

**Wednesday  
10 December 2025**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 10 December 2025**

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The following abbreviations are used to show a Member's party affiliation:

| Abbreviation | Affiliation                        |
|--------------|------------------------------------|
| Alliance     | Alliance Party of Northern Ireland |
| Con          | Conservative Party                 |
| DUP          | Democratic Unionist Party          |
| Green        | Green Party of England and Wales   |
| Ind          | Independent*                       |
| Lab          | Labour Party                       |
| Lab/Co-op    | Labour and Co-operative Party      |
| LD           | Liberal Democrat                   |
| PC           | Plaid Cymru                        |
| Reform       | Reform UK                          |
| SDLP         | Social Democratic and Labour Party |
| SNP          | Scottish National Party            |
| TUV          | Traditional Unionist Voice         |
| UUP          | Ulster Unionist Party              |

\*The term “Independent” may denote—

Members who have been elected as Independent candidates without affiliation to a political party; or

Members who have been elected after standing for a political party but no longer have the party Whip in the House of Commons.

# House of Commons

*Wednesday 10 December 2025*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

*The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—*

#### Conversion Practices Ban

1. **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of her timetable for bringing forward legislative proposals to ban conversion practices on affected people. [906818]

12. **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ban conversion practices. [906830]

**The Minister for Equalities (Olivia Bailey):** Conversion practices are abuse, they cause long-lasting harm, and they have no place in our society. We will bring our comprehensive, trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices before the House as soon as possible.

**Manuela Perteghella:** LGBTQ rights campaigners have warned that the Government's continued delay on banning conversion practices is dangerous and leaves vulnerable people without protection. Every month of delay leaves people exposed to practices that the Government themselves have said are abusive. Will the Minister now set out a clear timeline and give a firm commitment that the Government will not drag their heels on this any longer?

**Olivia Bailey:** As I have just said, conversion practices are abusive and we will ban them. All LGBT people deserve to live freely and without fear, shame or discrimination. This legislation is a priority for the Government, as set out in the King's Speech.

**Mr Barros-Curtis:** I thank the Minister for her answer. The recent BBC report that more than 250 people were subjected to electric shocks in NHS hospitals between 1965 and 1973, in an attempt to change their sexual preferences and gender identity, serves as a reminder of the urgent need for us to legislate in this area, and I am proud that the Government have committed to a trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. Can she assure me that the Government will legislate as swiftly as possible, and will she meet me to discuss this further?

**Olivia Bailey:** Let me be clear: being gay or trans is not an illness that needs to be cured. The so-called treatments reported by the BBC are abhorrent, and my thoughts are with anyone who suffered. Abusive conversion practices are still happening today, and we will bring

forward our draft legislation to ban them as soon as possible. I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

**Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): The Health Secretary's puberty blocker trial will stop the natural puberty of many young lesbians, putting them on a pathway to irreversible changes and a lifetime of medicalisation. What are the Minister's plans to stop this state-sanctioned conversion therapy?

**Olivia Bailey:** Young people with gender incongruence need access to high-quality, safe and effective care. We are following the Cass review, which was clear that the evidence on the care for these children is lacking and proposed this research to help provide it. We are now setting up clinical trials, as recommended by Baroness Cass, to build the evidence base that we need to support vulnerable young people.

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

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): LGBT+ communities, and particularly trans people, have many reasons to be fearful at the moment. Even though the Government have committed to delivering a conversion therapy Bill, trust is at an all-time low. Is the Bill on target to come before the House in this Session? If so, will the Minister outline the details of pre-legislative scrutiny and what involvement there will be from the LGBT+ community?

**Olivia Bailey:** I recognise the significant anxiety felt by many trans people at the moment, and I want to be clear, as the Supreme Court was, that protections for trans people are enshrined in law. Trans people deserve to live their lives with dignity and respect, and without shame. We are committed to delivering the trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, per the King's Speech, as soon as possible, alongside strengthening LGBT hate crime laws and improving trans healthcare.

#### "Break Down Barriers to Opportunity" Mission

2. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote equality as part of the Government mission entitled "Break Down Barriers to Opportunity". [906819]

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson):** Background should never be a barrier to getting on. That is why we are expanding Best Start family hubs, rolling out free breakfast clubs, expanding childcare and delivering on our moral mission to tackle child poverty by scrapping the two-child limit, creating a fairer Britain where every child has the opportunity to succeed.

**Rachel Hopkins:** Last week, I met the 93% Club to hear more about its vital work to address the impact of social class on young people's career and life chances. I welcome our Labour Government's steps to widen opportunities for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, such as the match funding for criminal barrister pupillages. What other action is this Labour Government taking to level the playing field, so that

young people in Luton South and South Bedfordshire, and across the country, can access opportunities, regardless of their background?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has long campaigned on these issues. The central driving mission of this Labour Government is to ensure that background is no barrier to success. That is why we are expanding free school meals, lifting the two-child benefit limit, introducing a new youth guarantee and bringing in maintenance grants for disadvantaged students. Of course, we are also rolling out free breakfast clubs, and it was brilliant to visit Denbigh primary school with her to see one open.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Earlier this year, I attended an amazing event at the Dorset Museum called “In My Shoes” for care-experienced young people, who explained the importance of making care experience a protected characteristic, as we have done in many councils, including mine in Mid Dorset and North Poole. Will the Minister take the same step with Cabinet colleagues, and consider making care experience a protected characteristic?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Lady raises an important issue, and we are doing lots of work across Government to make sure we have better outcomes for care-experienced young people, who are sadly more likely than other young people to experience mental health difficulties or even end up in prison. I lead that work together with the Deputy Prime Minister to make sure that the voices of care leavers are heard. It is why, for example, with the introduction of new targeted maintenance grants and the wider reforms that we are bringing to the higher education system, we are working right across Government to make sure that all Departments are pulling together.

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

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): The founders of the Cambridge University Society of Women—Maeve, Serena and Thea—are in the Gallery today. They are backing free speech in safe women-only spaces and discussing women’s concerns such as pornography, female genital mutilation and misogyny. Would the Minister agree that, if the Labour Government are to achieve their said mission of breaking down barriers to opportunity, it should never be controversial for a university society to champion women’s rights?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I have long campaigned for and supported women’s rights when it comes to the ability of women to meet together to discuss the issues that matter to them, and also to have safe spaces for women, including around domestic violence. I used to run a women’s refuge, and I know how important it is that women have safety and security, and are able to heal from trauma. However, I would say to the hon. Lady that we are having to address major challenges when it comes to violence against women and girls. The Conservatives’ record on this is shameful: we saw perpetrators let off, crimes not go punished and, in particular, rape all but decriminalised under her Government.

### Transgender People: Safe Spaces

3. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to ensure the provision of safe spaces for transgender people in the context of the draft code of practice issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. [906820]

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson):** It is important that everyone, including trans people, can access services that meet their needs, and I take that seriously. We are absolutely committed to upholding the protections in the Equality Act 2010 that allow trans people to live free from discrimination and harassment. We are carefully considering the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s draft updated code of practice and ensuring that the proper processes are followed.

**Jayne Kirkham:** I thank the Minister for that answer. I have very vulnerable constituents who have raised concerns about the draft EHRC guidance on transgender people. Many are scared and fear rising transphobia and discrimination. What steps is she taking to ensure that we protect the rights and dignity of everyone in society, and support the groups that work with those vulnerable trans people?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am deeply sorry to hear about my hon. Friend’s constituents. On the wider issue she raises, it is of course vital that everyone, including trans people, can live free from harassment and discrimination, and can access appropriate services. That is why we are carefully considering the EHRC’s draft updated code and making sure the proper processes are followed. Of course, the Equality Act upholds safeguards for trans people, and we are committed to it.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I appreciate the Minister’s clarification, but with organisations such as Girlguiding UK and the Women’s Institute saying that they have been forced to exclude the trans community against their will, how soon can we expect the guidance that the Secretary of State says is being considered?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I have said many times in this House, I welcome the clarity of the Supreme Court ruling, and providers should follow it. The EHRC has given me a draft code of practice. We are working through it—it is a lengthy document—and we will take this further as soon as we can.

### Tackling Violence against Women and Girls

4. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [906821]

8. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [906826]

11. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for the Home Department to help tackle violence against women and girls. [906829]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones):** Our work to halve violence against women and girls in a decade started the day we entered government. We have already announced a series of cross-Government measures to tackle these crimes, including launching our domestic abuse protection orders, which have protected over 1,000 victims of domestic abuse since last November. Our transformative cross-Government approach will be underpinned by a new strategy, which we will publish as soon as possible.

**Mohammad Yasin:** Bedfordshire's police and crime commissioner is working hard to deliver the Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls, tackling complex domestic abuse cases and driving a 250% increase in Clare's law disclosures. Yet women and girls face serious online harms, including violent pornography, highlighted by Baroness Bertin and Ofcom. Given the link between online misogyny and real-world violence, what action will the Government take to ensure tech companies properly protect women and girls from serious online harms?

**Alex Davies-Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for that really important question. Making the online environment a safer place for women and girls is a priority for this Government. It is this Government who are outlawing depictions of strangulation in pornography. It is this Government who are taking action to tackle violence against women and girls in all places. The Online Safety Act 2023 placed a requirement on tech platforms to proactively tackle the most harmful illegal content, much of which disproportionately affects women and girls, including harassment and intimate image abuse. Ofcom recently published guidance outlining further steps that services can take to make platforms safer for women and girls, but we are also developing a wider strategy to tackle this issue further.

**Jessica Toale:** Shut It Down is an organisation set up by two teachers at Glenmoor and Winton Academies in my constituency. It aims to prepare teachers for tough conversations and work with male pupils to tackle misogyny, and to promote positive masculinity and healthy relationships. What more can the Minister and her Department do to support such projects, and to tackle the culture of violence against women and girls at the earliest possible stages?

**Alex Davies-Jones:** Shut It Down and organisations like it are a brilliant tool. Everyone should feel safe and valued in school. We want our schools to counter misogynistic views by teaching boys about respect, empathy and equality. We will support teachers on how to deliver the revised statutory guidance on relationships, sex and health education, which strengthens consent on healthy relationships, with free resources available. We will be piloting a teacher training grant in 2026.

**Sarah Olney:** Today marks the final day of the UN's 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, which focused primarily on ending digital violence against women and girls. The domestic abuse charity Refuge has experienced a 62% increase in referrals of technologically facilitated abuse from last year. That abuse can take the form of stalking via tracking devices, non-consensual sharing of intimate images and recording devices being

used by abusers to monitor victims. Will the Minister confirm what steps she is taking with the Home Secretary to help tackle violence against women and girls, with specific reference to technologically facilitated abuse?

**Alex Davies-Jones:** The hon. Lady is right, and Refuge does brilliant work to support victims of tech-based abuse. I have been to its offices and seen its team working really hard on this issue. The Government are determined to have a cross-Government approach, and I am working very closely with the Home Office and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to see how we can get to grips with the issue. We will be publishing our cross-Government VAWG strategy imminently and there will be a specific reference to tech abuse in that strategy.

**Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con):** The Government's dithering on grooming gangs has gone on for so long that it is now unlikely that any report into what has happened will be published before the next general election. Does the Minister think that is acceptable, and will she commit to publishing interim findings before the next general election?

**Alex Davies-Jones:** The grooming gangs scandal was one of the darkest moments in this country's history, with vulnerable young people being failed time and time again. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I are determined to finally get victims and survivors the answers they need. It was this Prime Minister who brought the first ever major prosecution on the Asian grooming gangs, it was this Government who implemented the statutory inquiry recommendations, and it is this Government who have issued a national inquiry. We will get on with supporting victims and girls.

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

**Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD):** I am sure the whole House agrees that women's safety is of paramount importance. In my constituency, the city council has helped to develop a women's safety charter, with local premises pledging their commitment to a range of training for staff to consider and prioritise women's safety as standard. The evidence shows that, overwhelmingly, perpetrators of violence against women and girls are not strangers, as some may have us believe, but men already known to their victims. Does the Minister agree with me that women's safety will be addressed best not through stoking division and fear, but instead supporting and funding initiatives such as Chelmsford city council's, where the real work to protect women and girls is done?

**Alex Davies-Jones:** I totally agree with the hon. Lady, and I commend Chelmsford city council's work. If we are really going to halve the level of violence against women and girls over the course of a decade, it will not just be for Departments and Whitehall to tackle; it needs everyone across the country to take action. Local initiatives such as the one in Chelmsford do great work, and I encourage all local councils and local businesses to get involved to change the culture and really drive forward what we need to do to tackle this abuse.

### Unfair Dismissal: Protected Characteristics

5. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If she will monitor the protected characteristics of people judged to have been unfairly dismissed in the first six months of employment. [906822]

**The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra):** Data about tribunal cases will continue to be collected in the usual way. We know that disabled people are more likely to be impacted by unfair dismissals. Employees already have day one protections against discrimination, and recent developments in the Employment Rights Bill do not change that protection. This Government are absolutely committed to supporting disabled people to thrive at work, including by introducing disability pay gap reporting and stronger flexible working rights.

**Rachael Maskell:** We know that workers are often unfairly dismissed before the two-year threshold despite the application of the Equality Act 2010. That threshold was one year under the previous Labour Government; we are reducing it again down to six months. However, there is still a risk of disabled workers, ethnic minority workers and young workers being unfairly dismissed. Will the Government monitor the data about workers who have been unfairly dismissed in the first six months to ensure that their protected characteristics are not a feature of their dismissal?

**Seema Malhotra:** I thank my hon. Friend for her tireless campaigning on this important issue. It is right that we ensure that disabled people are protected at work. She may also wish to approach the Ministry of Justice, as the Department that collects data on protected characteristics across employment tribunals.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that answer. When ladies are dismissed, many feel they have been dismissed unfairly, and that men would not find themselves in that position. It is important that ladies feel they are getting equal opportunities and fairness under the law. How can the Minister ensure that ladies get those same opportunities and fairness? The present system seems unfair to them.

**Seema Malhotra:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: everybody should feel able to work without fear of discrimination. He is right that we must make sure—and we do make sure—that the law protects all.

### Women's Economic Empowerment

6. **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support women's economic empowerment. [906823]

13. **Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support women's economic empowerment. [906831]

**The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra):** Gender equality is not just the right thing to do; it is imperative to unlock growth, as a 5% increase in female employment could boost the economy by up to £125 billion every year. That is why we are backing women in work and those starting businesses by supporting the investing

in women code, expanding access to flexible working, funding childcare for working families and ensuring that employers have a plan to reduce their gender pay gap.

**Dr Sullivan:** In Gravesham, we have some fantastic small businesses led by women across a diverse sector of businesses, such as House of Leyla, Nell's Café, Maucare Services, Embridge Consulting, Ms Earlyn's and For Girllys. Will the Minister recognise the importance of women-led businesses to the local economy and economic empowerment and set out how this Government will support women leaders to thrive?

**Seema Malhotra:** I am happy to join my hon. Friend in recognising the fantastic women-led businesses in Gravesham and the impact that women-led businesses have on our communities and our economy. The Department for Business and Trade's venture capital unit has recently launched its second female founder cohort, and Government-backed initiatives such as the Women's Business Council, FTSE Women Leaders and the Invest in Women taskforce—whose first anniversary I was proud to join the Chancellor in marking yesterday—are making a difference to ensure that Britain is the best place for women to start or grow their businesses.

**Mike Reader:** Danielle Stone, Northamptonshire's brilliant police, fire and crime commissioner, has just launched the women's charter, which brings together employers, community groups and the public sector to create safer workspaces for women across my constituency. Will the Minister join me in commending Danielle's work and set out what the Government can do to encourage more partnerships like this across the UK?

**Seema Malhotra:** I thank my hon. Friend for sharing that work on the Northamptonshire women's charter and for his commitment to tackling violence against women and girls. All employers have a duty to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace, and we are further strengthening that duty through the Employment Rights Bill. However, statutory compliance on its own is not enough, which is why we are engaging businesses, trade unions and civil society on improving workplace culture. Local initiatives like the Northamptonshire charter are exactly the kind of partnership we want to see.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Minister not agree that women would be more empowered in the workplace and on the sports field if their changing spaces and toilets were not invaded by biological males?

**Seema Malhotra:** The hon. Lady will be aware of the Supreme Court judgment, which gave clarity on this issue. We expect that all providers will follow that ruling.

**Alex Easton** (North Down) (Ind): Has the Minister considered using all the Government's levers in female-dominated low-paid sectors, including uprating the minimum wage and strengthening fair work standards in social care, early years and the cleaning industry?

**Seema Malhotra:** The hon. Member will be aware of the work we are doing to ensure that we support women in all the ways we can.

### Topical Questions

T1. [906833] **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson):** This Government are reinforcing our commitment to championing the rights of disabled people. This month we celebrate Disability History Month, and we marked the International Day of Persons with Disabilities last week. This year also marks the 30th anniversary of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. We will continue our work to boost opportunities for disabled people, including by developing our plan for disability, which will outline our priorities for removing barriers faced by disabled people.

**Manuela Perteghella:** Women in rural areas often have to travel long distances to reach a refuge, police station or basic support services. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact that travelling those long distances has on the safety of victims of domestic abuse, and what action is being taken to close the rural support gap?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I do recognise that challenge. That is why in developing our violence against women and girls strategy we heard from victims in rural areas to understand what more is needed to ensure that they can access the services and support that they need.

T3. [906835] **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Western Isles Women's Aid in my constituency helped 180 women last year. The refuge is working at capacity, yet its funding is uncertain. That is why my fundraiser on Friday will seek to raise funds for the organisations. More than 1,800 women reported domestic abuse in the highlands 10 years ago; last year the figure was closer to 2,800. Does the Secretary of State agree that in rural and island communities it takes a lot of courage for women to report domestic abuse, yet we can see from the figures that domestic abuse is no less prevalent?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I do agree. It takes enormous courage to come forward, as women in rural communities often experience additional barriers. I commend my hon. Friend for his fundraising efforts. We are investing more in support services for victims, and my hon. Friend will see when we publish our violence against women and girls strategy that we have heard directly from those living in rural communities to understand what more is needed to put in place the support that they require.

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

**Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): Jennifer Melle, a black nurse with a faultless record, was racially abused by a convicted paedophile for correctly referring to his biological sex in a medical context. She was called the N-word multiple times in her workplace, yet she was the one who was punished by her NHS trust and the Nursing and Midwifery Council. She is still suspended from the job she loves, 18 months later. Does the Secretary of State agree that the dedicated nurses who

are being punished for asserting that biological sex is real are facing a gross injustice, and will she meet Jennifer to hear her story?

**Bridget Phillipson:** No one should face racist abuse or violence in any workplace, and that includes the NHS. As we have also seen with the Sandie Peggie case, coming to decisions on these cases in a timely manner is incredibly important. I hope that the matter the right hon. Lady refers to can be resolved as swiftly as possible. I would, of course, be happy to meet Jennifer to hear her experience.

