have 30,000 council homes available, but we now have only 6,000, and that number is going down every year.

This is not about the broken promise not to allow people to buy their homes; it is about the broken promise of not replacing those council and social rent homes. That has to be addressed, and it was never addressed by multiple Conservative Governments. Without those changes and wider tax reform and investment in social and council rent homes, this policy on its own would do nothing to help my constituents, and I am unable to support it.

3.46 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): In preparing for this debate, I was thinking about my history when it comes to stamp duty. I recall quite vividly going to see a mortgage broker on Dedworth Road in Windsor—I am not quite sure what year it was; perhaps I was in my late 20s. I had been quite dutifully saving for some years in order to achieve my aspiration, which a lot of young people have, to get a foot on the property ladder. I remember that I dutifully took my payslips and bank statements, and the mortgage broker turned to me and laughed. He said, “Congratulations on saving that, Mr Rankin. You have now saved the stamp duty; we just have to save up for a deposit.” It was a joke, but it was kind of true.

There has been lots of criticism of our record, but one of the things we Conservatives did in office that I was most heartened by was removing first-time buyers from stamp duty. That was incredibly powerful for young people in this country.

I might have to declare an interest that is not just historical. I am a father with a young family—we have two boys under the age of four. Housing is incredibly expensive in my constituency, with the average house costing around £750,000. We are considering a third child, and just like families up and down the country we are discussing what that means. The particular limiting decision for my family, despite us wanting a third child, is housing. We live in a wonderful home in the village of Sunninghill that is probably okay for three babes and

tots, but it would not be okay for a growing family. That is the kind of decision that is being made up and down this country.

One of the things that has made me proud this afternoon to sit on the Conservative Benches was listening to some Labour Members, because from some there has been a sneering assumption that stamp duty is a tax for the rich. When I think about myself and many young people in their early 20s trying to put together their stamp duty, I do not think that is a tax cut for the rich. When I think about families trying to get another bedroom in order to grow their families, I do not think that is a tax cut for the rich. That is not going into any of the other dynamic effects at all. I am proud that on the Conservative Benches, we stand up for aspirational people.

If we think about the crowded field of all the taxes we might want to cut, to my mind stamp duty is where we might start. We have heard from many Members who have quoted distinguished economists—much more distinguished than anything I might come out with—but it is clear that stamp duty is one of those taxes that destroys almost as much wealth as it raises. It is anti-growth, anti-ambition and anti-free market, and as I have already articulated, I think it is anti-family. It is a significant part of the reason why this country has such a lethargic housing market.

This is all despite the fact that home ownership is not only key to our prosperity; perhaps even more so, it is important to people's pride and the security of millions of families around this country. It is the foundation of this great property-owning democracy, but as a nation, we are not in a great state when it comes to housing. For my generation and the generation behind me, home ownership sometimes looks quite impossible. To fix this, our focus must be on supply, supply, supply, but we also need a market that flows freely. Frankly, today's housing market is gummed up.

Sir Ashley Fox: Is my hon. Friend aware that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), used to be part of the Resolution Foundation—that well-known right-wing think tank—which itself has called for the abolition of stamp duty to free up the housing market in the way my hon. Friend is describing?

Jack Rankin: I would say that I hope the hon. Member in question is closer to this Budget, but having listened to some of his other utterances, perhaps most of us on the Conservative Benches would not hope for that. Never mind!

The main criticism we have heard from Government Members, which is a fair criticism, is that of cost. There has been some constructive criticism from Labour Members who have agreed that stamp duty is a bad tax, but have then said that cost is the problem. They should be a little bit self-aware about that, because one of the reasons we are in such a fiscally precarious place is that some of the decisions the Government made in their previous Budget have put us in something of a fiscal doom loop, which we do not seem to have any chance of escaping.

Mr Snowden: While we are on the subject of paying for things and ownership of land—trying to find the funds to abolish a tax and allow our citizens to purchase

[Mr Snowden]

their own home—one obvious solution would be to not give away territory that we already own and pay £36 billion over the lifetime of the deal to do so. One way of paying for this policy that my hon. Friend might suggest to Labour Members is to avoid paying to give away our own land, taking money off our citizens who want to buy their own land.

Jack Rankin: My hon. Friend is quite right. Although we are at risk of picking apart the Budget in its entirety, I would suggest that giving away our sovereign land and paying for the privilege might not be a great thing to do at any time, but particularly in a fiscally constrained environment.

Despite having to have a reasonable answer on the question of cost, which I will get to later in my remarks, Conservative Members should not be shy when it comes to talking about some of the other positive fiscal benefits that abolishing stamp duty would yield. One area in which we Conservatives have not done as well as we could is that of making the positive, dynamic argument for some tax cuts, because every move in the housing market engages a raft of removers, decorators, window cleaners, gardeners, plumbers and electricians. Do those sound like the kind of people who could be described as “the rich”, as we have heard from Labour Members? These are real working people with decent jobs, generating income for the Exchequer through VAT, income tax and national insurance, and we should not be shy about saying that. If we are lucky, abolishing stamp duty might also lead to a reduction in welfare spending through job creation.

There are also gains that cannot be recorded in a spreadsheet. Those include families such as mine moving into homes that are the right size for them, and pensioners rightsizing—some people have used downsizing, but I think rightsizing is the better word—to be closer to their grandchildren, which might provide childcare support for young families. They also include economic and social mobility, such as taking a promotion in a new area. Those things might not show up on a Treasury balance sheet, but they are really important things for our society. Cutting stamp duty would generate extra revenue for the Treasury in myriad ways that we should be happy to talk about.

That said, as a credible Opposition, we still need to cost this policy. That is why, as we have heard already in this debate, the Conservative party has found £47 billion of savings, all while being able to honour our golden economic rule. That economic rule says that the majority of public sector spending reductions that we identify must go on deficit reduction.

As a policy, the abolition of stamp duty aligns with many of the principles that those of us on the Opposition Benches hold dear to our hearts. It rewards ambition, it unlocks free markets, and it lowers the tax burden on families. Labour will not make any difference on housing because it is just too conflicted. Fixing the housing market needs holistic solutions. We cannot talk about improving the housing market with the levels of migration that we currently have. We cannot talk about improving the housing market while overseeing record low house building numbers in London, as our developers are strangled in regulation. We need a holistic solution. We

need to abolish stamp duty. We need to end mass migration. We need, I am afraid to say, to deport hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants.

I look forward to seeing more ambition from the Opposition on reforming our planning system. That is part of a vision for my party, and I am proud to be a part of it. However, it is not a new vision. Home ownership and supply-side reforms have been at the centre of the Conservative vision throughout our storied history, whether that is Stanley Baldwin, Harold Macmillan or Mrs Thatcher. It is a moral mission to support young aspirant people through these important gateways of life. Buying your own home and starting a family—these are the building blocks of all our communities. Abolishing stamp duty in this costed way will give people the keys to their own futures and secure the future of this country.

3.56 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): All of us here want to improve the lives of our constituents, though we often differ in how we might achieve that. As a Conservative, I believe we do so by working with the grain of human nature, by allowing people the maximum amount of liberty to live their lives, by supporting families, by rewarding hard work, rather than penalising it, and by incentivising entrepreneurship and the creation of wealth. As legislators, we do that by keeping the size of the state under control, keeping borrowing low and reducing the burden on taxpayers wherever possible.

It is with regret that I see this current Labour Government increasing taxes, increasing borrowing, increasing the deficit and our national debt, and increasing the interest we pay on that debt. It saddens me that we have a Government whose answer, whatever the question, always seems to be more public expenditure. I am pleased therefore that not only will the Conservative party reduce taxes when we form the next Government, but will scrap one altogether.

Stamp duty is a bad tax. The current stamp duty regime means that anyone seeking to buy their first home or to move house faces an additional burden at one of the most important moments in their lives. By eliminating this tax on main homes, the Conservatives would be removing a financial barrier, which for many first-time buyers or young families makes the difference between owning their first home or not. My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) alluded to that in his excellent speech. It would mean the dream of home ownership was made more accessible.

While stamp duty has been around since 1694, the current regime was introduced by Gordon Brown in 2003. When it came into effect, it charged a fixed percentage rate depending on the value of a house—the so-called slab system. It meant that when the price went from £250,000 to £250,001, people faced an enormous increase in the tax paid. The coalition Government, to their credit, reformed the tax so as to remove the tax from those purchasing a property for under £125,000. They eliminated the slabs in the model with a slice model. That made the tax better, but the core problems remain. Stamp duty makes it harder to purchase a house. It dissuades people from upsizing or downsizing, and therefore prevents a host of other economic activities associated with moving house. A vibrant housing market is vital to economic health. When more people buy and

move, transactions increase, new homes are built, tradespeople are employed, and local economies benefit. The tax on each move discourages those transactions. People stay put because of the cost of moving, and that can lead to the housing market locking up. Scrapping stamp duty on primary homes will free up the market. That will have benefits not just for buyers and sellers, but for builders, developers, local services, and the whole national economy.

There is a fairness argument, too. Buying a home is one of the largest investments that most people will ever make, and to tax that moment seems not just counterintuitive but perverse. Removing the tax on a main residence signals a commitment to giving people a chance to grow, to aspire and to build their lives. Those are Conservative principles, and the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in Manchester recognised that. I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend that this change will create

“a fairer and more aspirational society.”

Dr Evans: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that when supply is tight, if we allow people to move more easily, the right people will be in the homes that are right for their time of life? An elderly couple in a five-bedroom house will make the choice to downsize, while a family can upsize to the right house. When supply is tight, that fits much better for us as a society.

Sir Ashley Fox: My hon. Friend has made a valuable point. This tax cut benefits not just the first-time buyer, but the family moving into a larger home and the empty nesters—I am almost one—seeking to move into a smaller house.

Graham Stuart: May I take up my hon. Friend's point about the dynamic market that we need? People in south-east England may be thinking of moving to, for instance, Beverley and Holderness to take up a job, but may be put off by the costs involved, and the risk that they are taking in moving to an area where there may be only that one job for them, and no other jobs to compete with it. So they do not make that move, and we do not benefit from their input into a business in Beverley and Holderness, purely because of the dampening effects of this tax. They stay in the south-east, although they, the country and Beverley and Holderness would be better off if only they were incentivised to move and take a chance.

Sir Ashley Fox: That is another valuable point. This tax cut benefits not just the housing market but the jobs market, and therefore the whole economy. Our politics ought to empower people, not load them with additional burdens. This is an important measure for young people, because, as we acknowledge, they face higher costs and more competition for housing than their parents did.

To be credible, we must explain how we will pay for this measure. That is a valid question, and, unlike some parties in this place, we will not make promises without a plan for delivery. The measure is possible as part of a wider package of economic reform, spending discipline and growth creation. The Government were elected on a policy of “going for growth”, yet everything that they do seems designed to bring about the opposite. A jobs

tax makes it more expensive to employ people; higher business rates make it more expensive to conduct business in a property; the changes in agricultural and business property relief—increasing inheritance tax—reduce investment by family businesses; and the Employment Rights Bill makes it more expensive, time-consuming and difficult to employ people. The Government have turned on the spending taps and levied record levels of tax, while at the same time implementing measures that increase unemployment and make Britain less competitive. Every Labour Government has led to higher unemployment, and it is deeply regrettable that in every month since the general election, unemployment has risen. I do not think that the Government are malevolent; they simply have no clue about how business works.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Conservative party's position on the green economy is now to remove some of the support for it. Figures show that the green economy is growing by around 10%; it is fuelling job creation and often provides better-paid jobs. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that it is in the economy's interests to cut the legs out from underneath the green economy?

Sir Ashley Fox: Well, I am amazed to hear that the real economy is growing by 10%. That must be a forecaster I have not heard of! We believe it is possible to cut welfare spending. In fact, a few months ago, the hon. Gentleman's party believed it was possible. The Government put forward a modest proposal to reduce welfare spending by £5 billion, which had our support, yet, unfortunately, at the first whiff of rebellion, the Chancellor caved. That shows that the Government have no idea how finance works, how business works or how confidence works. They undermined their credibility by being unable to undertake even the smallest reform.

We can announce the abolition of stamp duty because we have promised to put Britain on a different track. Our golden rule means that, for every pound we make in savings, half will go on reducing the deficit and paying down our debts. We will reduce spending by £47 billion a year, and have announced plans to do so. About half of that will come from cutting the welfare bill, including stopping the ballooning bill for Motability cars for those with mild mental health issues. Some £8 billion of savings will come from reducing the civil service to the size it was before the pandemic. We will save money by closing asylum hotels, reserving other benefits to UK nationals, and coming to a more credible position on net zero.

By taking those tough choices, we can cut taxes and help the economy. We estimate that abolishing stamp duty will cost £9 billion, which is set against the savings we have outlined. By pledging to remove it, we are signalling that we believe in growth, in enterprise and in enabling every citizen to build their future.

4.7 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on this important topic, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is one that I am passionate about. I got involved in politics to make people's lives better, and to be on the side of those who work hard, do the right thing and aspire for themselves and their family. That is the fundamental point at the core of this argument.

[Bradley Thomas]

My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) made a great point when he said that this is a moral mission. It is a moral mission to be on the side of those who are aspirational, and to unlock the hopes and dreams of a generation who want a tangible stake in society but have great fears that they will never have it. Stamp duty, for many, is a tax on that dream home, on that bridge between where they are today and where they want to go tomorrow, particularly for their family.

We have heard a lot in this debate about first-time buyers, and it is right that we focus on them; it is particularly shameful that one of the first acts of this Labour Government was to lower the threshold at which stamp duty was imposed on those first-time buyers. But once a first-time buyer has been in their home for a few years and had a child, and maybe a second, and wants to move up the property ladder into a house that will better meet their needs, that is when this tax really starts to bite. Constituents have approached me to say that they are able to afford a mortgage on their next home, and have even identified one that they want to move into, but the stamp duty prevents them from moving.

What strikes me about this argument between the two sides of the House—and, in fact, between Opposition parties as well—is that many make the case that if we removed stamp duty, it would cause house prices to rise. If it was removed as a temporary measure, there would be a chance of that happening, but if it was removed in perpetuity, the housing market would regularise without a huge increase in prices. That is the key to unlocking the aspiration that so many have for themselves and their family.

I do not believe that Labour Members have particularly nefarious intent; I can only conclude that their position really does demonstrate the politics of envy. It is a fact of life that some in society will always have more wealth than others—the scale is always relative—but even if those at the upper end of the wealth scale benefit from the abolition of stamp duty, those further down the chain will also benefit. The great reality of this proposal is that it is universal in its application, so everyone will benefit.

This is fundamentally about unlocking mobility and the aspirations of so many. It applies not just to first-time buyers and those wanting to move up the ladder, but to those who want to downsize, whom we have heard so much about today. There are plenty of constituents across Bromsgrove and the villages who are asset-rich but cash-poor, and who are trapped in larger houses but would like to downsize, should the fiscal incentive be there for them to do so. Stamp duty, in the form of tens of thousands of pounds, is absolutely key in so many cases.

Dr Evans: A really important issue, especially for elderly people who are caught in a large home, is social care. We need to make sure that healthcare and support is there as people get older. If they find themselves trapped in a large house, how do we make sure that it is modified? That has an additional cost, which is often lost. Does my hon. Friend agree that freeing up such people to move offers them the benefit of saving money?

Bradley Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a valid and important point. That is one of the great peripheral benefits of this policy, should the Government embrace it, and I encourage them to look seriously at it. I encourage the Government to vote for this motion, even if only to show their intent, and even if they cannot implement it anytime soon.

We have heard about the stimulus effect. The typical spend of a family moving house is around £9,000. My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor pointed out that those employed in trades would benefit from saving that money. These are people who are not necessarily rich; they are hard workers who set their alarms in the morning. They are the very people who have aspiration for their family and want to be able to move up the property ladder.

One of the fundamental ideologies that have emanated from Labour Members is a denial of capitalism and the role that it plays in driving up prosperity. My right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) made this point eloquently: capitalism is not something that we should be afraid of; it is the biggest driver of prosperity that the western world has known. Labour Members should embrace it with a little bit more vigour.

A point that I have to touch on, because it affects my constituency so profoundly, is the Government's increase in housing targets. We Conservative Members are not anti-house building, but we believe that house building has to be proportionate. Bromsgrove and the villages is a 79% rural constituency. It really is the green buffer between Worcestershire and the urban sprawl of Birmingham. It is 89% green belt, yet our housing target has increased by a staggering 85%, whereas the housing target in adjacent Birmingham has decreased by over 30%. I have given various Ministers various opportunities to address this point of the Floor of the House, but no one has been able to do so yet, so I can only assume that, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), the Government are “fiddling” the figures for political reasons. I would welcome it if the Minister could address the disproportionate burden that the Government's housing targets are putting on rural areas, including Bromsgrove and the villages.

There is something that the Government could do to make the bitter pill of more housing easier to swallow, but they abandoned the idea on day one: make high-quality design a central tenet in the planning system. The previous Government opened the Office for Place, which is an advisory body that advises the Secretary of State on the quality of the built environment. Every single Government, regardless of political colour, should embrace the principles of good design, because they lead not just to good houses, but to better communities. If the Government can convey to communities that new housing is not going to impose red-brick monotony that erodes their sense of identity and character, there will be much more openness from communities to the house building agenda.

Dr Luke Evans: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of the biggest concerns I have is that the Government have taken away the funding for neighbourhood plans. We know that neighbourhood plans give villages their say in where planned housing

goes, but more importantly they deliver more housing. Does he believe it is short-sighted to take away that funding, which will compound the problem he is talking about—he is discussing the aspect of style and design—of getting communities to take on extra housing?

Bradley Thomas: My hon. Friend is spot-on. That is incredibly short-sighted, and I think it will prove to be a false economy.

I urge the Government to embrace good design to provide a justification to my constituents for why they are pursuing the current house building targets in such a disproportionate way across the country. Most of all, I implore the Government to put at the centre of their fiscal plans the scale of ambition that hard-working people have every single day when they set their alarms and go out to work—they want to do the right thing for their families. The Government must realise that pulling the right fiscal levers and cutting the right taxes will stimulate the very activity that will drive the growth they are so desperate to achieve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.16 pm

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor for setting out the opening case for the Opposition's position on stamp duty. I feel particularly passionate about this policy, which is one I put forward when I was running for the leadership of the Conservative party. Like all good ideas, it has been embraced by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. I am particularly glad—this is a key point—that my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor and his team have worked hard to make sure that cutting stamp duty is not just a headline, but a fully costed and set out policy.

The Leader of the Opposition has, I think very magnanimously, said that if the Government want to steal this idea and implement it now, they will get no opposition from us. I think that shows her typical generosity of spirit. The Government are clearly struggling to come up with credible economic plans of their own, so they are very welcome to steal our economic plans.

I have been struck by the positive nature of this debate. As Conservative colleagues have noted, the expected wall of thoughtless opposition to this proposal has not materialised at quite the scale we expected. It has materialised in some instances, but that is only to be expected. We heard in a number of speeches, and I will refer to some contributions as I go through my speech, that Labour Members recognise that stamp duty is a bad tax, a counterproductive tax and a tax that has a dampening, drag-anchor effect on the housing market. However, they went on to say, "But we need the money." They are desperate for the tax revenues, which I think shows the fundamental challenge that, frankly, Labour is going to have to deal with in November. If the Government cannot agree to get rid of this damaging, counterproductive tax, what tax will they be willing to reduce? If they are going to say to the House that, basically, there is not a single tax in the British system that they are willing to cut, reduce or remove, then the mask has slipped. Under a Labour Government, this country faces ever-increasing taxes—that is basically

what they are saying. They admit that this is a bad tax, but they are not willing to vote for its removal because they want to see—they need to see, are desperate to see—taxes going up. That was fundamentally the argument put by many Government Members.

Dr Luke Evans: Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is compounded by the Government's position on spending reductions? We saw that on the Floor of the House, when the one attempt to make spending reductions was gutted mid-discussion, with proposals being pulled from a Bill that dealt with welfare. Therefore, the Government will not make any spending cuts either, which does not leave much else bar borrowing, in my estimation.

Sir James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is spot-on. That point was very well highlighted by my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), who said that official Opposition felt that this damaging and counterproductive tax should be removed. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has set out that that would be paid for by a reduction in the welfare bill—something that I know has universal support on our Benches. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater highlighted that a reduction in welfare spending is not only something that we think is a necessary and good idea, but something that Labour Front Benchers used to think was a necessary and a good idea until, with great leadership, they were told by their Back Benchers to stop thinking that it was a necessary and a good idea, and to start thinking that it was a terrible idea. Such leadership from the Back Benches is something that I admire from that party. If only Labour Front Benchers had anything like the spine of the Labour Back Benchers, the country might not be in quite such a dire economic state.

Labour Members have basically said that they are unwilling to cut even the worst taxes because basically they want to see taxes go up. The Lib Dem position is yoga-like in its ability to bend—

Dr Luke Evans: Pretzel-like.

Sir James Cleverly: Yes, pretzel-like. One after another, the speakers on the Lib Dem Benches stood up and said, "We agree that this is a bad tax. We agree that this is a counterproductive tax. We agree that it is a tax that needs to go." I, and I suspect others on the Conservative Benches, thought, "Here we go. Here is the crescendo, the pièce de résistance," and that those speeches would end by saying, "Which is why you will see us in the Lobby with you, ensuring that the motion is passed." But that is not what we heard.

Bobby Dean: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir James Cleverly: In a minute—I have a punchline to get to.

That is not what we heard. What we heard was, "We think this is a bad tax that should be got rid of, but we are not going to vote to say it is a bad tax that should be got rid of, because blah"—which is always the Lib Dems' punchline. I was waiting for an explosion of political integrity, only to be presented with a political damp squib.

Bobby Dean: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way after his fantastic punchline, which everybody really enjoyed.

Daisy Cooper: Where was it?

Bobby Dean: Exactly. He obviously was not paying enough attention to our argument. Yes, we did agree with the analysis that stamp duty is a poor tax, but we could not support the motion, because we do not think there is a credible plan for abolishing it. We would like to see a much more holistic review of property taxes, alongside a credible plan. There is no credible plan in the motion. We do not trust the public spending cut proposals that have been put forward.

Sir James Cleverly: You've gotta love 'em, haven't you? Never seen a fence they would not sit on, never seen a position they would not contort around. "These are our principles", they say, "but so are these, and so are these other ones as well." It is that clarity that we value from the Liberal Democrats.

Rachel Taylor: I will be a little clearer on Labour's principles: we will not be joining the Conservatives in the voting Lobby because we will not vote for unfunded tax cuts that predominantly serve the wealthy and do nothing to help first-time buyers or ordinary working people up and down the country.

Sir James Cleverly: That's how you do it! That is how you actually have a position—it is the wrong position, but at least it is a position. The hon. Lady keeps talking about unfunded tax cuts, but she is getting her language back to front. We do not fund a tax cut, because it is the British people who fund Government spending, so when Government spending is eased, it eases the burden on the British taxpayer. It is spending that needs to be funded, not a reduction in spending.

I will reinforce what I thought were a number of strong interventions in support of the motion. I was struck by my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) speaking about his own experience trying to get on the housing ladder and how his enthusiasm was diminished by the realisation that stamp duty was going to make it even more difficult. The hon. Member for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) made a legitimate point that this tax affects different parts of the country very differently. He made the fair point that there will be many parts of the country where it is not typical that people pay stamp duty land tax, or a significant quantum or scale of it, but that is not a good reason to deny this reduction in cost to those people in the country who do. Although there might not be many in his constituency, I guarantee that he would not have to travel far before he starts to meet people who are being dissuaded from purchasing properties because of stamp duty land tax. Certainly for Members representing constituencies near big cities, wherever they are across the country, or constituencies in the south, significant numbers of people pay this tax.

It has been mentioned by many Conservative Members—too many to single out—that this proposal would positively impact not just the people who pay, or may pay, stamp duty land tax. I guarantee that almost all of us can imagine the streetscape that I am about to

describe from our constituencies. There are perhaps Victorian or Edwardian semi-detached or detached houses on what used to be the periphery of the town or city before it expanded beyond that. It will typically be a band of properties populated disproportionately by older couples or older people, who have often been in the constituency for many decades. Their children have moved out and they are now under-occupying those properties with two, three or perhaps even four bedrooms spare, but they are deterred from downsizing because they fear the stamp duty that they will have to pay. Estimates show that 2.8 million people would consider downsizing—or rightsizing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor said—if stamp duty were removed. We would then have a ripple effect throughout the housing market, freeing up family homes for people who are currently in overcrowded accommodation.

Not only that, but the London School of Economics estimates that for every housing transaction, an estimated £6,000 of economic activity is pumped into the local market, with local builders doing refurbishments, perhaps doing extensions and fitting new bathrooms and kitchens, and people buying soft furnishings and white goods—the sorts of things that people buy when they move. What type of business typically provides those goods and services? It is local businesses—small and medium-sized enterprises embedded in their communities. These are the people who are being denied economic activity because this tax is stifling the property market.

We need liquidity in the property market. We need people buying and selling. We need people spending money with local businesses in local shops across the whole of the country. That is what reducing the tax burden on people does; it is what removing the stamp duty land tax will achieve.

Yet on the Government and Liberal Democrat Benches, Members are contorting themselves to find excuses not to reduce this burdensome tax, and I genuinely do not understand why. Some 2.8 million people could release their homes on to the market; if each of those homes had two or three spare bedrooms, that would immediately eclipse the 1.5 million homes that Labour is desperately trying to convince the country will be built under its tenure. It could be done almost immediately, without a brick being laid, and—more importantly—without the need for any Government subsidy.

That is what the House is saying no to, but not those on the Conservative Benches. We on these Benches understand aspiration. The Conservative party has always been the party of aspiration. We have always been the party that helped people to get on and up the housing ladder—a noble and normal aspiration, and one that we support, even if other hon. Members do not support it.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman wonders why this might not have happened. It might be something to do with the 14 billion quid that he has not worked out how the Government will find. If it was so easy, why, in all those days before covid, did his party never do it in 14 years?

Sir James Cleverly: It was the Conservatives who reduced the stamp duty burden—something that was reversed almost immediately when Labour came into office.

The simple truth is that the Conservatives have always been the party of home ownership and aspiration: helping people to have a stake in not just the country and the economy, but their local communities; helping parents to stay closer to their own parents so that grandparents can see their grandchildren; creating flexibility so that when job opportunities are created around the country, people can actually move to those jobs without facing a financial penalty for doing so.

That is what is at stake. That is what we are proposing. That is what the Conservatives will continually fight for, even in the face of opposition from Labour—a party that should be about aspiration and used to be about aspiration, but which has lost its way, drifted from the path of righteousness, and, if Labour Members do as they claim today, a party that will oppose the removal of what is regularly described by economic experts as the single most damaging tax on our books.

I will conclude with this point. *[Interruption.]* I can continue if Members want. *[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”]* No, I will conclude on this point. If Members opposite and to my left—both physically and metaphorically—are unwilling to countenance the removal of what is pretty much universally described as the single most counterproductive tax, what tax will they remove?

The mask has slipped. Labour cannot and will not bring themselves to reduce any taxes. The British people will notice this, and so will the markets. The unwillingness of the Labour party to make any difficult decisions with regard to public spending or the reduction of the tax burden on the British people is not just painful for taxpayers themselves. It will be painful for our children and grandchildren, who are going to pay increased amounts of money to fund the spending that, as my colleagues have said, is the only way that the Chancellor can try to dig herself out of this hole. That will be a burden on generations to come.

I suspect we will divide on this motion, and when we do the choice will be between a party that seeks to support aspiration, families, small businesses and the building trade, and those parties that oppose all those things and will increase the tax burden on British people, our children and grandchildren, and indeed the great-grandchildren of people alive today. That is not what my party is about or what this country should be about. I urge all those who want to do right by small businesses and future generations to support this motion and scrap this deeply counterproductive tax. I commend the motion to the House.

4.37 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I especially thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) for his speech at the start, and the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride) for bringing forward this debate. I also thank the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly) for concluding on behalf of the Opposition.

With those niceties over, I turn to the substance of the motion we are debating, which, as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said, is fundamentally flawed. Despite the Leader of the Opposition's seemingly steadfast commitment to having no policy at all, which has now

been very much abandoned, Conservative Members have looked back at their shockingly bad economic record and taken the rather extraordinary view that they are well placed to offer input and advice on the upcoming Budget, which is entirely a matter for the Chancellor to decide once she has seen the OBR's forecast and which she will share with the House at the end of next month.

The Conservatives have looked at all of this, thought for seemingly quite a long time about it, and decided that now is the right moment to offer some policy. The solution to all the hardship they inflicted on the country during their time in power is more of the same: more unfunded tax cuts, more instability, more austerity, more harm to our public services and, dare I say it, more of the approach that meant that their penultimate Prime Minister was outlasted by a lettuce.

Graham Stuart: Will the Economic Secretary give way?

Lucy Rigby: I will make some progress.

That is the Conservatives' pitch to the British public—reckless with our public finances, reckless with our public services and reckless with the future of this country. Conservative Members are competing to say how sad and angry they are about this tax. They will be furious when they find out which party gave us the highest tax burden since the second world war! *[Interruption.]* The motion is a seemingly straight-faced argument from Conservative Members that we should do the exact thing that brought their 14 years of government to an end. It is proof that they have learned—

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Stuart, is it an actual point of order? I think the Minister was coming to a conclusion, so we are just preventing our business from progressing. Ministers, Front Benchers or Members not taking interventions is not necessarily a point of order. Do you want to proceed?

Graham Stuart: I would like to proceed, Madam Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I wonder if there is anything the Chair can do to help the Minister. She appeared unaware that her own Government, for whom she is a Treasury Minister, have brought us to the highest ever level of tax in this country.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not my job to write yours or the Minister's speech—if only. That was not a point of order.

Lucy Rigby: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The motion is proof that the Conservatives have learned none of the lessons of their catastrophic mini-Budget or of the years of the punishing austerity that was inflicted on the people and institutions of this country, with nothing whatsoever to show for it but soaring debt, low productivity and devastated household finances.

Let me be clear that stamp duty is not a beloved tax—far from it; it is no more beloved than any other taxes—but it is an effective tax that raises billions of pounds annually, with those buying the most expensive properties contributing the most. That contribution is

[Lucy Rigby]

vital to the upkeep of our public services, our NHS, our schools and our armed forces. Abolishing it would take billions out of the public purse—£13.9 billion alone. It would be a multibillion-pound tax cut affecting the budgets of our most essential services.

It is the same horror show from the same old Conservatives, wildly swinging their scythe at public services without a care in the world for the consequences for our NHS, our schools and our armed forces. Which services would Conservative Members want to cut down this time? Would it be fewer nurses, fewer soldiers or fewer police officers? [Interruption.] Conservative Members are asking me whether I am asking them. I am more than aware that in the debate they referenced their fantasy economics based on welfare cuts. The shadow Chancellor oversaw the biggest increase in benefit spending in decades when he was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. If he truly believes that welfare spending needs cutting, why did he let it balloon? We have heard from various hon. Members about their objections to this tax and about all sorts of things they imagine might be in the Budget.

Graham Stuart: Just to be clear, does the Minister agree that this is a bad tax? Would she, in a perfect world, seek to find ways of controlling public expenditure so that the tax could be removed and people across the country—first-time buyers and the elderly in particular—could benefit from that?

Lucy Rigby: It is a tax, so obviously I do not love it, but what I find extraordinary is the Conservative party's new-found hatred of taxation when they increased taxes 25 times in the last Parliament.

As I said, we heard from various hon. Members about their objections to this tax. I will not engage on the points made about the Budget, for obvious reasons, except to repeat that we are committed to a single major fiscal event per year where the Chancellor will set out any tax decisions in the usual way alongside the OBR's forecast. That fiscal event will take place, as everyone knows, on 26 November, at which point there will be plenty of time to discuss and debate the decisions that the Chancellor takes in the Budget.

I want to speak to some of the points raised during the debate. We heard plenty from Conservative Members about why they want to abolish stamp duty. I think some points were made thoughtfully; I say that in a well-meant way. I am sorry to say, however, that we heard absolutely nothing from Conservative Members on their appalling economic record. We heard nothing from them on their appalling record on house building—save for the acknowledgment of the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—nothing on the waste of public money from the fraud on their watch, and nothing whatsoever that could be described as fiscal responsibility.

We heard from some of my hon. Friends on the Labour Benches about the urgent need to build more houses in this country, given our appalling inheritance. That is the key way that we solve the housing crisis. I pay tribute to the thoughtful speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis), for Crewe and

Nantwich (Connor Naismith) and for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), and to my hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) and for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance), who spoke powerfully of the consequences of the Conservative party's mismanagement of the economy, which include food banks, poverty and, of course, the housing crisis.

I welcome the commitment of the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire. He talked about the need to build more housing and, indeed, about beautiful housing. I assure him that that is exactly the type of housing that this Government will facilitate being built—although I note that his colleagues took him straight back to opposing development no sooner had he made that point. I also welcome his mini-insight into the infighting of the last Government.

Dr Luke Evans: The hon. Lady may recall that it was a Labour Secretary of State who removed the word “beautiful” from the national planning policy framework. How does she expect to have those beautiful designs if that has been taken away as a standard within the guidance that her Government provided?

Lucy Rigby: I assure him that the houses will be beautiful and that we will build 1.5 million of them over the course of this Parliament. There was a brief reference to Nirvana from the Conservative Benches before a descent back into half-baked and unfunded plans, to which we on the Government Benches thought, “Well, Nevermind.”

Sir James Cleverly: Have a word with your officials; that was very bad.

Sir Mel Stride: Stick to the day job.

Lucy Rigby: Thank you. I was pleased to hear the Liberal Democrats spokesman, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), and others in the party say that they will oppose the motion. I wholeheartedly agree with her that it is fundamentally flawed.

To be clear, we are a Government of fiscal responsibility. Our steadfast commitment to the fiscal rules has brought stability to our economy and allowed us to boost investment by £120 billion over the course of this Parliament. The dividends of that approach, even after just a year, are already clear: the highest growth in the G7 in the first half of this year, cuts to interest rates, real wages rising more in the time since the last election than they did in 10 years of Conservative Government, record investments from overseas, and new homes and infrastructure progressing all over the country. That is a strong foundation to build on in the years ahead.

Today, we have debated a simple question of two visions for the country. Put another way, does this country go forwards or backwards? The Conservative party wants us to go back—back to its time in office, when Britain had a Government that pursued unfunded tax cuts and austerity, leading to soaring debt, low productivity, under-investment and anaemic growth. It was a Britain where we did not build infrastructure, including houses, and where far too many people were unable to get on the housing ladder.

This Government want the country to move forward. We are managing the public finances with stability and certainty in an uncertain world. We are a Government

who invest in public services, our infrastructure and our communities, and work with businesses and local leaders to bring growth and opportunity to every part of the country. We are a Government who are building houses, including in areas of the country that the shadow Secretary of State—

Sir James Cleverly: She missed out the word “fewer”. It is “fewer houses”.

Lucy Rigby: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am afraid that I am being interrupted. We are a Government who are building houses, including in areas of the country that the shadow Secretary of State has previously described in rather unparliamentary language. We are a Government who support working people with new jobs, higher wages and new homes. We are a Government who are committed to building 1.5 million new homes this Parliament and to restoring the dream of home ownership.

We are a Government who will not duck the difficult decisions but face into them, because that is the only way that we will deliver a decade of national renewal and a thriving economy for the people of this country. That is what today’s debate is about: backwards with fiscal irresponsibility from the Conservatives or forwards with economic stability, investment and reform under this Prime Minister and this Chancellor.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 103, Noes 329.

Division No. 329]

[4.50 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Anderson, Stuart	Garnier, Mark
Andrew, rh Stuart	Glen, rh John
Argar, rh Edward	Griffith, Andrew
Bacon, Gareth	Harris, Rebecca
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Hayes, rh Sir John
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Hinds, rh Damian
Barclay, rh Steve	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Bedford, Mr Peter	Hollinrake, Kevin
Bhatti, Saqib	Holmes, Paul
Blackman, Bob	Huddleston, Nigel
Bool, Sarah	Hudson, Dr Neil
Bowie, Andrew	Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Brandreth, Aphra	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Burghart, Alex	Jenrick, rh Robert
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Cartledge, James	Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Chope, Sir Christopher	Lam, Katie
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Lamont, John
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Cocking, Lewis	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Costa, Alberto	Lockhart, Carla
Coutinho, rh Claire	Lopez, Julia
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Mak, Alan
Cross, Harriet	Malthouse, rh Kit
Davies, Gareth	Mayhew, Jerome
Davies, Mims	McVey, rh Esther
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Moore, Robbie
Easton, Alex	Morton, rh Wendy
Evans, Dr Luke	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Fortune, Peter	Mundell, rh David
Fox, Sir Ashley	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Norman, rh Jesse
French, Mr Louie	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Fuller, Richard	

O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Dr Ben

Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Trott, rh Laura
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Nick Timothy and
 David Reed

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Caliskan, Nesil
Abbott, Jack	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Abrahams, Debbie	Campbell, Irene
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Akehurst, Luke	Carden, Dan
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Carling, Sam
Aldridge, Dan	Charalambous, Bambos
Alexander, rh Heidi	Charters, Mr Luke
Ali, Rushanara	Chownes, Dr Ellie
Anderson, Callum	Collier, Jacob
Anderson, Fleur	Collinge, Lizzi
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Collins, Tom
Arthur, Dr Scott	Conlon, Liam
Asato, Jess	Coombes, Sarah
Asser, James	Cooper, Andrew
Athwal, Jas	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Atkinson, Catherine	Costigan, Deirdre
Atkinson, Lewis	Cox, Pam
Baines, David	Coyle, Neil
Baker, Alex	Creagh, Mary
Baker, Richard	Creasy, Ms Stella
Ballinger, Alex	Crichton, Torcuil
Bance, Antonia	Curtis, Chris
Barker, Paula	Daby, Janet
Barron, Lee	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Dalton, Ashley (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Baxter, Johanna	Darlington, Emily
Beales, Danny	Davies, Jonathan
Beavers, Lorraine	Davies, Paul
Begum, Apsana	Davies-Jones, Alex
Benn, rh Hilary	De Cordova, Marsha
Berry, Siân	Dean, Josh
Betts, Mr Clive	Dearden, Kate
Billington, Ms Polly	Denyer, Carla
Bishop, Matt	Dickson, Jim
Blake, Rachel	Dixon, Anna
Bloore, Chris	Dixon, Samantha
Bonavia, Kevin	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Botterill, Jade	Dollimore, Helena
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Dowd, Peter
Brickell, Phil	Downie, Graeme
Buckley, Julia	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Burgon, Richard	Eagle, Dame Angela
Burke, Maureen	Eagle, rh Maria
Burton-Sampson, David	Eccles, Cat
Butler, Dawn	Edwards, Lauren
Byrne, Ian	Efford, Clive
Cadbury, Ruth	Egan, Damien
	Ellis, Maya

Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirth
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim

Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James

Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Simons, Josh

Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Imogen Walker and
 Gregor Poynton

Question accordingly negated.

China Spying Case

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the proposed amendment. I call the shadow Minister.

5.3 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to release the minutes of the meeting chaired by the National Security Adviser on 1 September 2025, at which the prosecution of the two alleged Chinese spies, since dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service, was discussed, including all actions arising from that meeting; and further calls on the Government to publish the minutes of all other meetings where the case was discussed, whether by officials or with Ministers, all relevant correspondence between the Crown Prosecution Service and the Government and between Departments, including correspondence between the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Cabinet Office, Attorney General's Office, and the Treasury, and advice provided to the Prime Minister relating to the China spy case.

The purpose of this Opposition day debate and of our motion is very simple: transparency—that is all that we ask for. The basic facts are that two men were arrested on suspicion of having spied on hon. Members of this House for China, and the Director of Public Prosecutions has acknowledged that this appears to have been a “gross breach of trust” against hon. Members, yet the case against the two men collapsed because, in the words of the senior Treasury counsel, Tom Little KC, the case was “effectively unsustainable”; it was brought to “a crashing halt” because the Government’s own witness, the deputy National Security Adviser, refused to provide the fatal piece of evidence.

Mr Little had what he called a million-dollar question: was China an active threat to national security? The deputy National Security Adviser repeatedly refused to say yes. The Government effectively refused to say what was patently apparent to anyone remotely alive to the facts of the case. This House has every reason to be told why they refused, and why, for example, the Prime Minister did not intervene to prevent the case collapsing, when we know he was warned that it was unlikely to proceed. It is also reported that the Home Secretary tried to intervene.

We do not call for the publication of this material lightly. We know it is an extraordinary measure to call for the Government to publish documents relating to the formation of policy, but this is an extraordinary event. We have reached this point because the Government have been unable or unwilling to answer basic questions about what they knew when, and why they acted as they did. They have hidden behind civil servants and advisers, when it is Ministers who are supposed to make decisions, and in doing so, they have brought the actions and decisions of those advisers and officials into the spotlight in a way that is most irregular.