**Claire Coutinho:** I appreciate the Secretary of State's willingness to meet Jennifer.

Does the Secretary of State believe that an eight-year-old child with autism can consent to a medical pathway that will leave them infertile and without sexual function for the rest of their life? If not, will she personally tell the Health Secretary to stop this puberty blocker experiment, which will biologically castrate children?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are implementing all the recommendations of the Cass review. Those included establishing a clinical trial, through the PATHWAYS—Puberty Suppression and Transitional Healthcare with Adaptive Youth Services—trial research protocol, which has undergone a thorough, independent review and received all regulatory and ethical approvals. That was a recommendation that Baroness Cass brought forward along with many others, and it is one that we are taking forward.

T5. [906837] **Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): There is a massive problem with childcare for mothers doing PhDs. Even if they are fully funded for their university research, essentially by the Government, they will not be eligible for free childcare hours and that affects both parents. The average PhD stipend is just £15,000 a year, but the average nursery place is £12,500 a year. Will the Minister look into that?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am happy to discuss that further with my hon. Friend. We are committed to reviewing childcare support and making sure that it is accessible and simple for families. PhD students are not eligible for some elements of support, but depending on income they may be eligible for certain hours. Student parents are eligible for the universal 15 hours of early free childcare, which is also available for all three and four-year-olds, regardless of family circumstances.

### PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*  
**Engagements**

Q1. [906841] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 10 December.

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** The whole House will join me in sending our deepest sympathy and condolences to the family and loved ones of Lance Corporal George Hooley of the Parachute Regiment, who died yesterday in Ukraine. Lance Corporal Hooley was injured in a tragic accident, away from the frontlines,

while observing Ukrainian forces testing a new defensive capability. His life was full of courage and determination. He served our country with honour and distinction around the world in the cause of freedom and democracy, including as part of the small number of British personnel in Ukraine. I place his name on record today to express our gratitude and respect, and to affirm that his service will never be forgotten. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

On Monday, I hosted President Zelensky, President Macron and Chancellor Merz in Downing Street. We must redouble our efforts. The UK, Europe and our allies will stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine, stand up to Putin's aggression and work to deliver a just and lasting peace.

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

**Sarah Olney:** A couple in my constituency fled persecution from the Egyptian authorities, who accused them of being traitors and terrorists due to their work as professional journalists. They gained refugee status here in 2021 and are now three months away from being eligible for indefinite leave to remain. The UK is their home, but their stability and family life are being threatened by changes in Government policy. I am concerned that the Government have lost sight of the real-life impact that those changes will have on working families living here legally. With details of transitional arrangements still under consultation, will the Prime Minister provide clarity regarding the transitional support available to families already on the pathway to indefinite leave to remain?

**The Prime Minister:** This country will always be compassionate in relation to refugees and comply with our full obligations under the various conventions. It is important that we address some of the challenges that we face at the moment, but we must not lose sight that we have always been a compassionate country that welcomes refugees to our shores.

**Q3. [906843] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** While the last Government were indifferent to child poverty, this Government's driving mission must be to eradicate child poverty, and the strategy is a first step on that path. Over the first 1,001 critical days in pregnancy and early years, poverty contributes to malnourished babies, developmental delay, hypothermia and poor life outcomes. That is unacceptable. Will the Prime Minister lift pregnant women and babies in York and across the country out of poverty in this Parliament and ensure that we relieve poverty over the first 1,001 critical days?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. I am proud that babies born today will have a better start in life thanks to our decisions. I am particularly concerned by maternity services. That is why we have commissioned a review so every mother is heard and gets proper care at what should be a special time. Currently, too many are failed. We are funding healthy babies services in 75 of the most deprived areas and we have taken action to save parents up to £500 a year on infant formula. It is a moral mission of this Government to lift children out of poverty and we intend to do so. The Leader of the Opposition thinks

that maternity pay is "excessive" and would go back to the payment that put hundreds of thousands of children into poverty.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con):** I echo the sentiments of the Prime Minister: the thoughts of the whole House will rightly be with the family of Lance Corporal Hooley, who tragically died supporting Ukraine in its fight for freedom. Can the right hon. Gentleman tell the House why his own MPs are describing him as a "caretaker Prime Minister"?

**The Prime Minister:** My own MPs are very proud: we have just passed a Budget that protected our public services and our NHS—no austerity, which brought our NHS to the ground; we have created the conditions for economic stability with the headroom we need; and we are concentrating on the single most important issue for families up and down the country, which is the cost of living, by taking £150 off their energy bills. That is in addition to the £150 for the 6 million poorest households. We are concentrating on what matters to the country. The right hon. Lady is trying to save her job.

**Mrs Badenoch:** Let me answer the question for the Prime Minister. He is being called a caretaker because everyone can see that he has lost control of his party, and this lot on the Government Front Bench are all so busy trying to replace him—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The same people are making the same noises they made last week. I said last week that it was not the right time for that, so if I were them I would not do the same this week. Please, let's not carry on in the way we did last week.

**Mrs Badenoch:** Labour Members can make as much noise as they like. We all know that this lot are so busy trying to replace the Prime Minister that they have taken their eyes off the ball. Let us start—[*Interruption.*] Wait for it, wait for it! Let us start with the Energy Secretary, who wants to recycle himself as leader. He said he would cut families' energy bills by £300. Can the Prime Minister tell the House: how much have energy bills fallen by since the election?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very pleased to say that we are taking £150 off energy bills. I can also tell the right hon. Lady that that is on top of the £150 we took off last year for the 3 million poorest families and have now taken off for the 6 million poorest families. She talks about leaving, but the problem is that last week, three ex—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Mayhew! I have told Labour Members, and I will now tell Conservative Members. We do not need the pantomime auditions any more, please.

**The Prime Minister:** Last week I pointed out that three of the right hon. Lady's ex-MPs had gone to Reform. That included the former deputy chairman, Jonathan Gullis. He liked to think of himself as a straight talker. He said that the Conservative party was finished and that it had "lost the trust of the British people."

In total, 21 ex-Tory MPs have now left for Reform. The real question is: who is next? We can all see the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), twitching after his “come and get me” plea from the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). We need no lessons from them.

**Mrs Badenoch:** I asked the Prime Minister about energy bills. You could power the national grid on all that hot air. He promised to cut energy bills by £300. Energy bills have risen by £187.

Let’s look at someone else who is making a mess; let’s look at the Education Secretary—ah, there she is. Labour pledged to recruit 6,500 more teachers. Can the Prime Minister tell the House: how many extra teachers are there since she became Education Secretary?

**The Prime Minister:** More than when the Conservatives left office, and I am very proud to say so. We are on an upward trajectory—*[Interruption.]* They left our health service on its knees. They left our schools in a mess. They left our economy absolutely broken. They should be utterly ashamed of their record in service.

**Mrs Badenoch:** Wrong! There are now 400 fewer teachers since the Education Secretary came into office—*[Interruption.]* She is shaking her head, but it is on the Department for Education website. Does she not check it once in a while? I can understand why the right hon. Lady is angry; we are all angry at the mess she is making.

The Prime Minister does not know what is going on in energy. He does not know what is going on in education. Does he know anything about what is going on in the Home Office? Last year, the Prime Minister promised to recruit 13,000 more police officers. How is that going?

**The Prime Minister:** There will be 3,000 more by the end of March, and we are rising on police numbers. The Conservatives left the Home Office—the criminal justice system is utterly broken; Sir Brian Leveson has said that. They lost control of our borders. They lost control of every single Department.

The right hon. Lady has obviously spent the morning rehearsing for “The Liz Truss Show”. She is probably going to be the guest star next week, both of them talking about how Liz Truss was “100% right”. Liz Truss said that the Conservatives need to take—*[Interruption.]* They do not want to hear it! She said that the Conservatives need to take responsibility for their 14 years of failure. That was Liz Truss, their former leader, so perhaps the Leader of the Opposition will heed that, get up and say sorry.

**Mrs Badenoch:** Wrong again. I asked the Prime Minister how many police officers; there are now 1,300 fewer officers than at the election. I do not know whether the Home Secretary wants the Prime Minister’s job, but I read that she is having conversations with Tony Blair, because he has already given up on the Prime Minister.

Why don’t we talk about the Health Secretary? Let’s see how he is doing. We know he definitely wants the Prime Minister’s job. He said he would end the doctors’

strikes, so can the Prime Minister tell the House how many appointments have been lost to strike action since last July?

**The Prime Minister:** The Conservatives left the NHS in an absolute mess, with the highest waiting lists on record and the lowest confidence in the NHS ever. The Health Secretary said he would do 2 million extra appointments. He has not done 2 million or 3 million or 4 million—he has done 5 million extra appointments. That is because we invested in the NHS. What did they do? Having broken it, they voted against that investment. They should hang their heads in shame.

**Mrs Badenoch:** I asked the Prime Minister how many appointments have been lost to strike action. He does not know. Let me tell him. We have lost 93,000 appointments to strikes since the Health Secretary gave doctors a massive pay rise. *[Interruption.]* It is the truth; I know Labour MPs would not know the truth if it punched them in the face, but I am telling them the truth. It is no wonder that we read this morning that the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), has said that she would rather stick pins in her eyes than be on the Health Secretary’s golden ticket.

The Prime Minister congratulates himself on 5 million extra appointments. *[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]* Yeah, yeah: in our last year in office, we delivered 6.5 million extra appointments. Under Labour, everything is getting worse: jobs, bills, police numbers, teacher numbers. Everything is getting worse. The Cabinet should be doing their own jobs. What are they doing? They are trying to compete for the caretaker’s job. The only person who does not want the Prime Minister’s job is the Chancellor—she is just trying to cling on to her own. Is it not time that the Prime Minister admits that Labour isn’t working?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Lady is living proof that you can say whatever you like when nobody is listening to anything you have to say. There is absolutely no substance. She has no credibility on the economy. She still believes that Liz Truss was “100% right”. She wants to go back to austerity with £47 billion of cuts. She thinks the minimum wage should be frozen and that it is too high. She has no credibility on foreign policy. She complains about trade deals that she tried to get and we got. She says that we should stay at home and not attend NATO or the G7. On issue after issue, she is clinging on to Reform. That is not leadership; it is weakness. No wonder so many are leaving her party—they know that there is absolutely no reason to stay.

**Q4. [906844] Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab):** Thousands of families are moving into new estates only to discover that basic infrastructure—roads, drains and sewers—remain in limbo, unadopted by public authorities. In Mid Cheshire alone, 4,700 households—more than 12% of all properties in the constituency—face that uncertainty, with no guarantee on maintenance, safety and future costs, often years after developers have walked away. Can the Prime Minister say what steps he will take to make adoption timely and enforceable, so that homeowners are not left carrying the burden of unfinished infrastructure?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this serious issue for his constituents and for over 1.7 million homeowners across the country who are left at the mercy of unfair costs and poor management. I can confirm that we are consulting on reforming the system to reduce private management of these estates and to protect more homeowners from unfair charges. That is a vital part of our leasehold reforms to protect homeowners from high costs and ensure that everyone has the amenities they need.

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

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I join the Prime Minister in offering our condolences to the family and friends of Lance Corporal George Hooley, who died on duty in Ukraine. Our thoughts and prayers are with them.

I congratulate Glastonbury's Lando Norris on becoming the 11th British driver to win the Formula 1 world championship, and everyone at McLaren in Woking who powered him to the title.

President Trump's new national security strategy is a deeply alarming document. Quite apart from the irony of President Trump accusing others of trampling on basic principles of democracy, it repeats far-right tropes of "civilizational erasure" and threatens that the US Government will cultivate resistance in Europe. No wonder Vladimir Putin has welcomed the strategy. Will the Prime Minister pick up the phone and make it clear to President Trump that any attempts to interfere with our democracy are totally unacceptable?

**The Prime Minister:** I join the right hon. Member in congratulating Lando on his incredible win. I went down to Woking on Monday to see some of the team at McLaren, and they were all wearing the pride that that brought with it.

On the question of Europe and President Trump's comments, what I see is a strong Europe united behind Ukraine and united behind our long-standing values of freedom and democracy, and I will always stand up for those values and freedoms.

**Ed Davey:** I did not hear about standing up to President Trump. If we are going to stand up to President Trump, we do need to strengthen our ties with Europe, not just on defence, but on the economy. The truth is that this Government will not succeed unless they get our economy growing strongly again, and the best way to do that is a customs union with Europe. The Prime Minister's chief economic adviser knows it, the Deputy Prime Minister knows it, and yesterday the Labour Chair of the Treasury Committee showed that she knows it too when she backed our Bill. Does the Prime Minister fear that if he keeps opposing a customs union, in 12 months' time he will not be standing there?

**The Prime Minister:** We have got a close relationship with the EU through our reset earlier this year, and yes, I do want a closer relationship than the one we have at the moment—we are moving towards that. We do have manifesto commitments on issues such as the single market, the customs union and freedom of movement. But I gently point this out: having now done significant trade deals with other countries, including the US and

India, which are hugely important to the JLR workforce and on pharma, it is not now sensible to unravel what is effectively the best deal with the US that any country has got.

Q5. [906845] **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): Working in the NHS, I saw the consequences of Tory under-investment in our health service. I welcome the progress under this Labour Government: falling waiting lists, higher patient satisfaction with general practice and the roll-out of neighbourhood health centres announced in the Budget. I thank the frontline staff, including in mental health and community services, for all their hard work. I am especially grateful to all the staff at the William Harvey hospital in Ashford who turned up to work during the last British Medical Association-led resident doctors' strike and ensured that so many planned appointments went ahead. With rising hospital admissions because of flu and increased demand on A&E services, does the Prime Minister agree that the BMA should call off its next planned strike and instead work with the Government to find a solution?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is right. Waiting lists are falling, with over 5 million extra appointments; more people are being seen within 18 weeks; and we have hired 2,600 new GPs. That is real progress that has been made thanks to the hard work of NHS staff, backed by our record investment. I do think the strikes are unjustified, and they threaten that hard-won progress. The focus should always be on patients.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Prime Minister just said that he wanted a closer relationship with Europe, but he then referenced the Labour party manifesto. Wales has been hit hardest by Brexit—exports are down by a third. When will he admit that the only solution to the chaos imposed by Brexit is to rejoin the customs union and the single market, or is he too afraid of what his party might say?

**The Prime Minister:** I went to Solihull to see the Jaguar Land Rover workforce before we got the deal with President Trump. They were worried sick that they were going to lose their jobs—that would be a loss for them, their families and their communities. I took the call from President Trump, when we got the deal, in Solihull at JLR, so that the first people I could tell were the workforce, who knew very well that it meant their jobs were safeguarded. We have also just done a deal on pharma, which is the first of its kind, and the best of its kind, in the world. It is not sensible or fair to the JLR workforce, or to the pharma sector, to say that, having achieved those things now, we should unravel them through discussion of a customs union. I just do not think that is a sensible way to take our country forward.

Q8. [906849] **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Of the almost 1 million young people not in education, employment or training, hundreds of thousands are disconnected from the system entirely. Youth workers have a unique ability to bridge young people into support. I would not be stood here today if I had not been supported by a youth worker called Russell when I dropped out of school. Will the Prime Minister use the national youth strategy to deliver a shared

long-term vision for young people's outcomes, with good work as a central pillar, and youth workers and trusted adults at its heart?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Conservatives presided over a lost decade for our young people. I am determined to support every young person to reach their potential. That is why we are delivering the first national youth strategy for 15 years: to transform youth services, backed by over £500 million. That means more youth workers, more youth centres and a network of 50 Young Futures hubs, on top of our youth job guarantee and our plan to create 50,000 more apprenticeships. We are building a Britain for the next generation.

**Q2. [906842] Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con):** Over the coming weeks, millions of people from across the country will be visiting their local church. Churches are custodians of our history and they do enormous good, but in January the Government announced a £19 million cut to the listed places of worship grant, and put a cap on repair costs. The cut put thousands of local churches at risk. If we lose our churches, we lose the very soul and essence of our communities. There are 10 at-risk churches in the Prime Minister's constituency. As we go into Christmas, will he do the right thing and reconsider that policy so that we can save our churches?

**The Prime Minister:** We do support our churches and the work that those in our churches do, particularly in the lead-up to Christmas. I have a reception for them in Downing Street this afternoon.

**Q9. [906850] Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab):** Before May's election, Reform in Kent promised that it would improve services and cut taxes. Instead, vital services for older people and those with mental health conditions, provided by great organisations such as Imago and Involve Kent, are to be cut, and taxes are going up. Does the Prime Minister agree with me on two things: that given the additional money provided to the county through the fair funding review, it is beyond belief that Kent is cutting services on which vulnerable people rely, and that Reform's so-called DOGE unit, which we were told would eliminate waste, actually stands for "deluded, overconfident, gormless and embarrassing"?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend sums up very well how his community has been utterly let down by Reform. While the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is making excuses about his behaviour at school, look at what his party is doing across the country. There is chaos in Kent. Reform's mayoral candidate in Hampshire says that the Deputy Prime Minister, a black British man born in this country, should go back to the Caribbean. In Staffordshire, Reform's leader has been exposed as a white supremacist. That is not a coincidence, because chaos and division are the life's work of the hon. Member for Clacton.

**Q6. [906847] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** In Bath, parents of children with special educational needs, which are often very complex, are crying out for special school places. Funding to build a brand new special school at the Culverhay site in Bath was secured, but the Government have frozen the funding for almost 18 months without

any explanation, leaving many families in the lurch. How much longer do families and children with special educational needs have to wait for this vital new school?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for raising that. We are working closely with local authorities on plans for special and alternative provision free schools. We are keen to progress that, and I will ensure that Ministers update her on the case she raises. We are determined to fix the SEND system that fails parents and fails children, and that is why we have launched a national conversation to put families at the heart of lasting reform. We have already put money into extra new places, with language support and Best Start family hubs being rolled out across every area from April.

**Q10. [906851] Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op):** In Blackburn in West Lothian, St Kentigern's academy was part demolished due to reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, and it is being rebuilt at a cost of £35 million. West Lothian council found £20 million from its own stretched budget, but despite repeated pleas to the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, who called it a most deserving case, funding has not been delivered. Will the Prime Minister back my call for the Scottish Government to urgently fund the £15 million shortfall, and raise it with the First Minister in their next meeting?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend, who has fought for her constituents on this issue for years. Meanwhile, decades of SNP cuts and broken promises have left schools crumbling. What a contrast: by the end of this Parliament, every school in England will be either RAAC free or rebuilt entirely. We delivered the largest settlement for the Scottish Government in the history of devolution, so the question for SNP is: after decades of decline, what is their excuse?

**Q7. [906848] Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con):** Mr Speaker, I feel for the Prime Minister. It must be tough, wherever he goes in the UK, because of his policies: a pub, higher taxes; a restaurant, higher taxes; a café, higher taxes; a farm, higher taxes; a GP, higher taxes; a care home, higher taxes; a hospice, higher taxes. Is that the reason the Prime Minister chooses to spend so much time out of this country?

**The Prime Minister:** What a load of nonsense. We are at a critical stage of progress in Ukraine, which will affect Ukraine's sovereignty, the whole of Europe and the values that we hold dear. We are one of the leading countries seeking to strengthen NATO at a vital time for defence and security in Europe; we have secured trade deals that the Conservatives tried for years to achieve but never did, because of our international engagement; and we have got better relations with the EU, all of which is good for our country. Ridiculous question!

**Q11. [906852] Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab):** Last month, the video games company Rockstar in my constituency fired 31 employees without providing evidence or union representation. The IWGB union alleges union busting. When I met Rockstar, it failed to reassure me that it is following employment law, and I share the concerns about union busting.

Given that this Government are responsible for the biggest increase in workers' rights in a generation, does the Prime Minister agree that all companies, regardless of profit size, must follow UK employment law, and all workers have the right to join a union?

**The Prime Minister:** That is a deeply concerning case. Every worker has the right to join a trade union, and we are determined to strengthen workers' rights and ensure that people do not face unfair consequences for being part of a union. Ministers will look into the particular case that my hon. Friend raises and keep him updated.

Q12. [906853] **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Digital ID is intrusive and fundamentally un-British. The Government have no mandate for it, and no sensible person believes that it will tackle illegal immigration or illegal working. It is an attack on our open society and a staggering waste of taxpayers' money, isn't it?

**The Prime Minister:** Digital ID has huge benefits, as many countries in Europe are already demonstrating. Where the Conservatives failed on our borders, we are taking control of our borders, and I am proud that we are doing so.

Q13. [906854] **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): The Prime Minister will know that special educational needs and disabilities provision is in crisis across the country, but it is in particular crisis in Suffolk, where the county council is in special measures for its failings. I am delighted that the Government have listened to one of my asks, which is to have a national conversation about SEND, so that parents, young people and their advocates can have their voices heard. Will the Prime Minister back my calls to ensure that we deliver funding for the former Seckford Education Trust school in Saxmundham, which closed its doors for the last time in 2024?

**The Prime Minister:** I know that my hon. Friend is a dedicated campaigner on this issue and I will ensure that Ministers update her on the latest progress in her constituency. Our ambition is to ensure that all children with SEND have access to the right support. That is why we are working closely with local authorities to deliver places where they are needed most.

Q14. [906855] **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): This Government are always talking about the fair choices that they have made, but is it a fair choice to balloon the benefits bill? Is it a fair choice to introduce an unfunded and unwanted digital ID that will cost the public billions of pounds? And is it a fair choice to increase taxes on working people when the promise was not to? The answer is no. Can I ask the Prime Minister to consider one final fair choice? Thinking about food security and avoiding devastation for families across the country, will his Government reverse the family farm tax?

**The Prime Minister:** Welfare ballooned on the Conservatives' watch. When the shadow Chancellor was responsible for welfare, it ballooned by £33 billion. They left a £22 billion black hole—the Office for Budget Responsibility reviewed it and added £16 billion to that—so we will take no lecture from the Conservatives on the economy.

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): There is no denying that this Government inherited a crisis in our criminal courts, with the number of cases waiting to be tried growing every single day. If the Justice Secretary's plan to do away with jury trials in some cases, although not all, is really about addressing the backlog and getting the position to something manageable, then why will there not be a sunset clause? Why has that been ruled out?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the crisis in our courts—[HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] I hear "yes" from the Opposition Benches. Sir Brian Leveson is one of our most respected senior judges. He did an independent report and made it clear that we risk "total collapse" of the criminal justice system without change—[*Interruption.*] The Conservatives are chuntering along, but they left a system near total collapse, where victims of sexual violence and rape wait years to get justice. That is not justice—that is victims failed. I know that my hon. Friend feels very strongly about this matter, and I can reassure him that juries will remain a cornerstone of our justice system for the most serious cases. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Robertson, I do not want shouting like that again. Do we understand each other?

**Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab) *indicated assent.*

## Points of Order

12.33 pm

**Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), has visited my constituency to make a political video for social media. He has undertaken videoed interviews with apparently no reference to the services available to tackle the issues that he is seeking to highlight. I cannot accept his attempt to use the communities in Westminster and the City as a political football. Since before I was elected, I have campaigned for more local police officers and specialist outreach workers to tackle the very specific issues that we are facing locally. Following my campaigning, the Government have invested an additional £12 million into Westminster and—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think we have got the message. You are absolutely right to raise the point of order, but you do not need to go into the full detail. The point of order is about somebody coming into another person's constituency and the answer is clear: whichever party a Member might represent, if visiting another constituency, they have to give notice to the Member of Parliament who represents that constituency. We have had it happen before and we do not need it. We are a quite a long way off a general election. I am disappointed. Every Member should always be informed of somebody coming into their constituency. Please respect each other.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not like doing this, but I have to. On behalf of several Members, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Justice last Wednesday in relation to the hunger strike taking place in our prisons by Palestine Action prisoners, some of whom have now been hospitalised. We wrote simply asking for a meeting with the Secretary of State, but we have not received any response. I informed his office yesterday that I would be raising a point of order. We gave it another day, but we still have not had a response to that letter. This is a matter of urgency, and I expect at least the courtesy of some response, even if the Secretary of State is not willing to meet us.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the right hon. Member for raising that point. I always expect Ministers to take seriously correspondence from Members, whichever side of the House they are on. This is totally unacceptable. I cannot make a meeting happen, but I do expect people's correspondence to be dealt with quickly and effectively. I hope those on the Treasury Bench will be listening very carefully and will make contact with the right hon. Member. As I said, this is not acceptable; I am getting more and more people complaining about ministerial correspondence—we have even heard of one case that took 12 months. It is not good enough. The ministerial teams need to get their act together and make sure that Members of Parliament, quite rightly, get a reply timely.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for what you just said in response to the point of order from the

right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). Is there any way you can ensure that a Minister comes to this House to give a statement about the hunger strikers in the prison? I visited one of them yesterday, and I am deeply concerned about what is going on in our prisons: people are being held for an inordinate length of time on remand, and their access to justice is being delayed.

**Mr Speaker:** I cannot guarantee that. I am not responsible for what goes on within this Chamber; I am here to keep good order. With another senior Member quite rightly raising a point of order on this issue, I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the message again. Who knows? It might be that there are different ways to ensure that the matter is brought to the attention of the Chamber. Both of you know how to do that, so I will leave it with you. Given the experience between you—I would hate to add up how many years—I think you know the answer to the question.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have looked through the agenda up until Christmas, and it appears that there is no opportunity for Members to question either the police settlement or the local government settlement. Normally there is a debate held about both of these matters, or at least a statement given on the Floor of the House, so that Members are able to ask questions on the settlements. I understand it seems to be the Government's intention to put out a written ministerial statement on the last day of Parliament and not to give us an opportunity to challenge. Local authorities are at the moment finalising their budgets for next year, so they need to know how much funding they are going to get from the Government. Could you use your good offices to encourage the Government to come forward with at least a statement?

**Mr Speaker:** Quite rightly, the point has been raised, and once again I expect those on the Treasury Bench to have taken it on board. As I said previously, there are other mechanisms that the hon. Member may wish to consider. I could see the shock and horror of the Opposition Chief Whip when the hon. Member made his point of order—I was absolutely overwhelmed by the shock! Allowing that to rest, I do take this matter seriously, and the House should hear that. A WMS is not the answer on matters so serious, and those on the Treasury Bench should have heard that point. We should not shy away from this House; in fact, we should always come to the House first—I cannot say it more than I do. Once again, I suggest that at some point the ministerial code needs to be changed if people are not going to take it seriously. We will leave it at that.

## BILL PRESENTED

### REINDEER (LICENSING FOR EXHIBITION) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Sarah Dyke presented a Bill to provide that, for the purposes of the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, domesticated reindeer are not wild animals; to make further provision about licensing in respect of the keeping or training of reindeer for exhibition; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January 2026, and to be printed (Bill 347).*

## Data Publication and Quality (Immigration, Nationality and Country of Birth)

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

12.39 pm

**Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the collection and publication of data on immigration status, nationality and country of birth of certain persons, including relating to users of certain public services, claimants of certain benefits, the prison population, and arrests; to require that such data is published at least once per calendar year; to require the Secretary of State to review the quality and consistency of any such data collected and published; and for connected purposes.

I firmly believe that for nearly three decades, migration to this country has been too high, and it remains so. Every election-winning manifesto since 1974 has promised to reduce migration, yet since 1997, with the unsurprising exception of 2020, net migration has run at more than 100,000 people per year. Like Governments before them, the last Government promised to reduce migration; as my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) has said, they failed to do so. To paraphrase my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), mass migration is the single biggest broken promise in British politics, and the single biggest reason that trust in our politics is in such short supply.

Whatever we believe, though, it is an objective fact that our national conversation about immigration is often hampered by shockingly poor data—when that data even exists at all. My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) has worked for years to highlight this problem. As the Migration Observatory, a group of academics at the University of Oxford, noted just last week, migration data is plagued by

“gaps and quality issues which reflect structural and long-term problems with data siloes, disorganised databases and failures to keep complete records”.

All in all, the Migration Observatory identified 10 areas of public policy that are being undermined by a lack of high-quality migration data.

All of this starts with the fundamental question: how many people are in this country, and who are they? The truth is that we do not know. Remarkably, the United Kingdom does not have a proper system of entry and exit checks; we do not record the number of people arriving in the country, or the number of people leaving it. The migration figures that are published every year are just best guesses. When people do arrive here, we do not have comprehensive data on exactly where they have come from, or where in the country they might be moving to. Our best guess comes once a decade, at the census, but given the scale and pace of migration since the last census in 2021, that information will now almost certainly be hopelessly out of date.

Recently, the Office for National Statistics issued new figures on net migration for 2024. Using those new methods, the ONS now thinks that emigration of British nationals had been underestimated by two thirds of a million people between 2021 and 2024. For years, policy in this country was made on the basis of the old guess, which showed British national emigration running at below average. The new figures invite serious questions

about why so many British nationals—the vast majority of them young—are leaving this country, yet for years the official data showed that there was no such problem, so the conversation in this place never proceeded beyond the level of anecdote.

When people do arrive here, we know far too little about them. We do not know the number of foreign criminals who have been awarded visas since 2021, or where they have come from. We do not have the full information on how many people move between the asylum system and the formal legal migration system. In the case of EU migrants, we do not know why these people are coming here, or how many of them already have EU settled status.

All of this concerns the flow of migrants coming to this country, not those who are already here. When it comes to assessing the contribution of migrants who are already here, our understanding is even worse. In 2020, data about income tax and national insurance contributions broken down by nationality was discontinued. We have no such data by visa type, and following the collapse of the labour force survey, we have little data on the earnings or employment rate of migrants by immigration status, visa type or nationality. We do not know the immigration status of benefits claimants for benefits other than universal credit, which makes up about half of our working-age benefit spend, and when it comes to universal credit, we do not have detailed nationality data on claimants. We do not know how much migrants are costing this country in legal aid or in translation services, and we do not know what proportion of eligible foreign nationals are receiving pension benefits. We do not know the total cost, in any given year, to the NHS or to state education of migrants, pre and post having been given indefinite leave to remain. We do not have full official figures on the total number of foreign nationals in social housing, or where those in social housing were born. Without data on what migrants are contributing to the public purse, and what they might be costing, we cannot possibly have a full and informed conversation about the relative impact of migration on the taxpayer, and we cannot, in turn, make fully informed decisions about who should come here, from where, and under what conditions.

Fiscal contributions are not the only important measure. When it comes to data on migrant crime, the picture is just as patchy, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) has repeatedly highlighted. While we do have figures, albeit outdated, on the prison population by nationality, we still do not have full official data on the number of people arrested by nationality, the immigration status of prisoners or the number of people by nationality sentenced, but not imprisoned. The indicative data that we do have about migrant crime has been obtained via freedom of information requests, and it is often incomplete or disputed. It is also hard to assess over time, because it is not released on a consistent basis. In the absence of any alternative, however, it is the basis on which we must conduct the debate. We have no information at all on the nationality or immigration status of those referred to Prevent, which is a glaring gap in our ability to combat extremism.

All this—everything I have said—relates only to the UK's legal population. We do not have, and have not had for some time, a credible estimate of the number of people who are in this country illegally. There has been

no official attempt to combine datasets that we could use—such as utility usage, health registrations, census data and grocery purchases—to establish the number, so we cannot know what pressure this might be putting on public services and infrastructure, and we cannot properly assess how much money needs to be invested in our Border Force and immigration enforcement.

We do not have any information about internal deportation targets in immigration enforcement and Border Force, or what proportion of those targets are being met. We do not know what happens to asylum seekers who have been refused asylum, but who have not been returned to their home country. We do not know how often, and in what context, human rights-based claims are made to thwart removal, and how often those claims are successful, particularly as we do not yet have access to the judgments of the first-tier immigration tribunal. How can we possibly have a well informed conversation about illegal migration without a full understanding of the facts?

Those of us who wish to end the era of mass migration are often the loudest voices calling for more data, yet those who believe that this period of mass migration has been a good thing for our country should be the biggest supporters of more comprehensive and accurate data on the impact of migration. We are often told, including in this House, that the British people have been misled, or misinformed, about the true impact of immigration on our country, and that mass migration has in fact been better for this country than many believe. If that is the case, let us see it in the data. If, as many Members of other parties claim, the majority of migrants are a net fiscal positive, let us see it in the data. If, in fact, migrants are no more likely to commit crime than British nationals, let us see it in the data. Based on the indicative data that we do have, I believe that to be exceedingly unlikely, but until we have access to the full facts, the conversation about migration in this place and across our country will necessarily fall short.

There is no good reason to oppose a better-informed national conversation around immigration. More data and evidence would allow us to make better decisions about who should be allowed to come to and stay in our country, and in what numbers. It would allow us to truthfully assess the impact of different migrant groups,

moving us on from generalisations about the whole of migration, towards a more productive conversation about the relative contributions of specific migrant groups by nationality and visa type. Most importantly, it would provide transparency for the British people and enable more detailed scrutiny of any Government's policy on migration.

In countries such as Denmark, where migrant contribution data is published regularly, the Government trust their citizens to consider the data, consider their policies and, in turn, to make up their own mind about whether they support the action being taken. After decades of broken promises, the very least the British people deserve is the right and ability to scrutinise, in full, the migration policy of their elected Government. I sincerely hope that Ministers in the Home Office and across Government will recognise that and work with the Office for National Statistics to produce a more comprehensive and accurate dataset in the years ahead.

Immigration policy cannot be set in isolation. The people living in this country are this country, so the flow of people coming here necessarily has an impact on every area of our lives. Governments do not exist independently of the nations that they govern, and nations do not exist independently of the people who constitute them. They are, wholly and entirely, a result of those people, their collective contributions and their collective failings. Immigration policy, therefore, is upstream of our public finances, the health of our public services, the cost of housing, the quality of our schools, the population of our prisons, the cohesion of our communities, and the strength of our democracy. The very least that we can do, when discussing an issue of such enormous importance, is ensure that public policy is properly informed by the full facts.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Katie Lam, Neil O'Brien, Chris Philp, Claire Coutinho, Matt Vickers, Sarah Bool, Lewis Cocking, Jack Rankin, Harriet Cross, Mr Peter Bedford, Mr Andrew Snowden and Bradley Thomas bring in the Bill.

Katie Lam accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January 2026, and to be printed ( Bill 348 ).*

## Opposition Day

[14TH ALLOTTED DAY]

### Seasonal Work

**Mr Speaker:** I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I call the Opposition spokesperson to move the motion.

12.51 pm

**Nigel Huddleston** (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets Government policies that are making seasonal, flexible and part-time work more difficult; notes that these policies particularly impact young people who are likely to start their first job in the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors, and specifically regrets Government policy to increase business rates on the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors; further regrets the Employment Rights Bill, with its provisions on guaranteed hours, and late notice cancellation of shifts, which will effectively destroy seasonal, flexible and part-time work; also regrets raising the rate of employer National Insurance contributions; regrets that 84,000 jobs in the hospitality sector have therefore been lost; and calls on the Government to cut public expenditure in order to abolish business rates for thousands of high street businesses, and not to proceed with the Employment Rights Bill so that it is easier for young people to get their first job, and easier for people to move from receiving welfare into work.

Last year's Budget, with its increases in national insurance contributions, increases in business rates and inflation-busting pay rises, led to more than 180,000 job losses, because it increased the cost of labour. Most economists, and indeed most sensible people, understand that when you increase the price of something, there is less demand for it. By increasing the cost of jobs, Labour caused unemployment—yet this year, fully aware of rising unemployment, the Chancellor remarkably came back for more. Along with her colleagues in the Cabinet, she is imposing even more costs on business through the unemployment Bill, with more regulations and a whole new set of taxes, like the tourism tax. These decisions will do even more damage, snatching the opportunity of a first job, a seasonal job or an entire career from young people—and, indeed, people of all ages.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): On the tourism tax, only a couple of months ago, in response to a question that I had posed, the then Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), said, “We think they have been taxed enough.” Is it a surprise to Opposition Members to see a tourism tax being brought forward?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Yes, indeed; my hon. Friend makes an important point. I was here when the Minister said that. He said that there were “no plans” to bring in a tax—although clearly there were, because a few weeks later, one was brought in—and that the sector had been “taxed enough”. Well, I agree with that Minister, and I therefore do not agree with the Chancellor.

Not content with the damage to businesses and jobs done in last year's Budget, this year the Chancellor decided to go even further in her latest Budget, and went for the pockets of working people directly by making them pay more tax. That was a clear manifesto breach. Working people are paying the price for this

Government's inability to tackle the ballooning welfare bill, and to control the unions and their own Back Benchers. The Budget was not about the economy; it was all about internal party management. It is appalling that we have a Chancellor who appears to be willing to see thousands of our constituents lose their jobs, as long as she saves hers. In short, the Budget was a £26 billion tax hike on working people to pay for Labour's welfare spending. Last year's Budget destroyed jobs; this latest one disincentivised work. It takes a special kind of incompetence to destabilise both the demand and the supply of labour simultaneously, but this Government have somehow managed to do just that.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Is not the truth that we have a Government with no business experience who think that they can simply push the costs down to businesses, squeeze and squeeze them, and they will pass the price on to customers? They will have no customers. There will be no businesses. There will be no jobs.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Absolutely. My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. It is quite remarkable, following the Budget, to hear Labour MPs say to their constituents, “We have helped you out. We have reduced costs.” If they talk to their constituents, they will find that the very opposite happened.

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): Like me, the shadow Secretary of State will have been out in the constituency speaking to small businesses, and I am sure that Labour MPs will have been doing the same over the weekend. A local publican told me that that she would have to lay off staff in January because of the extra taxes that the Chancellor had come back for—more taxes, though she said at the last Budget that she would not introduce more. I wonder whether the shadow Secretary of State has had the same experience when talking to hospitality businesses, which particularly employ young people.