Just as worryingly, there has been a persistent inaccuracy and inconsistency in the Government’s statements, to the point where this House can no longer trust a word of theirs. There are a number of examples. First, on 13 October, the Security Minister denied in this House that the mega-mandarin meeting on 1 September, which is the subject of our motion, took place. Last week, the Solicitor General admitted that the meeting did take place.

We now know that it was led by the National Security Adviser and attended by the Cabinet Secretary, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, senior representation from the Home Office and the Attorney General’s office, and the chief of MI5, but we still do not know what was said there, what was agreed or why the Government tried to deny its existence.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I was interested to see that the National Security Adviser was listed as being involved in that meeting. The National Security Adviser is a political appointee—he is a special adviser—and that is usually the reason why the deputy National Security Adviser is put forward to take all the flak. If the NSA himself is participating in policy meetings about this matter, why does he not come forward? Why is he sheltering behind a full-time official who is being hung out to dry?

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend makes a very pertinent point and is personally very experienced in such things. It has been reported that the National Security Adviser chaired that meeting. That is to say that he was taking a very active role in what was going on. That is why it is incredibly important that the Government come clean with us about what happened in that meeting, who attended and what was decided there.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The National Security Adviser has spent a great deal of time visiting various Chinese entities before and after his appointment. One appointment that he does not appear very keen on taking up is with the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, which has requested—quite legitimately, under the Osmotherly rules—that he appears before it, but Ministers appear to be blocking that. Why does my hon. Friend think that is?

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend is right: the National Security Adviser showed a great reluctance to attend. I understand that he has now agreed to attend, although the report I read said that he was going to attend in camera. If that report is correct—the Minister has the opportunity to say it is not true—I am not sure that that is the best level of transparency that this House might expect.

The second instance of inconsistency and inaccuracy that we draw attention to is from 7 October, when the Prime Minister told journalists that what mattered in this case was the designation of China as it had been in 2023, when the offences were alleged to have occurred. However, last week, on 24 October, the Director of Public Prosecutions said that that was categorically not the case. He said:

“The test was...positively not what the then Government was prepared to, or did, say in public about China...but rather whether China was—as a matter of fact—an active threat to national security.”

This is a most important point, and one that was revisited yesterday. There is a very serious question about why the deputy National Security Adviser believed that he would

“need to be in line with government policy at the time”,

when the Crown Prosecution Service said that it did not need to know about policy, but about the facts. The Minister should explain to the House why the deputy

[Alex Burghart]

National Security Adviser chose to ignore the CPS in this case. He should also tell us whether he thinks the deputy National Security Adviser complied with civil procedure rule 35, which requires him to assist the court and overrides any other obligation.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can clarify what is happening here. Is the issue that the Government thought that China was a threat to national security but did not declare it, or that they declared it but China was not a threat? I am quite confused about the point he is making.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman will have a perfectly good opportunity to question the people responsible in a few moments' time. The point is that the Government have been unclear, inconsistent and inaccurate, and we are giving them an opportunity to clear this up right now.

Dr Arthur: I think the issue is that the Government in 2023 were not clear on whether or not China was a threat. Did they clearly make the statement that it was a threat, or was China a threat but the Government failed to make that statement?

Alex Burghart: The previous Government were clear on a number of occasions that China was a threat, but if the hon. Gentleman had been listening to what I just said, he would have heard that the Director of Public Prosecutions said last week that it was categorically not a question of what the last Government said. Now that I have the hon. Gentleman's attention, I will repeat for his benefit what the DPP said: that the question was "whether China was—as a matter of fact—an active threat to national security."

It was not a question of policy; it was a matter of fact. [Interruption.] I am not going to go through it a third time.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for setting out the story so far, but given that there have been so many variations on the truth, can he come up with an explanation of why the Government cannot alight on a single version of the truth of this matter?

Alex Burghart: I think there are basically two possible answers to my hon. Friend's question. The first is that the Government cannot tell their elbow from their posterior; the second is that they do not want this House to know the truth. Either way, on a matter as serious as this, it is incredibly important that we get to the truth. Tonight's motion presents the Government with an opportunity to be entirely transparent with us and set out the facts of the case as they were at the time—particularly on 1 October, when this all-important meeting took place.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I just want to clear up one small point. When the CPS originally decided to prosecute back in 2024, it was convinced on the basis of the then-required evidence that was in front of it that in this case, China was responsible, and therefore it posed a threat. What changed was the Roussev case, which redefined what

the CPS needed to be able to say in order to go ahead with any further prosecution. It was made clear that all that needed to be done was to make the clear point that China was a persistent, continuous threat to the UK's strategic interests. The reason why the CPS needed to make that statement had nothing to do with what had happened before; it was all about what resulted from the Roussev case. That was the key.

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct, and the Director of Public Prosecutions has been very clear and consistent on that point.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alex Burghart: I will give way one more time, and then I will make some progress.

James Wild: The first senior Treasury counsel, Tom Little, yesterday said that he took the extraordinary step of having a direct discussion with the deputy National Security Adviser because he could not understand why what he said was a relatively straightforward piece of evidence—namely, that China was an active and ongoing threat—had not been provided. Why did the Government not provide that commitment?

Alex Burghart: That is the million-dollar question. Why were the Government not prepared to say something that was manifestly evidentially true to all and sundry?

The third example is that on 15 October, the Prime Minister said that the deputy National Security Adviser acted entirely independently, without consultation with Ministers or special advisers, and without political involvement. However, the CPS has now made it clear that there were multiple discussions about what the DNSA would and would not say, starting with one such discussion on 3 July 2025. Moreover, the DNSA's first witness statement was sighted by

"the then National Security Adviser and the...Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary",

and

"sent to the...Prime Minister through No.10 private office", including special advisers.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Is it therefore not incredible either way that the deputy NSA did not discuss the biggest spy case this century with his boss, the National Security Adviser, and was left to his own devices to provide the evidence?

Alex Burghart: I think we all find it difficult to believe that the deputy National Security Adviser was left entirely to his own devices.

A fourth example is that on 20 October, the Minister for Security, who is in his place, told the House:

"Final evidence went in in August, and I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that there is nothing the Prime Minister or any Minister could have done thereafter."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 640.]

We now know that there were meetings between the CPS and the Government on 3 and 9 September to attempt to rescue the case. Why did the Security Minister tell the House something that was not correct?

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): As far as I can remember, the Attorney General told the House of Lords yesterday that 3 September was when he was informed that there were evidential difficulties with the case. The key point is that he had no power to intervene, because of the memorandum between the Attorney General's Office and the CPS. The Attorney General does not get involved in evidential sufficiency.

Alex Burghart: Ministers do get involved; it is their job to be involved. Ministers represent the Government. Ministers represent all of us. It is not good enough for the Government to say that they are entirely powerless in this instance—they are not.

A fifth example is that yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary said that he did not believe that the chief of MI5 had described China as a threat. On 16 October 2025, Ken McCallum said:

“Do Chinese state actors present a UK national security threat? And the answer is, of course, yes they do every day.”

How on earth did the Cabinet Secretary not know that? This issue is of paramount importance. There are many other such examples.

The Government have an opportunity to be clear with us today, not just about the meetings and the dealings of the past six months, but on their position as it stands. Will the Minister tell us what the material difference is between “a range of threats” and “an active security threat”? The deputy National Security Adviser was keen to make that point yesterday. Perhaps most importantly of all, do the Government believe that China is an active security threat? If not, what would it take to cross that threshold? It is time for the Government to publish all the details so that we can see what really happened here.

I know that the Government will protest their innocence and claim that it is all the fault of the CPS, or the last Government, or the legislation, just as they have tried to do for weeks, but such pleas and protests are no good reason for them to refuse to publish the material we are requesting today. This House may have been spied upon. This House has a right to straight answers. This House has a right to see under the bonnet when the safety and privacy of its Members may have been compromised. This House has a right to know the Government's real position and the Government's real agenda. If this Government have nothing to hide, they should hide nothing from this House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that this debate has to conclude by 7 pm. It is heavily subscribed, so I urge them to be as brief as possible.

5.18 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I will do my best, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart). First, I want to reinforce, not just as a Minister, but as a parliamentarian, the Government's deep regret about the collapse of the criminal case concerning the two individuals charged under the Official Secrets Act 1911. Everyone in the Government was hoping that the trial would go ahead and planning on the basis that it would.

As a reminder, following the arrests of Christopher Cash and Christopher Berry in March 2023 as part of a counter-espionage operation, counter-terrorism police requested that the deputy National Security Adviser act as a witness in the case. *[Interruption.]* Let me go through this, because it is important to the challenges made by the hon. Gentleman. The DNSA made it clear that he would provide evidence on the basis of the Government's position at the time of the offences, and that is crucial to the judgment that has been made in this case. The first statement was drafted—

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will make some progress, and then I will give way to the shadow Home Secretary.

The first statement was drafted between August and December 2023. During that time, Counter Terrorism Policing was updated on progress, including the information that the deputy National Security Adviser would not be able to call China an enemy, as that was not the position of the Government at the time of the offences.

Chris Philp: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Okay, I will let the shadow Home Secretary intervene on that point.

Chris Philp: The Minister has said twice in the last minute that the question was the policy of the last Government. Let me take him to page 4 of the letter from the Director of Public Prosecutions, dated Thursday of last week. In that letter, the DPP said—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Interventions should be short.

Chris Philp: The DPP said the opposite of what the Minister has said. He said that the issue was a question of fact, and not—categorically not—the policy of the last Government.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! The right hon. Gentleman has just quoted page 4 of the DPP's letter. Let me quote page 5 to him:

“The information that we required related to the period between 31 December 2021 and 3 February 2023. The position of the current Government was not relevant to the case.”

I suggest that the shadow Home Secretary look at the next page.

Chris Philp: It is misleading.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: No, it is not misleading. Will the right hon. Gentleman give me a moment? It was the position at the relevant time. What is even worse, however, is that the word “enemy” was not the position at the time. It came out of the statement, and that happened under the previous Government, I am afraid.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I took interventions from the shadow Home Secretary, and I must now make some progress.

Before finalising his statement in December 2023, the deputy National Security Adviser sighted the then National Security Adviser and the then Cabinet Office permanent secretary. On 18 December—this was all under the previous Government—the permanent secretary came back with three comments for the DNSA to consider. The DNSA then finalised the statement, and his private office sent a final version of the draft to the then Prime Minister through the No. 10 private office and No. 10 special advisers. Once the statements were submitted they were not shared, and in April 2024, formal charges were laid. That was the position under the previous Government.

Two supplementary witness statements from the DNSA were submitted in February and August 2025, following requests from Counter Terrorism Policing for further detail on the nature and extent of the threat to the UK from China. For the second statement, CTP specifically asked the DNSA to comment on whether China as a state, during the period from 31 December 2021 to 3 February 2023, posed an active threat; and whether that remained the case. For the third statement, CTP requested that the DNSA provide further points of detail regarding the UK Government's assessment of the nature and extent of the threat, with examples. The DNSA faithfully and with full integrity—I noted that the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster implied that somehow he was not compliant with part 35 of the civil procedure rules—set out the various threats posed by the Chinese state in line with the UK Government's position at the material time, in order to try to support a successful prosecution. We then come, obviously, to the meeting on 1 September to which the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster referred, and with which I shall deal in a moment.

I was fascinated by the opening speech of the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, in which he talked of the “clarity” of the last Government's position.

“The government's approach to China is guided by three pillars: strengthening our national security protections, aligning and cooperating with our partners, and engaging where it is consistent with our interest.”

Who said that? The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster did in 2023, and here he is now trying to talk about the clarity of the position in 2023.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Not for a moment.

On 1 September, the National Security Adviser convened a routine meeting to discuss the UK's relationship with China in the context of this case and several other upcoming moments. That is entirely what we would expect the National Security Adviser to do. We have learned that entirely separately, and entirely independent of Government, the CPS was deliberating on not offering evidence in this case. On 3 September, the DPP told the Cabinet Secretary and the DNSA of his intention, subject to confirmation, not to put forward evidence, and unfortunately that decision was confirmed on 9 September. I must say to the Opposition that that is a matter of regret. It is quite rightly an independent decision, but it

is a matter of regret. On 15 September 2025, the CPS officially confirmed the decision to discontinue the case against Cash and Berry.

I actually welcome scrutiny of that decision. That is why I welcome the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy's inquiry into espionage cases and the Official Secrets Act and the Intelligence and Security Committee's investigations into how classified intelligence was used. Since we last discussed the matter in this House, the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, the Cabinet Secretary, the National Security Adviser and the deputy National Security Adviser have all submitted evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

Yesterday, the Joint Committee heard evidence from the Director of Public Prosecutions and the First Treasury Counsel, and from the Cabinet Secretary and the deputy National Security Adviser at a later session. Tomorrow, the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister and the Attorney General will give more evidence. A question has been raised about the National Security Adviser; he will also be giving evidence soon, and certainly before the end of the year.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): The Minister expresses deep regret that this case has not gone to trial. I want to believe him on that, but the case did not go to trial. With the power of hindsight, if he was to go back and do this all again, what would the Minister have done differently to ensure that this case did go to trial?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will tell the hon. Gentleman exactly what would have made a massive difference: if we could have updated the Official Secrets Act far sooner than 2023. That would have made a material difference. This case was being prosecuted under a 1911 Act. The National Security Act was passed in 2023. If only the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster had been in the Cabinet Office to be close to what was going on; perhaps the legislation could have been changed at an earlier stage and we would not be in this position.

Let me be clear with the House: the allegations of political interference in this case are absolutely baseless. The CPS decision to discontinue the case was independent of Government. Indeed, the Opposition should ask what the Director of Public Prosecutions himself said about that; he reiterated it again yesterday when he gave evidence, sitting alongside Tom Little KC.

Sir Julian Lewis: Can the Minister explain to the House, once and for all, how it is possible for a Government to believe that China is responsible for posing a wide range of threats, but is not a threat itself? He would clear matters up, and allay suspicions that the Government are holding back for economic reasons, if he would simply say that China is a threat to our national security. Will he say that?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: China poses a multiplicity of threats; it poses a threat in terms of espionage, in terms of cyber, and in terms of economic security. However, with the greatest respect to the right hon. Gentleman, the issue is whether it was considered a threat at the material time, and I cannot go back and change that.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I am listening carefully to what the Minister is saying, but can we be informed how MPs today are to be further protected from foreign intelligence services?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is 100% correct, and that is a huge priority for the Government; it is a very serious issue. As I said when I opened this debate, it is not just about the position of the Government; I say as a parliamentarian that we in this place have to be protected from foreign interference.

The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster asked about the meeting on 1 September. We heard about that yesterday from the Cabinet Secretary and the deputy National Security Adviser, who both attended that meeting: it was a discussion about the bilateral relationship between the UK and China in the context of the case. The Cabinet Secretary made it clear yesterday that the meeting was entirely appropriate; no discussion of evidence took place, and everyone involved was participating on the assumption that the case was going to go ahead.

It was only on 3 September—as was confirmed by him in his evidence to the JCNSS yesterday—that the Director of Public Prosecutions informed the Cabinet Secretary and the DNSA of his intention, subject to confirmation, that the CPS would not be putting forward evidence at trial. The Attorney General was informed on the same day.

It is important that I finish this point, because I have been challenged on the chronology and I am only too delighted to enlighten the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The DPP confirmed to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy that the position was agreed after a period of internal decision making within the CPS in the run-up to the meeting on 3 September. At that meeting, the DPP made it clear that the facts must not be briefed out further, with the exception of informing the NSA and the permanent secretary at the FCDO. The Cabinet Secretary and the DNSA therefore did not inform anyone else until shortly before the case became public. On 9 September, the CPS confirmed the decision to offer no evidence to the DNSA. That is the chronology.

Let me now directly address what the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said, because I am conscious of the time. There is already an established mechanism for Parliament to address this issue. The Government are fully co-operating with the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy inquiry and the ISC, and will provide evidence and appear before the Committee in the usual way.

James Wild: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In one moment.

In the motion, the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is seeking a wide range of documents. He was a Cabinet Office Minister himself, and he knows the sensitivity of those documents. He knows the legal professional privilege—

Alex Burghart: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will give the hon. Gentleman one more chance before I conclude. I say to him that highly classified material is subject to legal professional

privilege and includes advice to the Prime Minister, which successive Governments have not released to the public. Why? Because it is in our interests to protect such material. The hon. Gentleman knows that in his heart of hearts.

Alex Burghart: I have always admired the shine on the Minister's brass neck, and never so much as at this moment. I remember the Brexit debates, when he and many of the other gentlemen and ladies on the Labour Benches overrode legal privilege and asked for classified documents week after week. Members of this House may have been spied on, and the Government have a duty to be transparent. They cannot hide behind anything, given that they have previously asked for similar documents. Make them available!

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am looking at the hon. Gentleman and remembering the debates we had. Let me tell him the difference between what I was doing then and what is happening now. First, I was applying at the time, via a Humble Address mechanism, for a single document. By the way, his rather shambolic motion, which seems to be a fishing expedition, is totally imprecise. Secondly, that was not security material at this level, which is in our national interest.

Alex Burghart: You didn't know that!

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, I did.

Let me emphasise that I support parliamentary scrutiny. I support and welcome the ongoing process with the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. I support the Government's continuing to engage with the ISC. What we will not do, though, is accede to the hon. Gentleman's demand. He knows in his heart of hearts that it would be totally inappropriate for the long list of material he has stuck in the motion to be put in the public domain. Asking for open publication is completely different from the appropriate parliamentary scrutiny which, quite rightly, will go on.

Let me conclude by saying this. The Government and I are gravely disappointed that the trial did not proceed. In response to the point that was put to me by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the DNSA's evidence articulated clearly the range of threats that China posed to the UK's national security and, indeed, our economic security at the material time. In the light of the threats that have been identified—I agree with the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—this is a very grave matter. The Government are resolute in our determination to work across all parties and in partnership with the parliamentary security authorities, as was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), to ensure that espionage and interference by China or any other country is not successful in the UK.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We have just 90 minutes, and over 20 colleagues wish to contribute. The last speech was definitely not short. Hopefully, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson can show us how it is done.

5.34 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): We congratulate the Conservatives on bringing forward this debate. Given recent news headlines about their own weaknesses on this issue, doing so is what Sir Humphrey would describe as a “courageous decision”. As the third party spokesperson, I feel obliged to play the role of a marriage counsellor. It is my duty to urge both sides—the Government and the official Opposition—to concede that they have made mistakes and to bring them together in the hope of finding common ground.

The Government and the official Opposition truly have more common ground on this issue than they would like to admit. The common ground is clear in the DNSA’s evidence statements, and it has become clearer as this sorry saga has dragged on. It became clearer still in yesterday’s Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy that there is barely a cigarette paper between the position of the Conservative party when it was in government and the Labour Government today. The Conservative party will not admit that, because all it wants to do is pretend that the Government are entirely to blame, which is a laudable aim for any Opposition party. The Labour party cannot admit it, because it cannot publicly concede that its position on a matter central to our national security interests is the same as that of the Conservative Government they replaced last summer. It falls to us Liberal Democrats to speak the uncomfortable parts of the truth and tell it like it is, because nobody else is willing or able to do so.

While some of their brave Back Benchers spoke out when the Conservatives were in government, the machinery of the Government were keen to take an approach on China that was far from hawkish. At the heart of this issue is the often unspoken suggestion that we must take a nuanced position on China because our economy is now vulnerable to international threats. The truth is that Conservatives and their allies aligned to the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) cut us adrift from the EU, and they have left Britain more exposed to economic pressure from hostile states than we should be.

We find ourselves in a position where the Government cannot bring themselves to describe as a national security threat a nation whose spies hacked the data of 40 million British voters held by the Electoral Commission. The Government cannot bring themselves to describe as a national security threat a nation that has agreed a “no limits” partnership with Putin, despite Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine. Just 10 days ago, Beijing was publicly bullying the Government into granting permission for the new Chinese embassy at Tower Bridge, warning of “consequences” if the Government did not approve the plans. Is our weak international trading position, caused by the disastrous Brexit given to us by Conservative and Reform Members, influencing the Government’s decision making on the new embassy? It would seem foolish to argue otherwise.

I would draw a comparison between that and the Government’s position on Russia, which has been listed on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. Given the “no limits” relationship between Beijing and Moscow, it is odd that Russia is listed while China is not. If the Government really wanted to strengthen the case for prosecution, perhaps placing China on the enhanced tier would have aided the prosecution, even absent the word “enemy”. The fact that the word “enemy”

appeared on the original draft witness statement but was later removed again raises concerns about what was happening during the tenure of the previous Conservative Government. The public deserve clear answers not just from those on the Government Front Bench, but from those on the official Opposition’s Front Bench. Did the DNSA meet Ministers between the initial draft and the final version of the witness statement?

This House owes a debt of gratitude to the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) and the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), both of whom have shown a great deal of bravery in the very best traditions of British public service. The DNSA’s witness statement referenced “backchannels” used to dissuade those two Members from criticising Confucius institutes in the UK. The Security Minister assured me that he was happy to speak with the Members in question last week about this very point. Has that meeting now taken place, and will the Minister let us know from the Dispatch Box what this Government’s understanding of the word “backchannel” is in that context? Does the word “backchannel” refer to the previous Government’s Whips, officials or others? The public deserve to know which element of the British state was attempting to prevent brave MPs from asking questions. If the Minister cannot let us know, perhaps someone on the Conservative Front Bench or anywhere else on the official Opposition Benches could clarify that for the House.

Finally, I turn to the involvement of the CPS in the collapse of this trial. The Government are adamant that the failure to designate China as an “enemy” is central to the failure to prosecute. I have already addressed the question of how that word was removed from the initial witness statement during the tenure of the previous Government, but I want to draw the House’s attention to the Roussev case, which was referenced earlier, that was being prosecuted at the same time. In that instance, the judge stated that

“any state which presently poses an active threat to the UK’s national security can properly be described as ‘an enemy’ in ordinary language.”

The outcome of that case was the conviction of six Bulgarian nationals last July for operating as part of a Russian espionage network. The CPS has serious questions to answer about why the China case fell apart when the term “enemy” was not an issue for the Roussev case as recently as last July.

Transparency and independence in national security decisions are an essential part of maintaining public trust. This case has thrown that trust into serious jeopardy at a time when the embassy planning application is already undermining the nation’s confidence in the Government’s approach to relations with China. Neither the Government nor the official Opposition have provided clarity. The public could be forgiven for thinking that both sides are ducking responsibility. The Liberal Democrats believe that we need a statutory public inquiry to get to the bottom of what went wrong and how influence over China policy caused the collapse of this case.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Slinger, who I believe has a very considerate three-minute speech.

5.39 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I will do my best, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Conservative Members are being nothing short of opportunistic and are playing political games with our national security. It is, of course, their job and their right to oppose what the Government are doing, but on issues of national security I would have thought there could be more appreciation of the national interest and the nuances involved.

In my speech I am going to do some myth-busting—quite a useful thing to do in this age of misinformation, disinformation and hyperbolic chest-thumping. What we are seeing is a somewhat phoney, but very definitely opportunistic, brand of national security patriotism. Frankly, if ever over-inflated balloons of confected outrage needed to be burst, it is today. So, I will bust two myths and state two truisms.

Myth No. 1: a narrative that the Tories try to push is that Labour prioritised a strategic relationship with communist China. However, the Government fully recognise that China poses a series of threats to UK national security, from cyber-attacks to foreign interference and espionage targeting our democratic institutions. The true fault lies with the previous Government. The right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), the then Foreign Secretary, said in April 2023 that summing up China in one word as a “threat” was “impossible, impractical and—most importantly—unwise”.

The Leader of the Opposition, while serving in the Cabinet, also said:

“We certainly should not be describing China as a foe”.

Now that this trial has collapsed, they are accusing this Government of interfering, when it was their carefully worded Government policy that did not define China as an “enemy”—and there is nothing that present Ministers can do to change that.

Gregory Stafford: I would urge the hon. Gentleman not to misquote the two right hon. Members that he has just quoted. Even if the quotes that he gave were whole and full—which they are not—the DPP has categorically said that it was not about policy; it was about whether China was an actual threat at the time. Is the DPP right, or does the hon. Gentleman have some other information?

John Slinger: I do not have any other information on that point, but I do believe that Conservative Members ought to look in the mirror and acknowledge the decisions taken by the previous Government. Let me turn to myth No.2—

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): On that point, it is really important to clarify why such tight definitions were important in the first place. That is because the case was brought under a 1911 Act of Parliament, not a modern, up-to-date Act of Parliament. Is that not why we are in this situation?

John Slinger: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is absolutely, deeply regrettable that the Conservative party, when in government, did not reform legislation sufficiently well.

Myth No. 2, another myth that the Tories will continue to spread, is that the Labour Government interfered with the delivering of evidence. The shadow Home Secretary has made the accusation that

“the government chose to deliberately submit inadequate evidence that led to two alleged spies getting off scot-free.”

This accusation simply has no real substance, as the Prime Minister has confirmed that no Labour Ministers or special advisers were involved with the provision of evidence for this case.

I shall move on to what I believe all Members across this House know to be true—truism No. 1. It is dangerous to undermine public confidence in the Government on matters of national security for party political advantage. Truism No. 2 is the more important one. It is perfectly possible to hold two thoughts in your mind at the same time: one is that China is clearly a strategic rival to the UK in certain areas, and another is that it is a vital partner, whether on the Security Council, in tackling global challenges or, of course, for trade and investment.

I will conclude, taking the advice of Madam Deputy Speaker, by saying that the Conservatives really do need to look in the mirror on this issue. This Government are acting with integrity.

5.44 pm

Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and Tavistock) (Con): This has been an interesting experience, almost revisiting ancient times with the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) leading for the Government on this debate. While I have a great deal of sympathy with his position, I cannot sympathise with his rather bland, anodyne account of the events to date. What is clear, and it is an apophthegm often imbibed with one’s mother’s milk, is that if it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, sounds like a duck, looks like a duck, it is almost certainly a duck.

The problem in this case is that the Government were never prepared to describe that animal as a duck. They must have known from a very early period; indeed, the first senior Treasury counsel said yesterday that, even in August, he had made the point abundantly plain to the Government that unless they reconsidered their approach and described the blasted animal as a duck, the case would go down the pan. There was nothing to prevent the Government, through their expert witness, from saying, “In our view, China was a national security threat in 2021”—nothing at all to prevent that.

Peter Swallow: Will the right hon. and learned Member give way?

Tony Vaughan: Will the right hon. and learned Member give way?

Sir Geoffrey Cox: No, I will not—too short of time.

There was nothing to prevent that because it was a question of fact. The fact is that the Government were not prepared to change their approach. It is a perfectly legitimate point for the right hon. Member for Torfaen to say to me, “Back in 2021, the policy of the Government was not to describe China as an enemy,” but at that time, we had not had the spying, the intimidation, and the direct targeting of this institution and the democratic assembly of our people that we have now seen by 2025. Things have moved on, and it was incumbent upon the Government to reconsider their approach, which was that they would not describe a duck as a duck. The witness was prepared to say, “It has webbed feet, it swims, it quacks, it has a bill—but we are not prepared to call it a duck.”

[Sir Geoffrey Cox]

Are you telling me, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the right hon. Gentleman can look this House in the eye and say that nobody raised this problem inside No. 10 and said, “We have a policy problem. It is a roadblock to this case. What are we going to do about it?”? Is he saying that that was never discussed with the National Security Adviser, that the DNSA never raised that with any relevant Minister? The Attorney General, when he met on 3 September, said, “Well, I couldn’t intervene on matters of sufficiency of evidence.” That is perfectly true; he cannot intervene, but he could challenge. He could say, “What do you need? Is there anything I can do by way of intercession with ministries to ensure that you get the evidence that you require?” But nothing was said. Nothing was said on 3 September because “nothing” was the policy of the Government. It was to wait while this case slid down the slope straight into the pan where no doubt many of the, not inaptly named, mandarins of Whitehall were perfectly content to see it slide.

There is extraordinary cheek in the right hon. Gentleman, who came to this House four or five years ago with his Humble Address when he asked for legal advice—advice on the most sensitive negotiating matters that this country was engaged in with the Berlaymont—to be disclosed for all to see, now saying that we should not see the truth of what in reality the Government were saying and doing at the time.

If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, walks like a duck, it is almost certainly a duck, and when I apply it to what the right hon. Gentleman says, it is almost certainly a complete crock of old—

Sir Julian Lewis: Duck!

Sir Geoffrey Cox: Duck.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Follow that, Paul Waugh. I am told that you have four minutes.

5.49 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): First, I want to put on the record my anger and frustration, shared by many in this House, at the collapse of this case, particularly the dropping of the spying charges against Christopher Cash and Christopher Berry and the resulting collapse of their trial, which had been due to go ahead this very month.

Secondly, I welcome Mr Speaker’s guidance on how to improve Members’ security. Members must not forget that we have a personal responsibility too to protect ourselves, our fellow Members and our staff from such foreign interference, which includes in our hiring practices and vetting of staff who can work in this building, which has not been often mentioned in this debate.

However, I want mainly to warn of the danger of some of the rhetoric that has been used to date in this case. Of course, it is the job of His Majesty’s Opposition to probe, challenge and scrutinise the Government, yet what has happened in this case goes way beyond that and risks harming us all, just as spying on our Parliament harms us all. I am talking about the repeated unsubstantiated and scurrilous suggestions that any Minister or special adviser in this Government interfered or intervened in the independent decision making of the CPS.

In an article in *The Times* on 15 October, the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), accused the Government of deliberately choosing to collapse the case:

“It is clear the government chose to deliberately submit inadequate evidence that led to two alleged spies getting off scot-free.”

He went on:

“They must now also explain who was guiding Matt Collins in preparing this evidence.”

That is an appalling accusation to make with zero evidence and an insult to the professional integrity of the deputy National Security Adviser, and I hope the shadow Home Secretary withdraws it. Sadly, he was not alone. On 13 October, the Leader of the Opposition told the BBC:

“This looks like a deliberate decision to collapse the case and curry favour with the regime in China.”

She went on to say that she suspected that Ministers

“have decided that closer economic ties with China were more important than due process and our national security.”

Just look at those words: “looks like” and “suspect”. There is not a shred of evidence, only insinuation. That is not the language of a Prime Minister in waiting.

As the Security Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), has made clear, it was an entirely independent decision by the CPS to discontinue the case, and the CPS has confirmed that it came under no outside pressure to do so. As for the Whitehall meeting on 1 September referenced by the Opposition in their motion, crucially, Mr Collins said yesterday that there had been

“at least four lawyers in the room who ensured that there was no discussion about the evidence”

in the case.

This House has maintained a proud cross-party consensus on Ukraine, helping President Zelensky to stand up to Putin—a consensus that is, sadly, not helped at times by Reform, whose Putin apologists are indeed Moscow’s useful idiots of the 21st century. We need to maintain a similar cross-party consensus in fighting against Chinese threats.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a good case about cross-party consideration of the threats China poses. I want to ask a very simple question, which I have asked in this place before: does he think that China should be on the foreign influence registration scheme, as Russia is—yes or no?

Paul Waugh: That is a matter for Ministers to decide; I am not privy to all the information that would be required to make that determination.

It is vital for our own national security and is in our national interests that we maintain a similar consensus as we have on Ukraine on the threats, challenges and opportunities posed by China. We should all stand firm in this House on issues of national security and human rights and on the threats China poses clearly to our economy, our industrial secrets, our intellectual property, our democracy and, yes, our cyber-space. We should also recognise that it is important that the UK engages with China where it is in our hard-headed national interest—and mutual interest—to do so, from climate change to global health and trade.

That is why the Opposition in government had a policy of protect, align and engage—there is that word “engage” again. How different is that really from our own compete, challenge and co-operate? I know that this place often thrives on political knockabout, with parties trying to seize on opponents’ perceived weakness, but in accusing one’s political opponents of somehow being enemies of the people and plotting non-existent cover-ups, the only beneficiaries are our real enemies abroad.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I come to Sir Iain Duncan Smith, after which Back-Bench Members will have a speaking limit of four minutes.

5.53 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a particular pleasure that you should be in the Chair for this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, because like me and the others, some of whom have been named, you are sanctioned by a brutal Chinese Government. I think it is excellent that you are here to invigilate this debate and to keep us on track—forgive me if I go over. [*Laughter.*]

I am not going to take the blandishments of the hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger) who told us to look in the mirror. I stopped looking in the mirror a long, long time ago. In fact, when I was elected in 1992 I was told by a journalist at the *Express* that I could look in the mirror and see my career behind me. I feel like I have been walking backwards ever since.

Can I just say, I think the whole principle that underlies all this is the Government’s behaviour over this decision? I will come to the decision in a second, but I want to address how the Government dealt with the decision—and how they have publicly dealt with it, which is really rather peculiar. It has been almost impossible throughout this to drag information out of the Government about why the DNSA took the decisions he took, where the Government were in this and when meetings took place. Denials slid towards acceptances that dates were in fact as they stood. As I understand it, it was even exclaimed by the Prime Minister that *The Sunday Times* was lying when it raised the idea of there being a meeting on 1 September containing all the various individuals, including the DNSA.

It has been a sort of meticulous nonsense. Dodge, duck, dive, dip, and dodge—the five Ds of dodgeball, or in this case the five Ds of dodge the spying case. Getting to the truth of this has been painful, and if it is painful for the Government, they have only themselves to blame. Had they come out straightaway at the beginning and been clear about all this, instead of hiding behind the DNSA, they might have found it easier.

I find ridiculous the position that the DNSA stated yesterday—that he was bound to reflect the position of the Government. The DNSA is not bound to reflect the position of the Government. He was asked by the DPP—and therefore bound to respond to the DPP—whether or not he said that China was an active security threat. What I do not understand is how the then DNSA, both at the time and again when giving evidence yesterday, was able to say that China posed a range of threats—just as the Minister said—on different areas all across the board, from sanctions right the way

through to espionage. I do not understand the difference between posing a series of significant threats to our national security in different areas across the board and being a threat to our national security. It is impossible to even conceive that we could define this so narrowly that we are unable to come out with the very simple statement: “They pose a threat to our national security.”

From my standpoint, I face a threat. I have been chased and regularly followed by wolf warriors, which are low-level intelligence operatives of China. They have impersonated me abroad and spread lies about what I have said, and those of us who have been sanctioned have been spied on. I know what a threat looks like. It looks like that. It is not a duck; it is a threat. There is no reason why any self-respecting Government could not have said that. The DNSA should have said that straight off—not go out and tell us that the police asked him to introduce what had been in the manifesto of the Labour party in the last election and then say that he knew nothing at all about it previously but had to put this in context. He was not asked to put it in context. The DNSA was asked to state clearly, from what he sees and the evidence he has taken, whether China poses an active security threat.

At the nub of this is another particularly important point. The 1 September meeting is critical in all this, because we have been given assurances throughout this—by the Prime Minister, for example, at Prime Minister’s questions on 15 October. He said:

“There was no further submission of evidence, one way or the other, after any discussion in September.”—[*Official Report*, 15 October 2025; Vol. 773, c. 368.]

Yet we know that now not to be the case. Why was the Prime Minister making such a fundamental statement at Prime Minister’s questions trying to shut this down? Did nobody bother to tell him that this had gone to a meeting? By the way, we were told that at no stage was the National Security Adviser or any other appointed individual at any meetings with or in contact with the DNSA throughout the submission of evidence. That is utterly untrue. We know that the DNSA was at the meeting chaired by the National Security Adviser on 1 September. What did they discuss? Was it football scores or what was right in front of them there and then: the still-unfinished business of whether or not the DNSA was going to comply with the DPP’s requirement for a very clear statement? It is that bit of subterfuge, with dipping and dodging throughout, that is really quite peculiar.

I have respect for the Minister. When he gets to his feet, can we not have this ridiculous game of “You did this” and “You said that”? I would simply like him to recognise that China poses a national security threat. Let us deal with that threat and take clear action, and not play games with terminological inexactitudes about what happened at what meeting.

We now know that the DNSA met all those characters—we do not know who they are—so the minutes of the meeting should be released. If the Government will not release them to Parliament, they can do it in camera to the Intelligence and Security Committee. They should do it to clear the record; I recommend that they do. People like me, the Chairman of Ways and Means and others have suffered attacks from this brutal regime, which has massacred people in China and committed genocide. Surely now is the time to make our position clear.

6 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Respect for democracy is fundamental to our British values, and to who we are as a country, but the world is increasingly an unstable place, and we can no longer be complacent about the multiple threats that our democratic norms and values face. Threats are coming from China, as we see from this espionage case, but also from other malign states, such as Russia and Iran. It is the job of all of us in the House to stand up to those threats and work in the interests of national security.

When I held a roundtable with my local Hong Kong community earlier this year to discuss proposed changes to immigration, I was saddened, but unfortunately not surprised, to hear that many members of the community chose not to attend a meeting with their local MP because they were worried about the long arm of the Chinese state, and the repercussions of the Hong Kong national security law on them and their family. Transnational repression is being used by hostile states to directly prosecute those whom they see as their enemies overseas, but it also has a wider, chilling effect, leaving whole communities afraid to engage with their basic democratic rights.

Meanwhile, I grow increasingly concerned about the influence of foreign actors on misinformation and disinformation online. In recent months, I have seen how anonymous posting on local social media groups in my community can have a pervasive effect on community cohesion and our democracy. Social media companies need to step up and do more on that. I am not suggesting that every anonymous social media post is from a Russian bot, but we all know that Russia and other states are using social media against us.

There have been direct attacks on our democracy, too, such as those from these Chinese spies. Last month, Reform UK's former leader in Wales, Nathan Gill, pled guilty to eight counts of bribery; he was bribed to make statements in favour of Russia while he was a Member of the European Parliament.

I turn to the China spy case. Part of the reason why the case did not proceed to trial and the two gentlemen could not be prosecuted was prevarication over reforming the Official Secrets Act. The Act was introduced in 1911—it predates the first world war—and despite unanimous recognition for at least eight years that it was completely out of date and not fit for purpose, the previous Government failed to act to fix the holes in our national security laws and left our country ill defended.

Sir Julian Lewis: Of course, the previous Government did subsequently introduce new legislation. However, under the 1911 Act, if the Government had been prepared to state that China was a threat, the case could have gone forward and would likely have been won. The hon. Member cannot blame that Act.

Peter Swallow: The case collapsed because under that Act neither Government provided enough evidence. The witness statements issued by the previous Government are a matter of record, and they do not state anywhere unequivocally that China is a threat. In fact, multiple Opposition Members have said on multiple occasions that it would not be possible to describe China unilaterally as a threat. That is a matter of record.

Chris Law: In 2023—we are going back a couple of years—Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee report on China warned

“that China's view of an ideal future...would be antithetical to the UK's interests”.

In its conclusion, China was detailed 11 times as a “threat”, an “acute threat” or a “grave threat”. Why can the UK Government today, based on a report from more than two years ago, not describe China as a threat?

Peter Swallow: The Minister quite clearly set out the range of threats posed by China. I am clear that China poses a threat. I also think that we have to be mature enough in this Chamber to accept that the way we deal with the second-largest economy in the world has to be to recognise the threats it poses to our democracy and our national security, but also all the ways in which we have to work with it.

I stood for election on a manifesto that committed to our co-operating with China where we can, challenging them where we must, and competing with them where we need to. I genuinely think that is a mature way of dealing with a state that does not share our values, and that poses a great threat to our democracy and to the way that citizens and residents of this country operate within a democracy, but that is also the second-largest economy in the world. As the former director of MI6 said on the “Today” show on the BBC this morning, “we need to learn to walk and chew gum at the same time.”

We need a mature acceptance of the risks that China poses, and that means recognising that we cannot just walk off the pitch and not deal with the second-largest economy in the world. It is infantile and not realistic to suggest otherwise.

If the new Act had been in place sooner, it is possible that these men could have been prosecuted successfully under it. I therefore have a simple question for Conservative Front Benchers, and they need to be clear on this point: why did they wait so long to replace a vital piece of security legislation, and make sure that we had the appropriate tools to keep this country safe? I am happy to take interventions on that point.

Dr Evans: Tony Blair was Prime Minister for a very long time. Did he amend the legislation?

Peter Swallow: As has already been set out, the threat from China has evolved over time. I would have loved it if the previous Labour Government had amended the Act, but it was the Conservative party that held a consultation, and then sat on the results for eight years and did nothing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Mark Pritchard.

6.7 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In its inquiry on China from July 2023, the Intelligence and Security Committee, of which I was a member at the time, concluded that China was a threat. The Committee took evidence not from junior security officials, but from the chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, the director general of the Security Service and the director of GCHQ, the chief of Defence Intelligence and—this is an important “and”—all the deputy National Security Advisers at the time. That is already public; they reported to the Committee.

That report is clear and unambiguous in calling out China as a national security threat to UK interests. It is also crystal clear, taking the report as a whole, that China's threat is both live and active. The report was from July 2023, and the alleged offences took place, apparently, from December '21 to February '23. I am aware that the refresh of the integrated review of '21 was in March '23. However, the Committee's inquiry started taking evidence from those senior officials from November 2017 to a similar time in 2019, and then the subsequent Committee carried on its work. Senior national security officials were giving evidence to the ISC about China being a national security threat well before the offences happened in this place.

Dr Evans: Is that an assertion of fact from the Committee's report?

Mark Pritchard: If we have the directors of all the intelligence agencies suggesting that China is a threat, it does not get much better than that. We have great deputy national security advisers, but their line managers—their directors, their bosses—were also clearly stating that China was a national security threat. In fact, the word “threat” is mentioned 284 times in that 207-page report.

The key word in this whole episode involving the deputy National Security Adviser—that is, the DNSA for intelligence, defence and security, not the other two remaining DNSAs, unless the Minister wants to correct me—is “active”. The question is whether China was an active threat, as underscored by the testimony to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy yesterday. The evidence in the ISC's report would suggest that China has been known to be an active threat for some time. I have mentioned the various reviews. Indeed, in his own witness statement, the DSNA refers to China conducting “large-scale espionage operations”. Again, this is not a historical reference or a past-tense reference; it is clearly referring to the here-and-now operations taking place today. There is clearly an active threat, not just a general or undetermined threat.

China being an active threat was also underscored by the director general of the Security Service's recent speech, in which he referred to China's

“cyber-espionage...clandestine technology transfer...interference in UK public life”

and

“harassment and intimidation of opponents”.

Once more, these threats are not just historical; they are current and active, happening in the UK right now. They have not stopped. They are increasing. They continue.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I am listening carefully to my right hon. Friend's excellent speech. Did he see, in the testimony yesterday, the intervention in which Sir Chris Wormald suddenly said that he did not believe that Ken McCallum, the chief of MI5, had described China as a threat? He intervened on the DNSA to make that point. That is fundamentally untrue, is it not?

Mark Pritchard: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. I think hon. Members will take their own view on who they think is the expert on national security. I think it will be Sir Ken McCallum, who is a long-serving and distinguished member of the UK intelligence community.

Chris Law: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Pritchard: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not, because I will not get another minute, and I want to make some progress and allow other colleagues to speak.

The director general's speech was explicit. The Security Service is very clear-eyed about the national security threat from China, even though Ministers might be tempted, arguably, to recalibrate and put economic interests over the UK's national security interests. I wonder whether there might be other factors at work here, too, including underlying vested interests and competing interests between different parts of Government, and even some conflicting personalities. We do not have time to go into that today. Today's debate is rightly focused on whether politics got in the way of national security.

A wider question might be why a political adviser was appointed to the role of National Security Adviser in the first place, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said. Perhaps there is something to see here. The current National Security Adviser has wide and vast experience, and I pay tribute to him for his important role in the Northern Ireland peace process and other peace-brokering exercises he has done around the world. There is absolutely no doubt that he is a long-standing, distinguished civil servant, but the fact that an outsider, rather than insider, became the National Security Adviser might be an issue as well. Some may see that as a strength, but today's proceedings might suggest that it could be a weakness in this case. There is a question mark about that, of course.

Back to China. The conclusions and recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee's inquiry on China talk about proper oversight. We need to ensure that, for example, the investment security unit has proper oversight by the ISC, because if there was ever a place where it was likely that politics would conflict with the economic interests of this country, it was that unit. That is absolutely critical. When politics gets too close to professional, cool, calm intelligence judgments, the situation will always be fraught with danger, as this country witnessed with the Iraq war. In conclusion, when—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Gareth Snell.

6.14 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) touched on several relevant points. There was a time in this House when a Member coming under attack and finding themselves on the wrong end of something was a moment of unification for us, and we would come together to find a way forward collectively. It should be of great regret to us all that following the events that happened to the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) and the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), we are throwing political rocks at one another about meetings that may or may not have happened over the last six or seven years. I do not know the hon. Lady, but I know the right hon. Gentleman. He is a gentleman of the utmost standing and principle, and I cannot imagine the horrors that he has been through and how much they have disrupted his life. We should keep that at the forefront of our minds in this debate.

[Gareth Snell]

We have had a complex relationship with China for the past decade. I cannot be the only one who is old enough to remember the pictures of the President of China pulling pints in the Plough with the former Prime Minister, who was subsequently the Foreign Secretary when some of what we are talking about was happening. We have not had a consistent approach to China publicly. I say “publicly”, because the evidence we have heard from various Opposition Members this evening makes it quite clear that officials in the last Government were naming China as a threat. They were using that terminology, but unfortunately the political faces of that Administration were not.

I will not get into the rights and wrongs of that, but it is clear that there has been inconsistency in the language applied to China throughout this period. If I were more legally minded, I would say that that may have led to the current situation, in which the CPS is saying one thing and the DNSA is saying something else, and we are getting the interpretation of an illustrious former Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox). By the way, I remember the debate in November 2017 when we argued for a Humble Address. Many Conservative Members said that it was a terrible idea to publish Government information, and it could never be done because it would undermine that information. They said that in the future, they might ask for such information and we would say no, and we are clearly at that point today.

We all invest a lot of time and energy into this job, and into our staff. We are at the mercy of the vetting services to make sure that the staff who work for us are looked into properly. We just do not know, for instance, whether operatives from other hostile states are active in staffing units. We can pretend we do, but we honestly do not. I hope we will get some answers from the Minister about how we have got to this point, but what I want to understand is how will we make sure that the same thing does not happen again.

How will we get to a point, in this Parliament, where we can be sure that every Member of Parliament—regardless of which political party they come from, the position they hold, their standing or their length of service—is free from such political interference, oversight and spying? How can we ensure that no more Members are sanctioned, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was? He has talked eloquently to the House on numerous occasions about the disruption to his life. For us to do our job properly, we must have confidence in the people around us and the advice we receive from officials, and we have to be certain that the processes that are in place to keep us safe are doing their job.

Ultimately, we all come here to do a job, and to do it well. We are only human, and we ought to hold at the forefront of our minds the fact that mistakes have been made—I think we would all agree on that; I do not think anyone can say, hand on heart, that everything has gone perfectly up to this point—but the key thing is how we learn from that and prevent it from happening again. That, Madam Deputy Speaker, is where I will draw my remarks to a conclusion.

6.18 pm

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), and I think he hit the nail on the head. I have been thinking throughout the debate that this is not just about the failure of the prosecution, but about our approach to China—not just this year, last year or during this Government; this has gone on for years and years. The sanctions were imposed in March 2021, which is four and a half years ago. Interestingly, neither the Government of the day nor the official Opposition demanded sanctions; it was the Speakers of the House of Commons and the House of Lords who responded by banning the Chinese ambassador from entering. It has been reported that at the time, the Government attempted to overturn that decision. The key point, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central has said, is crystal clear: all of us need to work on our lines and we need cast-iron assurances that, no matter where we have been in the past, going forward we will be very clear about the real threat that China poses.

China’s history tells us that already: six decades of military occupation in Tibet; the mass detention, re-education and forced sterilisation of the Uyghur population; we have witnessed democracy come under attack in Hong Kong time and again; and there is the ever-present threat against Taiwan. China runs a global influence operation and it has been acknowledged in this House that the united front has penetrated every sector of the United Kingdom’s economy. We have been well warned.

As I said earlier, and as has been repeated many times, in 2023 the Intelligence and Security Committee said that China was a “threat”, an “acute threat” and a “grave threat”. In 2022, the head of MI5, Ken McCallum, said that the Chinese threat

“might feel abstract. But it’s real and it’s pressing. We need to talk about it. We need to act.”

That is what we have failed to do until now.

If one of the key hinderances to the prosecution appears to be the concern that the Government would not be able to convince the jury that China was an enemy, how would the Minister describe a state that conducts long-term, large-scale espionage operations, including recruiting those who work in Parliament, and that poses a serious national security threat on these islands? Why has it taken the failure of this case for the Government to definitively state that China is a threat? Why has this position come as a response to an embarrassing political crisis?

Sir Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent and unanswerable case, but the trouble is that even in the circumstances of this case, the Government have not said that China is a threat. They keep saying that it poses a range of serious threats, but they keep baulking at saying that it is a threat. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has no hesitation in saying that China is a threat, and he should challenge the Government to do likewise.

Chris Law: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. China is a real and serious threat. I say that not just as an individual who happens to chair the all-party parliamentary group on Tibet, who is anxious about being spied on too, but on behalf of my party and of colleagues across the House who feel the real and present threat not only to ourselves but to our constituents.

Why has this position come as a response to an embarrassing political crisis, rather than as the principled position and proactive strategy for which so many of us have been calling for so many years? Why is it, as Luke de Pulford, executive director of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, put it that

“the Chinese Communist Party’s progress towards the ‘Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’...has met formidable resistance, not from governments, but little ole’ constituency MPs.”?

That is a really good question to consider.

The Government and the Opposition will squabble over who met with whom when, about who said what when, and about who they can blame to squeeze as much political one-upmanship from this case as possible, but the Chinese Communist party must be laughing at this House right now, as we ping-pong when it is clear that we need national security to be taken very seriously and we need to see China placed on the foreign influence registration scheme.

Public trust and the confidence of international allies are wavering, and the ongoing threat to our national security, democratic institutions and economic infrastructure remains. To conclude, it is time to end the inertia, caution and self-censorship from Whitehall and from Government when it comes to China, and to acknowledge, address and act on the threat that we continuously face.

6.22 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I put on record my anger at the collapse of the case. Colleagues have talked about the particulars of the case, so I will use the short time that I have available to broaden the lens and look again at the foundations of our security.

When the Conservative party brings Opposition day debates to the House, I attend because I am interested to hear the development of thinking in the party as it seeks to become a future Government. I also think about the party’s record in government and where it is going. I will make two points that I think the Opposition will disagree with, but I hope some Members will agree with my third point.

First, any Government, from whichever party, have a duty to invest in the institutions, infrastructure, capabilities and knowledge that enable our long-term advantage and security. Those are not built in five minutes, but they can be built in 14 years. It is my view that in the 14 years that the Conservatives were in power, they gave insufficient regard to building those things that can shore up our security.

Secondly, in cases where the Conservative Government did bother to build or pursue infrastructure, they opened the door to Chinese firms. While the Conservative leadership pretend to know what they think about China now, in truth they did not know what to think about China when they were in office, and that is an important reality to stare at. When it came to Huawei and 5G, the Conservatives were in, then they were out. When it came to nuclear, the Conservatives were in, then they were out. We are still unpacking George Osborne’s mistake on that front.

That contrasts sharply with the position of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I rediscovered his 2020 Hudson Institute speech, and I thought it was a very good insight into the situation at that time. Looking back at it five years on, it had considerable foresight on what has occurred. I am

very sorry and saddened that he has experienced what he has at the hands of the Chinese leadership—other colleagues have experienced the same—but he is in a minority in his party in standing up on these issues.

I do not believe that the Conservative leadership have been as clear in their thinking or as forceful in their condemnation, and for the leadership of the right hon. Gentleman’s party to now pretend that they were is inaccurate and does him a disservice. We should contrast his position with the words of the Leader of the Opposition when she was in Cabinet. As the Business Secretary pursuing business, she said:

“We certainly should not be describing China as a foe”.

We should contrast his position with that of one of the nine Conservative Foreign Secretaries, who said it would be “impossible, impractical and—most importantly—unwise”

to sum up China in one word as a threat. As a leadership team, the Conservatives need to stop throwing mud and to come to terms with what happened on their watch.

We must also look reality in the face: we cannot shy away from engagement with China. I bet that most Opposition Members have an iPhone in their pocket that was made in China; I bet they have other things in their home that were made in China. We must engage, but all of us in this Parliament must do so with our eyes wide open about the risks that that involves. Some of us in this Parliament have prophesied about that for many years and for longer than others, but we must be aware of that.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I was not going to intervene, but the hon. Gentleman made a statement about me justifying the position of the Opposition, as opposed to the Government. I assure him that had the two sides been switched, I would be carrying out exactly the same cross-examination that I have done today. No matter who has been in government, I seem to have been in opposition, and I want to say so. I am not doing this for any betterment; I am doing this because it is right.

Tom Hayes: I apologise if I misrepresented what I was saying. I was saying that throughout his time on these Benches, the right hon. Gentleman has been forceful in his condemnation. Whoever was in government, I believe that he would have done that, but I do not believe that the Conservative leadership either on the Opposition Benches or in office did the same. That is the point I was trying to make.

The Opposition called this debate to throw mud, but it is an opportunity to think about the wider security context in which we operate. As the months go on, I am intrigued to see what the Conservative party’s posture will be as it contemplates the security and intelligence environment we are in. Will it shy away from engagement with China—a significant market and economic opportunity for us—or seek to engage with China with its eyes wide open?

The Conservatives need to accept that they did less than they could have done in office to create the foundations for our security and economic growth. In so doing, they made us more vulnerable. Until they accept that and apologise for it, it begs the question: why should any of us in this Chamber and in the constituencies we represent listen to them ever again on the subject of keeping our country safe?

6.28 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The real threat to our security is not necessarily what others do in the shadows; it is what one's own Government hide from the light. That is the essence of what we are trying to get to in the motion before us—we are asking the Government to publish the papers.

Let me take a step back from this issue to look at the way in which the public will perceive it. This is the biggest spy story in this country's history, at least in this century. We can get into the tit-for-tat about what the PM did or did not know, whether the National Security Adviser speaks to his deputy or not, who told the deputy National Security Adviser that he needs to toe the Government line, and how the Labour manifesto got into the witness statements, but I want to concentrate more on the bigger picture.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) rightly pointed out the behaviour of the Government. The Prime Minister could have sorted this out by coming to the House and speaking about this topic. He could have laid it all out and put it all forward. The only thing we have had has been a statement before Prime Minister's questions. Of course, we Back Benchers cannot ask questions after such statements—there is no way for us to do so. If the Government are so angry, why is more action not being taken? Why are people not being fired, and why are we still having this debate several weeks on if all the information is so crystal clear that this House can move on?

I am worried that this is a pattern of behaviour with the Prime Minister, because we saw this with the ambassador. The Prime Minister was the decision maker on that issue, but he did not come to this House; he sent one of his Ministers. I expect that the retort from Labour Members will be, "It was always thus", but the reason this saddens me so much is that the Prime Minister is being judged by the standard that he set. He said that he would do things differently, but he is not. He is not coming to the House to explain when he could do so. We know that the information and the decisions rest with him.

When I pushed the Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), about leadership last time, that was not directed at him—I have a great deal of respect for him. He is following the leadership of the Prime Minister, who has not come to this House to explain what is going on. If this issue is as clearcut as Labour Members have said, that would be an easy case to make and this House would believe the Prime Minister, but we are not there. That is why I worry, because it leads to a wider debate and wider concerns among the public about whether something is going on.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the most obvious point is that, despite the Government's disappointment at the collapse of the trial—we have heard numerous Ministers, including the Prime Minister himself, stress that—it is shocking that they appear not to have done every single thing possible to bolster the case and put the CPS in the best possible position to secure a prosecution? The two just do not add up.

Dr Evans: Absolutely. Not only have the Government not done anything with the case, there are wider debates that could take place—about what legislation needs to change and other measures that could be included in the Budget, for example.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is true that the Government have repeatedly expressed disappointment, but—still more disturbingly, in a sense—so has MI5. It is quite unusual for MI5 to intervene, by means of a speech by its head which made it very clear that MI5 was profoundly disappointed that this matter had not gone to court. Had it done so, it would have been the culmination of years of work done by MI5 to try to deal with Chinese espionage in Whitehall and Westminster.

Dr Evans: My right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. It is because of these unprecedented facts that I would expect the Prime Minister to come forward and provide answers, not send a Minister in his place.

Peter Swallow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Evans: I will not, because I have taken two interventions already. My worry is about what the public perceive, because it is a statement of fact that since the Chancellor went to China, decisions have been made about the Chagos islands, for example, or British Steel and £1 billion—what is going on there? A spy case has now been dropped, and there is the possibility of a super-embassy and even ID cards. My constituents are coming to me seeing a running theme.

Tom Hayes: When I hear the hon. Gentleman speak, I listen to what he is saying—I think he could be a very good replacement for the shadow Minister on the Front Bench. The question I want to ask, though, is this: what is his view on the relationship of the UK to China? Ought we to engage and, if so, on what terms, or should we be economically decoupling? What is his view about the nature of that relationship?

Dr Evans: To repeat the quote we heard earlier, we need to walk and chew gum at the same time. It is easy to call China a threat, but still to engage. That is exactly what the Chinese Government do to us: they say, "We're embarrassed. We're upset. You promised us something", and we just say, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry about that." We could stand up for ourselves and say what we think. Let us not forget that we are in a trade deficit with China; it is economically in China's interest to be working with us, as much as it is in our interest to be working with China.

My worry, though, is that the public are joining dots. The Government will say that there are no dots to be joined, but the longer this goes on and the more incidents come out, it becomes harder to make that argument. That brings us full circle to where I started, because this is about transparency and releasing the documentation.

Peter Swallow: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way and for bringing us back to where he started. He started his speech by suggesting that the Government were intervening unduly in this case. He then went on to suggest that the Government did not intervene unduly enough. Can he be clear on this: is his position and that

of the Opposition that the Government should have interfered in an independent prosecution, or not? It is unhelpful to be saying both things at the same time.

Dr Evans: I feel I am being misquoted, because I have simply asked for all this to be resolved by publishing the information. The Government could come out and say that China is a threat. I have also said that we can call it a threat and work economically with the Chinese. That is what I hope will happen. *[Interruption.]* I will finish at that point.

6.35 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): My hon. and right hon. Friends have set out well how the Government's account of how the case collapsed simply does not add up, so in the interests of time I will make just this one point. If, as many on the Opposition Benches and I suspect to be the case, the Prime Minister's account of this situation is not factually correct, he has allowed this case to collapse to win favour in Beijing. That is a profound state of weakness.

Even if the Prime Minister's account of the situation is true, that means he does not have control over his officials. Serious national security decisions are being made without his knowledge. That, too, is a profound state of weakness. It is important to establish the facts.

Peter Swallow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Katie Lam: I regret that I cannot; I promised to speak briefly.

Whatever the facts may be, this is not how serious countries behave. Regardless of our politics, we should all want our country to be respected by our friends and our adversaries. Under this Government, our friends see us as unreliable and our adversaries see us as a pushover. It is time for the Government to tell the truth and undo some of the harm that they have done to this country's standing in the world.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I will be starting the Front-Bench contributions at 6.40 sharp.

6.36 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Among all the finger-pointing in this House, there are some immutable facts, and one is that in the spring of 2024, the evidential burden to bring a prosecution was met, because the CPS levelled a charge that the two individuals were guilty under the 1911 Act of having information capable of assisting an enemy. The first point is that a deficiency in the 1911 Act is not the problem, because the CPS was capable of bringing the charge. The second point is that to bring the charge, the evidential tests for bringing a prosecution had to be met: that there was a reasonable prospect of conviction and that it was in the public interest.

The unanswered question in all this is what happened between the spring of 2024 and September 2025, when suddenly the same evidential test was not met. What changed? It was met, or the charges could never have been brought, but suddenly it was not met and the charges were dropped. It seems pretty clear from what has been said to a Committee of this House that what

changed was that the Government backed off in their evidence as to what would establish whether China was an enemy.

The Government were assisted in the meantime by the Bulgarian case, where the Court of Appeal refined "enemy" to "posing threat or threats". Indeed, the Court said it was a matter of common sense as to whether something or someone was an enemy. There is no greater jury question than to decide whether or not something is common sense. The prosecution looked easier after the Court of Appeal decision, not harder, yet the prosecution was dropped. That is yet to be explained to this House. It seems to me that it can only be explained by the Government's failing to come up to proof. Since they had come up to proof to bring the charge in the first place, they obviously retreated. We can talk around this as much as we like, but that seems to me to be the immovable reality of the situation.

There are, of course, issues here about the equivocation of the Government towards China, but it is an equivocation that is even infecting devolution. Coming up in Northern Ireland is a co-sponsored conference between the Chinese Government and the Sinn Féin Economy Minister to talk about infrastructure and investment. I say to this Government that they need to take a long, hard look at the way in which devolved institutions, particularly in Stormont, are playing footsie with the Chinese Government.

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

6.40 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): "In my opinion, China poses an active and current threat to the United Kingdom." That is all that the Government needed to say to the Crown Prosecution Service in order to secure this conviction, and yet they did not.

As recently as 12 days ago, the director general of M15 said that China posed a daily threat. In July 2022, he and his FBI counterpart said that China was posing a growing threat. The former Security Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), said it in April 2024, from that Dispatch Box, and the July 2021 integrated review said that China posed the "biggest state-based threat to the UK's economic security."

It is pretty simple. I have said it, and the Government could have said it, but they did not.

The Government's commentary on this case has been evasive and sometimes misleading. For example, the Prime Minister claimed in India, on 7 October, that what mattered in this case was the previous Government's designation of China. He said it again, from that Dispatch Box, on 15 October. He said that the issue was the position of the last Government, and the Paymaster General said it again in his opening speech. That claim, made by the Prime Minister and made again by the Paymaster General earlier today, is categorically untrue. We know it is untrue because on page 4 of his letter, the Director of Public Prosecutions said it was untrue. He said:

"The test was therefore positively not what the then Government was prepared to... say in public...whether framed as...policy or otherwise...but...whether China was—as a matter of fact—an active threat to national security."

He said it again in evidence yesterday. He said:

"We were looking to the DNSA to provide evidence of the actual threat...and not what government policy was."

[Chris Philp]

The DPP has said that categorically in writing and in evidence yesterday. What the Prime Minister said was misleading, and I ask this Minister, the Security Minister, to retract it on the Prime Minister's behalf.

Moreover, the Security Minister himself said on 15 September that the collapse of the case had come as a big surprise to the Government, and that they heard about it only that morning. He said:

"the decision was communicated this morning".—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 1187.]

That, I am afraid, was not true. The decision was communicated on 3 September at the latest, and it most certainly did not come as a surprise to the Government.

It was not the case that, as the Minister claimed, he could not comment on why the case had collapsed, as if he did not know about it, because on no fewer than nine different occasions, according to the DPP, the Crown Prosecution Service pleaded with the Government—begged the Government—to say those simple words that I said a couple of minutes ago and the Government, over two years, refused to say. In June 2024, December 2024, February 2025, May 2025, July 2025—twice, on 3 and 10 July—August 2025, 3 September 2025 and 9 September 2025, the CPS begged the Government to say those simple words, and the Government would not say them. Why exactly was the Security Minister acting all surprised on 15 September, claiming that he did not know what was going on, when on nine separate occasions the CPS had pleaded with the Government?

Now we come to the meeting of 1 September, a meeting that the Home Secretary, quoted in *The Telegraph* on 5 October, claimed did not happen. Well, we now know that it did happen. What we do not know, however, is precisely what was discussed at that meeting. We have not seen the minutes of it, and we do not know the actions arising from it. We do know that it was chaired by Jonathan Powell, the National Security Adviser. We know that many people were there. We know that the deputy National Security Adviser, Matt Collins, was there. We also know that on 14 August, two and a half weeks before that meeting, he attended a conference that included the First Treasury Counsel, at which it became clear that Mr Collins would not change his evidence, and the case would therefore collapse. So Mr Collins went into that meeting on 1 September, most likely knowing that the case was unlikely to proceed. Was that discussed? Was the possibility of providing more evidence discussed in that meeting? We do not know. That is why the minutes need to be published.

We know for a fact that, on 3 September, the Director of Public Prosecutions informed the Cabinet Secretary and the DNSA that the case was not going to be proceeding on the evidence as it stood. The DPP also said in page 6 of his letter:

"It was agreed that"

the Cabinet Secretary

"might inform a limited group, including some ministers."

I therefore ask the Security Minister to tell the House now which Ministers were informed pursuant to that meeting on 3 September, and whether they took any action as a result—for example, deciding to provide better evidence, which they could have done. It was

recently reported in *The Sunday Times* that the Home Secretary got wind of this around that time, and decided to try to intervene.

I did ask the Security Minister this in an urgent question last week, and many of my hon. Friends did as well, but he did not answer the question, so perhaps he now can: when did the Home Secretary become aware of the collapse of the trial? Did she try to intervene? If so, how? It is quite clear that the Government, had they wanted to, could have intervened between 3 September, when the Cabinet Secretary was informed and was given permission to inform Ministers, and the meeting on 9 September, six days later, when the CPS tried, one last time—at least the ninth time—to get the evidence it needed, but, once again, it was not forthcoming.

Did the Government have any discussions in that period, between 3 and 9 September, about further evidence that they might have provided? If they did not, why not? A few simple words were all that were needed—words not about the previous Government's policy, but about the facts as they stood on the ground. I uttered those words just a few minutes ago—it was simple enough—and if this Government had said what I said a few minutes ago, this case would have proceeded. Why did they choose not to do that?

Members of this Parliament have been spied on by a hostile state: a state that has stolen intellectual property on an industrial scale, both covertly and through acquisition; a state that plans to build a large embassy, probably for espionage purposes among other things; a state that has opened secret police stations; a state that has put bounties on the heads of people living in the United Kingdom; and a state that has actively supported Russia in its war against Ukraine. The Government could not produce evidence that it was an active and current threat, even though I think it is quite clear to everyone in this Chamber that it was.

Why did the Government not provide the evidence they were asked to provide at least nine times? Is it because they are more interested in getting some sort of economic bailout from the Chinese, to fix the mess they have created, than they are in our national security? That is the question they need to answer.

If this House and the country are to understand exactly what happened with this case, we need full transparency and full disclosure: the minutes of those meetings, the actions arising from them, and the correspondence with the CPS. If they really want transparency—as the Minister for the Cabinet Office said earlier—all they have to do is support this motion and put this material where it belongs: in the public domain.

6.48 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I begin by thanking the Opposition for bringing forward this Opposition day debate, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for moving this motion, and the shadow Home Secretary for his remarks.

As I have repeatedly set out to the House, the Government are extremely disappointed that this case will not be heard in court. I also share Members' concerns about the threats that we face from espionage.

Bradley Thomas: Will the Minister give way?

Dan Jarvis: I am just going to make a bit of progress. Let me be clear about two things right from the start. First, we would not be discussing this here today had the outdated Official Secrets Act 1911 been replaced sooner. Secondly, it is the responsibility of the CPS and the DPP to bring criminal prosecutions and compile evidence. The statements submitted to the JCNSS confirm that, as does the evidence that the Joint Committee heard yesterday from the Cabinet Secretary and the DNSA.

We have been consistently clear that no Ministers and no special advisers interfered in the provision of evidence under this Government.

Mark Pritchard: Can the Security Minister confirm to the House that the UK Government, at ministerial level and diplomatic level, have not been threatened by the Chinese state about this trial? Has it said, “If this trial goes ahead, there will be consequences”? Is the Minister aware of any discussions or any correspondence, either from the Chinese embassy or directly from Chinese Ministers to ours, that threatens this nation?

Dan Jarvis: I say to the right hon. Gentleman—whom I hold in high regard, not least for the work that he did on the ISC—that I can give him the assurances that he seeks. I can also assure him and the House how seriously this Government take the challenges that we face from countries right around the world.

Let me return to the DNSA’s evidence. As his written evidence makes clear—this is an important point that the House will want to note—from the moment the DNSA’s witness statement was submitted, he was a fully bound witness in criminal proceedings. His evidence had not yet been heard or tested in court, so his witness evidence could not be and was not shared, and this was later confirmed by the CPS.

In this debate and in recent weeks, there have been a number of different, and at times conflicting, claims about this Government’s involvement in the case, and I want to address those claims directly today. At the DNSA’s request, the word “enemy” was removed from the first witness statement during the drafting process, because it did not reflect the Government’s policy at the time. The DNSA made amendments to ensure that his witness statement text reflected his assessment of the strongest elements of the evidential material provided by Counter Terrorism Policing, by demonstrating that the information that was alleged to have been provided was prejudicial to the safety or the interests of the UK.

When CTP approached the DNSA to write a supplementary statement in November 2024, he was specifically asked to comment on whether China posed an active threat to the UK’s national security during the period of 31 December 2021 to 3 February 2023, and to confirm whether that remains the position at the time of writing. That is why paragraph 6 of the second statement references part of the current Government policy towards China.

Dr Luke Evans: The Minister is making a powerful point about the active threat. At this point in time, do the Government perceive China to be an active threat?

Dan Jarvis: As the hon. Gentleman knows—I think I may have even said this to him previously, and certainly to the House—China presents a series of threats to the Government. I will say a little bit more about that.

As time is short, I want to focus on the DNSA and the evidence that he has given, because that is important for the House. The DNSA confirmed to the JCNSS yesterday that he used language from an answer to a parliamentary question in his third statement, in which he provided the current Government’s position as context, as had been requested. The DNSA’s third statement was written in a way that ensured consistency with his first two statements.

For the sake of clarity, I will say it again: the current National Security Adviser had no role in either the substance of the case or the evidence provided. There has been misreporting, speculation and fabrication about the officials’ meeting that the National Security Adviser chaired on 1 September—the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) mentioned it just a moment ago. I can tell him and the House that a meeting of senior officials took place on 1 September to discuss the UK’s relationship with China. The meeting was specifically set up to provide—

Sir Geoffrey Cox: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Dan Jarvis: Let me just finish my point. I will come back to the right hon. and learned Gentleman if time allows.

The meeting was specifically set up to provide the FCDO with an opportunity to discuss—at an appropriately senior official level; no Ministers attended the meeting—what the approach would be to handling engagement with China across a range of scenarios related to this case, as well as in relation to wider issues that would come up. Those who attended the meeting were operating on the basis that the trial would go ahead at the start of October.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith *rose*—

Sir Geoffrey Cox *rose*—

Dan Jarvis: I am going to make a bit of progress, because time is against me.

Meetings such as this are a routine part of the NSA’s role.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Sir Geoffrey Cox: The Minister did say he would give way to me.

Dan Jarvis: I am going to make a bit of progress, because time is against me.

Meetings such as this are a routine part of the National Security Adviser’s role of co-ordinating Departments across Government.

Sir Geoffrey Cox: Will the Minister give way on the question of who was present?

Dan Jarvis: Yes.

Sir Geoffrey Cox: Why was the Attorney General’s Office represented and present? If the meeting had nothing to do with the case, why was the Attorney General’s Office present through its representative?

Dan Jarvis: Simply because a number of Departments were represented at this meeting, as would normally be the case.

Sir Geoffrey Cox: The Attorney General's Office has nothing to do with foreign policy.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. and learned Gentleman served in a Government a number of years ago. I can give him an assurance that this Government work collaboratively across Government with other Departments, and therefore it seems to make perfect sense that other Departments would be represented at such a meeting.

I will try to reflect some of the points that have been made in this debate, including the point from the shadow Home Secretary, who asked specifically about the Home Secretary. I can tell him and the House that no Minister—no Minister in this Government—was involved in any aspect of the production of evidence.

Chris Philp: Will the Minister give way?

Dan Jarvis: The Liberal Democrats spokesman, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), offered his service as a marriage guidance counsellor. I would advise him not to give up his job.

Chris Philp *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Minister, please continue.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) nailed the myths, I thought very effectively, in his contribution. The right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox) described his duck. It felt as if his contribution was as much aimed at the DPP and the CPS as at the Government, but it was engaging none the less. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) raised important points about some of the critiques that have been levelled, and I agree with him about trying to establish cross-party consensus.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green spoke about the nature and the description of the threats we face from China. Let me say to him that it is completely unacceptable that he and other Members of this House are sanctioned, and I give him an absolute assurance of the seriousness with which this Government take those particular threats. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) spoke about transnational repression. He has raised it previously, and I can tell him that the defending democracy taskforce has concluded a review, and the Government have developed a range of support and security mechanisms. Most importantly, however, we condemn any malign activity towards anyone here in the UK.

The right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) spoke about the work of the ISC, and he was right to do so. The Government welcome the work of the ISC in looking carefully at the circumstances of this case, as we do the important work of the JCNSS. I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) made the really important point that, given the concerns that have rightly been expressed right across this House about what has happened, we should be trying to seek to work together and establish a consensus. I thought he made that point very powerfully.

Time is running short, so let me say to the House that national security is the first duty of this Government. That is why we oppose the Opposition's motion, which would see the release not only of information subject to legal professional privilege, but of information vital to the security of the United Kingdom, including advice to the Prime Minister. Successive Governments, including the previous Government in which the shadow Home Secretary served as a Minister, have maintained that position. This is not a question about parliamentary scrutiny. We welcome the ongoing process with the JCNSS, and we look forward to continuing to work with it, as we do with the ISC. This Government will continue to develop a consistent and pragmatic approach to economic engagement, but without compromising our national security.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I have a very simple question: if the Minister will not give the minutes of that meeting to the House, will he give them to the Intelligence and Security Committee, which sits in camera?

Dan Jarvis: The Government have given a very clear commitment that we will co-operate and work closely with all of the Committees of this House.

It is precisely because everything this Government do is rooted in the national interest that I say that this Government are extremely disappointed that this case has collapsed. It is right that the matter is being investigated by the appropriate parliamentary Committees, and we look forward to co-operating with that work.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 174, Noes 327.

Division No. 330]

[6:59 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Coghlan, Chris
Amos, Gideon	Collins, Victoria
Anderson, Stuart	Cooper, Daisy
Andrew, rh Stuart	Costa, Alberto
Aquarone, Steff	Coutinho, rh Claire
Argar, rh Edward	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Babarinde, Josh	Cross, Harriet
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Dance, Adam
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Darling, Steve
Barclay, rh Steve	Davey, rh Ed
Bedford, Mr Peter	Davies, Ann
Bennett, Alison	Davies, Gareth
Berry, Siân	Davies, Mims
Bhatti, Saqib	Dean, Bobby
Blackman, Bob	Dillon, Mr Lee
Bool, Sarah	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Bowie, Andrew	Doogan, Dave
Brandreth, Aphra	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Brewer, Alex	Dyke, Sarah
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Easton, Alex
Burghart, Alex	Eastwood, Sorcha
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Evans, Dr Luke
Cane, Charlotte	Farron, Tim
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Foord, Richard
Cartlidge, James	Forster, Mr Will
Chadwick, David	Fortune, Peter
Chamberlain, Wendy	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Chambers, Dr Danny	Franklin, Zöe
Chope, Sir Christopher	French, Mr Louie
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Fuller, Richard
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Cocking, Lewis	Garnier, Mark

George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Bobby Dean*)
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran

Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nick Timothy and
David Reed

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas

Alexander, rh Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine

Atkinson, Lewis
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Kendall, rh Liz

Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast
 by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)

Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Seward, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine

Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony

Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
 Gregor Poynton and
 Imogen Walker

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 (Mutual Recognition Agreement) (Switzerland) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 21 July, be approved.—(*Jade Botterill.*)

Question agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT (NOVEMBER, CHRISTMAS AND FEBRUARY)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Wednesday 5 November 2025, do adjourn until Tuesday 11 November 2025; at its rising on Thursday 18 December 2025, do adjourn until Monday 5 January 2026; and at its rising on Thursday 12 February 2026, do adjourn until Monday 23 February 2026.—(*Jade Botterill.*)

Question agreed to.

EDUCATION

Ordered,

That Amanda Martin and Marie Tidball be discharged from the Education Committee and Peter Swallow and Chris Vince be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Support for Disabled Veterans

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jade Botterill.)

7.14 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the issues faced by disabled veterans. At the last census, more than 3,000 people in Eastleigh reported that they had previously served in the armed forces; of those people, 1,045 are classified as disabled. Veterans have made huge sacrifices for our country, yet too often they find that the systems that are meant to support them are inconsistent or simply not fit for purpose.

I have previously raised the case of my constituent Mark Houghton MBE in this Chamber and written to the Minister about it. Mark is a decorated Army veteran who served with distinction for over two decades in the British Army. He was deployed in Afghanistan, Estonia and Latvia. In February this year, Mark suffered catastrophic injuries in an accident while working abroad. Mark cannot walk, yet he has been denied access to the personal independent payment and employment and support allowance because he did not reside in the UK for 18 months out of the last three years.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is great that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. Nearly half of UK veterans report being disabled. That figure is far higher than it is for the general population. Many of our disabled veterans receive military compensation, as my hon. Friend said, to support them with an injury or illness caused by service. Does she agree that it is an absolute disgrace that military compensation is included when people are means-tested for certain benefits? That leaves so many veterans and their families disadvantaged.

Liz Jarvis: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for her intervention. I will come to that point later.

During Mark's time abroad, he paid UK taxes, and he is now back in the UK permanently, yet he has been blocked from accessing continuous care and financial support because of the residency criteria. The emotional toll on Mark and his family has been enormous. They have been forced to sell their home of more than 20 years. In his words,

"I fought for this country. I've paid my taxes all my life. And now because I was abroad for 18 months I am made to suffer. I feel deserted, unwanted...abandoned. It's devastating".

I am sure the Minister will agree that this is an appalling way to treat a veteran. The armed forces covenant states that members of the armed forces community should be treated with dignity and respect, but in this case, as in so many others, that simply is not happening.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The armed forces covenant all too often does not live up to what people expect. I have a constituent who has struggled to access housing suitable for his needs. He has two children, but because he suffers with post-traumatic stress disorder and wakes up in the night with night terrors, the children are not able to stay with him. Does my hon. Friend agree that when it comes to housing, we need to do much more to support those who have served?

Liz Jarvis: I do agree with my hon. Friend. I am sure that the Minister wants to champion disabled veterans, so does she agree that Mark deserves support now?

Sadly, Mark is one of the many veterans across this country facing systemic challenges. Veterans report feeling unprepared for civilian life after medical discharge, as the system is unclear and inconsistent.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I recently spoke with Gloucestershire resident and British Army veteran Chris, who has been confined to a wheelchair since a jungle warfare training accident in 1998. He spoke of the obstacle of pride, and of how too many personnel decline to seek help until a point of crisis, if ever. He would have benefited from a regimental or service advocate, who could intervene either early on or post discharge to motivate and support those affected before it was too late. Does my hon. Friend agree that such support could help bridge the feeling of abandonment that injured veterans often feel after discharge?

Liz Jarvis: I agree with my hon. Friend.

Too often, the system fails to provide a simple, supported handover to civilian healthcare, or advice on housing, employment and benefits. Charities and veterans' groups are calling for an independent review of the medical discharge process across all services to make it consistent, compassionate and genuinely supportive, so that no disabled veteran falls through the cracks, or is left without the best possible support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on bringing forward this debate. The armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland needs to be upgraded as well. The covenant is only as good as the authority that implements it. Does she agree that a review must be carried out to ensure improvements in how our veterans are helped, especially those who have been left with physical or mental trauma? We must review the situation in every constituency of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Every soldier needs to be looked after.

Liz Jarvis: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

According to Help for Heroes, veterans with complex mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder, often face long waits for mental health treatment. Although the armed forces covenant promises priority treatment for service-related conditions, the reality on the ground can fall short. In England, Op Courage is a welcome single front door for veteran mental health, but there remain issues with consistency, capacity and specialist expertise. We need an improved Op Courage pathway with a common assessment tool, better signposting from GPs and acute trusts, and an explicit requirement that practitioners delivering care have expertise in military mental health. Access should be seamless across the UK, so that when it comes to support, there is no postcode lottery.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): On the Mental Health Bill Committee, we spoke repeatedly about veterans experiencing mental ill health, often linked to trauma from their service. They often end up in a system that does not recognise their trauma and what they have been through. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be a good idea to have a dedicated role of veterans'

[Dr Danny Chambers]

mental health oversight officer? The Lib Dems have been calling for such an officer, so that we can ensure that veterans receive the understanding and tailored care that they deserve.

Liz Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I agree with him.

The Royal British Legion has noted the structural failure to automatically transfer a service leaver's medical records to the NHS. Service leavers must request their full clinical records from Defence Medical Services, which is under the Ministry of Defence. That can take several months. Delays in accessing those records often result in difficulties obtaining civilian healthcare services or financial housing support. I understand that the Government have committed to digitising service medical records through Programme Cortisone, but can the Minister provide a timetable for completion? The delivery of that programme is essential to ensure timely access to services and continuity of care. Meeting the needs of the armed forces community, including those with disabilities, clearly relies on our knowing who and where they are, and how they access services and support.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I want to highlight a technicality that affects veterans who served before 1987. Prior to the Crown Proceedings (Armed Forces) Act 1987, veterans were unable to bring compensation claims against the Ministry of Defence. The 1987 Act changed that, but cannot be applied retrospectively, so pre-1987 veterans remain excluded. Does my hon. Friend agree that that needs to be looked at to ensure consistent compensation support for disabled veterans across the United Kingdom?

Liz Jarvis: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I am sure that the Minister will address that.

Veterans who use Government services often report having to set out their veteran status or repeat details of their time in service to multiple agencies. The Government must establish improved collection and sharing of data to help deliver tailored support. Disabled veterans frequently struggle with the PIP process, as the complex forms and assessments can be difficult to navigate, and the situation is made worse by the need to repeat traumatic information.