**Nigel Huddleston:** My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. The hospitality sector has been particularly hard-hit by Labour's damaging economic policies. Many of us who were out on small business Saturday spoke to a number of those businesses, and unfortunately, UK Hospitality fears that there could be a further 100,000 job losses because of Labour's policies.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Matt Allum, who runs the Cricketers and two other pubs in my constituency, is devastated by this Budget, having been clobbered last year with the NIC increases, but thinks that our policy of relieving smaller businesses and high street businesses of business rates would make all the difference. Could my hon. Friend persuade the Government to adopt that policy during this debate?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I suspect that during the debate we will hear many names of great pubs, and I will try to visit as many of them as I can, as long as they still survive—but my hon. Friend is right: there is an alternative course of action here. There is a Conservative, pro-business economic policy that we can advocate. Later in my speech, I will mention some of the numbers to show the appalling impact on pubs in particular.

**Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): Like many of my Labour colleagues, I was out talking to small high-street businesses at the weekend, specifically in Saltaire, in my constituency. For many of them, the permanent reduction in business rates announced by the Chancellor is very welcome. They are not being hit by property re-evaluations and they will be getting those business rate reductions, and they welcome the levelling of the playing field with the online giants. How does the hon. Gentleman propose to pay for his party's unfunded proposals?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I suggest that the hon. Lady talk to those constituents again. I do not think one has to be a sparkling economist to work out that when something has gone up, it is higher, not lower. Those people are not getting a permanent reduction in business rates. The numbers are going up. That is basic economics and facts.

It is part-time seasonal and temporary workers, young workers and people in sectors such as food production, tourism, retail and hospitality who are being hit particularly hard, but perhaps that should not surprise us. As many Members have already pointed out, Labour just does not understand economics, business, or incentives.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for introducing this incredibly important debate. I must say, with respect, that the Government will have a lot to answer.

In the Northern Ireland agrifood sector, the licensing process is so laborious that it is putting people off, which means that when we need workers in the sector, we do not get them. The hon. Gentleman is right to put forward the case for hospitality, but may I put forward the case for those in the Northern Ireland agrifood sector, who are also under great pressure, and who will be disadvantaged by the Government's system?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. We see that the hospitality sector is hard-hit, because numbers for the sector are easily available, and there have been a great many reports about the job losses there, but multiple sectors will be hit by these changes. As he points out, the problem is not just the tax hit but the regulatory burden, and that reinforces my point that the Government do not understand business.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): In 2023, just under 4,600 licensed premises closed down across the UK. Was the 2024 Labour Budget to blame for that?

**Nigel Huddleston:** No, the pandemic was largely to blame for that, but to ensure that we recovered from the pandemic, and to help save lives and livelihoods, which included supporting the hospitality sector, the Government spent £400 billion, so I am afraid I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question.

Of course, few members of the Cabinet have ever worked in the private sector, and I do not think any of them have actually run their own business—maybe one.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can correct me.

**Chris Vince:** Conservative Members will know my background and work career, because I mention that I used to be a teacher every time I speak. I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider that many in his party talk about education but have not been teachers. Does he not recognise that, as Members of Parliament, we bring the experience of the people we speak to? He spoke about Conservative Members getting out and talking to businesses. Does he not recognise that we bring to this House the experiences of the people we represent? The argument that we cannot talk about business because we have not worked in business is a nonsense.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Members of Parliament may not have to work in business, but I expect every one to come to this House and advocate for business.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge) (Con): As my hon. Friend will remember, it was wonderful to see the King and the President of the United States sit down at Windsor recently. What was particularly striking was that, on the British side, only the King had run a business—he ran the Duchy of Cornwall. Nobody else had run a business. On the American side, everybody had run a business. Is that not quite a stark contrast?

**Mr Speaker:** I was there, and I have run a business!

**Nigel Huddleston:** My right hon. Friend is correct: having people who have run a business is good for Government. I am sorry to hear that Labour Members do not believe that their Cabinet would be better if there were a few more pro-business people in it. I can assure him that most of his constituents agree.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have some affection for the hon. Gentleman, and he has a lovely smile. Can he tell me how many members of the shadow Cabinet—or Conservative Members who serve on the Opposition Front Bench—have ever had to sustain a long-term position on low-paid, insecure work while raising a family? Those voices are equally important in this debate.

**Nigel Huddleston:** I, too, have a great deal of affection for the hon. Gentleman; we go back quite a long way from when we were elected. We need to recognise that there are Members on both sides of the House who come from poor or modest backgrounds, and it is simply not true to say that the Conservative Benches are full of posh people and the Labour Benches are not. The hon. Gentleman does a disservice to the House in trying to give an alternative impression.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): From one state school boy to another state school boy—we were also the first in our families to go to university—does my hon. Friend agree that we all have gaps in our knowledge, understanding and experience, but that the way you fill them is by asking the people who practise in a sector and listening to what they have to say? You should not just tell them that they are wrong and you are right because you are the Government, and you should change when the facts urge a change upon you.

**Nigel Huddleston:** My hon. Friend puts it incredibly well. As I say, the onus is on all of us in this place to make sure that we listen, learn and advocate on others' behalf.

**Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I will give way one more time, and then I will make a bit of progress.

**Antonia Bance:** While we are being nice to the hon. Gentleman, I think with affection of the times we have sat together on the "Politics Midlands" sofa. For the benefit of the House, will he tell us how many zero-hours workers he has spoken to in preparation for his speech today?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I have spoken to a few zero-hours workers, and many of them are not happy with the Government's policy, because it is going to make some of them unemployed.

Of course, the one thing that we do know about Labour Governments is that they know how to spend other people's money. They have no idea how wealth is created and how the money that pays for our public services is generated in the first place, but they certainly know how to tax and spend. We have seen tax increases of £66 billion in just two Budgets, and tens of billions of pounds in additional debt. As Margaret Thatcher said,

"The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money."

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Hon. Members—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Hoare, your voice is carrying and I do not need to hear it.

**John Slinger:** It did not carry all the way to me.

**Mr Speaker:** It carried to me. That is why I am defending you.

**John Slinger:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Conservative Members often talk about wealth creators. Of course business people and entrepreneurs are wealth creators, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that wealth is also created by the public services and infrastructure that we need, which has to be paid for?

**Nigel Huddleston:** The hon. Gentleman's final words are key: how are public services paid for? The top 1% of income tax payers in this country pay 29% of all income tax. It is estimated that the Labour Government's policies have led to 16,000 of the wealthiest people in this country leaving—equivalent to a third of a million to half a million average taxpayers. The burden, therefore, is spread on the others. Instead of demonising some of the wealthiest people, who make an incredible contribution to our public services, maybe the Government should thank them.

**Dr Luke Evans:** It is not just wealthy people who have left. We know from the Office for National Statistics data that 257,000 Brits have gone—it had been estimated at 70,000—of whom about two thirds to three quarters

are under the age of 35. We are losing young people to the rest of the world because of the implications of not being able to get a job in this country.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Yet more common sense is coming from those on this side of the Chamber, and I agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, it is young people in particular who do not have confidence in this Government and are fleeing.

It is clear that I do not have particularly high regard for Labour's economic competence, but even I did not expect the Government to be running out of money quite so quickly. I expected them to be bad, but I did not expect them to be this bad. It does not give me any political joy to say that, because my constituents and their constituents are paying the price for Labour's incompetence through higher taxes and, in many cases, with their jobs and livelihoods. I genuinely wish that they were better at government, but that is wishful thinking, because here is another hard truth about Labour: despite the party's name and the false advocacy for working people, every Labour Government since the second world war have left office with unemployment higher than when they started, leaving the Conservatives to clear up their mess.

We Conservatives know that the best thing we can do for working people, and to lift people out of poverty, is to help them get a job, and we have a far better record than Labour in doing that. Between 2010 and 2024, Conservative-led Governments oversaw the creation of 4 million jobs—an average of 800 a day. This Government are destroying jobs by the tune of hundreds per day.

**Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): We know what the Government want to do to support tourism and hospitality: they want to get those on welfare to work in that sector, despite the fact that some of those people are on welfare because the Government have taxed tourism. Does my hon. Friend think that that is socialism or incompetence?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I think my hon. Friend knows my answer to that. It is ironic—it would be laughable if it was not so sad—that the Government announced over the weekend that they will introduce subsidies to create jobs, because if they did a better job at running the economy, jobs would be created anyway. I will come back to this issue in a moment.

On the record of the last Government, we took millions of people out of paying income tax. We increased the tax-free allowance from £6,475, which we inherited under Labour, to £12,570. As soon as we were in a position, following the pandemic, to start reducing taxes, that is exactly what we did. We reduced national insurance on workers from 12% to 10%, and then from 10% to 8%, with a plan to eliminate employee national insurance altogether and, of course, align the thresholds.

Labour talked about backing business when in opposition, but they are doing no such thing in government. In the Budget, the Chancellor had the brass neck to say that she was helping the hospitality industry with business rates. In reality, hotels, pubs, theme parks, restaurants, cafés are all seeing an increase in their business rates, as are the wider retail and leisure sectors. Investment in hospitality and tourism is already being paused or diverted overseas due to the UK's rising costs and regulatory environment.

**Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am that a typical pub in my constituency is paying around £2,500 per month more than it was 12 months ago? Let me briefly put that into context. Assuming that couples go in and spend £100, pubs have to clear 25 additional sittings, just to clear their costs. How are they going to survive?

**Nigel Huddleston:** My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right. I think the increase in costs for the average pub over the next few years—I have the figures and will come to them in a minute—is equivalent to needing to serve an extra 10,000 pints. How many pubs will be able to do that?

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con): Epping Forest is home to some wonderful pubs and hospitality businesses, such as The Bull and the Queen Vic in Theydon Bois, the Theydon Oak, and Mila in Loughton. I hope he will join me in congratulating Mila on reaching the final of the British kebab awards next year. Does he agree that it is only through the Conservatives' approach of scrapping business rates and supporting our high streets that these fantastic businesses will be able to survive and then thrive in the future?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Absolutely. Again, my hon. Friend is a great advocate for the hospitality and leisure sector. He is absolutely right that there are alternative approaches to backing businesses and enabling them to succeed and generate taxes and employment. I add my congratulations on the British kebab awards. As a big fan of kebabs, I will have to visit at some point.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this Budget and the previous one have been hammer blows to our already flagging high streets? Does he also recognise that the only retail premises that can currently be exempted from business rates are those that are listed and unoccupied? That introduces perverse consequences for the tone and texture of our high streets. By abolishing business rates, we will remove that perversity, and the look and feel and the vibrancy of our high streets should be improved.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Again, my right hon. Friend is correct. Of course, it is not just the tax policies, but the wraparound—the devil in the detail of what can and cannot be included in various exemptions—that causes some perhaps unintended or indeed intended consequences. I think we all care very much about the future of our high streets, which is exactly why, at conference, we announced the retail, hospitality and leisure relief.

As I have said, the Chancellor had the brass neck to say she was helping the hospitality industry with business rates. The Government were doing no such thing; they were increasing business rates considerably. While hospitality is the UK's largest employer of 16 to 24-year-olds, these cost pressures directly threaten in particular youth employment. New analysis from UK Hospitality reveals that small hospitality venues alone will see business rates rise by £318 million over three years, and subsectors—such as pubs, which are often mentioned in this debate—will see a whopping increase. The average pub's business rates, even with the reduced multiplier and transitional relief, will increase by 15% next year, which is an extra £1,400. In 2027-28, an average pub's rates will be £4,500 higher, and in 2028-29, £7,000 higher. In total over three

years, the average pub will pay an extra £12,900. An average hotel will be paying an extra £28,900 in rates next year. In 2027-28, it will be £65,000 higher, and in 2028-29, £111,000 higher. In total over three years, an average hotel's rates bill will increase by over £200,000—just in time, no doubt, for it also to face the dreaded new tourism tax.

Labour's unemployment Bill will do nothing but impose thousands of pounds in extra costs on businesses across the country—not to mention the ricochet impact on temporary and seasonal jobs.

**Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): On the tourism tax, which will come on top of the increase in business rates, I spoke last week to Catherine, from the Navigator hotel, who is in despair at these additional costs. She fears for the future of her hotel and, indeed, for the 10 employees who work in that hotel. What reassurance can my hon. Friend give her?

**Nigel Huddleston:** The tourism tax is an appalling tax, which we have said will do immense damage to an already overtaxed industry. As my hon. Friend will be aware, a consultation is going on, and we all need to encourage our constituents, particularly those working in these sectors, to participate in that consultation to ensure that Labour does not do the damage we fear it may do to an already hit sector.

Of course, many sectors of the economy rely on seasonal employment during peak times, whether that is food production sectors during peak picking and growing seasons, retailers in the run-up to Christmas, or the hospitality and tourism industry over peak summer season and during school holidays. However, if the Minister and Labour MPs had actually been engaging with and listening to businesses in their constituencies or across the country since they came to power, they would know the frustration that so many of those businesses feel. They want to employ more people, especially young people, and to give learning and skills development opportunities—perhaps providing people with their first job—but they have been unable to do so because Labour's policies are making it unaffordable for them to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) pointed out how bizarre it is that the Government announced plans over the weekend—note, Madam Deputy Speaker, over the weekend, not to this House—to help young people with skills building opportunities in hospitality, care and construction through taxpayer-funded Government schemes. Those are the very industries that the Government are undermining with their own tax policies. If the Government did not attack these industries, businesses would be generating such opportunities and jobs of their own volition, not needing Government handouts. Rather than spend £820 million using public money to help create jobs that may not be sustainable, surely it would have made more sense not to have taxed the hospitality, construction or care sectors in the first place. Even hospices were not exempt from the national insurance increases.

**Tom Tugendhat:** There is a fundamental misunderstanding between the Conservative Members and Labour Members. Labour Members seem to believe that the Government create jobs, wealth and everything, but we recognise that

[Tom Tugendhat]

individuals get up in the morning to group together into what we call companies, and they come up with ideas, stretch themselves and try different ideas. Some of them succeed and some of them fail, but relieving the pressure on them is not somehow letting them get away with something, but enabling them to express the freedom of the ideas they have.

A second fundamental misunderstanding is that this is not about who has had job experience and who has not; it is who has had an HR department and who has not. The problem is not that those on the Labour side of the House are bad people or good people—as we all know, there are bad and good people on both sides—but that, in reality, someone with experience of a business that has only ever had an HR department, or only ever been large enough to look at different in-year cost savings in such a sense, is not the same as someone trying to pay for one person, two people or three people. Actually, 80% of businesses in this country have fewer than 10 employees, and we are talking about them.

**Nigel Huddleston:** My right hon. Friend again makes some really important points not only with specific examples, but about the fundamental difference in political and economic philosophy between the Conservative side and the Labour side of the Chamber. We believe in personal responsibility, low tax, small Government, living within one's means and being unapologetically pro-business because we recognise that the private sector generates jobs and the economic activity that pays for our vital public services. Labour Members are agreed on the complete opposite. We recognise that, as the Leader of the Opposition has said many times, we get into difficulty when we stray too far away from these things—we let down the country and the economy when we stray from our principles—but Labour lets down the country and destroys the economy when it sticks to its principles.

**Sorcha Eastwood** (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): On the hon. Member's point about the employment of young people, in Northern Ireland we have one of the highest levels—if not the highest level—of youth unemployment and young people not in education, employment or training. Would he agree with me that the Budget absolutely hammers any prospect of young people being employed in hospitality or tourism, for example?

**Nigel Huddleston:** The hon. Lady has obviously been speaking to her constituents and businesses in her constituency, and young people are of course extremely disappointed and feel let down by this Government and their economic philosophy. That is why the Budget announcement followed by this other announcement—“Oh, we're now going to kind of help them a little bit with some public money”—is just bizarre. It shows that they do not get basic economics, and that is hitting young people in particular.

**Gareth Snell:** Under a Conservative council and a Conservative Government, Stoke-on-Trent had one of highest levels—if not the highest level—of NEETs anywhere in the country. The number is now coming down, but what does the hon. Member think was the reason why my city had to endure that under his Government and

his council? Would he accept that it was partly because economic growth was not felt equitably across this country, and that economic growth that takes place only in one part of the country is equally as damaging as much of what he is professing is damaging today?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I do agree with some the principles the hon. Gentleman articulates about the need for economic growth outside the M25 as well. London is a great dynamo—it needs to be London-plus—but we do need to make sure we grow across the country. That was, of course, exactly the point of the levelling-up agenda. However, I am afraid we cannot have this wishful thinking of forgetting that both the economic crisis in 2008 and of course the pandemic and other global crises had a major impact on the economy, and therefore economies around the world were challenged. The difference now is that our economy is doing badly uniquely because of Labour Government decisions. That is the difference.

The national insurance increases in last year's Budget alone cost the hospitality industry more than £1 billion. The business rates increases that it now faces make matters even worse. This is not so much giving with one hand and taking with the other; it is giving with one hand, then punching them in the face and giving them a good kicking when they are down on the ground. That is an appalling attitude to take towards business, but that is this Government's attitude.

**Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Just last week, I visited one of the many fantastic cafés in my constituency. The hard-working owner told me that she had chosen not to take on a young Saturday worker as a direct result of the increase in business rates. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that this Government's policies are directly affecting employment for young people in Chester South and Eddisbury, and across the country?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Yes. I had the pleasure of visiting a café in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I sincerely hope she is not referring to the one that we visited. This is a common theme across the country, and we hear it on way too many occasions. What is interesting is that the owners of these often very small business feel guilty that they cannot employ people in the way that they would want to—they cannot provide Christmas jobs and so on. They should not feel guilty about that; the Government should feel guilty about that.

**Bradley Thomas:** Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the tax rises and the additional cost burden that is causing a lack of confidence? That lack of confidence is in itself probably the most corrosive aspect of all, because once that is entrenched it is very hard to unpick, particularly when businesses repeatedly face a Government who are doing the exact opposite of what they pledged in their manifesto.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Yes. My hon. Friend knows that confidence is a major driver of economic activity. When the public, consumers and businesses do not have confidence, things fall apart. Without a significant change of direction, I am afraid I cannot see confidence returning. As I said, I do not get any joy in saying that. I want the Government to get their act together. I want them to be economically competent for the sake of our constituents.

**Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was interested in him suggesting that it was Labour's principles that are causing the problem. Which bit of our plan for small and medium-sized businesses, action to tackle late payments, reducing regulatory burdens and expanding access to finance does he disagree with?

**Nigel Huddleston:** This is just noise. The hon. Lady needs to speak to businesses in her constituency—*[Interruption.]* The facts are the national insurance increases, the business rates increases and the additional burdens on businesses. If anybody on the Government Benches can name any major business organisation that welcomes the employment Bill—the unemployment Bill, as we call it—I would welcome them doing so now, but I do not think they can. They are anti-business: that is the point. The Conservatives are pro-business, they are anti-business. The principle is key: to be pro-business means to be pro-workers and pro-public sector, because that is how the taxes are generated. The Government have the exact different—

**John Slinger:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I won't. I will give way in a moment to somebody behind me, but I am aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am on the final stretch.

I can only assume the Labour Government just do not understand the negative impact their tax policies are having on tourism, hospitality and leisure, because to do such harm willingly is pure economic vandalism. The Government's lack of understanding of the private sector and how jobs are created beggars belief.

None of this would be necessary with a competent, pro-business Government. There is an alternative: a pro-business Conservative alternative that backs business, that wants the private sector to succeed, that backs entrepreneurs and wealth creators, and has policies that enable job creation and economic growth through policies such as 100% business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure. Instead, the Government have decided on an economic strategy that punishes enterprise, burdens the taxpayer, disincentivises work, increases dependency on welfare and grows the size of the public sector. That is the wrong strategy.

The Labour Government are destroying the economy. They promised change at the last election. Well, we certainly got it: slower growth, higher taxes, higher spending, more debt, more welfare and higher unemployment. Time and again, Labour has betrayed the trust of the British public and we on the Conservative Benches will not tire of holding this disastrous Labour Government to account for their utter incompetence. The country cannot afford three more years of this. Britain deserves better.

1.24 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall):** I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and add:

"notes the Government's strong support for small and medium-sized businesses, including those employing seasonal workers; further notes that the Government's Employment Rights Bill will help seasonal workers by bringing the UK's outdated employment

laws into the 21st century; welcomes the policy paper entitled *Backing your business: our plan for small and medium sized businesses*, which sets out a comprehensive vision for productivity and success; further welcomes action to tackle late payments through the introduction of the toughest laws in the G7, helping SMEs maintain cash flow during peak periods; supports measures to cut energy bills for SMEs through investment in clean power and reducing levies; commends investment in high streets via the Pride in Place fund, boosting footfall for seasonal trade; also notes consultations to reduce burdens on hospitality businesses; and further commends targeted support through the Business Growth Service to help SMEs access skills, finance and growth opportunities."

Around this time every year, I like to re-read "A Christmas Carol". Last night, I read that passage from Dickens where the protagonist says:

"every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart".

I have to say that the tone of the shadow Minister's speech made Ebenezer Scrooge sound positively festive!

The Government recognise that it has been a hard few years for business. Despite the appalling economic legacy the hon. Gentleman's party left us, in this festive period we can look forward to the new year with a sense of optimism. Living standards are rising and wages are growing faster than prices. The Productive Business Index found, a few days ago, that nearly three quarters of small businesses expect revenue increases over the next three months and nearly two thirds have seen rising order volumes in the last three months. The hon. Gentleman mentions, as did other Members, Small Business Saturday. Small Business Britain reports that spending during Small Business Saturday last weekend was the highest it has been in five years.

Despite what the hon. Gentleman says, I ran a business for a decade and I know how hard the last decade was. *[Interruption.]* It would be immodest to agree with what he says from a sedentary position.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): On Saturday last, I was in Herne Bay on Mortimer Street, where there is an absolutely fabulous toy shop called Kids Korner. It was empty. I said to them, "How are you doing?" They said, "The shop is empty, the street is empty. Nobody is spending any money." The hospitality industry is on its knees. The hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) and I attended a roundtable recently, where every single person present said that they were having a hard time, and some were in danger of going into liquidation. I raised this example in the House earlier this week: one chain of 25 cafés, which employs young people, had a profit of £12 over the last 12 months. That is due entirely to this Government's policies.

**Blair McDougall:** The right hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head when he talks about people not spending money. That is exactly why this Labour Government are taking action to put money into people's pockets. We must recognise that a big part of why it has been such a difficult 10 years for business were the stagnating living standards and stagnating wages under his Government. I know that hospitality, leisure and retail, which have very thin margins, have been hit especially hard by the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and changes in shopping habits, but that is why we recognised that and published, for the first time in a decade, a Government strategy for small businesses. It is why we

[*Blair McDougall*]

are putting more money into people's pockets. It is why fiscal credibility, which the Conservatives just do not seem to value at all, matters to our constituents.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): The Globe Inn in North Petherton is a fantastic local pub. This financial year, its business rates bill is zero. By 2029-30, it will be £5,000, thanks to this Government. That is an extra 10,000 pints it will have to sell to meet that extra cost. How is the Government's strategy helping?

**Blair McDougall:** The hon. Gentleman will know about the transitional relief that we are putting in—I will come on to that in a moment—but we are putting more money into people's pockets.

I spent five days last week speaking to small businesses. I was in Staffordshire, the north-west and Scotland meeting dozens of small businesses, and all of them said the same thing to me: what they want is footfall. As the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) said, they want people to start spending money again and to get custom.

**Alison Griffiths:** Will the Minister give way?

**Blair McDougall:** I will make some progress first.

We are lowering costs. The hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham mentioned the burden of regulation and red tape, but I have to ask: where was he for the last 14 years? When Labour came to power, we inherited a situation where businesses were spending 380 million staff hours on form-filling and red tape every year. We are getting into that now in a way that just did not happen before.

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): On that point, it is important to note that businesses such as the Co-op and IKEA are supportive. The Minister mentions red tape; time and again, businesses in my constituency tell me that bureaucracy is holding them back. Will the Minister outline how we will cut red tape further?

**Blair McDougall:** Let us start with a few weeks ago, when we brought in changes meaning that thousands upon thousands of companies—particularly smaller companies—no longer have to engage in so much of that corporate reporting, which was completely unnecessary, saving about £250 million on the way to our wider target of cutting the regulatory burden by 25% and cutting £5 billion.

**Alison Griffiths:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I invite him to visit the hairdressers in Aldwick, in my constituency of Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, where the owner will tell him that he spends hours upon hours working to ensure that he can even stay profitable. The Government might be withdrawing some aspects of small business paperwork, but that does not change the fact that the maths do not add up. Unless the owner spends hours dotting every i, crossing every t and cutting costs where he can, his employees will not have jobs and be able then to spend more money.

**Blair McDougall:** The hon. Lady makes an important point, which is exactly why we are trying to drive down costs for business, not least when it comes to red tape. If there is something in particular about your constituent's business—I do not know if it is the hairdressers that you yourself frequent—perhaps I could pop along. I would be very happy to listen—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I do not wish to put on the public record which establishments I do and do not frequent, Minister.

**Blair McDougall:** My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Opposition Members raise the matter of business rates as well. It is exactly because we recognise the stress that retail, hospitality and leisure businesses face that the smallest of those properties will now have the lowest business rate since 1991, and those with values below £500,000 will have their lowest rate since 2011. That is a permanent tax cut worth nearly £1 billion a year, benefiting more than 750,000 retail, hospitality and leisure properties.

**Alison Griffiths:** I thank the Minister for giving way again. I would just like to tell him about Charlie Cockaday, who runs the Fox Inn in Felpham, who tells me that with the new business rates reform introduced by this Government, he will be paying £1,600 a month more in business rates going forward, which is the equivalent of 35p for each pint that he sells. How does that equate to putting more money in people's pockets?

**Blair McDougall:** Again, I will talk about the transitional relief that we have brought in. Under the plans for valuation that we inherited, pubs were looking at rates increasing by about 45%; because of the relief we have introduced, they will face about a tenth of that. So we are acting.

I have to say, the Conservatives knew that this revaluation was coming; they knew that the temporary covid relief was coming to an end. How much did they have in their financial plans to help businesses with this revaluation? Nothing. They did not allocate a single penny for it, and now they criticise us for having brought in a £4 billion package to help businesses with it. Worse than that, they oppose the higher business rates that we have brought in for the warehouses of online giants, which is exactly what is paying for the structural change allowing for permanently lower business rates on retail and hospitality.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): Governments have to make choices—we all understand that—but the choice that this Government made was not to cut spending on welfare, which has limited their choices elsewhere. There is a real choice. If the Conservatives had been in power, we would not have made those choices over the summer, and the hospitality sector would have been in a very different place in the Budget.

**Blair McDougall:** That is exactly my point—the Conservatives were not going to make those choices. Those choices were not in their financial plans, but they are in ours.

**Tom Tugendhat:** Will the Minister give way?

**Blair McDougall:** I will give way one more time, but only because I have deep affection for the right hon. Gentleman.

**Tom Tugendhat:** The Minister is a charming and, no doubt, soon to be very well-haircutted gentleman. The point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) was making—I am afraid this reinforces it—is that such a choice was clearly not in the Government's plans, either. Otherwise, they would not have brought forward the welfare changes they planned in July, but have since been bounced out of by their own Back Benchers. It clearly was not their plan either, and that is why we are in this position.

**Blair McDougall:** But it is in our plan. We have just passed the Budget, which introduces the relief on business rates.

Let me return to the theme of "A Christmas Carol" and the visit of the ghost of Christmas past. Let us travel back to when the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham gushed about Liz Truss's mini-Budget, with her unfunded tax giveaway, which he said represented "a new era" and would

"help everybody with the cost-of-living pressures".

Well, unlike Ebenezer Scrooge, the hon. Gentleman has not repented; he has not seen the error of his ways and the impact of unfunded commitments. Instead, he is at it again, calling for tax cuts without any idea whatsoever of how to pay for them.

**Chris Vince:** Members on the Conservative Benches talk about political choices—they made a political choice to bring in austerity, which meant a lack of funding for the NHS. My constituency of Harlow is full of sole traders who tell me that what really affects their ability to earn money, in order to have money in their pockets to spend in the pub or at other establishments, is the fact they have to wait for years on end to get a doctor's appointment or an operation. Does he agree that the Chancellor has made the right choice to invest in our NHS so that we can get waiting times down and my workers can get back to work?

**Blair McDougall:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is one of the important ways we will get the welfare bill down as well as getting more money into people's pockets, and ultimately more money into tills. Instead of fantastical unfunded tax cuts, we are giving real help to high streets across the country. Millions of British people will benefit from the £5 billion Pride in Place programme, which puts local people in 339 neighbourhoods in the driving seat of renewing their own areas.

**Ms Billington:** I am grateful to the Government for the fact that Ramsgate in particular is benefiting from the Pride in Place fund. More widely, on the matter of seasonal work, which is vital for coastal communities such as mine, can the Minister confirm that seasonal and hospitality workers will benefit from many of the measures in the Budget that will tackle the cost of living and raise their wages, such as increases to the minimum wage, cuts to energy bills and the freezing of bus and train fares?

**Blair McDougall:** Absolutely. Members on the Government Benches recognise the link between the standard of living and business sustainability. My hon. Friend mentioned that her area will benefit from Pride in Place—the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham has Smethwick, Darlaston, Bilston, Dudley and Bedworth in his part of the world, all of which are receiving funding through Pride in Place.

We are also ensuring that we protect the character and the safety of high streets, because again, what we hear from small businesses again and again is that they need footfall. We need to make high streets attractive places to go, so we are clamping down on illegal high street activity in premises such as mini-marts, barbershops, vape shops and nail bars. At the Budget, we announced an additional £15 million a year, alongside wider measures to tackle bogus retailers.

**Dr Morrison:** Has the Minister compared and contrasted Pride in Place with the future high streets fund, which was a proven mechanism for uplifting the state of many of our high streets, including Trowbridge in my constituency? He is trotting out a load of things that he thinks will benefit retail and hospitality. The whole point of retail and hospitality businesses is that they must be welcoming places that are open to all, so what does he make of the dozens of pubs and restaurants up and down the country that are now feeling forced to put up signs in their windows that say "No Labour MPs"?

**Blair McDougall:** I have yet to see any pub with any such sign. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) spoke about how disastrous the implementation of the future high streets fund was on the ground, and we are trying to learn lessons from that.

The hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham also criticised the Employment Rights Bill. I compared him to Scrooge earlier, but I am sorry to say that on this subject he was even less charitable than Dickens's great character. Scrooge famously wanted his workers to have regular hours over Christmas—indeed, he insisted on it—but the hon. Gentleman does not seem to want that. Even Scrooge by the end of the story gave Bob Cratchit a pay rise so that his family could enjoy Christmas, but the hon. Gentleman is arguing against that.

**Gareth Snell:** I remember sitting on the Opposition Benches when the Conservatives were in government. They were trumpeting their increase in the minimum wage and saying that the creation of the living wage was a demonstration of their commitment to helping low-paid people in this country. Does the Minister worry that, if we extrapolate the point that the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham has been making to its natural conclusion, the Conservatives are actually advocating a cut in the minimum wage as a way to help businesses, which would be detrimental to the thousands of people in Stoke-on-Trent who rely on that money to pay their bills?

**Blair McDougall:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Again, the Conservatives do not understand the link between what is in people's pockets and what goes into the tills. I spent a fantastic day with my hon. Friend and his local businesses last week, and I was impressed by how those at the businesses were all on first-name terms with him.

**Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that part of the problem was caused by the Conservatives, who did not welcome the introduction of the minimum wage in 1998, saying that it would destroy businesses, and later when in government split the minimum wage so that people over 25 got more than people under 25, which is causing the inequality that we are having to deal with now?

**Blair McDougall:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I recall working in this place as a younger man when we had all-night sittings, as the Conservatives united with those in the other place to try to stop our efforts to make work pay for people—and here we are again, a quarter of a century later.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): That is exactly the issue: the Minister was in this place back when the Government were coming up with their plans and policies; meanwhile, I was starting and running a business and employing people. That is the difference. A minimum wage cannot be given to someone who does not have a wage at all because they do not have a job. His party is putting people out of work. There are now 31% more young people not in employment in my constituency than there were this time last year. That is a disgrace, isn't it?

**Blair McDougall:** If the hon. Member had been here at the start of the debate, she would have heard me talking about how I ran a business as well. She mentions job creation. The first year of this Government has seen 138,000 more jobs.

**Alison Griffiths:** Will the Minister give way?

**Blair McDougall:** No, I have given way several times. I will make progress.

The Government are fully supportive of the variety of working arrangements that people, including young people, might choose depending on their circumstances, but the key word there is “choose”. Until now, that flexibility has been entirely one-sided; it has been something that employers have used to their benefit. It is time to let workers have their rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central asked about whether Conservative Members understand what it is like to be in insecure work, particularly at this time of year. This is the most expensive—

**Alison Griffiths:** Will the Minister give way?

**Blair McDougall:** No, I am coming to a close.

This is the most expensive time of year, and December is the most expensive month. Labour is proud to be acting to ensure that families can plan for the expense of Christmas and look forward to Christmas without worrying and having anxiety about whether they can make it to the end of the month. The criticisms and lack of understanding from the Conservatives about how important the cost of living and money in people's pockets is to the success of businesses is, quite frankly, humbug.

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

1.45 pm

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Training, hiring and retaining a skilled workforce are issues that affect businesses across the country. Many businesses, such as those in the farming and agricultural sectors, depend on recruiting the right people at the right time. Obstacles to hiring seasonal workers can have a significant impact on businesses, which are already struggling with sky-high energy bills, having trouble recruiting the workforce they need and facing high costs in trading with Europe.

We are seeing a practically stagnant economy, with business confidence down and unemployment up. Unemployment is particularly prevalent among young people, many of whom traditionally find their first jobs in the hospitality sector, which is the largest employer of young people. However, the sector is struggling to employ new workers. The damage being done to the prospects of our youth, as they struggle with unemployment, will be detrimental to the broader economy in the years to come.

Many of those challenges began under the last Conservative Administration. It was the previous Government who undermined farming, agriculture, hospitality and so many other sectors that are dependent on seasonal work by negotiating failed trade deals with the EU, Australia and New Zealand and breaking their promise to reform business rates. Their record is a dispiriting picture of low growth, high interest rates and falling living standards.

People endured years of Conservative mismanagement, which is why it is so disappointing that this Government have wasted the last 18 months by failing to pursue policies that promote growth and by imposing an unfair national insurance jobs tax that has stifled business investment.

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): In the west country, we have seen an icy chilling effect from the NICs hike on our hospitality and tourism industry, particularly in Torbay. The Torbay Coast & Countryside Trust, which looks after some of our beautiful natural spaces, has faced a £100,000 cost from the NICs hike, which has forced it to close its doors and take a step into the dark. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to explore the impact of the NICs hike on this fragile sector of our economy to see how they can step in to support it?

**Sarah Olney:** It is tragic to hear of the closure of my hon. Friend's local organisation. Not only will local people be deprived of the opportunity to enjoy the services it provided, but young people will be deprived of the opportunity to take on their first job.

On the Employment Rights Bill, the Liberal Democrats have been clear that we welcome many of the principles underpinning the legislation, but we have been pushing the Government to make crucial improvements to ensure that it properly delivers for workers and small businesses. We strongly believe in giving all workers security over their working patterns, and we are deeply concerned that too many struggle with unstable incomes, job insecurity and difficulties in planning for the future. On flexible work, we will continue to advocate what we think would have been a fairer and less onerous system, based on giving workers a new right to request fixed hours, which businesses would not be able to unreasonably refuse.

On seasonal work, we are glad that, thanks to the work of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords, the Government have made significant concessions for the benefit of businesses and workers, placing a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to consult with key stakeholders before exercising powers to specify what a “temporary need” is in relation to the provisions on the right to zero-hours contracts. We are pleased that the Government have listened to Liberal Democrat calls for clarity by providing examples of how an employer could approach seasonal demand while complying with the new right to guaranteed hours. These provisions, secured by Liberal Democrat peers, will support workers by giving them more control over their working hours, while ensuring that businesses are properly consulted and given the resources to navigate this new legislation.

This weekend, towns across the country mark Small Business Saturday, but many small businesses will have struggled to celebrate, given the challenges that they face. Recent Government decisions, including the devastating business rates hike in last month’s Budget, are causing huge damage to small hospitality firms, with many now considering whether their business remains viable.

**Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): Tourism is vital to the economy of West Dorset and hospitality is one of the largest employers. Our population soars by 40% during the summer months and those businesses require seasonal workers. Given all the headwinds my hon. Friend outlines that face the high street and UK hospitality, does she agree that the Government should reward and look after the sector with a 5% drop in VAT?

**Sarah Olney:** My hon. Friend is right; the hospitality sector has been disproportionately impacted by the hike in national insurance contributions because it generally employs people on lower wages for a shorter period of time. In particular, the decrease in the threshold has been damaging to many businesses that have that kind of employment pattern.

My hon. Friend is right that what we really need to do is boost growth and demand. We think that that could happen by introducing a 5% decrease in VAT for hospitality businesses. We need the Government to give hospitality the tools it needs to grow and help boost the wider economy. Thousands of venues are facing steep and unprecedented cost rises, making this a critical moment for the hospitality sector. I urge the Government to tackle the cost-of-doing-business crisis by adopting our proposal on VAT.

**Dr Luke Evans:** How much would the 5% VAT policy cost?

**Sarah Olney:** The cost of the VAT cut could be met by—

**Dr Evans:** How much is it?

**Sarah Olney:** I believe, off the top of my head, that it is about £9 billion. We think that that could be met by the money that we have lost from leaving the European Union—from Brexit. As a result of leaving the European Union, £25 billion a year has been lost to the Treasury thanks to the Conservatives’ botched Brexit deal. There are so many better ways that we could have been spending the money that the Conservatives’ botched Brexit deal has cost us.