When health and benefit systems fail, financial hardship is the result. According to the Trussell Trust, veterans are twice as likely to run out of food as people who have never served in the armed forces, and a third of veterans with a physical disability or mental condition regularly go without the essentials. I hope that the Government will tackle that in the Budget next month, and will ensure that veterans never have to struggle to cover the essentials. We know that financial insecurity and poor living conditions can make health conditions worse, so there needs to be greater urgency in ensuring that the benefit system supports the nation's heroes with the cost of living.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): I thank the hon. Lady very much for securing the debate, and for her generosity in taking so many interventions. In Clackmannanshire, we have the Wee County Veterans and Supporters Group, which provides incredible support

and camaraderie to ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen. However, it is incredibly dismayed at the withdrawal of the armed services advice project from RBL, which has been replaced with a generic telephone service. I consider that to be a serious downgrade from RBL. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Liz Jarvis: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I understand he has raised that issue in the House before, and no doubt the Minister will address it in due course.

I pay tribute to the Royal British Legion, Help for Heroes and SSAFA for their advocacy on behalf of disabled veterans. The Royal British Legion's "credit their service" campaign has highlighted that military compensation awarded for pain and loss in service is too often treated as ordinary income when people are means-tested for benefits, including council tax support, housing benefit and disabled facilities grants.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): John, who lives in Fivehead, lost his hearing due to inadequate ear protection on the practice firing range, and he receives compensation as a result. He has never claimed benefits. However, if he needs to apply for them in future, his compensation payments will disadvantage him. That is contrary to the armed forces covenant. Does my hon. Friend agree that military compensation for disability should not count when people are being means-tested for benefits, and that veterans should not be penalised?

Liz Jarvis: I absolutely agree. The situation is wrong in principle and damaging in practice. Military and civilian compensation should be treated the same. The Government should amend the legislation and guidance, so that military compensation is fully disregarded in means-tested benefits, and so that there is national consistency where there is currently a postcode lottery. For example, the means test for disabled facilities grants, which fund home adaptations, can deter those on modest incomes. Decisions are inconsistent, and the treatment of military compensation varies. Ministers should work with local government to remove those barriers, and guarantee timely adaptations for disabled veterans.

Rehabilitation is another area where the standard drops after discharge. While serving, severely wounded personnel can access world-class multidisciplinary rehabilitation, including cutting-edge devices, at the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre. However, once they leave service and the lifespan of those devices expires, replacing them becomes the responsibility of the NHS, which generally provides equipment of lower quality and utility. Help for Heroes is calling for an NHS rehabilitation pathway for veterans that provides an equivalent level of care, and that guarantees like-for-like replacement of essential aids and devices initially provided by Defence Medical Services.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I commend the hon. Member for bringing forward this debate. As a representative from Northern Ireland, I am conscious that it is where many of our veterans suffered the injury that gave them their disability; they were defending us from the terrorism of various organisations. For that, we owe a debt of gratitude; their sacrifice is well marked at this time of the year.

Flowing from that, in Northern Ireland, there is the victims' permanent disablement payment scheme, administered from Northern Ireland but available to all veterans across the United Kingdom who suffered their disability in Northern Ireland. Sadly, despite thousands having been injured, fewer than 1,000 veterans from GB have applied to the fund. It provides a monthly payment and the possibility of a 10-year lump sum. Through this debate, may I urge veterans in GB who suffered their injury in Northern Ireland to apply to that scheme before it closes for applications on 31 August next year?

Liz Jarvis: I thank the hon. and learned Member for his intervention.

For the most seriously injured, integrated personal commissioning for veterans can be transformative, but eligibility is too narrow; it excludes those injured before 2010 and those in residential care. The Royal British Legion is pushing the Government to increase investment in adult social care to meet the needs of the armed forces community. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government will ensure that social care reforms reflect covenant commitments?

Veterans are being let down across the board. They need much better help with the cost of living crisis. That is why I support the establishment of an Office for Veterans' Affairs, and the launch of an inquiry on the impact of the cost of living crisis on the armed forces community. More needs to be done for unpaid carers, and to fight stigma around mental ill health, as more than half of veterans say that they have had a mental health problem, and 60% say that they find it hard to speak up about mental health issues.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on holding such an important debate. A veteran in my Redditch constituency lives with severe PTSD and finds everyday noise—banging, shouting and even children playing—deeply debilitating. He would greatly benefit from a service dog, but his accommodation is too small and is without a secure garden. Does she agree that veterans and their families deserve access to housing that properly meets their physical and mental health needs, including space for vital assistance animals, and that they should not be asked to settle for second best?

Liz Jarvis: I absolutely agree.

More also needs to be done for unpaid carers and to fight the stigma around mental health, as more than half of veterans say that they have had a mental health problem and 60% say that they find it hard to speak up about mental health issues. We also need better recording of veterans' physical and mental health outcomes, including waiting times, so that we can see where services are falling short. That would allow us to work in this House to address that. Above all, military compensation for illness or injury should not count towards means-testing for benefits.

My constituency of Eastleigh has a unique and proud connection with our armed forces through the Spitfire and the role our community played in securing victory in the second world war. This Remembrance Day, I will also be paying tribute to the disabled veterans in my constituency who, like Mark Houghton, served our country with honour but now feel left behind and let down. Our veterans deserve so much more: better

mental health support; easier access to professional help; regular mental health check-ups at key life points; fair benefits that respect lived reality; and consistent data so that we can fix what is failing. I appreciate the time the Minister has given to this debate, and I hope that she will take on board the points I have made.

7.30 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): I very much welcome this debate on disabled veterans. It is a hugely important topic, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) for securing it and for speaking so passionately about the subject, which I know is dear to so many. I thank her for her excellent speech and everybody else for their thought-provoking contributions. As she rightly stated, almost a third of UK veterans have some form of disability, so this is an issue that affects every constituency and every community across the country. I will always welcome scrutiny of what we are doing to support disabled veterans and how we deliver the very best care and support for those who have served.

This is not just a professional imperative for me; it is personal. I served in the Army and I have worked alongside many soldiers and officers who were injured and who today carry the physical and mental scars from their service. Many are able to carry those as part of their day-to-day life, but many really feel the impact on their personal lives.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): My office is supporting a veteran with complex PTSD who has experienced a judicial process that simply does not adequately reflect the specific needs of some veterans. Does the Minister accept that veterans with conflict-related PTSD can function well in many or most aspects of life but may be especially affected or triggered in confrontational or adversarial settings such as court proceedings? Will she endorse the adoption of trauma-informed practice and proper training within the judiciary on the presentations of complex PTSD to help ensure fair treatment and, crucially, to ensure that veterans are not retraumatised by the system? I want to add that I had very good conversations with the previous Veterans Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), on this issue before the hon. Lady took on the role.

Louise Sandher-Jones: The hon. Member is absolutely right to draw attention to the importance of a trauma-informed response. If she is able to write to me with details of the case, I will take a look at it.

I was speaking about those I served alongside and about veterans across the country. They answered when our country called them, so it is now up to us to renew the contract with those who served.

I would like briefly to address some of the points that hon. Members have made. A point was raised by a couple of hon. Members about the interplay of military benefits, compensations, allowances and pensions, and the existing benefits system. As I am sure they are aware, there is a complex range of benefits, and the way in which they interact with the benefits system can be complicated. It is important to note that there is a principle about duplication. For example, where military compensation is received through the independence payment, there is a principle of duplication with regard

[*Louise Sandher-Jones*]

to the personal independence payment. A lot of military compensation allowances do not necessarily directly affect entitlement to benefits and have different impacts on tax.

The hon. and gallant Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) made a point about veterans not always reaching out to seek help. I hope he is aware of the recently announced Valour scheme, which will be a regional network of physical hubs. I passionately believe in the strength of those hubs because a veteran will be able to go in with absolutely no obligation, have a cup of tea and speak to people who understand. Veterans will gain trust and comfort from that, and therefore find it easier to talk about the issues they face and the support they need. I hope we will be able to announce more details soon, because I believe those hubs will help significantly.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the gallant Minister for giving way. On the point about the complex benefits ecosystem, I have fantastic charities in my constituency called Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans, which do an excellent job supporting veterans as they apply for welfare. Will the Minister join me in congratulating charities across the country that work every single day to support our veterans?

Louise Sandher-Jones: We are fortunate to have a wonderful charity sector made up of charities both large and small, some with quite broad remits and some, as my hon. Friend mentions, very focused. I am always blown away by people's dedication to supporting our veterans, and I applaud their valuable work.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) for securing this debate. Where the state falls down, so often the charitable sector and amazing volunteers are there to pick up the pieces. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to some of the incredible charities in my Surrey Heath constituency, which, as she knows, is deeply connected to the military through the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Pirbright and the former Deepcut barracks? I think in particular of the recently reconstituted branch of the Camberley Royal British Legion, but also the Surrey Heath veterans hub and incredible volunteers such as Roy Sellstrom, who have for years given time and effort to rehabilitating and supporting our very well respected veteran community.

Louise Sandher-Jones: As the hon. Member knows, I spent some time in his constituency while at Sandhurst. It is an area with deep connections to the armed forces, and I certainly join him in applauding them and the charities that he mentions.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and, I believe, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) spoke about the challenges of making sure that the covenant is applied fairly across the country. As I am sure they are aware, we are extending the armed forces covenant into law. Part of that is about preventing a postcode lottery so that we can set clear expectations about how the covenant affects a range of policy areas, particularly those delivered by local government, but also across areas such as housing.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for all her answers, and I wish her well in her new position. She will be aware of the charity Beyond the Battlefield in Portavogie, in my constituency, which looks after soldiers across Northern Ireland who fall between the cracks. May I extend an invitation to her? It would be lovely to see her in Portavogie and Strangford, and I know that the people there would be encouraged by a visit from her.

Louise Sandher-Jones: I certainly hope to visit Northern Ireland soon, and I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's invitation.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment to her ministerial role. It is encouraging to hear again that the Government intend to legislate to put the covenant on a statutory footing, but she will know that enforcement of the covenant is as important as the statute from which it derives. Across the country, some organisations voluntarily put the covenant at the core of what they do, and it is a tenet of the principles on which they make decisions. In other places, it is a certificate that lots of people have signed for show. How will the Government make sure that the new law is enforced properly to eradicate the postcode lottery, which none of us wants to see, from public services?

Louise Sandher-Jones: My hon. Friend raises an important point about how we make sure that the armed forces covenant, when it is put into law, is delivered consistently, and that those working across our country are held to account for their delivery of it. I hope to update him with more details soon.

On the covenant, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for the point he made, and I would appreciate it if he wrote to me about the case he mentioned. Finally, I thank the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for mentioning the troubles permanent disablement payment scheme, and for raising awareness of it.

Mark Houghton served his country with honour and courage, so I was shocked to hear about the horrific extent of the injuries he sustained in an e-scooter crash. As the hon. Member for Eastleigh will know, all benefits, including the personal independence payment, have certain conditions attached; some are means-tested or based on the number of contributions paid in relevant tax years, and a past presence test may be applied. The administration of those benefits is a matter for the Department for Work and Pensions. However, if she wishes to write to me, will ensure that the details of the case are shared with colleagues in that Department.

Anyone who has followed defence policy over the past 16 months will know how hard this Government are working to renew the nation's contract with those who serve. We are delivering the largest sustained increases in defence spending since the cold war, as well as the biggest pay increases for over two decades. We are transforming military housing and ensuring that we overhaul recruitment.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Minister—it is great to say that—for giving way. We know that our disabled veterans are over-represented in the homeless community, but Doncaster council has taken a lead in making the armed forces a locally represented group.

That means that members of the armed forces are considered more in the council's housing strategy and plans. Does she think that that is a good idea that should be rolled out across the country by other councils?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I applaud the work that Doncaster council is doing to take the needs of veterans into account. As the armed forces covenant is put into law, I hope that that is exactly the sort of thing that we will see rolled out across the country.

Although the data shows that almost a third of veterans are disabled, we must always remember that behind every statistic is a person who trained, deployed and served. Every one of those veterans will have a unique story, and faces unique and different challenges. To provide an effective support network, we must ensure that the service is tailored and flexible and responds to each individual's needs.

Helen Maguire: I thank the hon. and gallant Minister for giving way and I congratulate her on her position. I recently met representatives of the charity Combat Stress, which is based in my constituency. I was made aware that PTSD can come up to five, 10 or 15 years after deployment, which I did not know. At the moment, there is no obligation for GPs to be aware of the fact that individuals are veterans, so when a veteran presents to a GP, the GP might not know that they are a veteran. What does the Minister think about the mandatory registration of veterans, so that GPs will be aware that they have previously served and can provide adequate support?

Louise Sandher-Jones: The hon. Member raises an important point. In common with any veteran of the war in Afghanistan, I find it interesting how the experience changes as we move away from it.

There are many pathways to support. GP surgeries are often the first point of contact. I urge every veteran to flag with their GP that they are a veteran, so that it is added to their medical record, as that will help primary care services understand their needs. I know that many GP surgeries and NHS trusts have gone further and ensured that they have developed veteran-friendly GP practices and veteran-aware NHS trusts.

There are other schemes that provide support. Op Restore, the veterans physical health and wellbeing service, supports veterans if they have a physical health problem of any type or severity that resulted from their service, if they are based England, no matter when the problem first appeared or when they left the armed forces. A GP can refer veterans to Op Restore. The Ministry of Defence veterans welfare service delivers one-to-one support through a network of welfare managers across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It does a fantastic job and I commend the hard work of those managers. We also have integrated personal commissioning for veterans, which has already been raised.

For many veterans, being able to live independently in a safe and suitable environment is of paramount importance, as hon. Members have said. Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide adaptations for people who satisfy a needs assessment, eligibility criteria and means test. Indeed, this Government have boosted funding for the disabled facilities grant by £86 million annually—

7.44 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 October 2025

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

Obesity and Fatty Liver Disease

9.30 am

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered obesity and fatty liver disease.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford, alongside my parliamentary colleagues who have kindly come along this morning to debate and highlight the public health emergency that is obesity and fatty liver disease.

The vast majority of us do not often think about the health of our livers. If we do, our biggest concern is how many units of alcohol we drink every week and whether our livers can keep up. But we do talk about our weight a fair amount, either in terms of how we look and how our clothes fit, or, if we are linking it to disease, whether we are blocking up our arteries and risking a heart attack. Today I want to make the case for linking our concerns about being overweight and sedentary with the very real risk of developing fatty liver disease. Before I give the alarming statistics about the huge increase in liver disease in the UK, I want us all to hold on to the fact that a weight loss of 10% can halt and even reverse fatty liver disease progression, and the way to help us all to do that is not to point fingers and tell individuals to try harder. There are much more effective public health solutions than that.

Now for the alarming statistics that should give us all pause for thought: after heart disease, liver disease is the biggest cause of premature mortality and lost working years of life in the UK. In stark contrast with other killer diseases where the mortality rate has gone down, deaths from liver disease have increased by 400%—yes, 400%—over the past two decades. Every year we are seeing 18,000 deaths from liver disease. It is now the biggest killer of 35 to 49-year-olds in the UK. In two to three years it is set to surpass heart disease as the leading cause of premature death in the UK.

Today's debate matters because fatty liver disease is becoming one of the defining public health challenges of our generation—a disease that already affects as many as one in five adults in the UK, equating to about 1 million people, but one that hardly anyone knows about. When I asked my parliamentary colleagues to speak in today's debate, they said, "Fatty liver disease? What's that?" So hopefully this debate will highlight this alarming disease.

Closely linked to our ongoing struggles with obesity, fatty liver disease—for the record, its clinical name is metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease; that is the last time I am going to say that today—is deeply rooted in our broken food systems and the stark health inequalities that our communities face.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is outlining very clearly the importance of the issue. It is vital that people are aware of it. Does she agree that

if we do not deal with the issue, the NHS waiting lists over the coming years will be compounded even further than they have been already?

Dr Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for making that excellent point. He is absolutely right. The issues of the NHS waiting lists are pertinent and stark. Reducing them will mean that we have to get the left shift right as well as invest in acute services.

Our policies have failed the population for decades. This debate is an opportunity to make the urgent case for a national liver strategy, joined-up public health work and profound reform of the conditions that stop us all living well. Because we have failed to build an environment where healthy food is affordable and accessible, two thirds of UK adults are now overweight or obese, and one in three children in England are above a healthy weight when they leave primary school.

Fatty liver disease is a silent killer, often asymptomatic until at a very advanced stage, meaning many patients are diagnosed too late for effective intervention. Left untreated, as too many are, fatty liver disease can progress to liver inflammation, fibrosis, cirrhosis, liver failure or liver cancer. Fatty liver disease also increases significantly the risk of heart attacks, stroke and heart failure. It is projected to overtake alcohol as the leading cause of liver transplants within a decade.

How do we treat fatty liver disease? Despite high and rising mortality rates, there are limited treatment options for patients with this disease. As I have said, weight loss and lifestyle change are essential.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for bringing this very important subject to Westminster Hall. She is absolutely right. Fatty liver disease is the fastest rising cause of liver cancer death in the UK and highlights the risk of developing a less survivable cancer for people living with obesity. Does the hon. Member agree that improvements to diagnosis of and treatment for fatty liver disease should be covered in the national cancer plan, which I called for a year ago and the Government are to announce early next year?

Dr Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for his excellent intervention. I absolutely agree that the national cancer strategy is essential. We must make sure that liver cancer is integrated into it, and that diagnosis and treatment are a key part of it and are funded across the country, to make sure that the inequalities that I am going to talk about are addressed sufficiently.

Before we get to the issue of diagnosis and treatment, weight loss and lifestyle change are essential. We know that a Mediterranean diet plus exercise improves liver function and that reducing ultra-processed foods reduces intrahepatic fat. However, for those whose disease has progressed to scarring of the liver, or liver fibrosis, there is an urgent need for therapies that directly target the liver.

Currently, no drugs are licensed to treat fatty liver disease in the UK. We have fallen behind the United States and Europe, as our market is too small for prioritisation. If I might get a bit more political, that is driven in part by our decision to leave the European single market. But this is a rapidly advancing field and we are approaching a potential breakthrough in treatment. With adequate planning, co-ordinated action, investment

[Dr Beccy Cooper]

and leadership, we can ensure that our national health system is patient-ready to deliver the next generation of medications, and that all patients, regardless of postcode, can benefit.

Early diagnosis offers significantly better outcomes and a wider range of treatment options, but despite fatty liver disease being medically recognised in the 1980s, clinical and public awareness of it remains far too low. We urgently need to increase public understanding and encourage early liver checks, particularly for those at higher risk because of obesity or type 2 diabetes. What is more, we have seen primary care systemic failures to improve early detection, such that three quarters of people are diagnosed with cirrhosis at hospital in an emergency, when it is too late for effective treatment or intervention.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent and really important debate. May I take her back to what she was saying about the food industry, wider population prevention measures and what this means for school meals and for our poorer communities, who are reliant on food supporters, such as the Trussell Trust and others, in terms of the type of food made available to them?

Dr Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. She is absolutely right. With her public health expertise, she highlights the very real problems that lead to fatty liver disease: our broken food system, the issue with access to good, nutritious food for children in school, and the need to ensure that our stark health inequalities are addressed. I will come to that later in my speech.

To go back to the issue of diagnosis and treatment, we should note that a staggering 80% of England currently has no effective detection and treatment pathway—yes, a staggering 80%. The British Liver Trust, whose representatives are here today, is rightly calling for an end to this postcode lottery, so a key ask raised in this debate is that every integrated care board, every regional and national health area that we have, should have a full pathway for early detection of liver disease.

There is some excellent, innovative work out there that can help us to get to a much better place in tackling this disease. I recently met the team at Predictive Health Intelligence—whose representatives I think are also here today—who have developed hepatoSIGHT, which is a great name; well done. That is an inspiring example of how technology can transform early detection. The system uses existing NHS data to identify people at risk of liver disease before symptoms develop, allowing GPs proactively to invite patients for screening and support. I am delighted to say it is now being implemented across NHS South West. It is proof that, with genuine support from senior NHS management, clinical and digital teams at all levels can come together for the good of patients. That system is exactly the kind of innovation we need in order to make early diagnosis and prevention the norm and not the exception.

I now come to prevention. Screening and early diagnosis are vital but, as for all population health issues, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth

(Debbie Abrahams) rightly highlighted, we must have a laser focus on preventing the root causes of fatty liver disease.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this debate. We are calling obesity the enemy, but the liver does not count in pounds or kilograms. The real culprit is not body weight; it is metabolic dysfunction, as she points out—insulin resistance, poor diet, genetic risk and so forth. Lean people also get fatty liver disease, not always people who are overweight. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should talk less about obesity and more about screening early, taxing junk food and treating metabolic disorders and disease rather than strictly BMI? If we chase the scales, we might miss the science.

Dr Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point and agree absolutely. In our society, we focus on how people look for many reasons, cultural and commercial, but this is purely about health. This is about keeping people healthy on the inside and allowing them to live good quality lives. My hon. Friend is absolutely right in that sense.

Poor diet is now the leading risk factor for death and disability. It is responsible for millions of preventable deaths each year. In the UK, almost two thirds of adults are overweight or are living with obesity, increasing the risk of fatty liver disease, cardiovascular disease and a multitude of cancers. In my job as a public health consultant, I see a lot of data and read many papers, but this statistic shocked me: four in 10 children with obesity may already have fatty liver disease. That demonstrates the urgent need to act now to prevent an even greater epidemic of disease in future.

That has not happened by accident; it is the result of a broken food system, which has made the UK Europe's third most obese country and one of the world's biggest consumers of ultra-processed food. We have a system that makes the unhealthy choice the cheapest, easiest and most available choice. Healthier food now costs more than twice as much per calorie as unhealthy food. That is £10.24 per 1,000 kilocalories compared with £4.50. For fruit and vegetables, the cost is even more at £11.90 per 1,000 kilocalories.

For the lowest income households, following a recommended healthy diet would swallow half or more of their disposable income. It is no surprise that obesity and fatty liver disease hit hardest in poorer communities. As I said at the beginning, this is not about personal failure. As hon. Members have said, sometimes people feel that they are failing to lose weight and failing to keep themselves healthy. This is not about personal failure; it is a political failure. It is our collective failure to create a food environment that protects rather than undermines public health. If we are serious about prevention, we must be serious about reform—the right type—with stronger fiscal and regulatory measures to reduce the availability and marketing of foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and to rebuild a food system that serves public health and not profit.

Why have we not addressed this yet? Weighted against the commercial gain of the food and drink industry, our obesogenic environment is killing our population and costing the taxpayer billions. Economic analysis last year suggests that excess weight costs the economy

£126 billion a year. A Budget is coming up next month; I am fairly sure that our Chancellor would like £126 billion a year. That figure takes in wider factors, such as lost productivity, care costs and lost years of healthy life. The direct NHS cost of obesity is projected to rise from £6.5 billion to £9.7 billion by 2050. We cannot separate our health and our wealth, and we cannot hope to achieve economic growth without tackling issues such as obesity and fatty liver disease.

Since 1990, there have been nearly 700 policies proposed by Government to reduce obesity. Imagine having 700 policies about your life! Past strategies fell short because they targeted behaviour change—individual choice—rather than the structural and commercial drivers of diet. Many lacked delivery plans, timelines or evaluation frameworks, leading to fragmented progress and limited long-term impact.

What can we do now to ensure that this public health emergency is addressed? My key asks for our Health Minister, who is kindly listening here today, are as follows. First, there is a clear need for a national liver strategy, ensuring increased public awareness, early liver checks and primary care pathways. As stated earlier, every integrated care board should have a pathway for the early detection of liver disease.

Secondly, we need strong planning and co-ordination to be ready to deliver the next generation of medication for liver disease. Thirdly, if we truly mean to deliver the left shift to prevention, promised in the 10-year health plan for England, then we have to change the environment that is driving poor health. There is strong consensus about the necessity of upstream interventions to regulate the unhealthy food and drink environment. We can build on that strong consensus to extend the levy model to high-sugar and high-salt foods; to enforce the 9 pm watershed for high fat, salt and sugar advertising, closing brand mark loopholes; to provide stable funding for local food partnerships, so that councils can act on local needs; to reinstate the full childhood obesity plan; and to address food affordability via fiscal reform.

None of this is easy or it would have been done already, but right now our environment is draining our health service of billions each year and weighing heavily on the nation's health—no pun intended. Let us not keep repeating our mistakes, but rather embed food policy as a national health priority. Through our work on preventing obesity and fatty liver disease, let us support and finally see the long-discussed and essential shift towards prevention and a healthier, wealthier country.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob in their places if they intend to speak.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Right, that gives me a better idea. We will bring in the Front Benchers at 10.28 am, so that gives an idea of how much time there is for the six or seven Members who wish to speak.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), who is co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on liver disease

and liver cancer, for setting the scene incredibly well. I thank her for the detail and for her requests to the Minister. It is, as always, a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I wish her well and I look forward to her answers. I also thank the British Liver Trust and the Foundation for Liver Research, which supplied me with a briefing that made clear the excellent work at the Roger Williams Institute of Liver Studies, which continues to drive world-leading research into metabolic liver disease to shape how it is diagnosed and treated.

Liver disease is a growing cause of premature mortality and lost years of working life in all four nations of the United Kingdom. It has been estimated that some 4,878 potential years of life were lost due to chronic liver disease in Northern Ireland. It is clear that the UK is in the midst of a liver disease crisis, to which the hon. Lady referred. It is as serious as that, and we should all take note. While premature mortality rates from other major diseases have fallen over the past two generations, deaths from liver disease have risen 400% since the 1970s. There are more than 18,000 deaths from liver disease and liver cancer each year in the United Kingdom.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Members are asking that you speak into the microphone, Mr Shannon, so that they can hear you.

Jim Shannon: That has never been a problem in the past, Mr Efford. Do I need to lift it up to my mouth? I thought it was good enough to carry my voice; apologies if it is not. This would be the first time it has not worked.

Two thirds of adults are overweight or living with obesity, and one in three children are classified as overweight or obese when they leave primary school. Sadly, four in 10 children with obesity may already have liver disease. One in five people are affected by liver disease and liver cancer in the UK, and as many as 12% of those—more than 1 million people—go on to develop the more severe form of fatty liver disease.

The stats for Northern Ireland are unreal. That is not the Minister's responsibility, but it gives a flavour for the debate. Some 64% of adults in Northern Ireland were overweight or obese, a marked increase from 23% in 2010-11. My goodness me—if ever we needed a reality check, that is one for us. Shockingly, Northern Ireland has the highest rate of overweight or obese primary 1 children in the UK, with 25.3% of children fitting that category. In my constituency of Strangford, 27% of year 8 children were overweight or obese. It is estimated that 70% of adults and 40% of children who are overweight or obese have fatty liver disease, so urgent work must be done to prevent this health crisis in the making.

Shockingly, 37 million extra sick days are estimated to be taken by people living with obesity, harming economic output on a massive scale—a figure of 1% to 2% of UK GDP as estimated by the Institute for Government. The NHS alone is expected to shoulder an estimated £10 billion per year obesity bill by 2050, with obese patients costing twice as much as those of a healthy weight. Reducing obesity prevalence by 10% could save £6 billion per year in the UK economy.

Let me tell a personal story. I am a type 2 diabetic. Some 16 or 17 years ago, I realised that I needed to drastically change my eating habits. I was 17 stone. To be honest, to put it very starkly, I was a big fat pudding.

[Jim Shannon]

I realised that if I did not lose weight for my diabetes, I was going to be in trouble, so I reduced my weight quite substantially, by 4 stone. I have managed, by and large, to keep at that reduced level. First, it was down to stress but, secondly, it was down to Chinese takeaways five nights a week with two bottles of Coca Cola. That just does not work; when it is added up, you just get fatter and fatter. I took that away and tried to reduce my chocolate intake.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) has said that he is reducing his sugar intake—well done to him; he does not need to, but it is definitely a good purpose to have. The point I am making is that not everyone can. For those who cannot, it is important to look towards the weight-reduction injections, to which I will refer in a moment. I have been able to control my diabetes for the last 10 years by tablets. I take nine tablets in the morning and five at night to keep everything under control.

Newly released weight-management drugs such as Ozempic and Mounjaro have been shown to reduce the weight of patients by an average of 5%, reducing the risk of a variety of health effects, including fatty liver disease. However, although those drugs are available for those who obesity and type 2 diabetes, they are not for those with fatty liver disease. Making that happen would be my one request of the Minister. If someone has a body mass index of over 40, and does not yet have those comorbidities, unfortunately they will not qualify.

There is a new generation of drugs targeting advanced fatty liver disease. Resmetirom has recently been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and is expected to be approved in the UK within 12 to 18 months. Could the Minister give us an indication of where those drugs are in the system? Those new drugs—some of which improve liver function and some of which enable weight loss—can reverse fatty liver disease and must be made available in a timely fashion to save lives. The NHS needs to ensure that services are ready to support that, as previously no treatment has been available for those patients.

The UK faces a very challenging commercial environment for drug pricing. Lilly recently announced that it will increase the price of Mounjaro by as much as 170% in response to pressure from the US Government and historic pricing inconsistencies. My second question to the Minister is about what has been done to ensure that the price of drugs is reduced or kept controlled in a way that can make a difference.

Thirdly, I say to the Minister that ICBs must have an effective pathway for the early detection of liver disease. A new nationally endorsed pathology pathway to improve early diagnosis of liver disease is essential. Every community diagnostic centre should also have a fibroscan to assess fibrosis.

Finally, I say to the Minister that patients with advanced liver disease and cancer need access to weight management services in line with access for people with type 2 diabetes. This is a ticking timebomb, but there are scientific breakthroughs there to address it. I believe in my heart that the Government need to cut that wire and stop that timebomb now.

9.56 am

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) for securing this very important debate. I also thank the British Liver Trust and the Foundation for Liver Research for providing me with a lot of data and information. As a GP, I have learned quite a lot from preparing this speech—we will come to that a little later.

As my hon. Friend said, what we really need is the right type of reform. My Government are proposing three shifts in care. Probably the most important is from cure to prevention, and this issue fits in very well with that. It also fits into the other shifts that we want. We want to get out of hospitals and into the community, and a lot of work around fatty liver disease can be done in the community. We also need to use data properly to target people and to look at the digital ways in which we can identify high-risk people.

Fatty liver disease affects 20% of the population. I do not want to repeat all the statistics that we have heard, but 12% of those people go on to develop very severe disease, and that is 90% preventable. That is a perfect example of our being able to prevent disease rather than just allowing it to happen.

As GPs, we often do a liver function test—often if someone is on a statin or something similar—as a screening test, and we find that the alkaline phosphatase is slightly raised. We then do an ultrasound scan and, lo and behold, people who are overweight often have fatty liver disease. That is often as far as it goes in GP land, so we need to change that pathway. There is an obesity epidemic and two thirds of adults are overweight. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West said, children also carry a great burden of obesity and overweightness—by year 6, 32% of children are obese.

As my hon. Friend also said, there has been a massive increase. Most diseases are going down in frequency, but there has been a 400% increase in fatty liver disease. That leads first to fibrosis, then cirrhosis and even liver cancer. As she pointed out, detection is often at the acute stage when people are admitted to hospital with cirrhosis and sometimes hepatic failure. That is a sign of a poor medical system. We are failing those people.

Where I come from in Stroud, we have the fourth-highest hospital admission rate for liver disease in the whole south-west, and Gloucestershire has the highest. We need to get on and start dealing with fatty liver disease. How do we do that? As we have heard, prevention is probably the single most important thing, so I urge the Government to grab that ethos of preventing disease and really go for it. We have a national food strategy—there is plenty in there, which I will not talk about now—and ultra-processed foods are obviously causing a lot of harm. There are also some exciting options in the 10-year plan in relation to supermarkets, such as how they need to keep their data and about starting to sell healthier foods, rather than foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt. The plan also refers to the reformulation of some products.

I will point out two other things: first, free school meals reduce obesity in children; and secondly, as a Government, we are bringing in rules about advertising unhealthy food before the 9 o'clock watershed, which I welcome. We also need to halt brand advertising

before that time, because when people see a sign saying “McDonald’s”, they do not think about salads, do they? That is also important.

Screening needs to be data driven. In general practice, we know that a lot of people with a BMI of over 27, for example, should get near-patient testing for liver function, and those who have raised liver function should then have a fibroscan in their neighbourhood practice. That would be a fantastic community response to the problem: neighbourhood practices could take hold of the issue and start screening properly, reducing the burden of disease on our population.

Training is also important. I am a standard sort of GP, and I did not know as much before preparing this speech as I do now. We need to educate GPs on the importance of detection.

Lastly, although GLP-1 agonists are not authorised for treating fatty liver disease, we are certain that they are effective at reducing weight and would certainly reduce fatty liver disease. We must invest in weight-management services to wrap around that treatment. We have a great opportunity to prevent disease.

10.2 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I find it difficult to believe that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was a big fat pudding, but I suspect that even if he was, no one would have really noticed, given his charm and personality—I say that in all sincerity, as he knows.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) for being the driving force behind today’s debate. She has indicated that

“people do better in more equal societies.”

To some extent, as she made clear, that goes to the heart of what we are discussing. I will not repeat what she and other Members have said, but I will briefly discuss inequality in relation to my constituency. I also thank the British Liver Trust for its comprehensive and incredibly enlightening briefing on the issues that we face, which put into context the impact of those issues on our constituents. We are talking about individuals—mothers, fathers, sons, daughters and children—whose lives can be destroyed by this dreadful condition. My hon. Friend set the scene in relation to that. Time and again, the trust reinforced that fatty liver disease is a silent killer that is on the increase and clearly has been for a considerable time.

To put that into context—some figures have been mentioned—there are about 19,000 deaths each year across the country. If my maths is right, that is about 52 deaths every day. In my constituency, that would equate to about 29 deaths a year, but I suspect the figure would be much higher if health inequalities were factored in, given that the rate of the disease is five times as high in the most deprived areas, of which mine is one. The figure in my constituency might be five times that amount—100 or 150 deaths a year.

We should take into account that the average age of death is 61 for men and 62 for women, which, in this day and age, is really no age at all. In men, the chance of death is twice as high as in women. In that context, it is also important to emphasise that nine out of 10 cases of liver disease could be prevented.

I hope that this debate will enable the calls to action by the British Liver Trust and by hon. Members to be heard in relation to prevention, early diagnosis, treatment and tackling inequalities. Perhaps the most sobering issue, which my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West touched on, is the level of fatty liver disease in our children. She indicated that as many as 40% of children are affected in the more deprived areas, whereas in less deprived areas it is more like 14%—and even 14% is far too high.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend has enabled us to look at this issue in more depth. I look forward to the responses from the Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and for Winchester (Dr Chambers), and of course my hon. Friend the Minister.

10.6 am

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) for securing this vital and timely debate.

Liver disease is quietly stealing lives in every corner of our country. It is now the second-biggest cause of early death in England and Wales. Deaths have risen by more than 40% since 2001, which is in stark contrast to deaths from heart disease and cancer, which have declined. What makes it so heartbreaking is that 90% of liver disease cases are preventable.

In my constituency of Blackpool North and Fleetwood, this crisis is felt deeply. Blackpool has the second-highest rate of liver disease deaths in the entire country, with over 41 deaths per 100,000 people—almost double the national average. Childhood obesity rates are among the worst in England, meaning that many of our young people are already on the path to serious illness before they have even left school.

This is not about blaming people for their weight or lifestyle; it is about the world we live in—one where the cheapest food is often the least healthy, and where families in struggling communities have fewer choices and less support. Across England, people in the most deprived areas are more than six times as likely to die early from fatty liver disease. In parts of the north-west, people are dying 10 years younger than those in the wealthier areas. That is not right and it is not fair. Behind every statistic is a family torn apart.

Jamia and Stuart, in my constituency, were together for 35 years and cared for two disabled children. Stuart was fit and kind. When his stomach began to swell, he did not realise it was a warning sign. By the time he was diagnosed with fatty liver disease, it was too late. He passed away just eight weeks later. Their children still wake up at night looking for their dad. No family should go through that, but, tragically, they are not alone. The British Liver Trust has shared similar stories. Stephen, for example, was diagnosed far too late after years of missed opportunities for testing.

These stories are painful reminders that three quarters of people with cirrhosis are diagnosed only when they turn up at A&E, when it is often too late for treatment. We can change that. Early testing can save lives. Simple, painless scans, such as fibroscans, enhanced liver fibrosis testing, or the new intelligent liver function testing

[Lorraine Beavers]

pathway, can spot liver damage long before the symptoms appear. Pilots of those tests have shown a 43% increase in early diagnosis and major savings for the NHS. Every community diagnostic centre, including the one on Whitegate Drive in Blackpool, should be able to offer those tests. Early diagnosis makes liver disease largely reversible and gives people the chance to act before it is too late.

We also need to tackle obesity at its roots, not by lecturing people but by making it easier to be healthy. That means fair prices for good food, limits on junk food advertising aimed at children, and continued action such as the soft drinks industry levy, which cut sugar content by nearly 30% across the market without hurting sales, and even reduced childhood obesity among girls in year 6. We need stronger measures to make the healthy choice the easy choice: reformulation of ultra-processed foods, a comprehensive 9 pm watershed on junk food advertising and a level playing field for businesses that want to do the right thing. Such structural changes, not finger pointing, can reshape the food system for good.

Finally, we must make sure that the NHS is ready for the new medicines that are coming. Medicines that target liver scarring directly and other treatments that improve weight loss and metabolic health could be transformative, but those new therapies, which could stop liver disease in its tracks, must be available on the NHS to everyone, not just to those who can pay privately. That means planning for workforce capacity, diagnostics and equitable access because if we fail to prepare, we risk widening the health inequalities that have already cost too many lives in towns such as mine.

Liver disease may be a silent killer but we do not have to stay silent about it. If we work together across parties, communities and the NHS we can stop this pandemic before it claims another life like Stuart's. We can give families hope, and give our children the healthy future that they deserve.

10.12 am

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) for securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow all the hon. Members who have spoken; we are all concerned about what is happening in our constituencies. This issue was brought to my attention by a constituent whose father had died—I will go into her human story later. After speaking to her in Portcullis House, I wrote to every practice in my constituency highlighting the facts of St Helens, in case they did not know them—and that is no disrespect to our medical professionals.

Before I go into some facts, I thank the British Liver Trust and the Foundation for Liver Research, which have worked closely to prepare a joint debate briefing for MPs. I also recognise the excellent work by the Foundation for Liver Research at the Roger Williams Institute of Liver Studies, which continues to drive world-leading research in metabolic liver disease to help to shape how it is diagnosed and treated.

Sadly, St Helens has the highest rate of deaths from liver disease in England, at 43.5 per 100,000, and the second-highest rate of deaths from fatty liver disease. The north of England consistently has the highest rates of liver disease and obesity, and premature mortality from liver disease is as much as six times higher than in the least deprived areas of the country. My constituency suffers at the knife-edge of this crisis: premature death rates from liver disease in St Helens were the worst in the country in 2023, at 43.5 per 100,000—double the England average of 21.9 per 100,000. Premature death rates from fatty liver disease in St Helens were twice the national rate, and the rate of overweight or obese year 6 children is 41.2%, which is markedly higher than the national average of 35.6%.

The NHS Cheshire and Merseyside integrated care board that covers my constituency has in place only a partial pathway for the early detection of liver disease, despite the north of England having the highest rates of death and hospitalisation from liver disease. As of 2023, it did not have a named person responsible for liver disease, and only Liverpool carries out proactive case-finding for patients at high risk of liver disease. The inconsistencies in care that face my constituents and many more people are played out across England, placing thousands of patients at high risk of developing serious liver outcomes.

I will turn now to the human impact of obesity and fatty liver disease, speaking on behalf of one of my constituents, Sara, the young lady I met with her widowed stepmum. They have asked me to speak out and share their story. Sara's dad, Stephen, was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in 2000 and told he had a fatty liver in 2014, but not to worry about it. He received a liver scan two years later, after which no further action was taken. It was only when Stephen was admitted to hospital in 2024, for an unrelated condition, that he was diagnosed with advanced fatty liver disease, and he sadly died from the disease a few weeks later, aged 62.

Sara said:

"I know everyone thinks their dad is amazing, but mine really, really was. He was a gentleman in every sense of the word and was so kind, loving and generous. To say we're shocked, devastated and heartbroken at his death due to MASLD (metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease) and HE (hepatic encephalopathy) is an understatement. He was just 62 and had so much to look forward to.

My dad Stephen wasn't a drinker, but liked a sweet treat every now and then when he was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in 2000. His diabetes was well managed and he didn't need much in way of medication due to his healthy lifestyle. Dad especially loved cycling and walking in the Lake District. He did everything right, but it wasn't enough.

In 2014 blood tests revealed deranged LFTs and in his annual diabetic reviews my dad was told he had an abnormal liver but not to worry about it. He was never referred to anyone and the only scan I can see in his medical notes was in 2016, then nothing.

In April 2023 he was feeling really lethargic which his doctors thought was an iron deficiency and prescribed tablets. He told my sister his blood results had come back fine, adding: 'Nothing to worry about, love, I have a fatty liver, but I've always had a fatty liver'. By September Dad was quite withdrawn, forgetful, slurring his words, and kept going back to bed. The doctors were doing lots of tests and thought it might be something neurological like Parkinson's Disease, but still weren't looking at his liver. By December my dad was like a zombie and I thought could it be depression. If only we had known then that they were mild HE episodes."