Pubs, bars, cafés and restaurants across the UK that rely on seasonal workers need all the support they can get, so I sincerely hope Ministers will listen. Today’s motion calls for the abolition of business rates, and the Liberal Democrats agree that we need to see a complete overhaul of that unfair and damaging system. In 2019, the Conservative Government promised a fundamental review of the business rates system, which they failed to deliver. In their recent Budget, the Government committed to rebalancing business rates, but we saw nothing of the sort. UKHospitality says that the average tax increase for hospitality will be 76% over the next three years. Meanwhile, warehouses, offices and large supermarkets will see bills go up by just 16%, 7% and 4% respectively. The Chancellor said that she is looking to introduce permanently lower business rate multipliers, but the painful reality is that the new higher valuations will wipe out any benefit that businesses might have seen.

The increase in the minimum wage announced by the Government in the recent Budget is welcome and will support millions of low-paid workers, but it is not just workers who need a boost; it is small businesses too. Unless businesses are able to grow, there is a danger that the long list of cost pressures they face will result in fewer jobs being available overall.

**Anna Dixon:** When I have talked to small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency of Shipley, they have welcomed the announcement that there will be free apprenticeship training so that they can help the next generation of young people get into higher-skilled jobs and have careers. Does the hon. Lady agree, and does she support the Government’s announcement about apprenticeships as part of the youth guarantee?

**Sarah Olney:** I thank the hon. Lady, my colleague on the Public Accounts Committee, for her intervention. She is absolutely right. I 100% and wholeheartedly welcome any boost to apprenticeships and that announcement in the Budget. However, there has been and continues to be caution over whether there will be sufficient business growth for high-skilled jobs to be created, which is what will enable our young people to progress in their careers.

Businesses from all sectors across the UK continue to struggle with high energy bills, which is compounded by the burden of the NICs rise and concerns about the effect of certain aspects of the Employment Rights Bill on their monthly employment costs. The cost of employment has risen significantly over the last year and there have been nearly 70,000 hospitality job losses just since last October. Our small businesses face huge challenges and many are already struggling to absorb rising costs. Unless more is done to support them, vital entry-level jobs, which make an essential contribution to the culture and character of our local communities, may be lost.

As the motion looks to examine the challenges facing businesses, a perhaps unsurprising omission is the absence of any reference to the damage caused by the last Government’s failed Brexit deal. The appalling agreement negotiated by the Conservative party has been a complete disaster for our country and particularly for small businesses, which are held back by reams of red tape and new barriers to trade, costing our economy billions in lost exports.

[Sarah Olney]

The dismal impact of the Conservatives' terrible Brexit deal is becoming increasingly clear. A recent survey of 10,000 UK businesses found that 33% of currently trading enterprises experienced extra costs directly related to changes in export regulations due to the end of the EU transition period. Small businesses have been particularly badly affected, with 20,000 small firms stopping all exports to the EU. A recent study has found that goods exports have fallen by 6.4% since the trade deal came into force in 2021.

While the Liberal Democrats welcome the steps, hesitant as they are, that this Government are taking to rebuild our relationship with the EU, I urge them to recognise that this should only be the start of the move towards a new bespoke UK-EU customs union, which this House voted for just yesterday. Independent analysis has shown that a closer trading relationship with the EU would boost GDP by 2.2% and would bring in roughly £25 billion of extra tax revenue every year, which would be crucial in fixing the public services that the Conservative party left broken.

**Simon Hoare:** I am not suggesting that the hon. Lady should have been hanging on my every word yesterday, but she was in the Chamber during that debate. I would not call 100 votes in favour and 100 votes against a win. A ten-minute rule Bill will go nowhere. Why her leader jumps up and down on social media as if he has just introduced Magna Carta, I fail to understand. Did she not hear me when I said that in conversations with the European Union, the EU itself will not entertain a new customs union with the United Kingdom? It wants to evolve the agreement that we have, as per the agreement, not have groundhog day. Which bit of that does her party not understand, or are the Liberal Democrats just ignoring it because it is convenient to do so?

**Sarah Olney:** I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech yesterday, which I thought he delivered very well. I am grateful to him for putting the points against our Bill. He is absolutely right: it was 100 on each side. However, it passed with the help of Madam Deputy Speaker and it has progressed to Second Reading. I take his point, but I say to him: how does he know? If there is a political movement for change in this country, a political will towards further integration with the European Union and a political will in favour of a customs union—

**Jayne Kirkham:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Sarah Olney:** I will finish this point, if I may. I think the EU would welcome that and would be very keen to have a conversation on that basis.

**Simon Hoare** *rose*—

**Sarah Olney:** I will give way to the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) and then I will come back to the hon. Gentleman.

**Jayne Kirkham:** I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Does she not agree that the trade agreement that was signed earlier this year and the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, which the EU now has a

mandate to discuss and which will hopefully be through by 2027, will make a massive difference to a lot of the exporting that is done? We are getting there; it takes time, but we are getting there.

**Sarah Olney:** That approach is very piecemeal and it is taking time. If we had a more wholehearted approach to a customs union, we would be able to unlock all sorts of benefits that are not possible with a piecemeal approach.

**Simon Hoare:** I suggest that a new customs union might take a little bit of time—maybe just a day or two. The hon. Lady asked a perfectly legitimate question: how do I know? In direct response to her party's motion, I raised the issue directly with representatives of the European Union, and the answer was, "No, thank you." That is what I know. I was not speculating; it was knowledge.

**Sarah Olney:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for sharing that knowledge with us all. Obviously, that is something to reflect upon. That is why we are pressing the Government. It is the Government who hold the purse strings and the pen here. It is up to them to make those advances on behalf of the country.

**Antonia Bance:** I will ask this question in a spirit of genuine curiosity, if I may. The trade deal done with the United States earlier in the year by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the former Business Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), guaranteed more than 200,000 jobs in the west midlands at Jaguar Land Rover and in its supply chain. What future does the hon. Member envisage for those jobs in her ideal scenario, where we go back into a customs union tomorrow? What would she say to my constituents and the people in our west midlands region about the prospects for those jobs? Has she thought about that and does she have a plan?

**Sarah Olney:** Our allies in America are becoming increasingly unreliable, and it is absolutely right that we should look elsewhere for our alliances, not just on trade but on defence. Recent moves just this week show us the shaky ground on which our agreements with the US are built. For the long-term future of the car industry in the west midlands and of our whole economy, we need to look to Europe and build up those relationships with our European neighbours, because our partnerships with our allies in the US are becoming increasingly unreliable. If I were one of the hon. Lady's constituents, I would be looking to the Government to fully investigate other opportunities for trade as well as with the US.

More broadly, as we look at issues affecting the workforce, Liberal Democrats welcome the industrial strategy that this Government have put in place, alongside a funding boost for skills and training. However, this progress stops well short of the fundamental reform we need to see if we are to address the workforce shortages that many industries are facing. British businesses must be able to hire the people they need with the skills they need. A key cause of workforce shortages is ill health. To tackle this deeply entrenched problem, the Government must do more to invest not only in our NHS but in social care, so that people can get the healthcare they need and rejoin the workforce more quickly.

Any business will tell you that the apprenticeship levy does not work, despite the Government's attempts at reform. Firms cannot get the funding they need to train staff, and hundreds of millions of pounds of funding is going unspent. The Liberal Democrats have long called for proper reform of the levy, replacing it with a wider skills and training levy that will give businesses real flexibility over how they spend money to train their staff. We were pleased to hear in the Budget that more details on the wider youth guarantee and the growth and skills levy package would be announced shortly, but can the Minister provide a timeline for when we can expect to see that detail?

Will the Minister also set out a timeline for the introduction of a youth mobility scheme, which would be beneficial to our economy, easing some of the burdens that the hospitality sector is facing? Businesses across the country, especially our small businesses, are struggling with unprecedentedly high costs, such as the Government's unfair national insurance rise, sky-high commercial energy bills and a broken business rates system. Struggling businesses mean fewer jobs and lower pay, so it is absolutely clear that we must look for ways to support local businesses and all those who rely on them.

2.2 pm

**Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): I am going to confine my remarks to the criticisms of the Employment Rights Bill, because it is where my experience sits and because I tried—in no small part thanks to the efforts of yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker—to get into Monday's debate on the Bill, but sadly I was not able to speak.

Having said that, I do also want to make the point that it is imperative that all hon. Members listen to small businesses, as I did this Saturday as I helped out Falkirk Delivers and the Falkirk business improvement district team, disentangling the Christmas lights and carrying ladders about Falkirk High Street as they set up the inaugural Falkirk festival of trees. I encourage any hon. Member to visit the vastly brilliant hospitality venues in Falkirk. With that out of the way, I will now focus my contribution on the impact of the Employment Rights Bill.

We have heard from the Opposition that small businesses are looking for more solutions, although I would point out that very few of them say that we should either cut welfare substantially in a way that would push children into poverty or rejoin the European Union as the immediate solution. It is imperative, though, that we talk about seasonal workers and not just the businesses that hire them; that is, of course, an important perspective, but it can often be a parochial view that involves talking to one side of the labour market—the employer—and failing to grasp the incentive system that we need to change in order to get people into work, as I believe the Employment Rights Bill will do. After years of hearing the Conservative Government using the stick—tough language about benefit sanctions, often kicking down at a workless generation that they directly caused and also directly failed to address when in government—the Conservatives now repeatedly slam the carrot: the Employment Rights Bill and this Government's broader agenda to make work pay again.

So in lieu, I will provide my own relatively recent experience to the House. With the exception of the pandemic—when I lost my insecure hospitality job as

one of the workers who was not provided with furlough assistance because of the nature of my contract, and I had to move back in with my parents for the first time since I was 17—I have not gone one week unemployed since I was a teenager. After long days at school and, later, long days of studying law, I spent my weekends working behind the bar at weddings and various functions in the hospitality industry and the retail industry. I did this because of the ethos my family instilled in me as a 16-year-old, when I got my first seasonal job at Argos, that nothing is better for your self-esteem, your progression, your social skills, your life, your independence and, ultimately, your wallet than to get yourself in, and keep yourself in, work.

I still remember hitting 1,000 orders on Christmas eve 2016 in that first job, only to be told on Boxing day, alongside many of my generation who worked hard in that seasonal job and made sure that the business was running, that I was not going to be kept on. We have to remind ourselves that the workers who work over Christmas in hospitality, in retail and in gift shops are the economy that we are talking about here. They are the ones who consistently keep the lights on in our high streets. In my experience, working on the minimum wage, insecure and low pay, high turnover and insecure hours are major characteristics of the sectors I have worked in. Until I moved out of the hospitality sector in June 2022, my income was sometimes enough to pay the rent on my digs and for my bills, food and the occasional trip to the pub or a Falkirk match—but, sadly, sometimes it was not.

This is still the reality for far too many who work in hospitality, retail, social care and many other sectors, and it is ultimately the reason I got into politics: to improve the lot of those who, despite grafting and seeing little result for themselves or their families and sometimes working in quite deep poverty, still went in each day and got on with it. That same spirit lives on today in the young hospitality workers who are currently in dispute with their employer at the Village Hotel and at Vue in Glasgow. The hard-working generation that I am a part of are down there once again, organising and demanding better, because they are contributing and keeping our economy going, and they deserve fair pay and conditions over Christmas.

More than anything, this was the reason I ran for election: I saw in my generation the corrosive social sickness that the previous Government neglectfully allowed this country, and especially my generation, to be infected with. After 14 long years, many in my generation looked at the workplace with no prospect of being able to build a better life than the one their parents had. I believe that the last Parliament was the first in history in which living standards went down. Off the back of that, too many in my generation saw that they could either work hard and see little reward or sit about and see little reward as well.

Something had to radically change. This country had to make work pay again. That was the message in the manifesto that Labour stood on and promised the country that we would deliver if we had the privilege of winning office. This is what the Employment Rights Bill is designed to do, with day one rights to statutory sick pay, allowing workers who fall ill to bounce back into the workplace quicker and healthier, and day one rights to paternity leave—those were secured this week; I am

[*Euan Stainbank*]

grateful to the Minister—meaning that fathers can spend those precious first few days at home with their newly-born bairns, which I imagine will be crucial for many families this Christmas.

Having said that, as Ministers are aware, I was desperately disappointed earlier this week when the concession was made to the Tories and Lib Dems in the other place on day one rights against unfair dismissal. Those same peers have, throughout the passage of the Employment Rights Bill, fought to bargain on behalf of the bad bosses to weaken the sick pay and paternity leave of millions of ordinary people. The obstructions of the other place to delivering that core manifesto commitment, which will benefit so many in my generation—those who are seasonal workers, to boot—must be addressed by the Government at another time and, from my perspective, with far more radical intent in regard to the other place. I cannot and I will not forget the workers I have pulled pints alongside.

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. An 18 to 20-year-old this Christmas who is serving a pint will be earning £1.40 an hour more. Does he agree that this demonstrates Labour's commitment to young people?

**Euan Stainbank:** Yes, absolutely. I also find it disgraceful that the Leader of the Opposition suggested this week that we should freeze the minimum wage. That would mean that, in later years, the workers who are going to keep the lights on this Christmas in the gift shops, the pubs and the restaurants would be entitled to less as inflation went up—[*Interruption.*] Well, they are part of the economy. If we did not have the workforce keeping the lights on in the first place, there would be no restaurants, no pubs and, sadly, no Christmas custom. That is the experience of far too many people in hospitality.

This is the fourth Christmas in my working life that I am going to be able to spend with my family instead of working in the hospitality industry. If any of those on the Opposition Benches can share their experiences, I would be very interested to hear them, considering how much experience in business they utilised earlier in the debate. Throughout the progress of my career in this place and the votes that we make, I am not going to forget the workers I pulled pints beside and served tables with. I have heard too many stories about kids being bullied, belittled and booted out of the workplace by bad bosses during the first two years of their working lives. I do worry—and I have shared my concern with Ministers—that, especially in the seasonal work sector, this will now simply happen before the six-month mark. We should return to and address that later in the Parliament.

I expect nothing from Opposition Members but an apology to the 1.5 million people who were put into in-work poverty during the shambolic 14-year tenure of the Conservatives. They built a low-wage, insecure, low-productivity economy, all while practising austerity, and now they have come back to this House with essentially the same ideas but with 200 less MPs.

**Bradley Thomas:** What would the hon. Gentleman say to the 89,000 people who have lost their hospitality jobs over the last 12 months?

**Euan Stainbank:** An extensive amount of hospitality jobs were lost over the previous five years as well. I speak to small businesses in my constituency every week, and I do not deny that they have been hard pressed for a number of years. I know, because I was there—I was working in the industry.

**Bradley Thomas:** Would the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Euan Stainbank:** It is important that we back our hospitality sector, and I said earlier that I think there should be more to come. Small businesses in the hospitality sector have talked to me about their energy prices.

**Bradley Thomas:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way a second time?

**Euan Stainbank:** I will give way, given the hon. Gentleman's insistence. Maybe he will mention some experience of hospitality workers as well.

**Bradley Thomas:** I thank the hon. Member for giving way to me a second time. Some 89,000 hospitality jobs have been lost during the past 12 months. Youth unemployment is up, with 12% of 16 to 24-year-olds currently unemployed. There are an estimated 40% fewer seasonal jobs this year—the biggest decline in 15 years. Energy costs are up. Business rates are up. Confidence is down. Regulation is up. Does he acknowledge that it is not a coincidence that all that is happening at the same time, and that it must, at least in part, be related to the really poor choices made by this Government?

**Euan Stainbank:** Although I do not accept the premise, I think it is important to recognise that hospitality has struggled over a number of years. I am not in any way denying that. However, I do not know why the Employment Rights Bill is mentioned in the Opposition Day motion, given that its provisions have not yet come into place.

It is important that we listen to hospitality and give feedback, but it is also important not to discourage young people from seeking job opportunities in the first place. That has happened for far too long—for the past 14 years under the hon. Gentleman's Government.

**Alison Griffiths:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Euan Stainbank:** As I am going to draw to a close, I will not take any more interventions.

Moaning about the rates of maternity pay or proposing to freeze the minimum wage is not likely to incentivise more young people to grasp their first opportunity. It is not likely to encourage the people we are talking about here—the NEETs of my generation—into the workplace. This Government are delivering a fair wage and fair working conditions, but we do need to go further and faster, both on employment rights—instead of stepping back at the first sign of opposition from the Tories and the Lib Dems—and on support for the hospitality industry in my constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) pointed out something quite important: because of what this Government have done, the younger workers in our constituencies are going to be £1.40 an hour better off in their workplace. I only wish that, back when I got my first seasonal job, we had a Government who saw the value of my labour over the Christmas period.

2.13 pm

**Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Tourism and hospitality offers seasonal, flexible and part-time work, and that is why many people, particularly young people, choose to work in that sector. The UK tourism and hospitality sector is one of the most taxed sectors in Europe, so what did the Government do for the sector? They reduced flexibility and increased taxes, and that is having real-world consequences. It is little wonder that 55% of the jobs lost under this Government have been lost from retail, hospitality and leisure.

Youth unemployment is up, too, which is having real-world consequences in coastal communities such as those on the Isle of Wight. Towns that are reliant on the visitor economy, like Ryde, Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor, are seriously concerned that this is just the start, and that the Government are making plans for a tourism tax, which would hit small businesses even further. On the Isle of Wight, 38% of our local economy is based on tourism and visitors. If the Government tax something, we can expect less of it, and we expect fewer visitors, which will hit our economy. It is local businesses, not just those in my constituency, that provide the first job opportunity for so many of our young people. Young people may want part-time, flexible work, because they are in education, yet the Government say that the state knows best, and through their unemployment rights Bill, they have reduced the flexibility that benefits those looking for work.

The Government have already made some important U-turns, such as getting rid of the ridiculous idea of day one rights—by the way, the previous Labour Government never sought to introduce such rights—but they need to go further. What do I say to small business owners and to hard-working families on the Isle of Wight when they see job opportunities disappear and their taxes go up? The only answer I have for them is: more tax for more welfare. This is happening because today the Government want to grow an already substantial welfare bill. They did not want to do so last summer. Last summer, the Government tried to reduce welfare, though not by much, but they had to abandon their plans while a Minister was delivering a speech in this Chamber because their Back Benchers said no. This is not a Government being led from the front; they are being led from their Back Benches, and we have a caretaker Prime Minister in office. Having abandoned the Prime Minister's plans to cut welfare, the Chancellor has done the opposite and increased welfare spending.

The Government have a solution for the challenge that tourism and hospitality faces in finding people to do the jobs. We heard just a few days ago that their solution is to encourage people to do those jobs while they are on welfare, because there are vacancies, though jobs were lost because of the Government's taxation policy. In fact, there are more people on welfare because of taxes on small businesses, tourism and hospitality, and now the Government are asking those people, who once had a job in the private sector and are now reliant on the state, to help them out by doing some of that work. That is both socialism and incompetence, and ultimately the whole country loses out, because the economy is grinding to a halt, with inflation and unemployment both up.

The best way to fund public services is to grow the economy. Growing the economy would increase the tax take without any taxes going up. In fact, the Government could reduce taxes and increase the tax take if the economy grows. That is the money that pays for public services. The Minister said that the shadow Secretary of State was like Scrooge for setting out the severe challenges that this Government's economic policy presents for hard-working families and businesses. It is not being like Scrooge to hold up a mirror to decision makers to show them the outcome of their decisions. It does not matter whether it is Christmas time or any other time; the Minister and the Government need to hear the hard truth, and it is the role of Opposition Members to say it. We are not going to be put off from doing so.