As Stephen's family come to terms with their loss, his daughter Sara and widow Dorothy have been campaigning with the British Liver Trust to raise awareness of fatty

liver disease and its causes, and the urgent need for early diagnosis and effective national liver care pathways. It is those two ladies who brought this issue to my attention. One of their key asks is as follows:

“We need assurance from government that the NHSE Liver Transformation Programme will be extended (as NHSE transition into Department of Health) and that the programme will be properly funded and resourced to ensure consistent care and early detection across England.”

I will add to that a request for ICBs to look at the illnesses in their area and focus their attention on their community and our constituents.

10.20 am

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) for securing this really important debate.

We have a lot of medical professionals in the room. It might surprise colleagues that, although I am a rudimentary vet, we treat fatty liver disease quite commonly in animals as well. It is most commonly seen in very large, fat cats that are really cuddly and people like to have on their lap. It is really common for them to get fatty liver disease if they stop eating, and it is genuinely very serious and takes intense treatment. The other time we see it commonly in animals is in cows that are in good body-weight condition, immediately after they give birth; often, they end up with hepatic lipidosis, which can be quite difficult to manage.

My first charity visit as an MP—it was the week after I was elected—was to the British Liver Trust in Winchester. I met Pam Healy, its chief executive officer, who is here today. It is a brilliant organisation. I thank everyone for all the briefings we were given; the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) mentioned how much he learned from them, despite being a trained GP. On that note, I know he is doing some social prescribing—when is the comedy show?

Dr Opher: It is on 20 November, with Jonathan Pie, and it is on investigating men’s health.

Dr Chambers: Fantastic. Hopefully it will improve people’s mental health—and if they leave halfway through, it will probably improve their physical health, too. That is a fantastic initiative.

Other Members have talked about the soaring rate of liver deaths, which has shot up in the last 20 years. The hon. Member for Worthing West talked about it costing the NHS £6.9 billion directly, and some studies show that it has cost the economy over £100 billion in other ways, such as from people being off work.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I suggest to the hon. Member that one of the principal reasons that non-alcoholic fatty liver disease has shot up so radically in recent years is the increasing prevalence of food that is simply bad for people and is causing them damage—in particular, food that is high in fat, sugar and salt. For that reason, the Health and Social Care Committee, of which I am a member, is currently doing an inquiry on food. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government need to focus on making healthy food more affordable and accessible, and to tackle the advertising and marketing of so much of the unhealthy food that is out there?

Dr Chambers: I completely agree—that is hugely important. The sugar levy has been a huge success: between 2015 and 2019, the amount of sugar in soft drinks reduced by about a third, which reduced sugar intake in our collective diet by 48,000 tonnes. If we expect the Government to pay for people’s treatment when they are sick, as we rightly do, there is also an onus on them to help people to maintain their health. That is both a moral and an economic imperative.

It is often not noted that as well as the direct implications of obesity, diabetes and liver issues related to genetics and diet, there are also indirect costs that affect the NHS, such as the number of hip replacements and knee replacements, and other types of expensive and intense interventions that could probably be significantly avoided if we had healthier diets.

As we know, the issue with many liver problems is late diagnosis. The liver can take a huge amount of abuse in many forms until it stops functioning to the level at which it appears compromised. When symptoms are finally seen, there has often been sustained damage for quite a long period of time. The scanning that is done by the British Liver Trust and others—I encourage everyone to get their liver scanned when they come into Parliament—can pick up diseases such as fatty liver disease before the clinical symptoms are seen, which is absolutely key.

The UK ought to be one of the healthiest countries in the world, but we know we are not. Winchester is a relatively wealthy constituency, yet 54% of adults are overweight or obese, along with 27% of children. We are a country with a long history of world-leading medical research, grassroots sport and high-quality food production, yet over the last 14 years people have been becoming sicker for longer. That is multi-factorial, but it is in part due to the gradual erosion of public health funding by the previous Conservative Government.

The issue of improving health is multifaceted, and obesity is certainly an example of that. Factors such as poor mental health and the broken food system contribute towards the growing numbers of people who are overweight or obese. The hon. Member for Stroud talked about the importance of free school meals in helping to reduce childhood obesity, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) talked about inequality and poverty levels, and the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) highlighted the issues of different demographics and incomes. I spent seven very happy years in Liverpool and have very happy memories; ironically, my liver probably does not, as I was a student there for many years.

There has been a political failure. As has been said, over the past 30 years successive Governments have proposed more than 700 policies to tackle obesity, yet none has ever been successful. We have never had a coherent strategy. We cannot underestimate the scope that must be taken into account when discussing how we tackle obesity. We need to look at every intervention possible, including having a robust, well-supported food production system, ensuring that everyone can afford good-quality, locally produced food, and ensuring that we expand free school meals even further to help to keep children healthy.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill is a really good example. When Chris Whitty gave evidence to the Bill Committee, he said not only that it was the biggest piece of public

[Dr Chambers]

health legislation in 30 years, but that it is probably going to be the most significant piece of legislation to help to address inequalities, because smoking rates are one of the most significant reasons why there is such a difference in life expectancy between some of the more deprived postcodes and the wealthier ones. That type of intervention is not only good for health but really good for addressing inequality.

As other Members have said, we cannot tackle this problem without also ensuring that food is produced to high enough standards, that we have limits on junk food advertising, and that we force big food manufacturers to reduce salt and sugar in their products and have a much better labelling system, so that people can make more informed and affordable choices.

I am so impressed with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for being able to lose 4 stone. I have put on the best part of a stone in the last 18 months, since I was elected, partly because of my increased food intake since I have been here and also because the strange hours mean that I lack time for exercise. I used to have a fairly active job, which I do not really have any more.

Yesterday I went to the Winchester Boxing Club, where a guy called Glyn Parkin gave me a really good workout—I can still feel it today. I did the Compton 10K and the Alresford 10K this year—both big fundraising 10-kilometre events. Despite trying to keep up my exercise, however, it is really hard if I am not focused on food, because about 80% of weight loss is due to diet. At best, perhaps 20% is down to exercise. I am aware that if I do not get on top of my weight, it will affect everything from knees to hips, and in some ways, exercise will become more difficult. If I end up with knee or hip pain, I will end up exercising less—and when I exercise less, I make worse dietary choices as well. We need to encourage people to stay healthy and keep exercising, but if we do not get the diet right, those two things are almost impossible to achieve.

I again thank the hon. Member for Worthing West for securing this hugely important debate, and I thank the British Liver Trust for all that it does. I encourage everyone to go and get scanned by the British Liver Trust when it next comes to Parliament.

10.31 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) on securing this important debate, and I thank the British Liver Trust and others who provided information and reading material in advance of today's debate.

Fatty liver disease, as has been said, is often asymptomatic in its early stages. Even when symptoms do occur, they can initially be non-specific symptoms such as tiredness and feeling generally unwell. Initially, the fat deposits in the liver; in the next stage the fat causes inflammation, which causes metabolic dysfunction-associated steatohepatitis. It can then progress to fibrosis and then cirrhosis. As mentioned earlier, liver deaths have increased substantially in the last 50 years, but early detection can help to prevent them. What is the

Minister doing to ensure that liver function tests and fibroscans are more available? Does she regret having to delay her workforce plan? Will that have an impact on the treatment of liver disease?

As many have said, fatty liver disease is caused by obesity. Two thirds of adults are now overweight or obese, but obesity starts in childhood. As an NHS consultant paediatrician, I have in my time seen a 12-year-old weighing 120 kg and a nine-year-old weighing over 90 kg—around three times the weight of an average nine-year-old. That has a serious cost in terms of life expectancy, taking three to 10 years off a person's life. It also has an economic cost to the state of about £11.4 billion on the NHS, estimated at £75 billion per year when taking into account the wider economic factors.

We all know someone who has struggled with their weight and who has had huge success recently, including Members of this House who have talked about it in other debates, using Ozempic, Wegovy or Mounjaro. That is great, but do we want a future where a substantial proportion of the population are dependent on medication to maintain their weight?

Ben Coleman: If I may bring the hon. Member back to childhood obesity, does she agree that there is a serious problem with sugar being pumped into so much baby food? Does she therefore welcome what the Government have finally done after many years of the issue's sitting unaddressed? They are giving the industry 18 months to take the sugar out of baby food and to stop marketing basically unhealthy products, which no one should buy, as healthy or healthier. Does she welcome what the Government are doing here?

Dr Johnson: I certainly think it is wise to ensure that people get off to a good start in infancy and that unhealthy products are not advertised as healthy if they are not, although the definition of healthy is somewhat elusive and difficult to pin down. It is also important that we do not routinely feed little babies under one high-sugar foods, although I do not want to see them fed artificial sweeteners, either. It is about making things less sweet, so the reformulation will need to be done carefully. That is my personal view.

Going back to the medications, we know they can be very helpful for some and can improve their health. They may be able to help with fatty liver disease as well, although they are not licensed yet. Can the Minister update us on when the Government expect applications to be approved and whether the NHS is ready to deliver for all eligible patients? We have heard about the prevalence and burden of the condition across the country and the number of people affected. What is she doing to ensure that the NHS is ready so that, when these drugs are licensed, it has the capacity, workforce and money to provide them?

We have seen that drug prices can change quite dramatically. In August, Eli Lilly announced a huge price increase for Mounjaro. What plans does the Minister have to guard against that? Will she update the House on negotiations on the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing and access?

We understand she is reviewing the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence quality threshold; when does she plan to reach a conclusion? We have seen investment in this country's life sciences sector by companies

such as Merck and AstraZeneca being withdrawn from the United Kingdom or paused due to the environment created by the Government. We need urgent action to support that sector. Will the Minister update the House on discussions she has had with industry and the Treasury on that?

Medications are part of the issue, but there are also surgical implications. Many people who have lost large quantities of weight require surgery for excess skin, which can cause further medical problems. What is the Minister doing to ensure there is an assessment of demand for post-weight loss surgery? Are surgeons and capacity available to deliver it where medically indicated?

As many have said, prevention is better than cure. We know that fewer than one in three people eat five portions of fruit and veg a day, and that that is falling. We also know that starting early is important and have talked about children and infants. What is the Minister doing to ensure that school food is healthy and good for children? What work is she doing with the Department for Education on food choices and preparation, particularly advice on food that can be made in advance or quickly? We know that many young people will become adults in households where there are two working parents, where one of the largest challenges is not just the money needed to buy food, but the time required after returning from work to prepare and deliver it to children before they do their homework and go to bed.

We have talked about reformulation. The soft drinks industry levy has reduced sugar per 100 ml by 47.4%, but I am concerned that is leading to an increase in artificial sweeteners rather than a reduction in the sweetness of the product, ultimately meaning that people are still hooked on the sweetness. What does the Minister think of that? Some hon. Members talked about the advertising ban on less healthy food. Will the Minister tell us why that has been delayed until next year?

Why have the Government added the brand exemption? Do they think the addition of the brand exemption will make it harder for new market entrants, compared with well established brands? If I whistled the short tune for one food brand—I will not—it would be immediately recognised, without further introduction. That would be more difficult for advertising new entrants to the market.

The 10-year plan talks about mandatory healthy food sales reporting. Will the Minister update us on what she defines as healthy? There are also mandatory targets on healthiness of sales. What does that mean and when will it be implemented? We understand there is a planned update to the nutrient profile. Some are concerned that the free sugars that that includes mean that items such as date paste will fall under unhealthy sugars. Will the Minister provide information on that? Has she made an assessment of the Conservative Government's step of informing people by adding calories to menus? What effect has that had on consumption and food portion sizes in the restaurant sector?

Exercise is also important. We know that physical exercise strengthens joints, increases weight loss and helps in the reduction of diabetes, depression and dementia. The previous Government gave £1 billion to support the sports and leisure industry during the pandemic so that it could continue, and had a school sports action plan, guaranteeing at least two hours of PE and supporting after-school clubs.

The current Government have pledged £400 million for new sports facilities, but delivery of that money seems to be at a standstill. Will the Minister update us on that? Many grassroots sports facilities need that money. Will she also update the House on what the Government are doing to improve girls' attendance in sports? We know that teenage girls in particular are not taking the advised amount of exercise.

In summary, we need an NHS pathway to detect liver disease in the early stages so that it can be treated; an NHS that is ready to deliver the new treatments that are becoming available; and action to tackle obesity to prevent liver disease in the first place. There has been an emphasis throughout the debate on what the Government can do to prevent obesity and on state culpability in that regard. It is important that people recognise that they have agency and do not need to wait for the Government to do something about this. People do not need to wait for the soft drinks industry levy or for changes to regulations. They have the agency to help themselves; they can do that.

Ben Coleman: Will the hon. Member accept that there is now a general body of opinion that it is time to stop blaming people for not having the willpower not to eat bad food when they are constantly bombarded with advertising and marketing? Some £6.4 billion a year will be spent by the food industry on advertising and marketing to people, and in many areas it is very difficult to get food that is both affordable and healthy. Is it not time to stop blaming people for being fat and to support them to tackle obesity in the ways that I and many of my hon. Friends here have described? Is it not time to stop sticking up for the food industry and to start sticking up for ordinary people?

Dr Johnson: I do not think it is sticking up for the food industry to suggest that people have agency over what they eat. I will give an example. I saw a very small patient—about five years old—who was very obese. I asked the mum what sort of things the child was being fed, and the answer was, “Well, Doctor, he eats lots of crisps all the time.” But there is a simple point there: where was he getting those crisps from? He was getting the crisps from the cupboard without asking, but the crisps did not get in the cupboard because the five-year-old put them there. It is a question of making sure that what is available is healthy and what is being fed to children is healthy.

I have seen even in the last few weeks patients who have low vitamin D levels, critically low vitamin B12 levels and critically low iron levels as a result of the diet that they are getting. It is not just a case of, “It's all the Government's fault. The state must make sure that everyone eats healthily.” People have a responsibility of their own as well. This is about working together.

There are wider policy impacts as well. The hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) talked about food pricing and food security. This Government want to cover Lincolnshire—the breadbasket of the UK, where a third of the country's fruit and vegetables are produced—in glass solar panels. That is what his Government want to do, so there is a wider policy framework about food affordability. Food inflation is going up hugely under this Government, so they need to look in the mirror and see what they are doing to

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

reduce food prices for people. We need to work together: it is a combination of what the Government can do and what the individual can do.

10.42 am

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) on securing the debate. We have veered quite a long way into the public health arena in the last while, but that demonstrates how important it is. I pay tribute to the expertise that my hon. Friend brings to this House and everything that she is doing to promote public health, including sharing the news about the winter flu vaccine—I will get that in while I am here, Mr Efford, because it is so important.

As has been said by many, including the resident GP on these Benches, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher), we have all learned from this debate. Well done to the British Liver Trust for its fantastic campaigning and briefing, which has clearly paid dividends. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West has given me the chance to update the House on the Government's efforts to tackle the obesity crisis. I am here on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), who is responsible for public health, but this issue concerns us all. Many of us have been involved in this area for some time, and it is one of the defining public health challenges of our time.

We heard today some of the facts. Obesity is a major risk factor for both fatty liver disease and cardiovascular disease; there are common risk factors such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes. Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease now affects about one in three adults in the UK. Prevalence has increased with the rise in obesity rates. Currently, almost two thirds of the adult population in England are overweight or obese, and almost 29%—almost 13 million people—are living with obesity. When children in England start school, just over one in five of them are overweight or obese, and that rises to more than one in three by the time they leave primary education. Children living with obesity are five times more likely than other children to live with obesity as adults.

We have heard that there are major inequalities in how obesity is distributed across the United Kingdom. That was highlighted brilliantly by my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers), who talked about the loss of her constituent Stuart. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) spoke eloquently for Sara and her stepmother Dorothy on their loss of Stephen, which brought home to all of us the real impact of this disease on people's lives.

Kids in deprived areas are twice as likely to struggle with obesity as those in the least deprived, so this is an extremely serious matter. We are effectively hobbling the life chances of a little boy or girl before they have had a fair start. The Government cannot and will not look the other way as a generation of kids miss out on the best start in life. The points made by my hon. Friend

the Member for Worthing West make sense, given that we both stood on a manifesto that committed to halve the gap in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions in England, and reverse the legacy left to us by the last Government. We share that goal. The question is: how do we get there?

On my hon. Friend's calls for a liver strategy and a childhood obesity plan, our 10-year health plan sets out decisive action—we have heard about some of it in this debate—on prevention to tackle the obesity crisis head on and create a fairer, healthier food environment. We are looking at people as a whole: where they live, what services they need and how to prevent illnesses in their communities. That will help us to be better prepared for the changing nature of the disease and allow our services to focus more on the management of chronic long-term conditions. I will talk more about prevention later.

On my hon. Friend's call to extend the levy model, we are taking steps to ensure that the soft drinks industry levy, which the Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), discussed eloquently and which colleagues know as a sugar tax, remains fit for purpose. On the request that my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West made for an ICB pathway, we are working with partners including the British Liver Trust to raise awareness and address the stigma related to hazardous and harmful levels of alcohol use and viral hepatitis, which are key drivers of liver disease. We will continue to work with communities and help those most affected by liver disease through the community liver health checks programme.

Peter Dowd: This must be one of the safest places in the Palace, with at least three medics and a vet in the Chamber. My constituency has been designated a pride in place area. One of the aims of that programme is to create safer, healthier environments. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a great opportunity in those areas, which include an area of her constituency, for funding to be used in a lateral way for local community initiatives such as those that have been highlighted during the debate? There is real opportunity for those initiatives to be tested out, with local people making local decisions.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The pride in place programme does just as it says on the tin, and it is important. The Government's drive is to make sure that those communities, which know best what they need, are the drivers of how that is done. We will think laterally and bring together all that they know about why there is that level of deprivation in those communities. I know that, with his experience as chair of a primary care trust and as a local councillor, my hon. Friend is well placed to see what needs to happen for us to bring things together and think laterally. In my community, the legacy of the tobacco industry is the source of so much of the long-standing inequality.

The ICBs need to be tied into that community work and support it, and make sure that community health checks proactively identify people suitable for liver cancer surveillance. More widely, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said, our shifts, and particularly the transfer to community and neighbourhood health, absolutely support that agenda. I know that hon. Members will make sure that that agenda is well delivered. This disease lends itself very much to that drive, which we are determined to make happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West asked for us to be patient-ready for the next generation of liver disease medications. If my hon. Friend the Minister for Innovation, Lord Vallance, were here now, he would happily chew her ear off about everything that the Government are doing to ensure that the next generation of life sciences discovery is available to NHS patients. I will touch briefly on medicines later.

My hon. Friend also asked about local food partnership funding and action on food affordability. I cannot go into those points in detail here, but we absolutely recognise them, and we are working closely with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to develop DEFRA's cross-Government food strategy to provide healthier and more easily accessible food, particularly in deprived areas. I encourage my hon. Friend to ensure that she is completely aligned with that agenda, as I am sure she is. We want to make that work. On her call to enforce the 9 pm watershed, I will update the House on where we are in delivering our manifesto commitments.

Prevention is clearly an important part of this work, and our manifesto specifically promised to restrict advertising of junk food to children, along with banning the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to under-16s. We are consulting until 26 November on that ban, and the restrictions on junk-food advertising will take legal effect on 5 January. I thank the advertisers and broadcasters who are doing the sensible thing in getting ahead of the regulations by applying the restrictions already.

We have also restricted volume price promotions such as “buy one, get one free” on less healthy food and drinks, and given local councils stronger powers to block new fast-food outlets near schools. We will go further. Current promotion and advertising restrictions on less healthy food and drinks use an outdated nutrient profile model. That was formulated under the previous Labour Government, almost 20 years ago, because we also took this agenda seriously when we were last in government. We will update the standards that apply to the restrictions, and we will consult on their implementation in the coming year.

In a world first, as per our 10-year plan, by the end of this Parliament all large food businesses will be required to report against standardised metrics on sales of healthier food. That means that the large food companies will have to tell us regularly how healthy the food they are selling is, and whether that is improving. That will set full transparency and accountability around the food that businesses are selling, and it will encourage healthier products. We will also set new targets to increase the healthiness of food sales in all communities. Finally, with regard to liver disease, we are exploring innovative approaches to early detection, such as intelligent liver-function testing, to reach more people at a stage when liver damage can better be reversed.

Our focus is prevention—we have the shining example of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—but we do need to treat the millions of people who already live with obesity in the UK, so let me say what we are doing for them. First, we are building relationships with the biggest pharmaceutical companies to expand access to weight-loss services and treatments across the NHS.

Secondly, obesity drugs can be game changers in supporting weight loss, and we are entering what could be a golden age for obesity drugs, with many more in

the pipeline. Over the summer, the NHS started its roll-out of the weight-loss injection Mounjaro through GPs. About 220,000 people, prioritised by clinical need, are expected to receive Mounjaro on the NHS over the next three years.

Thirdly, our obesity pathway innovation programme, supported by industry, is testing new ways of delivering that care, including through pharmacy-led services in the community and through digital services—again, part of our shifts. We recognise that these drugs are not a replacement for good diet and exercise, as exemplified by the hon. Member for Winchester, and they are not the first thing for patients or the NHS to try. That is why we have committed to doubling the number of people who can access the NHS digital weight-management programme.

On hospital to home, we are providing treatment options for children by shifting care from hospital to community. That comes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West about the left shift. Earlier this year, the Government announced that we would support thousands of severely obese children to lose weight and live healthier lifestyles, thanks to the roll-out of specialist NHS clinics and new digital smart technology to deliver expert care at home. That game-changing tool is helping our specialists support and keep track of children's weight-loss programmes, without those children needing to leave home, while offering regular advice to them and their parents to help build healthier habits.

I have set out how the Government are tackling the obesity crisis head on, especially when it comes to safeguarding our children's future, but while we are shifting the focus of our NHS to prevention, we are also doing more to help people who are already affected by obesity and fatty liver disease, especially through medicines and new technologies and by shifting care from hospital to home. We remember that we stood on a manifesto that committed to tackle the root causes of ill health and to close the gap between the richest and the most deprived areas. That is exactly what we are focusing on through our 10-year health plan. This Government will not sit by and let ill children become ill adults—not on our watch. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West for securing this debate.

10.54 am

Dr Cooper: Thank you, Mr Efford, for chairing the debate this morning. I thank the Minister for her excellent remarks, and all the parliamentary colleagues who have taken the time to be here. I thank the British Liver Trust and everybody who came to hear the debate. I hope they found it edifying and useful.

I have no particular further remarks; I think most points have been covered. There is a lot of work to do. As has been said, 90% of liver disease is preventable. That is a serious amount of disease that we do not need to face in this country, which is incredibly important to remember.

Our obesogenic environment—my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) told me to say that slowly; it basically means it is hard for us to do healthy things and keep well—encourages us, consciously and subconsciously, to do things that are not great for our bodies. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham

[Dr Beccy Cooper]

(Dr Johnson), said that we have agency. Of course we do, but we are humans in an environment that is telling us all sorts of things all the time. Our job as parliamentarians, as representatives of our residents, as members of the party that is governing the country, is to make sure that the messages and signals that we send, and the legislation that we pass, encourage a healthy environment for our residents to live in. Within that healthy environment, people can make their own choices.

To those who accuse me and other public health consultants of being part of a nanny state, I say, frankly, the nanny we have in this state right now is not a great nanny. It is one that allows us to eat things that make us ill, that encourages us to not exercise, that makes our children sick and that means we die earlier than we need to. I do not want to live in a nanny state, but I do want to live in a healthy environment that allows our children to live well and allows all of us to live the lives that we want to lead—one that makes the healthy choice the easy choice, the affordable choice and the normal choice, and one where, if we want to do things that make us ill, we really have to try hard. I thank everybody for their time today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered obesity and fatty liver disease.

10.57 am

Sitting suspended.

Family Farming in Northern Ireland

11 am

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of agricultural property relief and business property relief on family farming in Northern Ireland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am very grateful for the opportunity to bring forward this debate on an issue that cuts right to the heart of rural Northern Ireland and indeed Britain.

The proposed changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief will have devastating consequences for family farms across our nation. Agriculture is not just another sector in our economy; for Northern Ireland it is our very foundation. It sustains our rural communities, feeds over 10 million people annually, underpins our agrifood industry and provides work for tens of thousands of families. I make no apology for repeating a comment that I have made previously, and that my grandfather tells me every Sunday at the dinner table: if the farmer is not doing well in this country, no one is.

In Northern Ireland we have over 26,000 farms. They form the backbone of our rural life—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend my hon. Friend for that point. She is absolutely right to underline the impact on family farms of the Chancellor's proposals. In tandem with decisions being made by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister in Northern Ireland, they will leave many farmers feeling that their generational family farms have no future. My hon. Friend will probably have seen "Countryfile" on Sunday. It highlighted two things for farmers: first, the mental health impact and that there have been suicides; secondly, the generational loss of the farms. If farms are not working, they are not viable, do not produce the food and the impact is great. The Government really need to sit down, take account of where we are and change the decision.

Carla Lockhart: I thank my hon. Friend for his consistent voice on this issue. I will come to "Countryfile" later in my speech.

The vast majority of our farms in Northern Ireland are family run, often handed down proudly through several generations. The farm is not just a business: it is a home, a heritage and a legacy. That is why any policy that affects how farms are passed on to the next generation goes to the very core of who we are as rural people. For many families, the dream is simple: to see the next generation take over, work the same land and continue the proud tradition of stewardship. The reality of that dream is now under threat like never before.

Agricultural property relief has existed for a reason. It recognises that farming is asset-rich but cash-poor, or as we would say in Northern Ireland, "We are asset-rich but penny-poor." A farm may be worth millions on paper, but that value is tied up in land, livestock, machinery, buildings and—most concerningly for many farmers—debt. Farmers spend money and they thrive in advancing. But for what—when they see what this Government are doing to them?

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): With over 26,000 farms in Northern Ireland, the value of farmland is incredibly high, if not higher, than in any other part of the United Kingdom. Does the hon. Lady agree that the negative impacts of changes to APR and BPR on Northern Ireland farmland will be much higher for those farming families than anywhere else across the United Kingdom?

Carla Lockhart: I agree with the hon. Member. I thank him for using his intervention to speak up for Northern Ireland farmers, because they will be hard hit because of the land values.

When a farmer dies, there is not the liquid cash available to meet a large inheritance tax bill. That is precisely why successive Governments introduced and retained APR, so that farms would not have to be sold off bit by bit, just to pay the tax man. It was a recognition that the nation needs farms to continue and not be broken up at the point of succession. The change is being dressed up as modernisation or rebalancing, but in reality it is an attack on the very concept of family farming. I am pleased to say that colleagues from every party in Northern Ireland have been absolutely united in our opposition to the policy.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) *rose*—

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Does the hon. Lady agree that although the Government say that the effect of the inheritance tax on farms will be pro-growth, it will actually be anti-growth? In order to prepare for the day when a huge tax bill will have to be met, rather than investing in growing their enterprise, farmers are holding back so that they can hopefully make some contribution towards the exorbitant demands that are made upon death.

Carla Lockhart: The hon. and learned Member is right; the policy is stifling growth. As I have said before, farmers want to advance and grow, and they want to spend money.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an important point. To follow up on the previous intervention, I wonder whether she has noticed in Northern Ireland, as I have in Cumbria, that farmers are holding money back. If they need a drystone wall fixing, they are not paying for that. If they need a new tractor, they are not investing in it. If they need to upgrade a barn for animal welfare purposes, they are not doing it. The policy is damaging not only farms but the rural communities that service those farms, and, as the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) said, constricting growth.

Carla Lockhart: I agree with the hon. Member. I need to give way to the leader of my party at this point.

Gavin Robinson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. It is quite right that she took the last two interventions because she was talking about cross-party support for Northern Ireland farms. She is blessed to have a constituency with some of the most fertile and therefore valuable agricultural land in Northern Ireland, with an average of around £30,000 per acre. Although there may be a policy intention in relation to the industrialisation of farms or people shielding their

wealth through farms, would she like the Government to recognise that that is not the case in Northern Ireland, and even a small family holding of 30 acres could get caught by the policy change?

Carla Lockhart: Absolutely. It does not take much arithmetic to work out the facts of that scenario.

In a recent joint letter to the Chancellor, signed by all MPs and peers from Northern Ireland, we set out a clear position:

“Agriculture is not simply an economic sector; it is a way of life. The removal or restriction of Agricultural Property Relief will place an unfair and unsustainable burden on family farms, jeopardising their ability to pass on their farms to the next generation and threatening the future of family farming.”

Those are not my words alone. They are the voices of rural Northern Ireland, speaking in unison in the House today.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing a debate that focuses specifically on Northern Ireland. Does she agree that what the Treasury and the Government have missed in the proposal is the unique nature of farms in Northern Ireland, where 99% are actually family owned? Even that promise of the opportunity to spread the tax bill over 10 years restricts families who want to invest in their farms, and puts pressure on not only the older generation who are concerned about the farm they are leaving, but the younger generation who are looking to the future.

Carla Lockhart: I agree with the hon. Member.

According to an estimate from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, the policy will impact a third of all farms and three quarters of dairy farms. Think about that for a moment. Three quarters of our dairy farms—the heart of our agrifood export industry—could be hit by a tax change that would make succession financially impossible.

The knock-on effects will be vast. Meat factories will face reduced throughput and rising costs, forcing scale-back and possibly relocation. Feed and supply companies will see demand collapse, threatening jobs and investment. It is not just farms that will be hit, and this is not a matter of large estates or wealthy landowners. The average Northern Ireland farm is about 40 hectares. Land values in some counties, including my own, are in excess of £30,000 per acre. It does not take much arithmetic to see that many modest family farms would easily surpass the £1 million threshold.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an extremely good point about the impact on Northern Irish farms, and a similar thing will happen in South Norfolk. I would like to present solutions to this problem. I posit—and she may want to comment on this later on—that the Centre for Tax Reform’s policy would actually raise the amount of income for the Treasury by 71%. I also encourage the hon. Lady to look at separating APR and BPR, pausing the process and looking at whether we can raise revenues and protect the family farm.

Carla Lockhart: I commend the Member for the stand he is taking and for encouraging the Minister in this way. We are not talking about millionaires; we are talking about hard-working family farmers who live

[Carla Lockhart]

modestly and work from dawn to dusk to feed us all. If these proposals proceed, we will inevitably see forced sales of land simply to pay the tax liability when a family member dies. That means the fragmentation of farms, the loss of viable holdings and the disappearance of many small-to-medium sized family farms.

The Government talk about a fair and balanced approach, but what about the 80-year-old who has not got time to plan? Did my brother think my dad would pass away at age 66? Absolutely not. Does a family think they are going to lose a son or a daughter at age 40, 41 or 42? They do not.

This will deter young farmers from taking on the responsibility of a business that leaves them saddled with debt before they have even begun. We cannot afford to drive the next generation away from farming. Once that chain of succession is broken, it is almost impossible to restore.

This debate is not just about fairness for rural families: it is about food security, which is a matter of national importance. We have learned through recent global shocks—the pandemic, supply-chain disruption and now inflationary pressures—that domestic food production is essential. To undermine family farming through ill-judged taxation would be a profound mistake that this Government will rue. Certainly, rural MPs will rue it in the days and weeks to come. It would make us more dependent on imports and less resilient to crisis, while sending a terrible message to those who feed our nation.

The policy is being advanced in the name of fairness, but there is nothing fair about it. Farming families have worked their land for generations, paid their taxes and cared for the countryside. They are not speculators; they are custodians. APR is not, as it is presented in public discourse, a loophole; it is a lifeline that allows farms to pass from parent to child without having to be broken apart. To impose a new tax burden at the point of bereavement is not reform; it is punishment for choosing to farm.

Let us be clear: the yield from this policy—even in Treasury terms—would be marginal compared to the cost it would impose on rural communities and the wider economy. In short, it is bad economics and bad morality. Across Northern Ireland, opposition to this proposal is widespread and heartfelt. From the Ulster Farmers' Union, who are here today, the National Sheep Association and the Dairy Council to the agrifood processors, the message is the same—this change must be reconsidered.

At rallies and meetings across my constituency and beyond, farmers have told me they feel under siege, squeezed by rising costs, regulatory pressures and now this looming tax threat. They want the Government to work with them, and not against them, which is why I have described this policy as a “farm tax heist”. That is how it feels to those who have given their lives to feeding our people.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to understand that Northern Ireland represents around 3% of the population of the UK, but produces a multiple of that in terms of food produce for the rest of

the United Kingdom? If that was recognised, there might be more recognition in terms of what she is trying to achieve through this debate.

Carla Lockhart: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, and I wholeheartedly agree. I urge the Treasury and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to pause, and engage in genuine consultation with the farming community. Sit with us and talk to us. They have refused every meeting request.

We need a review that recognises the unique structures of Northern Ireland farming, made up of predominantly family-run farms and regional variations. Many suggestions have been made that are worth exploration, including in the latest Centre for the Analysis of Taxation report, as has been noted. I am not saying that it is a silver bullet, but we should sit down, talk about it and start to engage in the conversation.

At its heart, this debate is about how we as a society value those who feed us. We speak often in this House about sustainability and food strategy, but sustainability begins with sustaining the people who produce our food. We cannot say we care about the environment and rural life on one hand and on the other make policies that threaten to strip families of the land they have cared for over generations. I say to the Exchequer Secretary, with the full force of rural Northern Ireland behind me: think again. Listen to the voices of those who know the land and who understand the realities of farming life. Do not create a policy that will devastate small family farms in pursuit of a marginal tax return. Agriculture is a national asset, not a target for revenue generation.

The changes to agriculture property relief are not reform. They are an attack on our family farming. They form part of a wider Labour agenda that is anti-rural, anti-farmer and anti-common sense. That is how it is seen out in rural Britain, and it is somewhat similar to the direction of travel of our own Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister in Northern Ireland. While our producers face rising costs and red tape, Labour's response is more tax and more barriers. Their net zero plans are driving good farmland out of production and into solar panels and their planning rules are choking rural life and pushing young families off the land.

On national TV this week, the reality was laid bare. I can still see Charles Rees in my mind as he said “if something doesn't change by next April I'd probably top myself.”

If that does not send a shiver down every spine in this place today, we are not in touch with the public. I ask Labour to stop, halt, talk to us, engage, get it right. Do not go on this collision course. I urge the Government to scrap this farm tax and rethink.

11.16 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, for my first time speaking from this position in this fantastic Westminster Hall. I congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) on securing the debate, and she spoke with passion and with personal insight from her own family farming background. She spoke clearly about the impact on jobs and employment and on communal life in Northern

Ireland, about how essential farmers are to so many of the villages, towns and communities in Northern Ireland and across the whole country, and of course about the importance of farming to family life.

The decision to reform agricultural property relief and business property relief from next April was not one the Government took lightly. Over the past 12 months, the Government have listened to the concerns of the hon. Member for Upper Bann, of other hon. Members and of external organisations. The Government and I recognise the strength of feeling on this topic in Northern Ireland and elsewhere across the country. But having listened and discussed the question with a range of stakeholders, the Government believe that the approach set out at the Budget last year is the appropriate one.

I recognise and deeply respect the contribution that small businesses and farms make to the economy in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom, but I and the Government also recognise the need to restore economic stability, fix our public finances and contribute to funding our public services. As well as all this, we need to make sure we raise taxes in a way that is fair for all of us.

Tim Farron: Will the Minister take a look at the University of Cumbria report that shows that upland farmers in all four corners of the United Kingdom will, at the end of the transition, will be earning only on average 55% of the national minimum wage—barely half the living wage? Those are the same farms, often worth £2 million or £3 million on paper, that may have to spend £20,000 a year to pay off the tax. How does he think that is fair and how does it raise money for the Government coffers in a sustainable way?

Dan Tomlinson: I will happily look at any report any Member recommends I read, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to send it my way.

Since we took office, the Government have taken a range of decisions to seek to restore economic stability and raise revenue to help support our public services, because it was vital to attempt to sort out the mess we inherited, so that we can invest again in the future. The decision to reform APR and BPR was one of the decisions that enabled us to do that.

Under the current system, the 100% relief on business and agricultural assets is heavily skewed towards the very wealthiest estates. According to data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs for 2021-22, almost half of agricultural property relief across the UK—40%—was claimed by just 7% of the estates that made claims. That is £219 million in tax foregone from just over 100 estates.

It is a similar picture for business property relief, which is linked and is treated in the same way under the reforms, with more than 50% of business property relief claimed by just 4% of estates. That is £558 million in tax foregone from just 158 estates. That contributes to the very largest estates paying much lower tax rates than smaller estates and everyday people up and down the country.

Jim Allister: In that context, does the CenTax report not make evident sense? If we impose the full-blooded inheritance tax on the top end—on those above £10 million—are we not reaping the same tax return,

while at the same time not punishing and driving out of existence those at the bottom end? Is that not logical, and is that not right?

Dan Tomlinson: The hon. and learned Member raises the CenTax report, and it is worth noting some points about the analysis in that report. First, the Government have consistently said that around 520 farms would be paying additional inheritance tax as a result of the reforms announced at the Budget last year.

Members from all parties have been turning to the CenTax report as an independent analysis of the Government's reforms. That report agrees with us on the number of farms that will be affected. That independent analysis conducted separately from the Government comes out with the same conclusion on the number of farms that will be affected and it says that its proposal—the minimum share proposal, which the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim mentions—would more than double the number of estates that would pay additional inheritance tax. I do not think the right way forward is to have the number of estates that would be affected increase from about 500 to, I think, about 1,200. I have looked at the report, which has been raised by Members from all parties, but I do not think it is the silver bullet that others have concluded it could be.

The context I just set out is why we are changing how we target agricultural property relief and business property relief from April next year. We are doing so in a way that maintains a significant relief for estates, including smaller farms and businesses. Individuals will still get 100% relief for the first £1 million of combined business and agricultural assets. I know that Members know this, but it is worth setting out the position again. On top of that amount, there will be a 50% relief. That means that inheritance tax will be paid at a rate of up to 20% rather than the standard 40%.

Robbie Moore: A £1 million threshold is nothing when we take into account the value of farmland, a cottage, a farmhouse, growing crops, stocks in store, livestock and machinery valuations—all of which will be taken into account at the valuation of an estate on death. A £1 million threshold is nothing before a 20% IHT liability is put on that estate. I urge the Minister to look at this again. Farmland values are significantly higher in Northern Ireland, and I reiterate my point that Northern Ireland farmers will see a greater impact from the £1 million threshold.

Dan Tomlinson: I do not agree that £1 million is nothing. It is a significant increase and a significantly higher threshold than that for anyone who does not have access to APR or BPR. I understand the point about land values in Northern Ireland, but at the same time, as far as I am aware, farms in Northern Ireland are smaller than those elsewhere. It is also worth bearing in mind that the £1 million relief comes on top of the spousal exemptions and nil-rate bands, so, depending on individual circumstance, up to £3 million can be passed on by two people, free of inheritance tax, and, as has been mentioned, the payment can be spread over 10 years, interest free. That policy design is not seen anywhere else in the inheritance tax system.

Carla Lockhart: The Minister is certainly sticking to the script, but can he give us even an opening through the door of the Treasury? Will he open that door and speak with the farming unions across the nation?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and hope that today we have been able to have that open and public discussion to share the different views on this policy. I would be happy to continue the discussion with her and others who think that the issue is important. Just last week, I made sure to speak to individual farmers to understand their perspectives on the policy. I will continue to engage with people who will be affected by the changes, and with Members in this place. I hope that we can continue those conversations across the aisle.

Let me make progress—I can see the time is slipping away from us. Overall, the reforms are expected to result in up to around 520 estates claiming UK agricultural property relief, including those also claiming BPR, paying more inheritance tax in 2026-27. Almost three quarters of such estates will not pay any more tax as a result of the changes, based on the data. As I have already mentioned, CenTax has looked at the Government's figures and has reached a similar conclusion. Its work concludes that of the estates that are affected, half will see an increase in their effective inheritance tax rate of less than 5 percentage points, and 86% of those estates could pay their entire inheritance tax bill out of non-farm assets.

Ben Goldsborough: I congratulate the Minister on his first appearance in Westminster Hall. My question is about that 5 percentage point change. This year has been a terrible year for yields, especially in South Norfolk with the droughts. That hits the profitability of farming, which is non-existent—there is not enough profitability in farming. Will the Minister share what investigations the Treasury has done on that fluctuation in profitability and the ability of our farmers to pay the 5 percentage point increase he mentioned?

Dan Tomlinson: The figures that I raised were from research carried out by an independent organisation, CenTax. Profitability and incomes change from year to year, of course, and can change for different types of farms—we can see that beef prices, for example, are higher this year than they have been in the past, and the Government are aware of that.

Overall, we understand that the reforms to inheritance tax generate strong views from Members from Northern Ireland and from all over the country, who are here to represent their constituents. I understand that, and I respect and admire the work of Members on both sides of the House in bringing their residents' concerns to this place.