2.18 pm

**Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carers and a member of the Public Accounts Committee. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) for speaking so much about his personal experience of working in the hospitality industry. Like him, I started out in the industry. I worked as a waitress in a hotel in Ilkley for just £1.70 an hour, so I am pleased that the Labour Government are doing all they can to raise the minimum wage for our youngest workers.

Under the guise of wanting to support seasonal workers, the Opposition are actually looking to scrap the biggest uplift in workers' rights in a generation, which this House recently voted on. The Employment Rights Bill is a landmark Bill that delivers on this Labour Government's promise to put an end to insecurity, poor productivity and low pay for working people. The Conservatives, along with Reform and the Liberal Democrats, opposed ending exploitative zero-hour contracts, ending fire and rehire, day one rights on paternity, parental and bereavement leave and giving statutory sick pay to 1.3 million of our lowest-paid workers.

I would therefore like to focus my remarks on the benefits of the Employment Rights Bill, and what it means, particularly for adult social care and unpaid workers. While care workers are not necessarily seasonal, they have a lot in common with seasonal workers: low pay, insecurity and variable hours each week. It was a tragedy that during covid so many of our hard-working and dedicated care workers feared staying at home when they were ill because they were not entitled to statutory sick pay. I am therefore proud that this Labour Government are strengthening those care workers' rights. What is good for workers is good for business, so I do not see this as a choice between the two. Take unpaid and family carers. Flexibility is hugely important to many of those who juggle care and work. The Bill will ensure that unpaid family carers, many of whom are women, can apply for a job, confident that they will have rights from day one. Workers with guaranteed hours will not have to worry about whether they can feed their kids or pay their bills. Keeping people in work, reducing recruitment costs and absenteeism, and boosting productivity—those of the results of giving security to workers. Healthy workers and a healthy workplace are better for workers, business and our economy.

[Anna Dixon]

The Employment Rights Bill makes good on the promise of a fair pay agreement for care workers. The Health Foundation's analysis has found that one in five residential care workers live in poverty. I find that to be an absolute travesty, given the vital work that care workers do, looking after older and disabled adults, day in, day out. It is perhaps not surprising, then—given that the public recognise what great work those care workers do—that 77% of the public believe that care workers are paid too little. Not only are the Government delivering on the fair pay agreement for social care workers through the Bill, but they have already ensured a fairer funding formula for local authorities, and I hope that as that gets negotiated, it will result in a fairer package of terms and conditions. Many not-for-profit providers already pay the national living wage, but it is important that care workers feel that they have a career, and that caring is a good job for them. Hopefully we can attract more young people into those sorts of jobs, and give them a more secure career in care work. They should have not low pay and zero-hour contracts, but guaranteed work and better pay, so that they can take that first step in a career in health and care. Those changes will make a huge difference to those who provide amazing care and support for disabled adults and older people.

The second issue that I want to highlight is the introduction of a fair work agency. Members may be wondering what that has to do with care workers, but sadly, under the Tories, the decision taken, with no plan or preparation, to open up the skilled worker visa to care workers resulted in the horrific exploitation of care workers. Overseas agencies were charging extortionate fees. New businesses were set up and registered here solely to employ overseas workers. I have heard of cases in which those workers were given tied accommodation and zero-hour contracts, and were expected to travel far away to get care work. As a result, they got into debt. If they complained, they were sacked. With no sponsor, they could not take any other job in the economy here. That is verging on modern slavery, and that is why I am glad that the new fair work agency will have powers to crack down on those unscrupulous employers that leave workers so susceptible to abuse.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): There is a bit of a debate going on. Unemployment has gone up every month since the Government have been in power. The Government say that is the fault of the last Government; we Opposition Members say that it is the fault of two Budgets that have been anti-business. If the hon. Member has faith in the Chancellor's policies, will she put her money where her mouth is and say that unemployment in Shipley and across the country will come down for the first time? If she could put a month and a year on it, that would be great testament to her faith in the Chancellor.

**Anna Dixon:** Clearly, the package of changes that the Chancellor brought in are a huge boost to the economy and jobs. There is investment going into businesses, and support for scaling up businesses. I have brilliant businesses in my constituency, like Jack Pennington Ltd, which is investing in a whole new warehouse. It has the confidence to base its business in Shipley, and to expand. Some of the capital funds will go a long way on this. There are

also the apprenticeships and the youth guarantee, and we are already seeing youth unemployment coming down; I am confident that will continue.

We still have too many vacancies and unfilled posts in care work, and a lot of that is because it is a very hard job, both physically and emotionally, and many people working in care found that they could get a better paid job at Aldi. We have to lift up the value of care work and value it more as a society to attract people. There are jobs there, and we need to encourage young people into vital jobs like care work.

The Public Accounts Committee was highly critical of the lack of assessment of the exploitation risks that led to vulnerable migrant workers facing debt bondage and unfair conditions, so as I say, I am pleased with the creation of the fair work agency. I hope that—perhaps the Minister could address this—it will also help tackle the problem of overseas recruitment fraud.

Care workers are exploited in other ways, too, like other part-time workers. They are often not paid for travel or for night sitting, even though there have been legal cases to say that they should. Again, the fair work agency, as I understand it, will address that issue for those underpaid workers who are not even receiving the minimum wage.

In conclusion, I support the Government amendment to the Opposition motion. I believe that Labour is pro-business and pro-worker. The care sector is a major part of our economy. It employs some 1.6 million people, as well as providing vital care and support to millions of people. I hope that these reforms will be the beginning of us creating the foundations for a national care service.

2.28 pm

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): Let us take a look at the amendment which Mr Speaker has selected in the name of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's amendment tells us that he

"welcomes the policy paper"

on

"the plan for small and medium sized businesses, which sets out"—

wait for it—

"a comprehensive vision for productivity and success".

[*Interruption.*] "Wow" indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) says from a sedentary position—she is less well trained in keeping her excitement levels under control. After 14 years of opposition and 18 months in government: a policy paper, a plan, a comprehensive vision—that is the sum of the contribution from the Treasury Bench towards these important and vital parts of the sector. The Government need to learn, I suggest, a key and important lesson: policy papers, plans and comprehensive visions deliver of themselves nothing. They create no jobs. They give no certainty. They provide no confidence to employees, employers, investors, entrepreneurs, innovators or consumers. Strategy and policy are not the same things. Vision and delivery are not two sides of the same coin.

The Government tell us in their amendment that their Employment Rights Bill

"will help season workers by bringing the UK's outdated employment laws into the 21st century".

Well, I would dispute first and foremost the idea that our employment laws are outdated; I think they have been organic and iterative over the decades, as one would expect. But the Government will not help seasonal workers if they cannot become seasonal workers because putative employers have neither the confidence to employ nor the headroom to create jobs and pay salaries. We are in fantasy land, with a fantasy idea about how to run an economy: we just legislate and, hey presto—pantomime-like—it happens. A strategy is published and—bingo!—it is all resolved. That is not the case.

This first example will, I am sure, be of enormous interest to the Labour party. Mark Fulton, a constituent of mine in Tolpuddle, is the landlord of the Martyrs Inn.

**Antonia Bance:** Lovely pub!

**Simon Hoare:** It is a lovely pub. The hon. Lady has been and has not been barred yet. Anybody who knows their trade union history, as I know she does, will know about the Tolpuddle martyrs in 1834. The pub is named after them.

**Antonia Bance:** Excellent sandwiches, too!

**Simon Hoare:** The pub was bought by the village for £500,000. It is a community asset-type pub. One significant stakeholder is the TUC itself, which decided that thirsty trade unionists might, after the martyrs memorial, enjoy a pint and, indeed, one of the excellent sandwiches that the hon. Lady has referenced.

After the Budget, Mark Fulton wrote to me:

“With the impact of this Budget, we risk losing these vital community hubs that are so important to our local life and economy.”

He, like others in all our constituencies, has been arguing for—and this freedom exists now we are outside the European Union—a bespoke reduction of VAT on pub sales, including the wet trade. We are asking publicans, who provide far more in the community hubs that Mark talks about, to fight with one hand tied behind their backs, when in essence they are paying a VAT rate of 20% compared with the 2% paid by supermarkets.

Business rates are clearly going to go up. That is, again, the fantasy world of this Government. One sector representative group after another tells the Government that, by the Government’s own figures and calculations, business rates will rise. “Oh no,” says the Minister. “Everybody else is wrong. I am right, because I am a Minister of the Crown.” This is the politics of the emperor’s new clothes. It is about time that one or two people on the Government Benches stood up and told the Treasury team that many of their policies leave the Government naked as they try to garner and foster a small, entrepreneurial business sector.

On employer national insurance and increases in the minimum wages, I quote Mark Fulton again:

“The latest rise risks opportunities for young people to be employed in our sector.”

He goes on to remind us that

“40% of young people begin their careers in hospitality—the sector plays a crucial role in training, upskilling and supporting social mobility.”

All that is put at risk. Surely, irrespective of geography or party affiliation, we should all be worried if a cogent argument is deployed about social mobility being reduced as a direct result of Government policy.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) said in his excellent speech, many of the harmful decisions taken in the recent Budget were not of the Government’s choosing. They were, in essence, a fulfilment of what the Chancellor rightly said to rebellious Back Benchers on welfare: “Rebel if you like, and we’ll abandon if we have to, but there’ll be a cost that will have to be paid. That cost will be taxed, and there will be a concomitant diminution in confidence among employers and customers.”

I could quote several publicans, but Barbara Cossins, who owns and runs the Langton Arms in Tarrant Monkton, would have my guts for garters if I did not take this opportunity to mention her. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) knows it well and says what a good pub it is. Barbara Cossins replicates many of the points made by Mark Fulton, but adds that rural pubs in tourist areas are particularly reliant on seasonal summer trade. They have to pay business rates, but their major competitor in those small rural settings, Airbnb, pays no business rates at all. It is an un-level playing field.

The Government had an opportunity—and they possibly still do, as the Finance Bill progresses—to try to level that playing field. We are asking these important sectors of our economy to go into bat for UK plc—to create the jobs that create the tax that funds our public services—but at every step and turn, this Government seem hellbent on hobbling and hamstringing them and tying their hands behind their backs.

The Government have the laudable aim of seeing housebuilding increase. Who does not? Again, that is an important part of social mobility—we know that a lot of seasonal jobs are created in the construction sector. However, Travis Perkins sent out a customer email just today that said that, from 1 January, supplier increases in prices will come in across the industry.

**Antonia Bance:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Simon Hoare:** I will, but let me finish this point.

Roofing prices are up 7%, bricks 8%, blocks 9%, landscaping 8%, drainage 8%, and plaster, plasterboard and cladding 7%. Costs can be increased, and companies can absorb as much as they can, but at some point, as Travis Perkins points out, those increased costs can no longer be self-absorbed and must be passported off to the consumer. When the consumer’s costs go up, their margins of profit decrease, and their likelihood, potential and appetite for creating additional jobs disappears, like an early spring frost, arguably never to return.

**Antonia Bance:** I am so glad that someone has mentioned the construction industry. However, the hon. Member is talking not about seasonal jobs but about contract work. The key to maintaining sustained employment in the construction sector is having a strong pipeline of repeated projects so that people can build their skills and move on to the next contract, and then the one after that, to build a career in that way. Does he agree that the Government’s announcement of construction technical excellence colleges across the country—including close to my area, at the end of the new tramline in Dudley—£39 billion over the next 10 years for sustainable housebuilding, including social and affordable housing, and the largest sustained infrastructure funding in four decades, means that there will be a sustainable pipeline—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order.

**Simon Hoare:** Over the next 10 years—another “wow” moment. Jam tomorrow—well, we don’t even know if it is jam tomorrow; it is a promise of something that might materialise, but these sectors need support now.

Let me conclude my remarks by highlighting what I fear will be a terrible downward-pulling spiral in confidence from investors, employers and consumers. I am not an economist, but it seems to me self-evident that if we increase the costs of employing people, we are likely to see fewer people employed. Someone might not expand their business; they might not create that new job.

General elections create a lack of confidence in the sector. This Government were returned with a massive majority, which should be giving stability and confidence to the marketplace. In fact—it is the greatest perversity that we have seen since July 2024—the complete reverse is taking place. Why is that? Last year, the Chancellor created in her own mind a black hole. She decided to fill it by additional taxes, and she assured the House and country that it was a one-off. Growth was going to do everything else, spending was going to be looked at, and everything would be hunky-dory. Well, that did not come to pass. The Government changed the environment, and we had the Budget just a few weeks ago—fabrication, being economical with the actualité. That is saying to potential investors and job creators, “Well we thought we might have believed them on year one, but year two transpired not to be the case.” How many more acts that would make the Artful Dodger blush will they be dipping into our pockets next time, next time, and the next time? We will have a rebellion on that, or on that, and that rebellion will have to be funded not by a recalibration of where Government spending is allocated, but by increasing the pot that the Government have to spend by increasing taxes.

I took the advice of our Clerks, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to whether I should conclude with a certain word or not. The advice was that I would be better to slightly spell it out, so I will take that advice. North Dorset is not a constituency of large firms. They are family businesses, most will be micro, some will be small, and precious few will be medium-sized. A small business owner in my constituency has a family business that he has grown and he was seeking to employ. He wanted his kids to get involved with it as well. He said to me, “Simon, you can tell that Rachel Reeves”—because he said “Rachel Reeves”, not the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the right hon. Lady—“to describe this Budget, in a few easy words for the media headline, as ‘The why the eff should I bother Budget’” Why the eff should he bother to invest, to create, and to provide opportunity for our young to then pay the taxes to deliver the public services that we require?

But if the Government do not give an eff, Opposition Members certainly do. There is an alternative Conservative vision for this, and I look forward with colleagues to presenting that to the country over the coming months.

2.43 pm

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I refer Members to my membership of Unison and the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain. In my constituency of Scarborough

and Whitby there are thousands of seasonal job opportunities each year, and as well as an enlarged tourism sector during the summer months, there is regular seasonal employment for the rest of the year, such as the fabulous Scarborough Lights festival each and every winter—it is going on at the moment. Overall, 11% of working people in Scarborough and Whitby are employed in retail, with another 20% working in hospitality. The Employment Rights Bill will boost and protect those workers against zero-hour contracts and last-minute shift cancellations.

Having worked as a freelancer for many years, I understand the pressures that workers in the so-called gig economy face. Too many women have to constantly juggle their work around caring responsibilities, with no certainty as to whether they will work enough to pay the bills each month. I was one of those women. The Bill will establish day-one parental rights, and strengthen statutory sick pay, transforming the world of work for millions of women. In fact, 40% of unemployed women say that flexible working hours will likely get them into work. If Conservative Members claim to be pro-growth, they cannot disregard the economic benefits of legal protections that will help women to enter and stay in the workforce. The Employment Rights Bill protects both employers and workers by implementing common-sense protections and real financial provisions that will drive growth in coastal communities such as mine and across the country, and I fully support the Government amendment.

2.46 pm

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): As it comes towards Christmas, I tend to think of the shows I like to watch, and one is “Blackadder Goes Forth”. Near the end there is a famous quote. Blackadder is finally trying to get away, but he cannot. He knows he is going to go over the top and he says, “Well, it rhymes with clucking bell”. For me, that is what many in my constituency who run businesses are now feeling about not one but two Labour Budgets.

When I think about high streets in Earl Shilton, Barwell and Hinckley, I think about our little cafés and restaurants, the shops, and the pubs. They are really feeling the pressure. The Government came in on a mandate of raising taxes—that is true—but to the tune of £7 billion or perhaps £8 billion, not £40 billion in the first Budget, and £26 billion in the second. Every Government may need to raise taxes—the Conservatives did it when we were in government—but the problem with the current Government, and the issue hitting all my businesses, is the toxic concoction of everything changing at once. There is constriction around the whole idea of growth. We see that at micro level on the high streets of Hinckley and Burbage, and at macro level as a country, with ever tightening red tape and tax, all under the auspices that we are supposed to be growing as a country. We have seen inflation and unemployment go up, and growth stagnate. That is the reality that the country is facing, and so are my high streets.

**Alison Hume:** Under 14 years of the Conservatives, productivity and growth stagnated—the worst in the G7. Would the hon. Gentleman like to enlighten Members as to whether he thinks that helped or hindered businesses and their employees?

**Dr Evans:** I would love to elucidate, because if we go back to 2010, we had to deal with the financial crisis, and we had to borrow £158 billion to deal with that. Then we had to get the coffers back in the right position, and we were just about doing that before the pandemic hit and we had to borrow another £400 billion. The hon. Lady was not here under the previous Government, but every time we were here, the Opposition were asking us to spend more, and we are now feeling the pressures of having to deal with that.

The hon. Lady talks about what Labour inherited, but it also inherited the fastest growing economy in the G7. We also had inflation at target and very little unemployment, but all those things are now changing under this Government, because of their policies. It is easy to see why. In the first Budget, there was an increase in the national living wage and in national insurance contributions, and business rates relief for the hospitality sector was cut from 75% to 40%. If we fast forward to this Budget, the national living wage has been raised again and the business rates relief has been cut again.

Now the Government have come forward to say, “We are putting transition measures in place”, but those measures will mean a 15% increase for the vast majority of businesses. That increase is capped—I give the Government credit for that—but for the vast majority of businesses, the increase is 15% this year, and then up to 30%, 40% or 70% over three years. That is the prospect for hospitality businesses. They were already struggling because of the very nature of the pandemic as well as high inflation because of the war in Ukraine, so the situation is difficult for those businesses—they are the most vulnerable ones—yet the toxic concoction put in place by this Government is making things worse.

I will go down my high streets this Christmas to speak to those businesses, but I fear what lies in prospect for them as a result of this Government’s actions. How will the measures that the Government have put in place encourage those businesses and help them to move forward? I do not think that Labour Members are anti-business and I agree that they want to support workers, but they are blinkered and naive to think about giving extra rights and pay to workers without taking into consideration the consequences of what may well happen. It is all very well having increased pay, but for people who do not have a job, that is an increase in nothing. That is the heart of the problem.

We want to see more secure pay. The previous Prime Minister, the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, talked about high productivity and high-value jobs, which all hon. Members want to see. The question is how we get there. We do not get there by tying a tight noose around the businesses that will drive those jobs, which is a real concern for me. Why would anyone take the risk of setting up a restaurant in Market Bosworth or a new pub in Donisthorpe? Why would they take on the responsibility of the livelihood of their employees? Most employers are good employers and care deeply about their workforce.

**Alison Griffiths:** To reflect on my hon. Friend’s point about risk, employers are taking personal risk when they set up businesses and employ people. When they have so much cost piled on them, that risk-benefit equation evaporates, and with it the jobs that they deliver to other people in their communities.

**Dr Evans:** My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I bow to her experience as I know that she has run and been involved with many businesses. She speaks the truth about what businesses and risk-takers are looking at in this country. They are saying, “Why would I take that risk? Why would I take on that responsibility if there is not any reward?” I would have had more truck with the Government if they set out what they were trying to achieve over the next three or four Budgets sequentially. They could then have increased national insurance contributions, for example, as a one-off, and built around that. However, the problem is that there is a toxic concoction of measures all coming in one go.