I know that the questions about inheritance and family businesses are deeply personal, and I do not pretend that such changes are not difficult, but I believe that the reforms get the balance right between supporting farms and businesses and funding our public services. They mean that assets will be taxed at a lower rate than most others, and, in this tough context, I think that the Government have made the right decision. I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann again, as well as all the Members who have intervened today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Connected and Automated Vehicles

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered connected and automated vehicles.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. Yesterday, I jumped in a car with a couple of other people near King's Cross station. It was a pretty normal journey. We watched the world go by, chatted and got stuck in a bit of traffic. The journey was completely ordinary, except for one thing: the car was driving itself. That 20-minute journey represents the future of what our roads could look like, which is why I am pleased to be leading today's debate. I originally applied for this debate for reasons related to road safety. I have met too many families in my constituency who have lost a husband or a mother through other people's dangerous driving. I am fascinated by how automation and technology could help us to eradicate road danger and death, but getting deeper into this topic, my speech will focus on not only safety but accessibility and economic growth.

Turning first to safety, in the UK, 30,000 people are killed or seriously injured on our roads each year. If we speak to the police, they will say that most deadly crashes are caused by the "fatal five"—speeding, drink and drug driving, mobile phone use, antisocial driving, and not wearing a seatbelt. I do not need to be a machine learning expert to know that automated vehicles, trained by safe, expert drivers and programmed to comply with the strict rules of the road, could avoid all five of those issues and the needless death they cause. A self-driving car is not going to be drunk, high or scrolling through TikTok. During the passage of the Automated Vehicles Act 2024, the last Government rightly put safety at the heart of the regulation, stating that a self-driving vehicle should be at least as safe as a competent and careful driver. There are still some questions about what exactly that means.

In the US, where the roll-out of autonomous vehicles and robotaxis is far ahead of here, the safety statistics on automated versus human-driven vehicles look impressive. Waymo, the Google-owned company that runs self-driving taxis there, claims that its vehicles have 80% fewer injury-causing crashes compared with the average human driver, but within the human average there will be drivers who are neither careful nor competent, so these figures are quite hard to compare. What progress has the Minister made on expanding the safety expectations for automated and connected vehicles, and what is the timeline on the remaining regulations that need to be set out? Furthermore, what do the Government hope the safety gains from automated vehicles could be?

Proving the reliability and safety of automated vehicles is essential for public acceptance of this new technology. Lots of people might feel reticent to get in a self-driving car because they do not feel safe, but I found my own experience yesterday in a Wayve autonomous vehicle reassuring. During the journey, we had cyclists jumping red lights, pedestrians walking out on to the road and other drivers cutting across our right of way. The car dealt with it all. The whole journey felt safe and smooth

the whole time. Some critics say that these cars cannot handle British roundabouts because they were made for American grid cities. I can confirm that the Wayve car handled the roundabouts with ease. We had a safety driver sat ready to take the wheel if any issues arose, but none did.

Other areas of safety are important to mention too. In a world where cyber-attacks are becoming more common and more devastating, there is a fear that fully connected and autonomous vehicles could be hacked. Could the Minister say more about that and the protections that are being put in place? Another key element is data sharing, particularly in the event of a collision involving cars that are either fully automated or have advanced autopilot systems. The latter is where a vehicle can steer itself, but drivers must keep their eyes on the road, ready to assume control if needed.

Many of these driver-assist functions are important safety enhancers, and these functions, including things such as lane assist, should not be so easily turned off. However, in other countries, there have been examples of cars in self-driving modes where collisions have occurred, and companies have refused to share all the data with families and authorities. Is the Minister confident that we will not have the same issue here?

My personal campaign this year has been to address the wild west that is the British number plate regulation system. The traditional number plate, as the public identifier or passport of a vehicle, has been mandatory since the Motor Car Act 1903, but they are still as important as ever—even more so for determining ownership in the era of driverless cars. Can the Minister, who is in charge of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, reassure me that he is looking at the gaping holes in regulation of number plates and the sale of vast numbers of illegal ghost and cloned plates?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Member for looking into this subject. It is something we all have to learn a lot about. The University of York has the Institute for Safe Autonomy, which is really interested in how the Government will monitor the initial pilots of this scheme, and how lessons will be learned and then, of course, fed into the regulator. Does she believe that we need to have a proper framework for how we do that data collection before the roll-out of such a programme?

Sarah Coombes: Definitely. Safety has to be paramount. Britain is a leader in universities and institutes such as the Institute for Safe Autonomy, to ensure that as this new technology rolls out, it is safe and has public confidence.

On accessibility, 30% of my constituents in West Bromwich do not have a car; they rely on buses, bikes, trams, trains, taxis, lifts and legs. We also have bad congestion problems. We do not want to see that made worse by a massive increase in vehicles on our roads. The dream is that autonomous vehicles could help us on both counts if we shape the future right. The Royal National Institute of Blind People has welcomed Waymo coming to London, saying that it will give those with visual impairments more scope for independent and spontaneous travel. Transport for West Midlands is interested in how we could integrate autonomous

technology with our public transport system. How could we use driverless cars to fill in the gaps that buses and trains do not reach?

I keep thinking about the possibilities of an automated dial-a-ride service—larger, disabled-accessible autonomous vehicles that can be ordered easily and work out optimum routes to drop off passengers. The staff on existing services offer valuable support and care to passengers with additional needs. This is not about replacing them; it is about adding extra capacity.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): The success of automated and autonomous vehicles will depend on infrastructure—not just roads but connectivity, data and mapping systems—but if the infrastructure is upgraded only in big cities, we will have a two-tier system and leave behind towns such as Weston-super-Mare. Does my hon. Friend agree that this should be a national project that supports innovation and, importantly, accessibility across the whole country, with a special focus on coastal communities and city centres?

Sarah Coombes: I absolutely agree that the infrastructure needs to be in place and the benefits of autonomous vehicles need to be felt across the whole country—in coastal areas, but also in urban areas and towns, such as those that I represent.

Car clubs have never reached their full potential in the UK—I think that is because of the cost and lack of density of vehicles—but if people could order an AV to their home and it was cost-effective, safe and reliable, I can see a world in which families do not necessarily need a second car, or perhaps a car at all. What plans do the Government have to harness the power of autonomous vehicles to complement, rather than replace, public transport and how could we use it to fill in the gaps?

The main issue that I want to talk about is growth and the potential benefits that technology and automation on our roads could bring to the UK economy. The Government estimate that the automated car industry could add £42 billion to the UK economy by 2035, not least through 38,000 new jobs. This is a difficult topic because I know that many people who drive for a living are worried about potentially losing their jobs as a result of self-driving vehicles.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Even though my hon. Friend's constituency and mine are very different, the car industry is also critical to the livelihoods of constituents in Hampstead and Highgate. Recently I have had a huge number of emails from local cab drivers who are facing severe delays when it comes to renewing their driving licence, which obviously impacts their financial security. Could my hon. Friend comment on the fact that it is of course important to create the jobs of tomorrow, but it is also important to protect the jobs of today?

Sarah Coombes: Absolutely. I represent many professional drivers myself, so I completely agree about the importance of the current systems working for them, as well as future systems working. I want to be clear about this. Given that full vehicle automation is decades away, I hope that we can provide reassurance that mass redundancy of drivers is not around the corner. People who drive for a living do much more than an automated

[Sarah Coombes]

vehicle could do, whether that is by supporting vulnerable passengers, protecting freight as a heavy goods vehicle driver or managing antisocial behaviour on bus services.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Many moons ago, I was listening to a futurologist on the radio, a job that seems to involve mainly sitting on beanbags. He was talking about autonomous vehicles and was asked, “Is there anything that you think people should be thinking about on autonomous vehicles?” He said, “We’ve got to get used to the idea that grandma is going to turn up dead, because right now when you have a medical emergency, whether it be in a taxi or in a car, you’ll crash the car and get some kind of medical intervention as a result of that, but with autonomous vehicles, grandma will unfortunately arrive back at the house.” When we talk about the importance of cab drivers or vehicle-led driving, we also need to think about the unintended consequences of automated vehicles.

Sarah Coombes: It is absolutely about creating a safe system for the future. If AVs are involved in an incident, will they be able to get to hospital? All those questions have to be talked about, as we begin to see fully driverless vehicles on our roads.

One person who has benefited from new employment in the AV industry is our safety driver at Wayve yesterday. He told me how thrilled he was to have secured a job there. He spends at least six hours a day training and testing their cars around the streets of London, having formerly worked as a delivery driver.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Northamptonshire has the skills, location and ambition to play a massive part, with our logistic sector being right next to Milton Keynes, which is already testing these vehicles. Does she agree that we are perfectly placed to be part of the growth she talks about?

Sarah Coombes: I agree that exciting pilots are going on. I am sure Kettering and many other parts of the country could benefit. Wayve is an example of a company leading the way in helping the UK to become a global leader in this technology. Although the company was founded out of the University of Cambridge and is now based in King’s Cross, there is an unmissable opportunity for industry up and down the country. My own region of the west midlands is an automotive manufacturing heartland. Jaguar Land Rover produces the Jaguar I-PACE, the vehicle used by Waymo robotaxis. Some of the factories in my constituency make parts for Nissan, which has announced a partnership with Wayve for new AI driver software.

Dan Aldridge: As my hon. Friend mentioned JLR, it is important to reflect on the necessity for cyber-resilience. Do she and the Minister agree that we cannot progress with such technologies without a national push towards cyber-resilience?

Sarah Coombes: It was very important that the Government intervened after JLR suffered a cyber-attack and went into full shutdown, because many businesses in my area rely on JLR. I agree that cyber-resilience has to be at the heart of this.

I want the west midlands to feel the benefit of manufacturing the hardware and the vehicles that will be the self-driving cars of the future. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade about how to ensure that the west midlands and the whole UK realise the benefits of the autonomous vehicle boom? So far, the regulatory environment in Britain is very attractive to companies in this space because it is safe and sensible. The UN is responsible for much of the international vehicle safety regulations. Will the Minister reassure us that Britain will not diverge, putting us at a disadvantage, and that the remaining regulations being consulted on will not be delayed and hold us back?

In San Francisco, robotaxis, as they are called, are a tourist draw. People travel from all over to see the future in action. Waymo has announced that the vehicles are coming to London but I would love Birmingham and the Black Country to be an early adopter of driverless taxi pilots too. Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe, full of innovation and entrepreneurship. Previous automotive revolutions have started there. Frederick Lanchester built what is considered to have been Britain’s first four-wheel petrol car in Birmingham in 1895. There is a reason why Birmingham is often called the workshop of the world. There have already been driverless cars zipping up the M6 through my constituency, training the vehicles on highway driving. I would love local people to experience that at first hand.

I will finish, as I know others want to speak. Yesterday, I experienced the future of driving. As the automated steering wheel turned itself and we manoeuvred deftly and safely around packed and unpredictable London streets, it felt as if that future was being built on firm ground. As with any new technology, there are risks that must be managed, but the safety, accessibility and economic benefits could be huge. The UK Government have been leading the way. I know the Minister is certainly not in auto-pilot mode as we continue to shape the self-driving century that is upon us.

2.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is as always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. It is nice to see you again and catch up. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for leading today’s debate and I congratulate her for doing well. I am not a petrolhead but I love a gear stick—I love going through the gears, one to six. I love the smell of the car and the roar of a diesel engine.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich is right to bring this matter to the House for consideration, but I am afraid I will never get an electric car. That is just me. A driverless car? I like to be in charge of the steering wheel. I am not sure I could sit in a car like the one Arnold Schwarzenegger sits in in that film, where a wee model thing, with a head that spins round, tells him where he is going. I do not think I could ever do that, but the hon. Lady is right to bring this to us for consideration.

There is a need for technology and a need to move forward. My son, who has an electric car and is not afraid of the future—unlike his dad, perhaps—is willing to consider the technology that there will be. Someday there will be driverless cars; I am sure of that. One thing

that I would love to see in the future—this is not about cars—is something like the device in “Star Trek” where they say, “Beam me up, Scotty.” The day they do that will be the day I would be convinced that is the right way to go, because I could be in my office at 9 o’clock on a Tuesday morning, and then be over here at five past 9—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Be careful what you wish for!

Jim Shannon: Now, will that ever happen? Who knows? But we are talking about driverless cars.

I want to refer to Northern Ireland, of course. First, the Automated Vehicles Act 2024 does not apply to Northern Ireland and, furthermore, there is as of yet no comprehensive legislative framework in Northern Ireland for automated vehicles. I believe it will come, because technology is moving on, the future is moving on, and people will want to be part of that.

That situation means that there is some confusion about the use of a self-driving vehicle authorised under the GB regime in Northern Ireland; the hon. Member for West Bromwich is right about that. There would also be implications for those coming across the border from the Republic of Ireland, as the vehicle would be operating without clear legal responsibility. It is always a joy to see the Minister in his place, and we look forward to some clarification on what it would mean if a self-driving vehicle from the mainland or the Republic of Ireland came to Northern Ireland, where we do not have any legislation in place. If it works, it has to work everywhere, so my question to the Minister would be about how that might happen.

Some pilot schemes are emerging back home. For example, there was an eight-seater Harlander shuttle bus operating in the Titanic quarter in Belfast. There was always a safety operator, of course, but it did give a little taste of the future of driverless vehicles in Northern Ireland. Sometimes it is a step into the unknown that people are a wee bit concerned about. A recent survey carried out by CompareNI highlighted that out of 800 motorists, some 75% would not feel safe travelling in a driverless vehicle—I am probably one of that 75%. I am in the majority, by the way; at least in Northern Ireland. The lack of public trust must be looked at. If this is the future, more must be done to instil public trust as that could be a barrier to progression.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the question of trust in automated vehicles, does my hon. Friend agree that one issue that people will be concerned about is the cost of car insurance? When we are consulted and approached by constituents and we write to insurance companies, we usually hear that the number of accidents occurring is increasing insurance costs. Does he agree that it would be right to be somewhat sceptical? If there is going to be a significant reduction in accidents—I think there will be—we would like to see a significant reduction in the cost of car insurance, but I will not hold my breath.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend always brings pertinent points to the debate. Insurance in Northern Ireland is more expensive than it is anywhere else in the United Kingdom, so we would love to see those advantages.

The big question that many people have about insurance is who would be liable in the case of a crash or a road traffic accident? Would it be the driver, manufacturer or software provider? One of the three has to be accountable. On the other hand, human error causes a large percentage of road traffic accidents. Although I have said I like to be in charge of the steering wheel, if there is driver error or something goes wrong, it is the driver at the wheel who is to blame, and perhaps with a driverless car, the chances of an accident will be reduced dramatically. I think my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) was referring to that, and the stats probably do as well. However, there is just the unknown question of where we are moving to. Whether it is about ill-judgment, drink driving, fatigue or distraction, there is perhaps an argument for the introduction of driverless cars on the grounds that it will be safer but, personally, I think it is the loss of control that worries people. How do we instil confidence into those who, like me, want to ensure that it is completely safe to drive a car?

There have also been reports that the introduction of driverless cars will be pivotal in transforming mobility for elderly people and the disabled. That is obviously a plus factor as well. It could give people who have been prohibited from driving manually, or are unable to obtain a driving licence because of their disability, the independence, flexibility and opportunity to have a life outside of the home. I see the advantages of that, and I hope the Minister will reply on that point. It will be interesting to see how this progresses over time, and whether we can do more to support it.

As Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom look to the future of transport, driverless vehicles present both a challenge and an opportunity. It is only fair for me to give my opinion, but there is an opportunity—and I am not against opportunity or technology moving forward. It may not be what I want to do, but the opportunity has to be there for everyone else.

We do not yet have a dedicated legal framework for automated vehicles, which is the big question for the Minister. I asked him at the beginning, but I will ask him again: will the Minister ensure that when we move forward, all the regions come together? There are implications for drivers from the Republic of Ireland coming across the border, so will the Minister ensure that we are all on the same page? Although it could create uncertainty, it also gives us the chance to design a system that reflects our needs. The hon. Member for West Bromwich passionately put that case forward. I look forward to engaging on this issue further in the future, and I hope that the views of the general public can also be taken into consideration. Once again, I say well done to the hon. Member for West Bromwich.

2.51 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this timely and insightful debate.

The advent of automated passenger services as a new pillar of our transport infrastructure is a huge opportunity to transform the lives of disabled people. Turning travel from an exhausting gauntlet into a predictable door-to-door

[Lee Pitcher]

experience would be transformational. For too many people right now, travel is a lottery. A ramp that does not arrive, or a lift that is out of order: when supporting my wife, who lives with sight loss, I see at first hand what that means to her. The stress is in not just the journey but the uncertainty. APS can flip that around on its head, and provide reliable, bookable and predictable journeys with accessibility built in rather than just being bolted on.

If we design the vehicles, the pick-up points and the booking systems around real lives, APS can deliver something really quite remarkable but simple and profound, which most of us take for granted: the confidence for someone to get where they want to go every single time. Designing it around real lives means universal design as standard: kerb-level boarding; audio, haptic and visual cues; secure wheelchair spaces; induction loops; seats that can be reserved; and booking systems, in-app and by phone, that work for blind and partially sighted people.

Rosie Wrighting: I lost my driving licence because I was having seizures when I was 19 years old. Will my hon. Friend also talk about the fact that this would help people who cannot drive due to seizures?

Lee Pitcher: I 100% agree with my hon. Friend. My wife was born with full sight, but over the years her degenerative condition has meant that she had to lose her licence. I know that it was almost like ripping her heart out; the independence she lost was huge. Anybody who experiences that independence—having the ability to go where they want, when they want—will know that it is so difficult to lose. APS should help many more people who experience that.

We have the chance, for the first time in history, to develop a system with the needs of disabled people entrenched from the beginning; not as an afterthought or adaptation, but built for the right purpose from day one. That means co-development, not just consultation, for although disabled people are poised to benefit most from the technology, they are also the most vulnerable if we get it wrong. Co-development means having disabled people in the room with engineers, coders and operators from the first day. It means trials where users co-write the test plan, safety cases published in plain English and feedback loops that actually change the service.

Trust is the prerequisite for adoption. We will not win it with glossy brochures. We will win it by working with disabled people to design safeguards and standards that resonate with them. That is how you build a service that people can have confidence in. Clear rules and accountability must back that up with independent safety audits, black box-style incident logging, a human in loop for edge cases, and transparent performance data for on-time pick-ups, successful ramp deployments, and complaint resolutions, published route by route. APS should knit together the network, not replace accessible buses and trains. Think real-time handovers, shared tickets and guaranteed connections, with compensation when the system fails.

New technology can mean a new lease of life for tens of thousands of people by giving them independence, dignity and the confidence to get where they want to go

every single time. We have a genuine once-in-a-generation chance to get this right. I call on the Minister to enshrine the principles of accessibility by design from the very start and ensure service user co-creation from this point on. If we do not do that, we will spend years playing catch up, and the opportunities missed by those who stood to benefit the most will never come again.

2.56 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this important debate. To the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I say: automated vehicles—

“It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it”.

Connected and automated vehicles offer the prospect of a safer, more efficient and more sustainable public transport system. They hold particular potential for areas such as my constituency, Surrey Heath, where public transport remains inadequate, with slow, disconnected bus routes, poor rail links to London and limited options for those without a private vehicle. If implemented effectively and securely, this technology could transform mobility by giving greater independence to older residents and—as the hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) said—to those with disabilities or medical conditions. That would reduce isolation and improve access to essential services. It could also help us to meet our net zero goals by cutting reliance on private cars and encouraging cleaner, shared modes of travel, while improving road safety for all users, including cyclists and pedestrians. In semi-rural areas, connected and automated vehicles could link villages where bus services are unreliable, while easing congestion. Congestion is a major issue in Surrey Heath, which has the second-highest car dependency rate of any in the country, with 1.64 cars per household.

However, the transition will only succeed if the public’s trust in the digital infrastructure that underpins it is enhanced. Connectivity must go hand in hand with security. Our vehicle identification systems—our number plates—cannot be the weak link in an otherwise forward-looking transport agenda. In the past, I have raised concerns about the fragility of automated number plate recognition technology. In an age of connected technology and digital identifiers, it is troubling that we still rely on what is largely an analogue process for our security on the roads. Number plates should be the cornerstone of road safety, yet they have become a point of vulnerability: easily cloned, exploited and poorly protected.

When ANPR fails or is undermined by cloning or ghosting, that is not a minor inconvenience but a failure of public protection. One Surrey Heath resident was fined thousands of pounds after criminals cloned her number plate. She faced bailiff threats and months of stress with little support. Another resident received 42 penalty notices for the same reason. Both spent many hundreds of pounds replacing their number plates, not because of any wrongdoing on their part but because the system meant to protect them failed. Those are not isolated cases. A recent parliamentary written question revealed that in 2024 the DVLA received over 10,000 reports from people across the country disputing responsibility for private vehicles that they did not recognise when they were challenged—a 42% increase since 2020.

To realise the potential benefits of connected and automated vehicles, our security infrastructure and legislation must evolve in lockstep with advancing technologies. The Government should legislate for tighter registration controls, stronger supply verification and a digital audit trail to prevent tracing and cloning. Transport innovation must not outpace regulation; as vehicles become smarter, the systems that identify them must become smarter, too. Only then can we protect motorists, build and maintain public confidence, and ensure that connected and automated vehicles deliver safer roads, lower emissions and greater mobility for all.

3 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this important debate.

I have no doubt that one day autonomous vehicles will be the norm on our buses, and I am perfectly okay with that, because I am fairly sure that any robot would be better at driving a bus than I would be. I am keen to hear from the Minister whether he has a timescale for the publication of the automated passenger services permitting scheme consultation.

Technology has moved at pace over the last two decades; LiDAR—light detection and ranging—tech, radar and cameras all working together so that autonomous buses can handle junctions and roundabouts, and keep pace with the general traffic. I thank Ian Pulford, who has recently been telling me about the self-driving shuttles in Milton Keynes that have transported thousands of passengers without incident. I also thank a pair of Dans—Dan and Dan—who talked me through the Connector project. When I travelled on that, I found that it worked rather well, albeit that it had perhaps been programmed to be a little too cautious; it felt a bit like the 21st-century equivalent of having a man with a red flag walking along in front of the bus. Particularly when we sat waiting to turn left into oncoming traffic, I felt that basically we needed braver autonomous buses.

I think that passengers will be just fine with AV buses. After all, people travel happily on the driverless docklands light railway or airport shuttles without a second thought. Indeed, research from the University of the West of England has found that in the main passengers' desire for a safety driver is not so much about the technology within the vehicle, but more about other aspects of safety, for instance personal security.

However, there is still some way to go. The Oxfordshire Mi-Link team freely admit that they had not fully anticipated quite how tightly controlled roadside vegetation has to be for their autonomous buses to work, and sometimes on windy days the buses get confused by moving branches, which they regard as hazards. The Connector team also told me that rain sometimes disrupted the sensors on their buses—while tech might be changing rapidly, I do not think that British weather is going to. Also, if potholes frustrate people today, imagine the outcry if the faded white lines along the side of the road stopped buses altogether. Council maintenance regimes would have to change radically; indeed, they would require a complete overhaul.

Then there is the question of the highway code. The current one was obviously written for human beings, for our reaction times and our capacity to make judgments in complex situations. I am sure there will have to be an update of the highway code and that it will have to be more than just a basic legal update; there will need to be an entirely conceptual update. Does the Minister envisage that we will need two sets of rules, one for human drivers, and one for the robo-buses of the future?

Finally, I turn to cost. Large-scale commercial deployment will mainly rest on cost. The main cost saving with autonomous vehicles is on driver hours, although a human being must still be present under current legislation, of course. I note that the Scottish trial between Edinburgh and Fife's park-and-ride system seems to have met many of its technical goals. The problem was that, as with many other kinds of buses, the buses in this trial did not attract enough passengers. As we all know, buses outside London have bit of an image problem and many people who could use buses do not use them, not because of the service itself, but because of the perception.

As the Minister knows, it has always been my mission to get more fare-paying and probably middle-class passengers on to buses, because increased farebox revenue is the key to sustainable services. However, I wonder whether we need to think more about what autonomous buses of the future will look like, because we seem to be going down two different paths. The ones being deployed in places such as Edinburgh, Oxford and Cambridge look and feel much more like a regular bus or minibus: they have a steering wheel that is moving, albeit no one has to turn it. The Milton Keynes example, which is also being used in Suffolk and in Birmingham at the National Exhibition Centre, has no steering wheel; it is a little shuttle thing that feels a bit more futuristic.

Is this the moment that we could be using to grow passenger numbers? We could attract people who might never in a million years think about catching the bus. It may be that we cannot persuade them to catch a bus, but if it were billed as exciting, technological and futuristic, they might happily get aboard a "zog-pod" or something like that.

3.5 pm

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) not only on securing this debate, but on her positive and optimistic vision of the future, which I really like.

I think many of us have long had a vision of autonomous vehicles based on science fiction. Reality is not quite there yet, but it is moving fast towards it. We have seen the progress on autonomous cars, and the various pilot sites in the USA—and closer to home, as we have heard.

Fully autonomous cars in Newton Abbot are, I suspect, quite some way off. Drivers who have not grown up with our Devon lanes find them hard enough, and we can only dream of having white lines on the edge of the road. In well-defined urban environments, it is quite another matter, largely dependent on the legal and insurance issues that we heard about earlier. We could easily see AVs soon beyond the trial stages that we have today. However, we have some issues in running trials of uncrewed maritime and air connected and autonomous vehicles.

[*Martin Wrigley*]

I recently met with a retired navy air traffic controller, who told me of his latest work using aerial drones to deliver test samples from Scottish islands to mainland hospital labs, Project CAELUS, which had excellent success. We could use that sort of technology to get samples between our hospitals in Devon, which would be good—it would avoid the summer traffic. However, it took eight months to get the flight path agreed and approved, and it required a special use airspace application for beyond visual line of sight uncrewed air system operations under civil air publication 1616. I ask the Minister, or perhaps his colleagues, to seek speed from the Civil Aviation Authority in reforming CAP1616, including a more proportionate approach to BVLOS airspace, to improve clarity, efficiency and transparency while maintaining safety.

Additionally, a couple of weeks ago, as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, we visited the Royal Navy in Portsmouth and saw a connected uncrewed boat doing tests in the harbour. It was being controlled by a team on land—essentially, it is a standard 5-metre rigid inflatable boat with a remote skipper. Following it was a crewed Navy boat, which is required by maritime regulations to constantly escort uncrewed 5-metre RIBs. The Navy fleet of the future described in the strategic defence review is highly dependent on the use of uncrewed vessels to supplement and complement the existing Navy ships. We must be able to develop them and test them in a more effective way, as we are doing with cars on land.

I urge the Minister, or perhaps his team, to see what exemptions and exceptions may be made. Marine guidance note 705(M) exemptions are limited to boats less than 4.5 metres and at 6 knots or slower. That does not cover what the Navy needs to do. Unless we can find a way to rapidly and safely regulate, and not prevent, tests of remote air and marine craft, we will struggle to get to where we need to be. The Chair of the Ukrainian Parliament, on his recent visit, stated that their drone technology lasted about three months, by which time they had developed a whole new set-up. We need to speed up.

3.8 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this debate. In this debate, I want to talk about place and the role of connected autonomous vehicles within it—but before I do, I want to follow on from my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), who talked movingly and importantly about the role of accessibility. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the campaign for civil rights by disabled people, which culminated in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and a key part of that campaign was for accessible public transport. Thirty years on, as we look to the future, we must think about how we can have accessible transport with all these technological changes.

I am thinking about what Bournemouth's future roads will look like. Will we see self-driving cars going anywhere anytime soon? By what date this side of 2050 might a majority of driving miles in Bournemouth be completed

by machines and not humans? At what point in the future might the Minister's car become a museum piece? When we talk about technology, we think about novelty in the future. Bournemouth has not just lived a sense that technology is advancing faster than society can keep up; it has even helped to engineer the feeling. Bournemouth University has published important research into topics such as cyber-security and connected autonomous vehicles. We are a town with remarkable scientific minds and technological innovators, and we want to contribute towards that new future.

Indeed, the future is usually with us for a long time before society sees the recognisable breakthrough of a certain technology. With the onset of motorisation, early cars were referred to as horseless carriages and many shared features with horse-drawn predecessors, while others used technology from the bicycle industry. With the onset of electrification in the early 20th century, the petrol-powered car was briefly less common than either steam or electric-powered ones. The electric car disappeared by the 1930s, reappeared in the 60s, slipped back and then reappeared with gusto in the last decade.

Thinking of autonomous vehicles, General Motors sponsored Norman Geddes to design the Futurama exhibition at the New York World's Fair in 1939, where he depicted the first driverless car. In the 1960s, the Slough-built Citroën DS19 was trialled in the UK as an autonomous vehicle. This issue has been with us for a while and we politicians have a duty to think about what that means. We have a duty to make choices before the disruptions that such technologies cause reverberate throughout our daily lives—the good, the bad and the ugly.

Issues such as how we get around will affect our lives and the future prosperity of the communities that we represent—and we are often behind the curve: it was only compulsory for rear view mirrors to be fitted to cars from 1 January 1932; driving tests were only introduced under the Road Traffic Act 1934 and were made mandatory in January 1935; driving licences were introduced by the Motor Car Act 1903, yet cars have been around since 1895. Are we keeping pace with change?

We must also think about some of the negative side effects. In 1894, *The Times* estimated that by 1950, every street in every British city would be buried nine feet deep in horse manure because of the horse's dominance of transport. That did not quite turn out to be the case, but it brings me to the point with which I want to close in a couple of minutes: are the Government looking properly at how technology is changing? Where in Government are we thinking about those changes? How are we developing laws and policies that are as smart as the cars that are going to be on our roads? Do we have a Parliament filled with people who have the knowledge, the experience, the expertise, the access and the contacts to shape the laws that will ensure that our prosperity is secured and that our roads are being cared for?

When we look at polls, on balance, British citizens tend to lack trust in autonomous vehicles—partly because they have a lack of knowledge. That is unsurprising, given that AVs are theoretical and elusive; only a small number of self-driving vehicles are on our roads today, mostly test vehicles unavailable to the riding public. As AVs become more commonplace, they could become more popular as people become more educated. As MPs, we clearly have a role in helping to achieve that.

I will close by considering a few ways that we must think about AVs, because of the impact they will have on how we use our streets. Pedestrians will discover that AVs can halt when they detect human movement, and many may feel confident to cross the street anywhere. What might that mean for the smoothest flow of traffic through our streets? I recently discovered that, because of people's tendency to look at their phones at traffic lights, some places are installing silent light-emitting diode strips on the ground so that people can see when a traffic light is being indicated, because they are often not paying attention to the noise.

Technology is already changing. How do we think about that with AVs? An AV can drop a person off, circle around Bournemouth, then come to pick them up wherever they want. If people think that Bournemouth's roads and streets are choking on congestion—and they are—just wait until somebody goes to a meeting in the town centre, tells their AV to drive around continually and then calls for it to come and pick them up.

AV use will free up space currently reserved for parking for entirely new purposes, which will prompt local authorities to think about how they will generate income from the parking they provide. What do we do with the space that is made available? Do we turn that into housing, playgrounds or green space? How does that change our urban landscape? Wider use of AVs could risk increasing traffic congestion by drawing people out of other types of transport and into private car use. What does it mean for cycling, which we know helps people to get around their towns and cities and enhances their physical health? What will it mean for bus travel? Pool shuttles might become more important in order to avoid single-passenger AVs congesting our roads and fixed-schedule services could become a harder thing to sustain. There may be a move to on-demand services. Park and rides will become more important, because AVs could arrive at the outskirts of towns or cities and people could disembark to board shuttles that will take them to work. Indeed, AVs could communicate with park and rides or even public shuttles, relegating waiting around to the history books and ensuring non-stop journeys. Just as we relied on a mix of horses, trams, bikes, buses and cars during the first half of the last century, we could see a similar rivalry again during the first half of this century—a rivalry between human-controlled cars, semi and fully automated vehicles, bikes and buses.

What is the new hierarchy of transport? How society draws the balance will be critical. The Government and Parliament have a critical role to play because we cannot leave it to councils, even though councils cover geographies larger than our constituencies. We need national laws and frameworks that provide consistency across all the places we represent. We need foresight and we need to pre-empt potential future disruption. We must continue to improve the machinery of Government so that it can look to the future and make changes in response to technology. If we maximise the benefits, we minimise the costs and when our grandchildren look back on our decisions they will be able to believe that we made them with future generations in mind.

3.16 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes)

for bringing up this very important topic, which as a species we have been grappling with for a couple of decades, so that we can talk about how to deal with it in the UK. It was interesting to hear of her experience of using Wayve in London and her finding it miraculous. She made an interesting point about the potential for autonomous vehicles to act as a form of demand-responsive transport—a point also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton). They may be interested in the discussions of demand-responsive transport in the recent Transport Committee inquiry report called “Buses connecting communities”, the response to which we eagerly anticipate from the Government.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked of his great enthusiasm for diesel fumes and gear sticks. Hon. Members will be surprised to learn that he has not already encountered the transporter room in “Star Trek”, as it appears to many of us that he has already been subject to an accident using said technology; that would explain his ability to appear in multiple places in Parliament at once.

The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) correctly highlighted the need to get regulation and monitoring right—more on that shortly. The hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) once again showed her knowledge and passion for all forms of buses in the widest sense of the term. She highlighted some existing examples of driverless transport, including the docklands light railway, although all DLR trains have a member of staff on board precisely to address the issue that she rightly highlighted: needing to ensure that people still have a strong sense of personal safety and security in such vehicles.

The hon. Lady was also quite right to highlight the challenges of vegetation and white lines management. White lines are a major issue for today, let alone for autonomous vehicles—it is a major issue even for those of us who use the very primitive form of transport known as a bicycle. The presence of a white line makes cycling on unlit roads enormously easier compared with roads without white lines—we seem to have a completely arbitrary mix of the two. That has relevance for tomorrow's debate on headlight dazzle, because drivers can lock their eyes on white lines when they are suffering from that. I make that point only to show that sometimes historical solutions are applicable to new problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) also talked about the importance of white lines, and quite rightly suggested that the challenges of introducing autonomous and connected vehicles are going to be rather different for rural roads than for urban roads. The hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) took us through the history of transport and what we consider normal. He rightly made the point that it is important for local authorities and all of us to have knowledge of these things. I am a complete luddite about artificial intelligence, and that is certainly one of the challenge of our jobs: we are expected to know everything about everything, whereas really the key challenge is to know enough about the key topics.

The Liberal Democrats were pleased to support the Automated Vehicles Act 2024, which was introduced by the previous Conservative Government. Automated vehicles represent the next step towards safer and more sustainable transport.

[Olly Glover]

In my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, I was pleased to see Milton Park trialling an autonomous bus—not just within the park estate, which is a reasonably contained business-park environment, but covering the couple of miles between Milton Park and Didcot Parkway railway station. The United Kingdom has a strong tech sector and a real opportunity to lead the development of self-driving vehicle technology, which is an opportunity to attract the investment and innovation that we all know our country needs.

Autonomous vehicles have the potential to play a major role in improving road safety, given that the majority of traffic accidents are caused by human error. They also have the potential to help move us towards net zero by reducing the need for individual car ownership and promoting the more efficient use of vehicles. However, public confidence is essential for the success of automated transport.

As one who worked in rail before coming to this place, it is a mystery to me that there is relatively little driverless and automated technology in the sector, despite it being a self-contained, heavily regulated environment that in theory ought to be the more promising place to try it. It is true that Paris has automated some metro lines, but in a job I did before coming to this place, UK rail experts—believe it or not—were dispatched to Canada to help work on a new automated metro system in Montréal, known as the Réseau express métropolitain, which was entirely driverless. It all seemed to work perfectly in trials, but at peak times, during large-scale operations and at times of major computer failure, the whole system, lacking staff, completely collapsed. We were sent there to suggest how they could come up with ways of managing such major disruption better. That is one of my points of scepticism.

I am sure that the hon. Member for West Bromwich is right that Wayve cars operating in London have anticipated all the normal difficulties, such as pedestrians, cyclists, whether or not they go through red lights and so on, but we do not know whether, if every car were autonomous, they would be quite so resilient. We can only find out by doing more trials and research, looking at that data and exploring it with great care. Safety for all road users, especially cyclists and pedestrians, must continue to be a top priority.

Early international trials, such as those in San Francisco, show encouraging signs of safety improvements, but any single serious incident could damage public trust. As is so often the case with these things, one very bad thing will negate nine very good things. It is the same with customer service in a restaurant or a hotel. Clear communication about the purpose and limits of trials is vital, and the interaction between human control and automation must be carefully managed.

Issues seen in overseas trials, such as autonomous vehicles blocking emergency vehicles or stopping in cycle lanes, must be addressed to ensure public confidence in UK deployments. A strong and transparent safety network is needed to govern how automated vehicles are tested and introduced on public roads. Automated vehicles should meet or exceed the safety standards of careful and competent human drivers.

The shift provides an opportunity to not just maintain but significantly improve the overall safety and accessibility of road networks. The success of AVs will depend on adequate infrastructure. Poor road conditions, including pot holes, could affect vehicle performance and public safety. Therefore, minimum road-quality standards and sufficient resources for local authorities will be essential to support their introduction.

As hon. Members have already said, accessibility must remain at the heart of automation. Older and disabled people often rely on drivers for assistance, including in terms of boarding the vehicle. That is one area where we need to think carefully before designating this as the solution to some of the accessibility challenges. Automated taxis or public transport must continue to provide appropriate support for vulnerable users. Ensuring inclusivity will be key to public acceptance.

The real challenge is that, once autonomous vehicles become owned on a large scale in the same way that cars are now, what sounds like a great opportunity will also come with some risks. Presumably, they would not initially be cheap, just as electric vehicles are not cheap now. Something that has the potential to erode public transport ridership could also erode public transport viability, which is likely to still be essential for those who would not necessarily be able to afford to own such a vehicle. The cost aspect needs to be carefully considered.

Data protection and privacy are also critical concerns. We need to consider how processing large amounts of data, including potentially sensitive personal information, will be handled, and the strong safeguards needed to prevent the misuse or monetisation of personal data. Insurance arrangements must also be clear and fair, and cyclists and pedestrians involved in incidents must have access to fair and timely compensation, particularly as many of those will not hold personal insurance.

In conclusion, although there is a huge opportunity for automated vehicles to make travel safer, more efficient and more accessible, we need to adequately consider the risks. Some of those have been well covered in this debate, but others may not have been—for example, the potential for job losses, the need to manage cyber-security carefully and the potential health impacts. I do not mean health impacts from the vehicles themselves, but we are already struggling to encourage walking and cycling in this country; were these developments to further erode those activities, our current issues with obesity and other health inequalities might worsen.

The UK can lead in this field if it embraces innovation responsibly and brings the public with it. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how we can do just that.

3.26 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is lovely to appear before you today, Ms Vaz. I join everyone in congratulating the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) on securing this interesting and important debate. She rightly focused on the three main issues, one of which, of course, is safety—a potential enormous benefit of the developing technology. Another is accessibility, which I will talk about in my comments. She also spoke of the potential for significant economic growth, while accepting that through any economic and

technological transition, there are losers as well as winners. A responsible Government ought to take proper account of that.

The only other contributor who I will reference specifically is the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has never missed an opportunity to contribute to a debate. I have never heard a more heartfelt elegy for the diesel motorcar than his. I say it was elegiac, because there is, I think, a *fin de siècle* element to this technology, as we move towards more fuel-efficient cars, then ultimately to self-driving cars. It is so unlike the hon. Gentleman to be hesitant about boldly going where no passengers have been before. I am sure he will catch up when he gets the opportunity—as the hon. Member for West Bromwich has done, having already had the experience of going in a driverless car. I look forward to the opportunity myself.

The last Conservative Government took a clear decision to support the introduction of autonomous vehicles on our roads, and to pass the Automated Vehicles Act 2024 to establish the regulatory framework to allow AV technology to flourish in the United Kingdom. The Act defined the legal framework for the authorisation of AV use on our roads through the creation of the concept of the statement of safety principles, as well as subsequent legal responsibility that would be used to govern AV actions—for example, the imposition of a legal liability on a corporate entity, the provider of the technology, as opposed to it being on the driver of a car. That is a novel legal concept on our roads that will clearly be necessary for autonomous vehicles, because who is in command? Who is in control? It is no longer the driver, and that has a knock-on impact on insured risk. The Act also sought to deal with that because it included appropriate sanctions for situations in which a vehicle fails to drive either legally or safely.

The Act set out the ability for the Government to set regulations—secondary legislation—requiring organisations to report certain safety-related data to the authorisation authority, of which it anticipates the creation, and the in-use regulator. It sought to protect customers by prohibiting misleading marketing: only vehicles that meet the safety threshold can be marketed in the future as “self-driving”. Finally, it set out the approach to the policing and seizure of non-compliant AVs.

As far as they went, the last Government did a great job. They brought forward practical, legislative proposals, which generated confidence in the sector, and they set out the structure that allowed the sector to grow and invest in this country. Modelling put forward by the Government suggests that there is the potential to create 38,000 jobs in the sector in the next nine years, generating value of £42 billion—I always have a healthy degree of scepticism when we are told that future industries will be enormously valuable, and I slightly wonder how people come up with such figures. Nevertheless, that optimism is shared by serious organisations such as Goldman Sachs, which has predicted significant increases in ridership, particularly in the US, following considerable growth over the last few years. It is therefore right that the UK, at the very least, does not block such technological advances and supports its tech sector as it seeks to develop AVs and the software behind them.

The Opposition recognise that these developments go well beyond merely economics, as the hon. Member for West Bromwich said. Automated systems can help improve

driving quality, reduce congestion, increase the more efficient use of fuel and help with elements of accessibility. Rural pensioners may not have to move into a town when they are too old or infirm to drive. Vehicles as a service can reduce costs for lower-income families. Efficient fuel use and lane discipline can reduce congestion and the environmental impact of driving. On safety, we are told that 88% of all road accidents are contributed to by human error. If AVs can improve that statistic, the societal benefits of this technology could be profound.

Waymo, the market leader in the US, claims that compared with the figures for the average human driver over the same distance in its operating cities, the reduction in crashes resulted in 91% fewer serious injuries, with 80% fewer injury-causing crashes of any description. Those are startling statistics. Even though we are at an early stage, those assertions, backed by millions of miles of AV driving—albeit in US conditions—do create cause for optimism. We want to see this technology benefit the British people by making our lives on the road both easier and safer.

So far, so good—we all agree—but this is where the consensus is at risk of ending. When technological development is at stake, time is the issue. The 2024 Act was enabling—it anticipated a host of secondary legislation to put meat on the statutory bones—but we are yet to see concrete action from this Government. Where is the secondary legislation around data sharing for insurance purposes? Does the Minister have a timeframe for the introduction of that regulation?

While the Minister is looking through his notes to see if he has the answer to that question, where is the legislation on cyber-security? We only have to look at the recent experience at JLR to realise that this is not a theoretical threat—it could be absolutely central to the viability of this technology and its adoption in this country. Where is the secondary legislation on data integrity and resilience against hacking or system failure? That is anticipated in the 2024 Act, and the Government need to take the next step. They have not yet.

I do not want to throw too many bricks—well, I do really, but I will restrain myself and ask the Minister for an update: where is the detailed definition of the statement of safety principles? Where are the regulations allowing for competition within the sector, while still maintaining robust safety standards? That is not going to happen by itself; it requires the Government to act. We need an update from the Minister.

We have the Government’s industrial strategy, which was published in June. It commits to making AVs commercially viable in the UK, but it did not say when. Perhaps the Minister can provide that answer. The Government are supposed to be seeking to harmonise international regulations on self-driving, and enabling pilots of self-driving vehicles by the spring of 2026. We have some movement on that, but can the Minister update the House on his progress?

We all agree that AVs represent a big opportunity for society and business. I welcome the Government’s wholesale adoption of the Conservative approach to this sector. The issue is not party political; we all appear to agree on the same objectives. But there needs to be a sense of urgency from this Administration, and I look forward to the Minister’s response demonstrating that urgency.

3.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) on raising this important issue. What a fascinating and thought-provoking debate this has been.

Establishing our new regulatory framework for automated vehicles provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to harness the transformative impact that artificial intelligence could have on our roads. Not only will the framework strengthen our position as a global AI superpower, but automated vehicles can also be a key enabler of our plan for change. They can make transport safer, more convenient and more accessible. They could increase choice for non-drivers, including disabled people and older people. Self-driving vehicles that are zero emission can support cleaner, more efficient transport, particularly when paired with the transition to electric, helping us on our way to our net zero goals. By better enabling freight to be transported outside peak hours, they may also reduce congestion, making journeys to work easier and quicker. In doing that, automated vehicles could improve the lives of millions of people.

Although the UK's roads are safe by global standards, every road death and injury is a tragedy for the families involved. In 2023, collisions cost medical and ambulance services an estimated £2.2 billion. Every collision prevented will improve the safety of our communities and support our NHS to get on a more sustainable footing. As many hon. Members have referenced, 88% of collisions involve human driver error as a contributing factor, and automated vehicles can be a major player in tackling that challenge. They have a faster reaction time and the ability to learn from vast amounts of driving data, and so could help reduce those numbers. Unlike human drivers, automated vehicles do not get tired, get distracted or drive under the influence. That gives them strong potential to improve road safety.

Although vehicle technologies have already provided significant advances in road safety and will continue to do so, technology is not foolproof. The UK has a heritage of world-leading intelligent regulation. Our new framework must uphold that standard and capture the opportunities while safeguarding against new risks that may arise. We have already made big achievements in this space, with the Automated Vehicles Act 2024 establishing one of the most comprehensive legal frameworks of its kind in the world.

We also play a leading role in harmonising international rules on safety and assurance at the UN, ensuring that consistent approaches are adopted globally. That has involved close working throughout, and I am grateful for the expertise shared by industry, road safety groups, accessibility advocates, trade unions and academia to develop our thinking.

Passenger safety remains vital, and the Government intend that any organisation wishing to deploy a self-driving passenger service must have robust policies to ensure that their passengers are kept safe throughout their journey. We will continue to learn from best practice internationally, including from world-leading autonomous ride-hailing companies, to help us to achieve our safety mission.

The future of self-driving vehicles will be shaped by the public's level of trust in their safety. Trust depends on transparency, regulation and performance. That is why the Government recently consulted on protecting marketing terms associated with automated vehicles to ensure that only genuinely self-driving vehicles can be marketed as such. In 2026, we will also consult on safety principles to ensure that all automated vehicles meet or exceed human driving standards. The Government have backed the setting-up of Partners for Automated Vehicle Education United Kingdom. PAVE UK brings together industry, academia and non-profits to provide clear and accurate information to the public on automated vehicles.

Ensuring the security of UK data is a priority for the Government. The UK has strong safeguards to ensure that data is collected and handled responsibly and securely. Companies registered in the UK are subject to our legal framework and regulatory jurisdiction. Personal data transfers abroad are subject to a high level of legal protection. We actively monitor threats to UK data and will not hesitate to take the necessary action to protect our national security.

We want to harness this sector's huge potential to kick-start economic growth by providing the right conditions to unlock an industry that will be worth £42 billion by 2035 and will create up to 38,000 new skilled jobs. These services can also open up new opportunities in fields such as software, safety assurance, vehicle engineering, logistics and customer service.

Self-driving vehicles are not about replacing current forms of transport, but about complementing and improving them. Traditional driving roles will remain vital, and some people will continue to have a preference and choose to use human-driven services. This is about growing and improving transport options, not revolutionising things overnight.

The automated passenger services permitting scheme—I think my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) went into this—can help to facilitate pilots of commercial self-driving passenger services with no safety driver. Following our recent consultation, we are analysing responses and intend to implement the scheme from spring 2026. At present, no changes to the highway code are anticipated, although we will keep that under review.

We are delighted that Waymo has signalled its intention to bring automated passenger services to London next year under our proposed piloting scheme—subject to meeting vital safety and local authority consent requirements. Cutting-edge investment such as that is helping to deliver our mission to be a world leader in new technology and spearhead national renewal that delivers real change in our communities. Waymo's announcement, and the previously announced ambition of other companies such as Uber with UK start-up Wayve, are evidence of the impact of the UK's leading role in self-driving-vehicle regulation. Following the recent closure of the consultation on our permitting scheme, we will announce next steps soon.

I will touch on ghost vehicle registration plates; I know that tackling those is a passion of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich. The safety of all road users is a top priority for the Government. As part of the development of our road safety strategy, we are considering a range of policies relating to motoring offences, and we

will set out our next steps for the strategy in due course. Officials are also considering options to ensure we have a more robust, auditable register of number plate suppliers process, which would enable tighter checks on number plate suppliers. On-road enforcement for offences relating to the display of plates is of course a matter for the police.

I have time to touch on a few other points raised by Members. In terms of this being a complementary form of public transport, self-driving vehicles are not about replacing current forms of transport, but about complementing and improving. There was some concern about potential job losses and impact on the taxi industry. I think the initial deployments under the pilots are likely to be pretty small in scale. Where a taxi or private hire-like service is proposed, local licensing authorities will need to give consent to the permitting of those services. That may include consideration of the right mix of automated and other services in their area.

We have touched on cyber-security, which is at the heart of the Government's priorities for the roll-out of self-driving vehicles. The Automated Vehicles Act allows for obligations to be placed on the authorised self-driving entity—the entity for ensuring that the vehicle continues to drive safely and legally—to maintain vehicle software and ensure that appropriate cyber-security measures are in place throughout the vehicle's life.

Very importantly, coming back to accessibility, we recently closed the consultation on the proposed automated passenger services permitting scheme. That provided an opportunity for accessibility advocates to provide their views on the proposed approach. Just before I came to this debate, I chaired a roundtable with representatives from across the accessibility community to enhance our understanding and grow awareness of the risks and benefits that this new mode of transport can offer. We are continuing to review the need for further research, which includes consideration of how older and disabled people in particular can be involved. Examples of previous research include work undertaken to understand the extent of driver roles in supporting people to make journeys and the implications in emergency situations. We are considering developing guidance on accessibility for APS and are working to establish a group of accessibility experts to support its creation and ensure meaningful learnings from the pilot deployments. We obviously want to see the benefits realised across the country. The pilots are a decision of developers, as it stands, in collaboration with local transport authorities.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised some interesting points. Let me first cling on to the bit about "Star Trek". [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] I spent at least 30 minutes thinking of that—no, not really. I am quite relieved that I am not responsible for transport at this time, although who knows in the future? We do not legislate for Northern Ireland in this area, rightly respecting Northern Ireland's role in legislating for its road traffic laws. Northern Ireland has not sought to replicate the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018 within its legislation, so an authorised EV under a GB scheme could be driven only as a conventional vehicle in Northern Ireland.

Very briefly, because I have to wrap up, my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard touched on autonomous buses. The automated passenger services permitting scheme facilitates the piloting of bus-like services. For example, the Government have

supported the trialling of self-driving bus-like services currently under way on the outskirts of Cambridge. If the operators believe that the vehicle is capable of meeting the threshold that we will set for self-driving capability, the permitting scheme will be available for it. The larger scale of buses may make these things more challenging, but through our funded trials we hope to provide a route to building the required capacity while remaining safe.

The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) mentioned autonomous aviation and maritime. I am afraid I can only reassure him that the applicable Minister, the Minister for Aviation, Maritime and Decarbonisation, will have heard his point on that loud and clear. The same applies to the Minister for Rail and the comments from the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), on rail.

I once again thank hon. Members for the wide range of comments. I hope they will be reassured that the Government are committed to realising the very real benefits of self-driving vehicles, particularly where they can catalyse our road safety ambitions, open up travel for many and support our national renewal efforts.

3.47 pm

Sarah Coombes: We have heard about all the different parts of this issue today: sharing the benefits of the future autonomous revolution UK-wide; the importance of public trust and uptake; accessibility and independence; and security and safety. We need the benefits to be shared nationwide—in Strangford, Weston-super-Mare, Kettering and beyond.

The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) made the good point that we need to look at regulation for autonomous vehicles beyond just that for road-based ones. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) made important comments about his university's contribution in this space and the fact that we are often behind the curve on many of these things.

On public trust and uptake, although I do not agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about how nice the roar of a diesel engine is, I absolutely agree that people are unsure about this development in the future. We need to address public trust issues and bring people with us on this journey. My hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) made a very good point about making buses sexy for the public, and this issue is definitely part of that, and a way to increase uptake.

The Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), talked about demand-responsive transport, which is very interesting in the area of autonomous vehicles. On accessibility, my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) spoke movingly about his wife and the experience of sight loss, about how autonomous vehicles can improve independence and be transformational and about how APS will knit together the network for the future.

On security and safety, I am glad to have found a kindred spirit in the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), who spoke about the importance of the humble number plate in this country and all the deficiencies of the system. The 10,000 cloning incidents he mentioned show how much we need change in the system.

[Sarah Coombes]

On insurance, the point was made that, ideally, if safety went up, costs and insurance premiums would go down. The Motor Insurers' Bureau thinks that connected vehicles, which would mean that we could have a new system to detect whether cars are insured, could be helpful on that. There is also the issue of the number of cars with no registered keeper on our roads shooting up. That is driving up all our insurance premiums, because no one can work out who owes the money.

In summation, I appreciate the Minister's comments and the hope and opportunity we have in front of us. The Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), is right that the previous Government laid good groundwork here. We need to build on it. We need to fix ghost plates and things like that in the current system. The UK is a leader in AI. We have always been leaders in automotive. Let's embrace that, bring the two together and lead in the self-driving future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered connected and automated vehicles.

3.50 pm

Sitting suspended.

Lasting Power of Attorney

4 pm

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I remind Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. As is the convention for a 30-minute debate, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered lasting power of attorney.

Thank you for that introduction, Ms Vaz; it is a pleasure to speak this afternoon under your chairship. This debate has been secured at an extremely important time, as lasting powers of attorney continue to be granted across the country. Although it is clear that the vast majority of attorneys act in the best interests of the donor, there is still considerable abuse among the very small minority who do not.

Since the campaign, in which I have been involved, to end the abuse of lasting powers of attorney began, I have received hundreds of testimonies from across the country in respect of vulnerable people who have had their funds stolen or used for purposes not in the interests of the donor. Most of the campaign's focus has been on the abilities of the Office of the Public Guardian and the implementation of its powers, but it is important to look at the root cause of the abuses and why they are able to occur in the first place.

The abuse often begins following interactions with banks. There is no getting away from the fact that the digitisation of lasting powers of attorney processes has opened the door to abuse from a very small minority of unscrupulous individuals who have taken advantage of the ease with which an attorney can gain access to a donor's bank accounts. The lack of legislation and duties placed on banks has resulted in an uneven implementation of safeguarding when it comes to lasting powers of attorney. That is why our campaign has called for the implementation of Government-regulated safeguarding procedures for all banks in how they deal with LPAs and the accounts of donors.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for all his hard work in the House. I do not think anybody in this House is not impressed by his dedication, interests and commitment, and this debate is another example.

In Northern Ireland, the enduring power of attorney is a legal document that lets us choose someone to make decisions about our property and financial affairs if we lose mental capacity. Unlike in England and Wales, there is no equivalent of the lasting power of attorney for health and welfare in Northern Ireland. Instead, a separate process is available, through the Royal Courts of Justice, to appoint a controller if no EPA exists. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the processes both here and back home must be streamlined and accessible, while still ensuring that safeguards are in place to protect people from the abuse of power?

Fabian Hamilton: The hon. Member will hear later in my speech how I intend to address the issue of safeguarding, which is one of the most important parts of the process.

Let us be clear that, as I said, the vast majority of lasting powers of attorney have no difficulty, problems or issues whatsoever. We need to concentrate our efforts on the small minority who cause the grief, in respect of whom people need to be safeguarded from abuse.

The Government-regulated safeguarding procedures that I mentioned, in respect of all banks in dealing with LPAs and the accounts of donors, would include a requirement to contact the donor or a GP before an LPA is activated, and the monitoring of spending prior to and after its activation.

I am afraid abuse is rife in a small minority of cases, and the recorded increases do not scratch the surface, given that most cases are undetected, not thoroughly investigated and not reported as often as they should be. The Office of the Public Guardian's annual report made that clear last year. For example, there has been a 6.5% increase in the number of concerns about abuse raised with the OPG, but a slight decrease, from 34.5% to 33.9%, in the proportion leading to a full investigation. That change might seem small, but a lot of people are affected, and every individual concerned has a family, relatives and friends who are deeply concerned.

Two weeks ago, alongside UK Finance, I hosted a roundtable for banks that administer lasting powers of attorney. They verified that the figures cited have been seen in their work on vulnerability, with the OPG admitting that approximately 65% of potential financial abuses are being disregarded simply because the donor is deemed to have capacity. Let us be clear: someone may have capacity, but that does not mean that they cannot be coerced or financially abused.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): In the light of the projection that 1.4 million people will be living with dementia in the UK in 2040, does the hon. Member agree that we need sufficient safeguards to protect vulnerable people?

Fabian Hamilton: With the increase in dementia and with Alzheimer's projected to rise incrementally, the hon. Gentleman is right that safeguarding needs to be far tighter. I will come on to say what I think that would involve.

At our meeting, several banks highlighted clear failings in safeguarding procedures and investigations by the Office of the Public Guardian. Given that the OPG will not investigate any case in which the donor is deemed to have capacity, and that it has no powers to access the financial records of attorneys, investigations are toothless at best. The banks then face a back and forth with the OPG, as both urge the other to investigate what they claim to be a "civil matter". Banks regularly ask the OPG whether they should act on an account that is under investigation, but are told it is up to them to decide whether to do so. That begs the question: "What is the purpose of the OPG and why does it lack the powers to act?"

One of the banks raised the example of a single individual to whom tens of LPAs were registered, but UK Finance was not aware, so no investigations took place until concerns were raised and a bank conducted a vulnerability check on the donor, by which time it was too late and the individual had already gathered the funds of several people. That case is sadly not an isolated incident.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his dedicated work on this subject. Does he agree that, given that over 6 million people in the UK hold lasting power of attorney agreements, mandatory safeguarding procedures for all Government staff who handle LPAs, alongside clear guidance for banks, is essential to protect vulnerable people and communities such as mine in Redditch?

Fabian Hamilton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is what the campaign has been arguing for since it began. The publicity given to the cases that I raised on the Floor of the House last November, when I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill, led to a large number of people bringing forward cases from up and down the country, often through their local MPs, asking to be added to the list of abuses. In total, the number of abuses may not amount to more than a fraction of a percentage of the total number of LPAs granted; nevertheless, my hon. Friend mentioned 6 million people, and I believe it is more like 8 million, and a small percentage of 8 million is still an enormous number of people.

The issues go much further. Whistleblowers at the OPG have told me that no potential attorney is ever vetted, and that it is extremely easy to walk away with a signed document stating that someone is the attorney. Let me repeat that: no attorney is ever vetted. That is rather worrying. There is evidence of abusers producing fake religious documents to help them to claim they are married to people who are decades older than they are and who clearly lack capacity. Technically, that is still not against the law so, despite it being utterly immoral, there is very little that the OPG can do about it.

As I have said, hundreds of cases of potential abuse have been raised with me since I introduced the Powers of Attorney Bill to Parliament last November. I will highlight some more of them now, in addition to the cases I raised last year. Azhar Hayat lost his life savings as a donor through the granting of a lasting power of attorney. An alleged investment of £126,000 was transferred to his attorney, with most of the funds going directly into a company of which the attorney was the sole director. Mr Hayat's funds were then converted into shares in the attorney's name, and he subsequently lost everything in one fell swoop. In the same year, the attorney closed the company, leaving with all the funds. That has left Mr Hayat having to seek an order for the sale of his own home in order to survive financially.

The OPG took over four months to terminate the LPA, and by then, as ever, it was too late. It was only after an intervention from his Member of Parliament that Mr Hayat was able to seek to recover funds via insolvency. I am afraid that route failed, so he did not recover any of those funds.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Minehead has a very large elderly and deprived population. Could we, as Members of Parliament, help the hon. Gentleman in his best endeavours by encouraging our constituents, particularly if we live in or represent constituencies with large elderly populations, to come forward and talk to us as their MPs, so that we can pass on their representations to him, because he is doing an excellent job?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, indeed. My constituency office in Leeds North East is trying to compile a list of all the cases that have come to us. Every one of them is different but they all have a common theme: unscrupulous individuals who have taken advantage of a lasting power of attorney in order to gain the donor's funds as quickly as possible for their own nefarious purposes. That tragedy is part of the ongoing trend of the abuse of older people, which we have to stop. As parliamentarians, we have a duty to do just that.

Another victim, Nicola, wrote to me to outline her family's tragic case. Nicola is not alone when she describes the interaction between banks and prospective attorneys as "a tick box exercise". In her case, the bank's representative queried a change to the power of attorney that had occurred a few months earlier. The bank asked only for an affidavit from the solicitor to ensure the capacity of the donor. Later, however, court evidence showed that the solicitor had a conflict of interest in respect of the subject and their business manager.

Around the time of the bank's involvement, the donor had received a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, which had been confirmed by a CT scan nine months earlier. The donor's deteriorating health was clear, with the LPA activated on health grounds having been actioned a year earlier. The LPA for finance was invoked following the specialist diagnosis. The donor was isolated, away from her brother, whom she had originally appointed as the attorney to protect her interests. The solicitor removed the safeguard of unanimity without advising her brother until months later, when it was far too late.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I understood that someone could execute a power of attorney only if they had capacity, so if there had been a diagnosis of Alzheimer's, that would not have been possible. Am I incorrect?

Fabian Hamilton: No, the hon. Lady is not incorrect, but an LPA can be executed in advance of any potential diagnosis. When somebody starts to feel that they are losing the capacity to make financial decisions or decisions about their future health, they can execute the lasting power of attorney to be implemented or actioned once the diagnosis is made or capacity is lost completely or irreversibly. That is my understanding, but I am sure the Minister will correct me if I am wrong.

The brother was then removed as an attorney two months later when he challenged the withholding of the donor's income and clawing back of historical expenses. He was replaced by the donor's accountant.

Nicola told me:

"The donor in this case had a long standing history with the bank both in her personal and business capacity. The bank would have been aware of the manager taking over the management of her personal banking affairs going back years. This may have started as a convenience for the donor, but later became a necessity." That partly answers the hon. Lady's question. Nicola went on:

"This casual arrangement apparently accepted by the bank allowed financial abuse to follow."

Obviously, in that case, the Office of the Public Guardian did not have a role, although it will later in the story. The business manager and the accountant both admitted in court that they had withheld income from the subject for the preceding year and continued to withhold income until the donor's death seven years later.

Nicola has rightly called for banks to have annual face-to-face meetings with their elderly clients to establish their ability to manage their affairs on their own without outside influence. Any changes to LPA documents and wills within a year of a diagnosis of a cognitive illness, such as dementia, should also be treated with caution and investigated thoroughly before they are granted.

There is also serious anxiety about this issue within the industry. I have spoken to sources in the Office of the Public Guardian and trading standards who highlighted their concerns regarding the lack of the use of powers and the systemic failure to protect people. An officer with more than 30 years' experience in trading standards told me that they are seeing the numbers of this type of abuse climb to levels they have never seen before, but they can never prosecute because of the lack of assistance from the OPG.

Furthermore, the officer had suspicions that a certificate provider was selling LPAs for far more than the usual registration fee, but when the evidence started to mount, the OPG and the Competition and Markets Authority failed to provide the crucial information needed to prosecute. I would be keen for the Minister to look into what steps are taken to verify that a certificate provider is genuine and not making profits from its work.

Another experienced officer from the Office of the Public Guardian told me about their utter frustration at the processes. They cited a four-month backlog that is allowing abuse to continue. In a lot of cases, that gives the abuser ample time to move money around to escape justice. When grounds-to-investigate processes begin, they are not acted on for weeks, with timeframes set for investigations only after that has taken place.

OPG staff say that since the introduction of digital applications for LPAs, demand for investigations has increased. They suggested that best practice is for the Court of Protection to give consent if the donor has lost capacity and the attorney wants to gift a substantial amount of money. However, that is being applied inconsistently among banks as there are no regulations that ensure they follow it through, and banks are simply taking an attorney's word that a donor has lost capacity.

A staff member pointed to declining morale at the OPG because of the rise in cases, with little to no safeguarding training. They even expressed concern about the dehumanisation of the people they deal with. These are some of the most vulnerable people in the country, and some are clearly being coerced or abused.

Members of this House have previously looked closely at the lasting power of attorney. In 2004, the Health Committee endorsed the recommendations of the Joint Committee on the draft Mental Incapacity Bill relating to the lasting power of attorney. It recommended that there be clarification of the extent and limitation of an attorney's powers, as well as adequate guidance and training for donors; that there be further guidance to warn donors of the potential for conflict; and that an additional safeguard be included in codes of practice as a mechanism by which the Court of Protection or the public guardian could monitor the use of LPAs with a view to preventing the abuse and exploitation of an attorney's powers. It also recommended that an express duty of care should be incorporated into law for attorneys acting under an LPA, in that a greater degree of accountability should be required, with specific requirements in the form of a standard of conduct that should be

included in the codes of practice. Attorneys should also be under an obligation to notify the donor, the bank and the public guardian that the donor lacks capacity, or is losing capacity, thereby putting that information on the public record and opening it up to challenge.

I thank the Minister for meeting me earlier this year following the introduction of my Bill. I know that she takes these issues extremely seriously, and I am pleased to see her in her place. I am also grateful to the victim-survivors of this horrendous financial abuse who shared their stories with me. Each story has similar patterns, but each has its own victim who is often coerced and robbed of their life savings and assets.

Finally, I am struck by the commitment of those who have reached out to me. Ending this injustice for other families and vulnerable people is their driving force, and I cannot commend them enough for their selfless and committed campaigning on an issue that could impact any single one of us. I look forward to the Minister's comments.

4.21 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for continuing to raise awareness on this extremely important subject.

While I cannot speak to the individual cases that my hon. Friend raises, I send my deepest sympathies to those individuals impacted by the behaviours and abuse he describes, which were directed at them by people who had been selected to protect them and trusted with lasting power of attorney. I recognise the personal and financial impact on those affected people, and the impacts that are more widely felt by families.

My hon. Friend drew attention to the risk of abusers misusing lasting powers of attorney, and he highlighted the Office of the Public Guardian's important role in investigating such concerns when they arise. His strong, ongoing commitment to raising awareness of those issues is welcome. As many hon. Members will know, he tabled a ten-minute rule Bill on this subject at the end of last year. That Bill has not yet reached Second Reading, but I know that he continues to engage across the mental capacity sector to raise awareness of it. As he noted, we met and discussed the Bill and his work in this space, and I welcome that engagement. I know that he has also engaged directly with the Office of the Public Guardian so that they can work together. Today's debate is another demonstration of his dedication to the issue.

For context, the Mental Capacity Act 2005 provides the legal framework for supporting individuals who may lack capacity to make specific decisions. It ensures that any decisions made on a donor's behalf are in their best interests, and that their rights and autonomy are respected. A lasting power of attorney is a legal document that allows a person—the donor—to appoint one or more trusted persons to make decisions on their behalf if they lose mental capacity. In that sense, at its best, it is a source of empowerment for individuals.

As my hon. Friend rightly points out, we need to set the very real issue of financial and economic abuse in context. The evidence demonstrates that the incidence of such abuse is thankfully relatively rare. At the end of 2024-25, the Office of the Public Guardian had

9.3 million lasting powers of attorney on its register. A total of 11,300 concerns were received by the Office of the Public Guardian during 2024-25. Some 96% of those concerns were responded to within five working days. Of those concerns, 3,800 cases led to a full investigation by the OPG, and 24% of completed investigations resulted in court action.

That does not for one second diminish the significance of the impact of abuse in individual cases, but it tells us that cases of abuse are rare in the context of a powerful and empowering tool for many. We want the LPA to be accessible, affordable and empowering. Indeed, I was advised by my officials that we should all take one out—obviously, through the proper processes and with the proper safeguards. It is important to set this discussion, which centres on the role that banks and financial institutions play, in the context of the existing regime and its safeguards.

LPAs must be registered with the Office of the Public Guardian before they can be used, and there are safeguards in place to protect against abuse. A lasting power of attorney must contain a certificate, signed by a person with relevant skill and expertise or by someone who has known the donor for at least two years. That person confirms that the donor understands the LPA, and that no fraud or undue pressure was applied in the making of it. That confirmation is an important protection against the coercion and abuse that we have been discussing. There is also an existing statutory right for attorneys and persons named in the LPA to object to its registration if they have concerns about how the LPA has been made. Once the LPA is registered, anyone—any third party—can raise an objection about how it is being used for the Office of the Public Guardian to consider. Those are the concerns that I spoke about, which in 3,800 cases last year led to an investigation and, in many cases, to court enforcement.

As I have said, the abuse of LPAs can have serious financial and personal consequences. The OPG plays an important role in identifying and responding to such cases. It investigates concerns raised about an attorney's actions. It has powers to request information from individuals and organisations such as banks, care providers and medical professionals. It can ask attorneys to explain their decisions and to provide records. If the investigation reveals serious concerns, the Office of the Public Guardian can apply to the Court of Protection to suspend, restrict or remove an attorney.

The Court of Protection plays a crucial role in protecting individuals from the abuse or misuse of powers under a lasting power of attorney. It can order the revocation or suspension of LPAs or the removal or replacement of attorneys if it determines that the attorney is acting contrary to the donor's best interest. If a donor has lost capacity when a lasting power of attorney is revoked and there is no other attorney to act, the Court of Protection can step in and appoint a deputy to manage the donor's affairs. It can also issue orders to protect the donor, such as freezing bank accounts or prohibiting certain actions by attorneys. If an attorney's behaviour raises concerns but does not breach the criminal law, the OPG can still order remedial actions.

The point I seek to make is that we have a regime that contains a sequence of safeguards designed to guard against the very abuse that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East raises. It is also important that we

[Sarah Sackman]

scrutinise and hold the Office of the Public Guardian to account. That is the job of the Ministry of Justice, so I take very seriously the cases that my hon. Friend has raised, particularly where there are suggestions that the Office of the Public Guardian has not been as proactive as it might have been. That ongoing performance review of the OPG is critical.

I want to look ahead to the future. I am not for one second seeking to minimise the severity of what my hon. Friend described, nor seeking to suggest that there is not room for improvement or that we cannot strengthen those safeguards, because that will be a critical part of modernising the lasting power of attorney. As others have mentioned, such powers are only going to become more critical in an ageing society with growing numbers of people losing mental capacity through conditions such as Alzheimer's or dementia.

As a Government, however, we are committed to going further and modernising the service to increase the safeguards in the lasting power of attorney process and to improve access to them. The Powers of Attorney Act 2023 introduced several provisions to enable a modernised system. To combat fraud and abuse, the Act will facilitate the introduction of further identity checks for parties making an LPA. The Act also lays the groundwork for reforms to the objection process so that any third party—typically organisations already involved with vulnerable adults, such as local authorities or the police—can object to an LPA being registered. Those reforms, which are in train, are designed to make the LPA system more secure, providing greater protection for individuals appointing attorneys to manage their affairs.

I am conscious of time but I will say something quickly about banks. My hon. Friend will understand that the Treasury leads on the regulation of the banking sector and on safeguards for vulnerable consumers, including those with LPAs. I am not a Treasury Minister but I want to reassure my hon. Friend that the Government work closely with the Financial Conduct Authority, which is the independent regulator, on vulnerable customers, including vulnerable donors of LPAs. In 2023, the FCA introduced the consumer duty. Banks, of course, are also subject to the financial abuse code, the Equality Act 2010—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

World Stroke Day

4.30 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I beg to move,
That this House has considered World Stroke Day 2025.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank all the hon. Members who have come to Westminster Hall today to mark World Stroke Day, which is tomorrow. This year, recovery is in the spotlight, and this debate provides a timely opportunity to consider the life-changing impact a stroke can have both on a survivor and their loved ones and how the NHS can better support patients' recovery beyond the acute phase of treatment in the early days following a stroke.

Every day in the UK, another 240 people wake up to the catastrophic impact of a stroke. There are currently more than 1.4 million stroke survivors in the UK. On 9 May this year, my mother was one of those people, and that is the primary reason why I secured this debate. Her experiences over the past six months are still too raw and too devastating for us as a family for me to talk about today. Sadly, too many stories shared with me in recent weeks reflect exactly what my mum has been through and is still going through.

I will endeavour to use the short time available to highlight some of those stories and to call on the Minister to prioritise stroke rehabilitation in particular. Not only is that the right thing to do for the patient and for their family, but it makes a lot of financial sense. Ultimately, it would save the taxpayer money in healthcare and social care costs and enable those of working age to continue to work and to be active in their communities.

The Stroke Association estimates that, without Government action, stroke is expected to cost £75 billion by 2035. Approximately 100,000 people have a stroke each year in the UK, with 59% of them occurring in older generations. There are 38,000 stroke-related deaths every year, which makes it the fourth single leading cause of death in the UK. It is also the leading cause of complex adult disability in the UK, with around 60% of stroke patients leaving hospital with a disability. Stroke causes brain damage and can leave survivors unable to move, see, speak or even swallow. It can leave people doubly incontinent and lead to personality changes as well as depression. The NHS is rightly lauded for the care it provides, particularly in hospital, often delivering world-class support to those who need it when the unexpected happens.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): In my constituency, Manchester royal infirmary's ward 31 provides outstanding acute and rehabilitative stroke care, supported by dedicated community health champions who promote prevention and early intervention to reduce the risk of stroke. Will the hon. Member join me in thanking both our dedicated hospital staff and community health champions, and support sustained investment in prevention, staffing and rehabilitation so that we can save lives and help survivors recover fully?

Munira Wilson: Of course I am very happy to congratulate the staff in the hon. Gentleman's local hospital. Through my personal experience with my mother, I have seen how amazing hospital staff are, and where community services are available, I am sure those staff

are brilliant, but the crux of my speech is about how poor the rehab services are in some parts of the country and how we really need to staff and boost them if we want to help people to have a good quality of life.

I have heard time and again from those who have lived experience that support for community rehabilitation is simply not good enough and often collapses six weeks post discharge from hospital. In some cases, support even six weeks post discharge is not available, depending on which integrated care board or local authority is responsible.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): In Torbay, in Devon, we have the third highest prevalence of strokes in the United Kingdom, and yet, within the last 12 months, we have seen cuts to support for the local stroke association. That has left people who are suffering from strokes feeling isolated and abandoned. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to see more investment at the grassroots to support sufferers of strokes?

Munira Wilson: I 100% agree. The post-stroke support is critical, and I will share some stories about people who have felt abandoned and isolated in exactly the way that my hon. Friend describes.

Despite guidelines from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy says that 20% of people do not receive the minimum specialist rehabilitation required in the first five days following a stroke, and 68% do not have an assessment for rehabilitation, which is required after discharge. The reality is that those who want to regain a level of independence need to be able to fund support privately.

I pay tribute to Richard Sealy, who runs the Neuro Rehab Practice in Hampton, which is in my constituency. He and his whole team are doing brilliant work in trying to fill that gap. Over the summer, I had the privilege of visiting the practice and speaking to stroke survivors and their carers about their experiences. What runs through so many of their stories—I am sure Members will have heard similar—is the cliff edge that people fall off when they leave hospital, and the devastating knock-on impact that can have.

I would like to share some of their testimonies. One stroke survivor said:

“I felt lost, like I had been thrown out of the boat, not knowing what to do or where to find help”.

Another survivor’s family member said:

“Although the NHS took care of her while she was in hospital, we felt that after the six weeks had finished, it was very much goodbye. You’re now on your own”.

Another, when asked what happened when the NHS rehab ended and whether they were given any further options, simply replied, “Nothing.”

Those survivor stories are far from unique, and that is unacceptable. According to the Stroke Association, only 17% of community-based rehab services have appropriate access to each core therapy—physiotherapy, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. The Right to Rehab campaign argues for the simple idea that rehabilitation should be accessible to everyone who needs it, for as long as they need it.

We know that stroke survivors continue to make incremental improvements over many months, even years, so I welcome the Government’s ambition to rebuild our

NHS through transitioning care from hospital to the community, and to improve integration of rehabilitation. While the Government target to reduce stroke and heart attack deaths by a quarter in the next 10 years is also welcome, given the devastating impact that stroke can have and the struggle to recover faced by many, the scope of that target must be widened to also reducing disability.

Take Miriam, a resident of Twickenham, who at just 21 years old suffered a stroke only three months after graduating with a BA in music. After spending four days in hospital without diagnosis or treatment, where she suffered two more strokes, she was unable to play an instrument or even grasp a pencil. She suffered significant challenges, including depression and isolation, but through therapy and determination, she was able to rebuild her life. Miriam is now a neurological music therapist, working with children and adults with learning disabilities, and I believe she is here, watching today’s debate.

Chris Stirling, who suffered a stroke in his 60s, was told by doctors after six months in hospital that he should go into a care home. He left hospital in a wheelchair, unable to shower. Thanks to privately funded neuro physiotherapy and the support of his family, he is now able to play golf, one-handed. Not everyone is as lucky as Chris to have both the means and the family support.

Miriam and Chris’s stories, and the testimonies I shared earlier in my speech, show just how important it is to get both stroke diagnosis and rehabilitation right.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. Family friend Hannah Garrity, who is now in her 20s, took her stroke at the age of eight. She was a little girl, who woke up one day and took a severe headache, and out of that, she had a very severe stroke. She is an inspiration. She is now teaching art in schools. She is a Sunday school teacher in her local church, and she gives so much back to society. Would the hon. Member agree that more research is needed, particularly in relation to strokes in young people and children, given the increase in the number of them who are taking strokes?

Munira Wilson: Absolutely. I am sure that in stroke, as in so many other areas of medicine, more research would be welcome, particularly into how we can prevent stroke in younger people. It is shocking to hear that a child so young suffered a stroke.

The stories that I have shared today demonstrate the impact that good care and rehab can have on quality of life, regaining independence and restoring people’s identity. The moral, social, health and economic cases for better rehab support are overwhelming. Will the Minister therefore commit to expanding the Government target to cut deaths caused by stroke and heart attack to include reducing disability? With stroke and cardiovascular disease a trailblazer for the modern service framework, what discussions is he having in the Department and with the Treasury to resource implementation and ensure there is a lead in the Department on this area? With 40% of physiotherapists saying that insufficient staffing is leading to their patients experiencing increased levels of pain and ill health, what work is he undertaking to expand the physio workforce? Will he look at ensuring that integrated care boards’ data plans capture and report on performance and rehabilitation, including in relation to populations who are not accessing rehabilitation?

[Munira Wilson]

On this World Stroke Day, stroke survivors and their carers are not asking for the impossible: a concrete plan to make stroke rehabilitation accessible across the country, no matter what someone earns or where they live. As the Secretary of State himself said only at the start of this year,

“Whether in the NHS or in social care, we definitely need to do more on rehabilitation, because rehabilitation is often secondary prevention.”—[*Official Report*, 6 January 2025; Vol. 759, c. 608.]

He was right, and now that needs to be delivered. I look forward to the Minister’s response. I would welcome the opportunity to meet him to discuss these issues alongside patient groups and representatives.

4.41 pm

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing such an important debate ahead of World Stroke Day. I send her mum our best wishes; I know how hard it is to speak about these personal issues in the House.

A stroke happens every five minutes. That means that each year 100,000 people in Britain will have a stroke. One in seven of those stroke patients die in hospital, and six in 10 will leave hospital with a disability. Until last year, those were all simply statistics to me. I knew that stroke was a major cause of disability and that people suffered strokes, but to me those people were always much older.

Since then, my understanding has changed drastically. Last year, on my first day in Parliament, my husband, Jacob, suffered a stroke. While other colleagues were queuing to be sworn in, I raced across London to find him in an intensive care ward. Learning what had happened was terrifying. It was totally unexpected. Jacob is young and healthy, and does not drink or smoke, but stroke does not discriminate. I learned quickly that what happened to him is not as rare as we thought: one in four strokes happen to people of working age. Stroke has the ability to turn someone’s life upside down. Simple, everyday tasks become difficult, and the jobs people once did may become alien to them. Stroke does not discriminate in who it strikes or where it strikes, but the care stroke patients receive across the country does. There are severe inequalities, and we must end the postcode lottery in access to treatment and rehabilitation.

When it comes to acute treatment, we absolutely know what works. Thrombolysis and thrombectomy save lives. The Prime Minister has spoken about the power of artificial intelligence to help doctors find blood clots in seconds. We also know that, too often, where someone lives impacts the quality of care and their quality of life after a stroke.

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Currently, no Scottish hospital offers 24/7 emergency thrombectomy. For example, there is no night-time provision of mechanical thrombectomy, and in Glasgow emergency thrombectomy is available only Monday to Friday. There are severe gaps in the system. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is just not good enough?

Uma Kumaran: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Thrombectomy is highly effective and can transform recovery, massively reducing the chances of a disability. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point about care in my hon. Friend’s community.

Recent statistics show that while in London more than 10% of patients receive a thrombectomy, in the east of England, only 1% of stroke patients underwent this potentially lifesaving treatment. I apologise that I do not have the statistics for Scotland.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Uma Kumaran: Does my hon. Friend have the statistics?

Dr Arthur: I do. I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and wish her husband well—I am sure that he is incredibly proud of her. In Scotland in 2024, only 212 thrombectomies took place, which accounts for 2.2% of all eligible cases. Those are statistics that should shame us. If we compare it with Ireland, a comparably sized country, the number is five times higher. Does my hon. Friend agree that we can always do better?

Uma Kumaran: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and thank him for having the statistics and always being a voice for Scotland. As we discussed, these inequalities have real-world consequences. Gaps in care and inequality in access jeopardise lives—in the most extreme cases they cost lives. While previous Governments have left stroke care underfunded and under-prioritised, I am proud to see this Labour Government tackling it head on. They are getting on with delivering the changes that we need to see so that the NHS can prevent strokes, and act fast when they strike, making the most of digital innovation, and delivering the best quality care for everyone as they recover.

While I am pleased to say that, after heart surgery this summer, Jacob is fully recovered, his stroke has absolutely transformed our family’s life—it changed it forever. But every day, hundreds of families across the UK face the same reality. That is why I can say that this Government’s target to slash stroke mortality in a decade is not just a statistic; it is lives saved and lives changed. I use this opportunity to thank the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), for both his professional and personal support to Jacob and I during this time in our lives. We will never forget his kindness and fast thinking.

I join hon. Members from across the House in calling on this Government to do all they can to ensure that their 10-year health plan delivers for stroke patients, no matter their age, postcode or what region they live in. Every stroke survivor must get the care that they need to thrive.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. If Members stick to between three and four minutes, we should be able to get all the listed speakers in—there are a few more standing. There will be a Division at 5 pm.

4.46 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this important debate and sharing her mum's story.

One of the best bits of being an MP is meeting individuals and organisations that do so much good across Alloa and Grangemouth, like when I met the Clackmannanshire Stroke Support Group earlier this year. Their courage, spirit and determination in the face of serious adversity was truly inspiring.

I will focus on the relationship between deprivation and having a stroke. In Scotland, approximately 13,000 people have a first stroke each year. There are an estimated 150,000 stroke survivors in the country, and recent data shows that people in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to have a stroke as people from the most affluent areas.

The relationship between deprivation and stroke mortality is over five times higher for those in the 10% most deprived areas compared with the 10% least deprived, in the under-65 age group. There is a significantly higher risk of dying within a year of having a stroke for those people from more deprived areas. These patients are less likely to receive recommended treatments such as blood thinners for atrial fibrillation, and are more likely to be given less effective alternatives.

Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland works hard in communities across Scotland to deliver prevention and support recovery, and to enable people to self-manage their condition. But it cannot be up to organisations to fight this alone. They need help from the Scottish Government, and there must be a much more proactive approach adopted in how healthcare services are delivered. The postcode lottery in what treatment someone receives in Scotland because of where they live really must end.

4.48 pm

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this debate and sharing her stories.

I start by sending my best wishes to my constituent John Falconer, who recently suffered a mini stroke. John has been campaigning tirelessly to reopen the hyperacute stroke unit at Yeovil district hospital—he was campaigning before he had the stroke. In 2024, Somerset ICB decided to close the unit as it could not sustain a full service. Instead, patients are now treated at Musgrove Park hospital or Dorchester county hospital.

While I understand the reasoning, I remain deeply concerned about the impact that has, particularly the long travel times. When someone has a stroke, every minute matters. The target for patients with a clot stroke is to receive treatment within 180 minutes of 999 being called, but data collected by John and the Quicksilver Community Group shows that that would be met for only 13% of Yeovil patients taken to Taunton and 30% taken to Dorchester, compared with 74% when treated at Yeovil. Although staff at Taunton and Dorchester can provide treatment for people from Yeovil, there is real concern that some patients may not get there in time, with consequences, as we have heard today.

My constituents want to know why greater resources cannot be invested to maintain a full, sustainable service in Yeovil. I am calling on the Somerset ICB to run a trial—as I have previously asked—comparing outcomes for patients in the Yeovil HASU and those taken outside the constituency.

4.50 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.5 pm

On resuming—

Adam Dance: I call on Somerset ICB to run a trial comparing outcomes for patients in the Yeovil HASU and those taken outside the constituency. Staff in Yeovil hospital would welcome that, and it would give peace of mind to know that the decision was based on clear evidence.

When it comes to stroke care, speed saves lives. My priority is to ensure that every person in Yeovil can get the treatment that they need, as quickly as possible. With one in four of us at risk of having a stroke in our lifetime, we must make sure that our health services are safe, local and accessible.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. We have five more Back-Bench speakers and we expect the winding-up speeches to start at 5.23 pm.

5.6 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this important and timely debate and for sharing her personal stories.

We have heard the statistics: stroke is the UK's fourth biggest killer and the single largest cause of complex disability. Stroke survivors' lives are completely altered. Some are left paralysed, their fondest memories are lost and old personality traits and mannerisms are erased by new, unfamiliar ones. Loved ones experience the heartbreak of seeing someone they love become a shell of their former self.

The aftermath of a stroke often extends beyond the physical changes. Many survivors are left with the trauma and grief of being sick and of losing within a matter of minutes the ability to do some of the things they were once able to do, and overwhelmed by the fear they might experience stroke all over again.

However, there is a reason to be hopeful. How fast we act when someone experiences a stroke can have a profound impact on their journey to recovery. The minutes and hours after a stroke can be the difference between a good and a poor quality of life, and even between life and death. That is why I was very pleased that last November the NHS expanded its FAST stroke campaign, reminding us of the key signs of stroke: F for face, A for arm, S for speech and T for time to act. By recognising those warning signs, we can act and improve survivors' futures. The NHS campaign demonstrates that stroke signs can be less pronounced, like someone being unable to finish reading a bedtime story to their grandchild or someone suddenly feeling that they are unable to smile.

[Jas Athwal]

I was particularly pleased to hear that the new campaign has been making its way to ethnic minority TV channels and on to social media to raise awareness. Researching for this debate, I came across an alarming study revealing that ethnic minority patients tend to have strokes about five years earlier and are at least twice as likely to face serious complications or death. The study highlighted the fact that that disparity co-exists with many chronic health conditions such as increased rates of diabetes, a condition that also increases the risk of stroke.

That is why this World Stroke Day we need to focus our efforts on prevention and awareness. We need to continue promoting a healthy lifestyle to all, and ensuring that those from ethnic minorities have the same awareness about stroke, so that they can benefit from better health outcomes. World Stroke Day provides us with the opportunity to pay tribute to carers at home and in the NHS, to raise awareness of the signs of stroke—remember the FAST acronym—and to acknowledge the bravery and perseverance of stroke survivors. I say to the Minister, “Please end the postcode lottery and improve the care in the community.” Stroke strikes indiscriminately, so the 10-year plan must address the inadequacies and differences across the country. I appeal to the Minister to reach out.

5.9 pm

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this important debate.

During the past year in Ayrshire, 852 people’s lives changed in an instant when they suffered a stroke, the outcome of which depended on the speed and quality of care that they received. Stroke is a medical emergency; “Every Minute Counts” is not just a slogan, but a theme of this year’s World Stroke Day. That is because for every minute that a stroke goes untreated, the brain loses nearly 2 million cells. Time is brain. Yet within NHS Ayrshire & Arran, just over 55% of stroke patients received the full stroke care bundle, a package of interventions proven to improve survival and recovery. That is way below the SNP Government’s own target of 80%.

The situation becomes even more critical during out-of-hours periods, which are weekdays from 5.30 pm to 8.30 the next morning, and the entire duration of weekends and public bank holidays, when GP practices are closed. Although thrombolysis, the clot-busting drug, must be administered within four and a half hours of symptom onset, access to the treatment can be delayed at night or on weekends.

The new thrombectomy service at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow is a welcome step, but the programme is still in a phased roll-out. Shockingly, to date only 10 patients from Ayrshire and Arran have received a thrombectomy, despite its being one of the most effective treatments for large vessel occlusion strokes. Yes, it is good that 10 lives have potentially been saved, but it is concerning that many more people might have missed out due to limited access and timing. Many patients who suffer a stroke outside standard hours face a postcode lottery, in terms of not just geography, but time, with the result being delayed treatment, poorer outcomes and a higher risk of long-term disability.

I have a 23-year background in the NHS, so I know that we must do better. Stroke care must be prioritised. Our NHS across Scotland must have the vital investment to be able to deliver stroke services 24/7, ensuring rapid access to thrombectomy for my constituents in Kilmarnock and Loudoun, and indeed throughout Scotland. The SNP Government must acknowledge the urgency and recognise stroke as a medical emergency by adequately funding our NHS with the vital resource to be able to deliver stroke services 24/7 to people in Scotland, regardless of where they live.

5.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz.

I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), both for setting the scene and for sharing the story of her mum, because such stories always give a very honest and true perspective. My own mother is now 94. When she was 93, she had a number of transient ischemic attacks, or TIAs. I remember being in the ambulance with her and in the hospital as she waited to be admitted. Ultimately, unfortunately, it led to physical disabilities. Although she is compos mentis and really sharp in her mind, even at 94, physically she will never be able to do the things that she once did—so I understand, and I thank the hon. Lady for sharing her story.

World Stroke Day is a day that sticks out for so many people—we would struggle to find someone who does not know an individual affected by the impact of stroke. Of course there is more to be done, and I am very pleased to be here today to discuss that.

I welcome the Minister to his place; I understand that this might be the first Westminster Hall debate as a Minister. Last night, he was in an Adjournment debate in the main Chamber; today, he is in Westminster Hall, so he is seeing great things on the tour of Westminster, and I wish him well in all that he does.

Statistics from the Stroke Association highlight that every day in the UK another 240 people suffer the catastrophic impact of a stroke. Two thirds of people who survive a stroke find themselves living with a disability and six in 10 survivors rely on the help of a carer, often a family member or friend.

This year, World Stroke Day aims to focus on the truth surrounding post-stroke recovery. Whether it is a short-term or long-term process of physical, behavioural or emotional rehabilitation, it begins in hospital, but can be lifelong, requiring support for months or even years in the community through carers and family.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Unfortunately, Northern Ireland, where the hon. Member and I live, has the second highest rate of stroke across the UK, with something like 4,700 strokes each year. Does he agree that we need to share best practice and research, which is emerging from certain parts of the UK, right across the board?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and he is right.

Whether it is our lifestyle, what we eat, the way we live, or whatever it may be, it is really important that we address these things. Recovery can take years and some people find it completely life-altering. Over the past

10 years, there has been a 23% increase in the number of people who are registered with their GP for chest, heart and stroke conditions. The figures are serious. It is crucial that support is available to those who require it. Those organisations, which offer fantastic support to families, ultimately take on a large amount of caring responsibility—and therapy, whether it is physical, occupational or speech therapy, should be accessible and helpful to all.

In conclusion, I remind hon. Members of the importance of the FAST strategy—face, arms speech and time—which is imperative in noticing the signs of stroke. This World Stroke Day, let us focus on recovery care and giving people the support they need to rehabilitate, get back on track and learn to cope with their new normal. I urge the Minister to work with the regional Administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; these are things that we can do better together.

5.15 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this important debate and for sharing her personal story and those of her constituents. That is exactly why this is such an important issue for us to speak about. Stroke can happen to anyone, at any time, in any family.

Stroke is the leading cause of complex adult disability in the UK, yet too often it remains underfunded, understaffed and under-prioritised. Recovery does not end when someone leaves hospital—for many, that is just the beginning. Relearning to walk, to speak, to eat or simply to live independently again takes extraordinary strength and proper support. Physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy can transform lives, but right now only 17% of community services have access to all three.

In Redditch, there are around 2,000 stroke survivors. I thank everyone who has contacted me, from Redditch to the Lenches, from Harvington to Wychbold, to share their stories and experiences. This issue cuts across every age, every background and every family. I have spoken to people in their 30s and 40s whose lives were turned upside down overnight. Stroke affects not only individuals, but their loved ones, their workplaces and their communities.

I thank the organisers of the Redditch stroke support group for everything they do to help local stroke survivors and their families.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that organisations such as the one he mentioned, the Stroke Association and others have a vital role to play in bringing these matters to the attention of this House for as long as it takes?

Chris Bloore: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. The work of those organisations—the listening, guidance and encouragement—is often what helps people to take the first steps back towards confidence, independence and hope. They are a vital part of our community and I am deeply grateful for their dedication.

The Government's 10-year health plan is an opportunity to do better: to shift our focus from hospital to community and from sickness to prevention. We know that nine in

10 strokes are linked to preventable risk factors such as high blood pressure and heart disease. Prevention saves lives, but it must be matched by proper rehabilitation and support for those already living with stroke, because one in four stroke survivors will have another stroke within five years.

As we mark this World Stroke Day, I pay tribute to the Stroke Association, to our incredible NHS staff and, above all, to all survivors and carers, who show every day what courage and recovery looks like. With the right help, life after stroke is not just possible; it can be full of purpose, love and dignity.

5.18 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson).

As it is for a number of speakers today, this debate is deeply personal to me. My dad had a severe stroke with no warning in 2013. He was just 55 years old. He lived with the aftermath of that stroke for 10 further years. In December 2022, he was hit by both pneumonia and covid and was placed in a medically induced coma, during which time he had a further stroke from which he never recovered. He died in January 2023, aged just 65.

That experience was one of the main reasons I decided to stand for Parliament. As it happens, stroke is a major issue in my constituency, where there are currently 2,868 stroke survivors. Of the 543 English constituencies, we rank 469th. Being disabled in a rural community such as mine comes with significant additional challenges. Many disabled people are unable to drive because of their disability. With inadequate public transport options, getting to basic medical appointments—or simply going on shopping trips—becomes either really difficult or really expensive. Loneliness and isolation are particular concerns and often worsen underlying mental health challenges.

In Norfolk, my constituents have to contend with a hospital that ranked 134th out of 134 in a recent NHS league table, making it the worst in the country; the worst ambulance service in the country, with the East of England ambulance service placing 10th out of 10; and the Norfolk and Suffolk mental health trust, which ranks 57th out of 61, making it almost the worst in the country. The cumulative impact of so many failing health services cannot be overstated. The ICB funds the Stroke Association to provide a “life after stroke” service in west Norfolk. I was very concerned to hear recently that the service may have come to an end in September. I wrote to the ICB to outline my concerns, and I am pleased that the service has been temporarily re-funded until March 2026, but there is no certainty after that point. I very much hope that that important service can be continued, given the clear need in the west of our county.

The Government's 10-year health plan provides a great opportunity to improve our whole national health service. As we do so, I hope that stroke prevention and services for people who have experienced stroke or cardiovascular disease more generally will be given the support they need. I welcome the ICB's wider review of stroke services in Norfolk, which is backed by £3 million of growth funding. That includes projects to find and treat people at increased risk of stroke, such as those

[Terry Jermy]

with undiagnosed high blood pressure. That shift from reactive care to prevention is a key Government priority, and I hope that it will result in fewer families going through what my family has gone through with my late father's stroke.

5.21 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this important and timely debate and for her personal and emotive speech. I send her mum my best wishes. I thank all other Members for their speeches and for their personal stories.

Over the summer, a constituent wrote to tell me that, after having a stroke, he was looking for a support group to aid in his recovery. He reached out to the closest group he could find, but they informed him that the council services were drastically cut about 12 years ago under the Conservatives, leaving only volunteer-led groups. The stroke left him with limited mobility, so he is unable to travel the distance from his house to the nearest volunteer-run group and he is therefore unable to access a vital support network.

We have heard just how quickly lives can change following a stroke. They leave people to navigate a whole new reality, which has been made even harder by the stripping of local services under the Tories. That is why I urge the Government to invest in prevention, community care and rehabilitation, including by restoring the public health grant to 2015 levels, and to empower local communities to co-design health initiatives that address their specific needs.

More must also be done to support social prescribing and community projects that tackle loneliness and improve mental and physical wellbeing—key factors in stroke recovery and prevention that would make a direct difference to people in my constituency and across the country. We know that preventive action and early intervention are key to increasing survival rates and improving outcomes for those affected. The Sentinel Stroke National Audit Programme at King's College London found that 57% of people believe that they should have two to three symptoms of a stroke before calling 999, despite just one being a sign of a medical emergency. Furthermore, nearly two thirds of respondents said that they would not call 999 as their first course of action if they noticed that someone was suddenly struggling to smile.

Although I welcomed the launch of a new NHS stroke awareness campaign last year and this Government's preventive policies, including regulations on the advertising of less healthy food and drink and the measures in the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, far more needs to be done. The most common risk factors for cardiovascular diseases, including strokes, are environmental and behavioural. They include smoking, diet and weight, physical inactivity, excessive alcohol consumption and air pollution. That is why it is imperative that we get more people moving and encourage healthy eating, including by closing loopholes in the soft drinks levy by extending it to milk and juice drinks that are high in sugar. There is also scope to go further by requiring better labelling of junk food and restricting the advertising of products that are high in fat, salt and sugar.

Furthermore, encouraging some form of exercise throughout people's lives improves not only their physical outcomes but their mental health. To make a real difference, the Government must invest more in public health budgets to enable active travel, supporting local clubs and making cycling and walking routes more accessible. We also cannot ignore the social differences that dictate stroke survival outcomes. People in the most deprived 10% of the population are almost twice as likely as those in the least deprived 10% to die prematurely. No one in this country should be subject to poorer health outcomes just because of where they live or how much money they make.

For the 240 people who wake up every day in the UK to the life-changing impact of a stroke, and the 60% of survivors who leave hospital with a disability, we must go further to reduce the environmental and health risk factors of strokes, to educate people on the signs of a stroke and empower them to act immediately, and to provide easy, accessible rehabilitation and support services for survivors and families. We cannot leave more people, such as my constituent, alone to navigate the complexities of post-stroke life. The Government must invest in prevention, community care and rehabilitation, and undo the Conservatives' devastating cuts to public health funding.

5.25 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing this important debate.

Strokes are life-threatening medical emergencies that affect more than 100,000 people in the UK every year, taking over 38,000 lives and leaving many survivors with life-changing disabilities. A study in *The Lancet Healthy Longevity* estimated their annual cost to be £8 billion, comprising public spending on care and lost economic productivity. The number of cases is rising—in England, stroke admissions increased by 28% from 2005 to 2024—and, as the Stroke Association has said, demographic reality makes it all the more urgent for the Government to take action today to improve stroke care and reduce modifiable risk factors. As we have heard, when stroke care is delayed, the typical victim loses 1.9 million neurones for each minute they are untreated. Of course, delay is measured not just in brain cells, but in lost independence, lost potential and, all too often, lost lives.

The Government cannot just acknowledge the challenge; they must act. The previous Government designated stroke as a national priority area in the 2019 NHS long-term plan, with several commitments to improve prevention, treatment and care. We set out to increase the proportion of people receiving clot-removing thrombectomy to end their stroke, improve post-hospital stroke rehab models for patients, and enhance the Sentinel Stroke National Audit Programme. That important work was led by a network of 20 integrated stroke delivery networks, which were established in 2021, with a national service model setting out best practice. The previous Government also invested more than £57 million in mechanical thrombectomy, and by the end of 2023, 24 centres were open and delivering mechanical thrombectomy across England. Do the Government have a delivery plan to create more of those centres, or do they think there are enough?

Prior to the general election, the previous Government began work on a major conditions strategy to improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of six major conditions, including stroke, but rather than see it through, this Labour Government chose to take an axe to progress, pausing the scheme in August 2024 and, a year later, announcing a service framework for cardiovascular diseases in the 10-year plan. Have the Government incorporated the strategy's findings in the 10-year plan? The plan mentions stroke just twice, and only in the context of smoking and obesity.

I am pleased that the Government have shown an interest in reducing modifiable risk factors. Prevention is always better than cure. Those categorised as obese face an elevated risk of stroke—64% higher than those of healthy weight—and one in five children leaves primary school obese. We spoke about obesity in this morning's debate, but I did not get answers to most of my questions. I appreciate that the Minister is covering for someone this afternoon, but will he undertake to get answers not just to the questions asked in this debate, but to those asked in this morning's?

I am encouraged to see Ministers showing an interest in furthering the previous Government's work to tackle smoking, a habit to which one in four strokes is directly attributable, but it seems to be taking quite a long time. Just yesterday, health leaders warned that more than 120,000 young people have started smoking since the Tobacco and Vapes Bill was introduced. Will the Minister assure us that the Government will prioritise the Bill and pass it without delay?

High blood pressure remains the single biggest risk factor for strokes, and it is generally asymptomatic, which is why it is so important that tests are carried out in locations that are convenient for people. Last year, community pharmacies in England delivered more than 140,000 blood pressure checks and diagnosed nearly 11,000 cases of hypertension. As the Government complete the latest round of pharmacy negotiations, will the Minister commit to expanding that service further, so that pharmacies can detect more cases and prevent more strokes?

The Government's delay to the NHS workforce plan is particularly concerning. We need enough doctors to train to perform thrombectomy and care for patients, and enough physios, occupational therapists, nurses, speech therapists and so on to support rehabilitation. After the Government cancelled the major conditions strategy last summer, their 10-year plan promised a service framework, as I said. Given that they have now delayed the workforce plan, the cancer plan, the neonatal and maternity plan and the HIV plan, will the Minister assure the House that they will not also delay the service framework for cardiovascular disease? We need action and not just words, so will the Minister explain what the Government have done materially to improve early stroke diagnosis since they came to office?

Stroke care is not only about medical interventions. For many survivors, recovery starts when they return home and have to re-learn to walk, speak and carry out daily tasks, so access to physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and other support is vital. How do the Government plan to improve that provision, and what are they doing to provide psychological support to the families of stroke victims and victims themselves, especially in cases where there is a change of personality or emotional disturbance?

Prevention is better than cure. Work on smoking, obesity and high blood pressure are important. In the event of a stroke, every minute counts. Every minute the Government spend perfecting plans instead of putting things into action is a minute of suffering that could have been spared.

5.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this timely debate and wish her mother well in her recovery. It is not easy to channel personal pain for the greater good, but the hon. Member has done so, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) and for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy). They can be assured that their articulation in this place of their personal experience will prevent strokes and lead to their faster treatment. Often, debates such as this can increase awareness and reduce the threshold at which people contact the NHS and the ambulance service for help.

The hon. Member for Twickenham asked me to address a number of issues, and I will do so before I get into the bulk of my speech. One was about data capture. Although I am responding on behalf of the public health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), I am the Minister responsible for digital health and data, so I can assure the hon. Member that the interconnectivity of data among primary care, secondary care and social care is important to me, both for ease of access for the patient and for learnings and auditing. She can be assured of my personal commitment that that is the way forward in the new iteration of a modern health service.

The hon. Member also asked about physiotherapy and disability reduction. I can reassure her that, through the workforce plan and our upgrading of the digital architecture, we are working intensively to see how we can bring world-class physiotherapy to all and not just to some. Part of disability reduction is timely access to cutting-edge treatments, which no longer involves clot-busting; it now involves clot removal, in the form of thrombectomy. Thrombectomy services are planned to be totally universal in England by April 2026. I hope that answers some of the questions the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) asked about those services.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a plan in Scotland to install 24/7 emergency thrombectomy care across the country as soon as possible? I believe the objective is 2031, but we should be pushing the Scottish Government to go further and faster on that.

Dr Ahmed: My hon. Friend must have read my mind. As I was saying, our plan is only for England. Hon. Friends have already articulated the fact that in Scotland, despite the best efforts of clinicians in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee, there has not been the ability—or the intent from the Scottish Government—to bring forward a proper 24/7 stroke thrombectomy service. That means that the time of day that Scottish patients have a stroke determines the outcome. They are literally being dealt a roulette wheel of care: 20th-century care out of hours

[Dr Ahmed]

and 21st-century care within office hours. It is simply unacceptable, and the UK Government stand ready to assist the Scottish Government in any way, shape or form they require to make sure that access to the highest quality of care is as available to patients in Scotland as it is to those in England.

Dr Caroline Johnson: I am grateful to the Minister for answering the question and talking about universal services being available from next year. Can he confirm whether they will be 24/7 and what he means by “universal”? If someone is living in a rural area, what is the greatest distance or time they should expect to travel to get to their local thrombectomy centre?

Dr Ahmed: What I mean by “universal” is indeed 24/7. As the hon. Member well knows, there are always challenges in delivering stroke care and heart attack care to rural communities. She, as a clinician, knows that we try our best, through the ambulance service and other forms of repatriation, to try to make sure there is equitable access wherever we can achieve it.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow again for her kind words about the very small part that I played in her husband’s diagnosis. I am glad that he continues to do so well. I want to pay tribute to some of the charities involved in this space, because they have been instrumental in the innovation in stroke care over the past 20 to 30 years. I thank the Stroke Association, Different Strokes and Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland for the incredible work that they do, including in my own constituency.

As the fourth largest cause of death for adults, stroke has a devastating impact on patients, families and the wider community. About one third of people who suffer a stroke will be left with some form of long-term disability. This is an important inequalities issue, as has already been discussed in this debate. Cardiovascular disease hits hardest in the most deprived parts of our country, including in parts of my own constituency, where people are more likely to smoke and less likely to have access to decent food and open green spaces. This Government were elected on a manifesto to tackle the biggest killers, including cardiovascular disease, and our health mission is committed to reducing deaths from heart disease and strokes by a quarter in the next 10 years.

I want to set out our reforms to the NHS, especially those which are part of our 10-year health plan, which will drive down rates of disease while helping people to live well for longer. Many Members in this Chamber are familiar with our three shifts: moving more care into the community, advancing the cause of digital health, and prioritising prevention over treatment.

On prevention, as much as I love my job as a surgeon I am still rooting for the public health Minister to put me out of business. She is taking forward strong preventive measures in her brief, through our Tobacco and Vapes Bill and by beefing up the NHS health check, which is England’s flagship cardiovascular prevention programme. That programme helps to target the abnormalities common to heart disease, to stroke, sometimes to diabetes and to kidney disease, and in many cases even to dementia through behavioural and clinical interventions. Each year, the programme engages 1.3 million people, preventing

around 500 heart attacks or strokes. To improve access and engagement, we are developing the NHS health check online so that people can use it at home. That is being piloted by three local authorities until December.

We have already begun trialling more than 130,000 lifesaving heart health checks in the workspace—in offices, shop floors and commercial areas—all across the country. That will also help to reduce the risk of stroke. The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham asked about community pharmacy. Community pharmacy can and will continue to provide free blood pressure check services for anyone over the age of 40.

On rehabilitation, the stroke quality improvement for rehabilitation programme has increased the percentage of patients discharged from hospital to community stroke services from just under 66% when this Government took office to almost 70%. There is much more to be done, of course, but I believe that we are moving in the right direction.

As hon. Members are aware, the NHS fell behind in the last 14 years—certainly behind the private sector—in using digital technology. That was an appalling inequity, so let me come to our shift from analogue to digital. Half of all people who experience a stroke in England are now recovering thanks to revolutionary scanners that mean patients can avoid the risk of serious disability. The world-first technology that is coming online will analyse CT scans of stroke patients arriving in hospital, identifying them within 60 seconds. That means that the average time between a patient arriving at a hospital and starting life-saving and life-changing treatment is shortened from 140 minutes to only 79, resulting in less disability and a greater quality of life. I am pleased to update the House that since the roll-out last summer, the tool has been used to interpret the brain scans of more than 60,000 patients.

This Government believe that working people have the right to expect the same level of rehabilitative services as the wealthy. That is why we are so gladdened by the new state-of-the-art rehab gym hub at Montagu hospital in Doncaster, which is a perfect example of the best of the NHS that we wish to bring to the rest of the NHS. The suite relies on robotic therapies, which are otherwise provided only in private healthcare. The machines combine robotics with gamified, interactive activities to enhance both physical and cognitive recovery following a stroke—an example of what the seamless integration of physiotherapy and investment in digital health can achieve for stroke patients.

We are also forging partnerships with medtech companies to deliver the next generation of healthcare for patients. Reneural, which has partnered with Hillingdon Hospitals NHS foundation trust, is bringing virtual reality stroke rehabilitation to patients, and enabling therapists to remotely deliver and monitor stroke rehabilitation. Our shift from analogue to digital is supporting both in-hospital and community-based therapy, and, in many ways, allowing equality between rural and urban communities.

I am not saying that everything is perfect—far from it—or that there will not be bumps along the way. However, in a few short months, we have improved the outcomes of more than 60,000 patients, which is a testament to the actions of this Government. Through focus, and by delivering on the promises of digital and

bringing the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS, we can, and we will, do better for stroke patients and their loved ones.

5.40 pm

Munira Wilson: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, particularly the hon. Members for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), for sharing their personal stories. I also thank everyone for their good wishes for my mum, which I will pass on when I speak to her next.

I am grateful for the Minister's response. I am encouraged by what he said about data, prevention, the digital tools that will come into play, and the fact that we are trying to make thrombectomies universal during that acute phase when somebody is blue lighted somewhere. However, I come back to one of my key asks, which was to widen the target for stroke and cardiovascular disease to prevent disability, not just to save lives.

Of course, saving lives is crucial. Thanks to those interventions, many lives are saved, but the disability that goes with that is incredible. Yes, we can use robots and all sorts of other new technology, but, ultimately, physios, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists are desperately needed. Frankly, community-based rehab is withering on the vine, and I have been personally quite shocked by how patchy it is. My plea is for the Minister to take the need to build up those services to the public health Minister, and I hope that she will be willing to meet me, as well as patient groups and patients.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Stroke Day 2025.

5.42 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 28 October 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Switzerland Free Trade Agreement Negotiations: Round 8

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): The eighth round of negotiations on an enhanced free trade agreement with Switzerland took place in Switzerland between 20 and 24 October 2025.

Economic growth is our first mission in Government and trade agreements have an important role to play in achieving this. An enhanced trade agreement with Switzerland could support British businesses, back British jobs, and put more money in people's pockets.

Services will be at the heart of a new agreement, reflecting that there is around £28 billion in services trade between our two countries in everything from finance and consultancy to legal and transport. The trading relationship supported 130,000 services jobs across the UK in 2020.

Switzerland is the UK's 10th biggest trading partner and the UK-Swiss trade relationship was worth more than £45.1 billion in the four quarters ending Q1 2025. Services exports accounted for more than £18.4 billion of the trading relationship, making Switzerland the UK's sixth largest services export partner.

An enhanced FTA with Switzerland aims to deliver long-term certainty for UK services firms, by locking in access to the Swiss market, guaranteeing the free flow of data and cementing business travel arrangements.

The round saw positive progress in a number of areas:

Services and investment

Constructive discussions were held across services, following a series of productive intersessional talks held over the summer. The UK and Switzerland exchanged market access offers prior to the round. Discussions continue to focus on market access supporting UK services exports.

Digital

Constructive discussions continued on digital trade in round 8 with some good progress made across the chapter. With 75% of UK services trade with Switzerland delivered digitally in 2022, the UK is seeking commitments in the FTA that will guarantee the free flow of data between our two countries.

Intellectual property

During this round, the UK and Switzerland discussed intellectual property rights areas. Negotiations will continue with the aim of agreeing a comprehensive framework for the protection of intellectual property.

Goods

Discussions continue to focus on goods market access.

We are close to concluding negotiations on the goods chapter text, which will help streamline the process for UK exports to Switzerland and vice versa.

In addition, good progress was made on the technical barriers to trade chapter, including provisions on technical regulations, international standards and conformity assessment.

Competition

Negotiations concluded on competition issues, promoting open and fair competition for UK firms at home and in Switzerland.

Next steps on FTA negotiations

Round 9 of negotiations on the FTA is set to take place in the UK in early 2026.

The Government are focused on securing outcomes in an enhanced FTA that boost economic growth for the UK and Ministers will continue to update Parliament on the progress of negotiations.

The Government will only ever sign a trade agreement which aligns with the UK's national interests, upholding our high standards across a range of sectors, alongside protections for the national health service.

UK-Switzerland services mobility agreement

In addition to progress made in the FTA negotiations, the UK and Switzerland have also agreed a further extension to the existing UK-Switzerland services mobility agreement to cover the next four years, up to 31 December 2029.

The extension will ensure that businesses and services providers in the UK and in Switzerland have the certainty they need to continue to make use of this arrangement, while we are negotiating a permanent solution to this in the free trade agreement. This follows the announcement in November 2022 to extend the agreement.

The SMA allows UK professionals to travel freely to Switzerland and to work and deliver services visa-free for up to 90 days per year. The agreement also ensures UK professionals will not face economic interests tests or be required to secure work permits during these first 90 days of service supply.

The agreement also allows Swiss professionals to come to the UK and provide services under contract in a number of key skilled sectors through the UK's service supplier visa for up to 12 months. This supports broader trade in vital industries of the UK economy, including finance, consultancy, legal services, the tech sector and the creative industries.

[HCWS997]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bathing Water Regulations 2013

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Cleaning up our waters are a priority for the Government. The Government will respond to the recommendations published in the final report of the Independent Water Commission through a White Paper and will bring forward root and branch reform to secure better outcomes for the environment and customer bills, restoring trust and accountability. Together with the actions the Government have already taken, this will mark the most fundamental reset to our water system in a generation, and we are keen to work closely with stakeholders, looking for a new partnership between Government, the sector, investors, and communities which will deliver the change the public expects.

Bathing waters are a vital public amenity and continue to attract considerable public interest. The Government are committed to improving the quality of our coastal waters, rivers and lakes for the benefit of the environment and everyone who use them. We are continually working to improve and modernise our bathing waters system to support the Government growth agenda.

Today, DEFRA, alongside the Welsh Government, has laid before Parliament a statutory instrument to amend the Bathing Water Regulations 2013. The amendments in the Bathing Water (Amendment) (England and Wales) Regulations 2025 reflect the outcome of our November 2024 consultation. The Government response to our consultation was published in March 2025 and outlined our intention to deliver three core reforms alongside several technical amendments. These changes respond directly to calls from stakeholders to modernise the framework governing bathing waters.

Core reform 1 removes the automatic de-designation provision from the 2013 regulations, which states that if a bathing water site receives a classification of “poor” for five consecutive years, it is automatically de-designated, and the Environment Agency or National Resources Wales must issue permanent advice against bathing. Instead, following a site receiving five consecutive “poor” classifications, the EA or NRW will advise the appropriate Minister on whether it is feasible and not disproportionately expensive to improve the site to “sufficient” standard. Ministers will then make a final decision on whether a site should continue to be designated. This change reflects our commitment to fairness and long-term environmental stewardship.

Core reform 2 amends the process to designate a bathing water to include consideration of the feasibility of improving a site’s water quality to at least “sufficient” water quality as a criterion for final designation. This reform also introduces consideration of whether there is likely to be a significant risk to the physical safety of bathers from the particular features of the water (where Ministers have reasonable grounds to believe this), or if it is likely that a large number of bathers will have a significant impact on environmental protection measures at site, prior to final designation. This reform will support tailored, site-specific decisions that better protect public health and the environment.

To support this reform, we are working with an external research organisation to develop a new feasibility assessment to ensure any decisions made under this reform are fair and accurate. This assessment will be developed through a stakeholder-driven process, ensuring transparency and inclusivity in the development of the assessment and associated guidance. This guidance will be published at the beginning of the 2026 general bathing season and application window.

Core reform 3 amends the fixed-date bathing season in the 2013 regulations, allowing Ministers to set site-specific bathing seasons where appropriate. While a general season (15 May to 30 September) will remain in the 2025 regulations, flexible, locally appropriate dates—including monitoring periods—can be determined to reflect actual water use. Next steps on how this reform will operate in practice will be developed in partnership with stakeholders and shared through published guidance in due course.

The technical amendments will modernise the regulatory framework, improving the Environment Agency’s operational efficiency and aligning legislation

with best practice. These include removing outdated sampling requirements, clarifying data standards, and streamlining administrative processes.

The reforms will come into force in stages to ensure a balanced and effective roll-out. Notably:

Core reform 1 and core reform 3, along with the technical amendments, will come into force on 21 November 2025.

Core reform 2, which introduces further considerations ahead of designation, will come into force on 15 May 2026.

This phased approach ensures that we act swiftly to prevent the potential automatic de-designation of sites while allowing sufficient time to develop comprehensive guidance for future applications.

These reforms mark a significant milestone in our commitment to protecting public health, enhancing environmental quality, and empowering communities. By modernising the Bathing Water Regulations 2013, we are ensuring that our approach remains fit for purpose in the face of evolving challenges and opportunities.

[HCWS999]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Reorganisation

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): The Government’s ambition is to simplify local government by ending the two-tier system and establishing new single-tier unitary councils. This is a once-in-a-generation reform, and our vision is clear: stronger local councils empowered across local services, equipped to drive economic growth, improve local public services, and empower their communities.

Strong local government will help grow the economy and drive up living standards—the Government’s No. 1 mission. With one council in charge in each area, we will see quicker decisions to grow our towns and cities, and connect people to opportunity. Reorganisation will speed up house building, get vital infrastructure projects moving, and attract new investment, with more people able to buy their own homes and access high-quality local jobs. It will also help reform local public services. Bringing services like housing, public health, and social care under one roof means that one council can see the full picture and spot problems early—for example, supporting a family in need of housing, and then supporting the children to stay in school. Ensuring public services are effective and responsive to their communities will help to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, and enable people to reach their full potential.

To this end, on 5 February, councils in the 21 areas of England that still have two-tier local government and neighbouring small unitary authorities were invited to submit proposals for unitarisation. Surrey councils were invited to submit their proposals by 9 May, on an accelerated timetable, due to the unique financial context of the area. Today, the Secretary of State has written to the leaders of Surrey councils about those proposals, and I can update the House on those decisions.

I would first like to thank all councils in Surrey for their hard work and commitment. Their dedication and collaboration has been vital for ensuring that quality proposals for new local authority structures, with the interests of residents at their heart, were brought forward.

Two proposals for unitary local government in Surrey were considered: one from Elmbridge borough council, Mole Valley district council and Surrey county council, for two unitary councils; and one from the borough councils of Epsom and Ewell, Guildford, Reigate and Banstead, Runnymede, Spelthorne, Surrey Heath, Waverley, Woking, and Tandridge district council, for three unitary councils. As the House was informed on 17 June, these proposals were taken to consultation, which closed on 5 August. A summary of the responses to that consultation will be published today.

We have now considered the proposals carefully against the criteria set out in the invitation letter of 5 February, alongside the responses to the consultation, all representations and all other relevant information to assess the proposals. In summary, these criteria are: whether the proposal achieves for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government; whether the councils are the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks; whether the unitary structures prioritise the delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services to citizens; whether councils in the area have sought to work together to come to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views; whether new unitary structures support devolution arrangements; and whether new unitary structures enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.

The Secretary of State has decided to implement the “two unitaries” proposal for Surrey, subject to parliamentary approval. In our judgement, although both proposals met the criteria, the proposal for two unitaries better meets the criteria in the case of Surrey. In particular, we believe it performs better against the second criterion, as it is more likely to be financially sustainable. This criterion is particularly relevant in the unique context of Surrey, where reorganisation is a critical intervention to improve the financial viability of the area’s councils, given unprecedented levels of unsupported debt. Putting Surrey’s local authorities on a more sustainable footing is vital to safeguarding the services its residents rely on, as well as investing in their futures. We will bring to the

House, for approval, a structural changes order to implement the proposal for two new unitary councils, East Surrey council and West Surrey council.

I would also like to confirm at this time our commitment to repaying, in principle, £500 million of Woking borough council’s debt in 2026-27. This is a significant and unprecedented commitment, given historic capital practices at the council. It reflects our acknowledgement that, even after the rationalisation of Woking’s historical assets, there is significant unsupported debt held by the council that cannot be managed locally.

The figure of in-principle support we are announcing today is subject to further assurance of the council’s financial position, progress with asset rationalisation, and the local government finance settlement. This is a first tranche of repayment support, and we will continue to explore what further debt support is required at a later point. Any support must take into account value for money for the local and national taxpayer and the council’s continued commitment to reducing debt as far as possible within its local capacity.

Simplifying local government also ensures a strong foundation for devolution. We are committed to working with partners across Surrey, including new unitary authorities once established, to establish a strategic authority for the area in order to ensure that relevant functions held at the county level can continue to be delivered on that geographic footprint where possible, such as transport and adult skills. The establishment of a strategic authority will be subject to the relevant statutory tests being met and local consent. We will also ensure that fire and rescue functions continue to be governed on the same geography.

For the other 20 areas going through local government reorganisation, I would like to emphasise that the decision to implement the proposal for two unitary councils in Surrey does not set any precedent. Decisions will be taken individually, based on the merits of each proposal we receive and the local context.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents I have referred to, which are also being published on gov.uk today.

[HCWS998]

Petition

Tuesday 28 October 2025

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Allotments in Wymondham

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Norfolk,

Declares that the allotmenters of Wymondham are saddened by the ending of the lease of the land by Anglian Water to Wymondham town council, which will result in the loss of allotment plots.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Anglian Water to uphold its corporate responsibilities to local people and areas, including the allotmenters of Wymondham.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ben Goldsborough, *Official Report*, 29 April 2025; Vol. 766, c. 299.]

[P003057]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

The Government hope that Anglian Water recognises the strength of feeling in the community and works closely with the local authority and local partners for a mutually beneficial outcome. However, this matter does not fall under the remit of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Anglian Water is a private company and must comply with all legal requirements and planning rules, but is otherwise free to do as it wishes with land it owns. DEFRA regulation of the water sector is focused on water supply, water quality, sewerage provision and control of pollution. The Government do not interfere with the actions of a private company unless and until it breaches regulations enforceable by a Government regulator, such as Ofwat. Allotments are a matter for the local authority; therefore it is its responsibility to work with the company regarding the sale of the land, and to make alternative provision for allotment holders.

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