**John Slinger:** The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech. On his point about risk, Conservative Members always look at that through the lens of the employer. There are, of course, risks—I spent most of my career in the private sector, so I have some experience of this—but does he accept that employees also take risks? When they take up a job, they need to be paid sufficiently so that they can live their lives with dignity, look after their children, and so on. Does he accept that a balance must be struck between people seeking jobs and employers providing jobs?

**Dr Evans:** The hon. Gentleman is right. As an MP, he will be an employer. No doubt, he is a good employer who offers the members of his team good terms and he cares deeply about the staff who he is looking after. However, we have taxpayer-funded jobs, but the private sector has to generate the funding to employ people, so those businesses have to take the risk and work out whether there will be a job in the first place. Worse still, because of the Government’s Budget choices, many cafés and pubs are looking to reduce the hours that they open, to reduce their staffing hours or even to close because they cannot make the numbers add up. We are seeing a cumulative effect, which is having an impact at a micro level on the likes of Twycross and at a macro level on the whole country, with every industry speaking out and saying that it is having problems.

I had hoped that the Government might listen to those ideas. The Government’s mantra has always been that their No.1 mission is growth, but all the measures that they have put in place are anti-growth. We are seeing the results of that, with inflation being higher.

**Lincoln Jopp:** The Conservatives are often accused by Labour Members of talking down the economy, but from my recollection, over its 14 years the Conservative party set the conditions for the creation of 800 jobs per day, on average. I have just checked the recent statistics and the number is running at about 373 under the current Government. In addition, net inflation has risen every month that the Government have been in power, since July last year. Will my hon. Friend take an intervention from any one of the very few Members present on the Government Benches who is prepared to say when they think that unemployment might start to fall from the record levels of low unemployment that they inherited from the last Government?

**Dr Evans:** I will take an intervention on that point, if any Labour Member would like to make one. More importantly, my hon. Friend correctly makes the point that it is the Government’s job to set the framework. There is no such thing as Government money: it is

[Dr Luke Evans]

taxpayers' money, earned by those who create the wealth. It is businesses and the associated workforce that provide the public sector with the money it needs to do its job—it is that simple.

In my trade as a doctor, we talk about A-B-C-D-E when it comes to a patient. There is no use dealing with the circulation—the heart—if the person does not have a clear airway. The same applies here: we need to have an economy that is growing and thriving to be able to give the foundation to the funding for the likes of the NHS or education. This is where the Government might be slightly wrong and where they have got the balance wrong, about which we heard from the hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger). If the system is tilted too far and made too tight for people ever to take a risk, we are not going to have the tax inflow in the first place. Worse still, we have seen 16,000 millionaires and counting leave the country.

**Mr Adnan Hussain** (Blackburn) (Ind): I had the pleasure of meeting two risk-takers in my constituency this weekend: Habbak Watches and AutoLab. They are run by people who are simply wanting to grow their businesses and offer chances and opportunities to young people in my town. I have also met many micro and small businesses, all of whom felt neglected and that they were not being offered the support that they deserve. I support the Employment Rights Bill and I support the rights of employees, but I am beginning wonder and worry: are we pitting employers against employees, and vice versa?

**Dr Evans:** I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention. There is a risk of doing that, but we have to remember that it does not need to be like that. There are many good employees and many good employers, far more than hon. Members like to talk about. Our job is to protect those margins. If we make the margins too tight, we hinder the very people who are doing a good job, which I think is his inference and what I hear in my constituency. That is why I am asking the Government to rethink this balance and to reconsider the toxic concoction of legislation, red tape and taxation all at once causing such a big problem. At the end of the day, we can have as many employment rights as we want, but if we do not have businesses driving growth and providing jobs, they will not apply—it is as simple as that.

In conclusion, at the end of "Blackadder Goes Forth", Blackadder resigns himself to going over the top, but Baldrick taps him on the shoulder and says, "Sir, I have a cunning plan." I hope that the Chancellor has a cunning plan to deal with this situation, but I will not wait with bated breath.

2.58 pm

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for opening the debate and for taking my slightly too long intervention. I also thank Sir Tony Robinson for his visit to Harlow before the general election. He had a cunning plan to get me elected as the MP for Harlow, and with that particular cunning plan, he was successful.

Let me start by thanking businesses in my constituency for everything that they do. Later this week, I am visiting the wonderful Stort Valley Gifting to get my

Christmas presents; I am taking the lead from Robert Halfon, my predecessor in this House, who did the same thing. I will talk about another Stort valley business, Lea Valley Growers Association, which is in my constituency—I am sure there will be a joke from the Conservatives about growth, but I will let them make it themselves. I met with it recently and will continue to meet with it, as I do with other businesses in my constituency.

I mention specifically the Lea Valley Growers Association because it uses seasonal workers, particularly seasonal workers from EU countries. I met with it recently, alongside Nazeing parish council. What I found particularly heartening about that meeting was how keen Nazeing parish council was to work with the Lea Valley Growers Association to support seasonal workers and make them feel like part of the community during the time they spend in the UK.

I am trying not to look at the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) as I say this, but the association mentioned concerns with the additional red tape following Britain leaving the EU. I ask the Minister to consider that when she winds up. How can we cut red tape to ensure that the Lea Valley Growers Association, which does an important job growing food for people in my constituency and across the UK, gets the seasonal workers it likes. A fact raised in the meeting was that many of these seasonal workers come over to this country to work in Nazeing on a regular basis. The association has said in recent years that it has seen some of those families—they are often families—not returning.

I welcome the measures the Government have taken in the Budget to support businesses and the workers they employ, such as tackling late payments, reducing regulatory burdens and extending the grace period for business premises. I also welcome the fact that Harlow is one of the places that will benefit from the Pride in Place programme, which will look at how we can revive our public spaces. I always try to find cross-party agreement when I give my speeches, and I hope we can all agree that our high streets face challenges. I look forward to seeing how we can revitalise Harlow. In the Minister's summing up, I ask her to consider how we can cut the red tape and bureaucracy holding back the businesses that I speak to.

I welcome the commitment of the Co-op to bring down the cost of thousands of items as a direct result of the Government's changes to business rates. I declare an interest as a Labour and Co-operative MP.

I will very briefly talk about the ERB and my favourite Swedish furniture maker. People often criticise and say, "IKEA is not a British company," but it employs British workers, and it absolutely welcomes the Employment Rights Bill. When I met with IKEA earlier this year, its No. 1 complaint about the ERB was that it was taking too long to implement. It was very interesting that when I spoke to staff at IKEA, I heard that they are very happy in their jobs and very loyal to a company that treats them incredibly well. We should be thankful for that.

We must turn the page on insecure, poor-productivity and low-paid jobs. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) is not in her place, but I welcome the comments that she made about the need to support unpaid carers. I take any opportunity to talk about unpaid carers and young carers in this place—I appreciate

that this is slightly off topic, Madam Deputy Speaker—because they are a hugely important part of this country and make a huge difference.

Ultimately, as I said in one of my interventions, being in government is about making choices—sometimes difficult choices. Under the last Government, we saw austerity that led to our schools and hospitals being at breaking point. We need to invest in those vital services. It will make a huge difference to people in Harlow to be able to go to the hospital and actually get appointments. It will mean that they can get back to work and continue to contribute to the economy.

Thank you for your time today, Madam Deputy Speaker. I look forward to hearing further contributions to the debate.

3.4 pm

**Dame Caroline Dineneage** (Gosport) (Con): As I mentioned to the Minister when he was in his place earlier, I started my first business at the age of 19. That is what I did for 20 years, before I became an MP—I ran businesses. That is why I am so upset at some of the ways in which this Government have behaved: I understand viscerally how taking that leap takes everything somebody has. It takes their time, money, energy and social life, and it is all a risk.

For so many months—and years, in some cases—people work almost without pay, but the reward is fantastic, because they can employ people, create jobs, offer opportunities, change lives and futures, and generate their own supply chain for other small businesses to do the same. They can play a really valuable part in their local community. That is what small businesses across our communities do every single day. They are brave, resilient and dedicated, and they need to be valued, but over recent years so many of them have been suffering. The pandemic took a huge toll on them, and that was followed by the energy crisis. Now, worst of all, we have a Government who pledged to see their contribution and to help them deliver growth, but this Government are letting them down.

I feel viscerally that enterprise and entrepreneurship should be rewarded, which is why I run local schemes in my constituency. I have a competition for the best independent shop running at the moment, in line with Small Business Saturday last weekend. It is the sixth year that I have run this competition, and we get the results on Saturday—it is very hard-fought on my Facebook site. Thousands of residents are voting, and they love doing it, because they like to show how much these independent traders and little shops mean to local jobs, to our communities and to keeping our high streets vibrant and compelling.

Last year, I held a best pub competition. After another very fierce public vote, the winner was the Windsor Castle in Hardway. When I visited the pub to give its team their certificate, I saw the time, effort and pride that they put into everything they do—the programme of events, the decorations, and the hospitality they offer—just like all the other pubs that were on the longlist. I saw how much local people value their local, but the message from these pubs is stark: they are suffering.

Despite the Chancellor's spin, the average hospitality business will see business rates rise by almost £20,000 over the next three years. The statistics have already been

mentioned very effectively today by the shadow Minister, but these numbers are real lives, real jobs and real futures, and that £20,000 represents an existential threat to the margins of these businesses; it will drive them to extinction.

Combined with rising energy costs, after the Government promised to tackle overheads, and last year's rise in national insurance, this is a perfect storm. It is having a direct impact on jobs in my Gosport constituency, particularly jobs for young people. It is also closing off traditional routes into work. As a parent, I know that a part-time Saturday seasonal job is valuable—we probably all did one. My first job was at Olivers shoe shop on Waterloo high street. I got £10 a day, and I spent most of it on shoes, but it taught me a lot. It taught me employability skills and how to save money—actually, it did not, as I spent most of it on shoes—and it also taught me the very valuable lesson that I did not want a career in retail or selling shoes. These are all fantastic life lessons and experiences that prepare people for their future careers.

Some of those jobs are on contracts that the Labour party has such a visceral problem with, yet they offer flexibility and convenience, particularly during exam time, when young people do not necessarily want to do all those hours. There are sectors that need that flexibility, such as hospitality, leisure and events. In the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, we heard this week from people at major events, such as the London marathon, that the number of staff they need grows enormously as they get towards the event, then obviously tails off afterwards. These are the sectors that offer the most chances for young people, and they are right in the crosshairs of the Government's punishment.

The evidence is clear, and in Gosport it could not be more tangible. The number of young people on out-of-work benefits has gone up by 31% in the last year alone. A recent article in *The Daily Telegraph* painted a bleak picture of the prospects for young people in my Gosport constituency; it makes for very tough reading.

**John Slinger:** Does the hon. Lady accept that more 18 to 24-year-olds are in employment than a year ago—210,000 more, according to the November labour force survey? The story of doom and gloom that she is portraying is not entirely the case.

**Dame Caroline Dineneage:** That may be the case, but the hon. Gentleman needs to read his data a little more accurately, because the number of young people on unemployment benefit has also gone up. I will repeat the figure: it has gone up 31% over the past year in the Gosport constituency alone. It is all very well swapping numbers across the Chamber, but these are lives, futures, and opportunities to get on a career ladder. The hon. Gentleman should be ashamed of his party for what it is doing to young people in my constituency.

The law of unintended consequences is at work. If local businesses are not giving opportunities to young people, that impacts the fabric of a town, including its social fabric. I recently received an email from one of the pubs in Gosport, which said:

“I can guarantee we will not be open this time next year if things continue. The Labour government is doing nothing to help the industry, the knock-on effect to the customers, staff, us, jobless, homeless... Sadly there will be no British culture left, and

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

that is the very sad truth of it. It's only the Government at the moment, who are gaining and laughing all the way to the bank. The place and the building and the customers—the whole aspect of the 'local' pub—will be no more."

Then there is the hair and beauty salon—another fantastic industry, worth £5 billion and as much again in social value. According to the National Hair and Beauty Federation, the Government's tax policies are forcing businesses to make very tough decisions, such as taking on fewer staff and fewer apprentices, and incentivising staff to become self-employed, without all the protections that the Government say they want to promote. The British Hair Consortium has warned of an existential drop-off in the number of apprentices entering the sector, while a beauty parlour in Gosport recently told me that it was not optimistic at all about the health of the sector over the next year, and that it does not think the Government are supportive of such businesses.

**Antonia Bance:** Does the hon. Member agree that the way to solve the crisis in apprenticeships in hair and beauty, as well as the crisis of bogus self-employment in hair and beauty, is to strengthen the single worker status?

**Dame Caroline Dinenage:** It is all very well supporting the status of workers if there are jobs to offer people. If you have the status, but no job to attach it to, you feel like a bit of a lemon—as I am sure the hon. Lady might do after that question. She should listen to businesses in her constituency, because what businesses are saying is that they do not feel the Government are supporting them. Given her track record in her previous life, she should understand that the hair and beauty industry is one that disproportionately employs young people and women, and the businesses in that industry are very often women-owned. This Government are not friendly to women-owned businesses, either.

Retail, hospitality, and hair and beauty—taken together, the failure of those sectors will prove to be the death knell for our high street. The hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) spoke about how important it is to see his high street regenerated. If we are going to regenerate our high streets and see them as living, breathing, vibrant things, we need to reimagine them as places where we not only shop, but live, work, socialise and engage in leisure activity. The only way that is going to be delivered is if our high streets are filled with small independent traders, but since the Budget, over 1,000 pubs and restaurants have closed—the equivalent of two every day.

We on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee are seeing a similar trend in our work on grassroots music venues, which are still closing at the rate of two a week. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) said, those venues say that the outcome of the small business rates review is nothing short of a disaster for them. A cap of 15% this year is going up to a 40% cap in 2028-29—that is what they are getting after transitional relief, and that still will not be the end of it.

**Dr Luke Evans:** When the Chancellor stood up and said that the Government would be changing business rates, there was some relief across the industry, but now

businesses are realising that because the temporary relief that has been in place for five years since the pandemic is being stripped away, even though they are getting these new business rates, they are much worse than what they had before. It is the cumulative effect of both those things crossing over that is causing the problem—that is why bills will go up, rather than come down. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Dame Caroline Dinenage:** I agree 100%—my hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. The grassroots Music Venue Trust says that despite multiple Ministers saying on the record that business rates would go down for the live music sector, it cannot find a single venue in the country whose bills will be lower.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): My hon. Friend may recall my question at Prime Minister's questions last week, in which I raised the case of Claire Howard Jewellery in Fakenham. It is one of many shops that contacted me in the aftermath of the Budget. There is a real sense of anger that the Budget claimed there would be a reduction in business rates—particularly for hospitality, retail and leisure—but the experience of those shops, looking at the numbers, was that business rates were going in exactly the opposite direction. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a real sense of a breach of trust when people hear politicians saying one thing in public and doing the opposite in the small print?

**Dame Caroline Dinenage:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government may be fooling their Back Benchers, but they are not fooling our constituents.

This goes back to the wider question, and it is not only Members on the Conservative Benches who are asking it; our constituents are asking it, too. What is the strategy, and whose side is this Labour Government on? Are they on the side of business? They are not on the side of working people, since 80,000 working people have lost their jobs in the hospitality sector alone. They are not on the side of my constituents, either; the Minister may not have been in the room when I mentioned this, but 31% more young people are on unemployment benefit in the Gosport constituency over the past year alone. National insurance contribution rises have hit my constituents disproportionately, due to the very high proportion of people in my constituency—three times more than the national average—who work in care, leisure or other service occupations. This year's Budget confirmed that Labour is not on the side of our small businesses or our high streets. That is why I welcome the shadow Chancellor's plans to introduce 100% business rates relief for the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors, which I think the Minister should look at.

The Minister opened with analogies to "A Christmas Carol" and likened the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), to Ebenezer Scrooge. That is a travesty—he is nothing like Ebenezer Scrooge. However, "A Christmas Carol" can offer a cautionary tale to us all; let us talk about Jacob Marley, the ghost whose heavy chains are a metaphor for the burdens he created through his actions in life, and who said:

"I wear the chain I forged in life".

I hope the Minister's chains do not prove to be the misery that he and his Government are delivering for businesses and our communities.

3.16 pm

**Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I beg the indulgence of the House for a moment to welcome the opening this week on Market Place in central Wednesbury of the new Walden restaurant. The menu looks absolutely delicious, and I very much look forward to sampling it soon.

I also want to mention Chris Birch from the Swift Group in Wednesbury, who I met yesterday—he was in town to go to the Goldman Sachs “10k Small Businesses” reception yesterday evening. Chris is the managing director of a family-owned business; he and his 36 employees make industrial and commercial kitchens, and he spoke to me about the help he has received with solar panels, which are going to be installed on his buildings—he has got a grant for that. He has also got a grant to help with the CRM through the Goldman Sachs scheme.<sup>1</sup>

Chris spoke to me about his recent success in winning a major Government public procurement contract to supply every prison in the country with kitchen equipment. I was so pleased to hear that, and I know that the Minister for Small Business will be particularly glad to hear it as well. That is a huge, multimillion-pound contract won by a SME thanks to the targets that have been put in place to ensure SMEs are able to access public procurement. I know the whole House will be so very pleased to hear that that bit of the small business strategy is beginning to take effect, and I thank Chris for coming down to Parliament and telling me about it yesterday. I look forward to visiting him and his staff team soon.

In response to some of the points made in the debate, let me say that no Labour Member will apologise for being a Government in a hurry. Perhaps at times we do try to do many, many things at the same time, but there is a reason for that. Opposition will teach you about the powerlessness of being unable to effect the things you want to, and I can hear the frustration of Opposition Members—the regret they feel about their powerlessness in the face of a Government who are doing things that they do not like—but it would be good to hear some Conservative Members apologise for the damage caused over 14 years that led us to the situation we are in now.

**Lincoln Jopp:** I notice that there are quite a lot of people on the Public Gallery at the moment. The former Government left almost record levels of low unemployment, and unemployment has gone up in every month that this new Government have been in power. Would the hon. Lady like to answer how this Government in a hurry are heading in the right direction, and perhaps suggest when unemployment in her constituency and across the country might start to come down, rather than continually going up?

**Antonia Bance:** I am sure the hon. Member knows me well enough by now to know that I am not going to indulge in silly games. What I will say is that this Government's priority is to get the economy growing. It is why we are investing in infrastructure. It is why we are rebuilding our public services. It is why we have put the greatest level of investment in our public infrastructure.

It is why we are investing £39 billion in house building, as I said in my intervention on the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is no longer in his place. It is why we are rebuilding our public finances. At times, this does involve some difficult choices, and some that not everyone may always agree with, but we are making the fair and right choices: asking those with the broadest shoulders to bear the heavier load, rebuilding public services, helping with the cost of living—and, yes, clearing up the Tory mess.

We are cutting borrowing more than any other country in the G7, leading to a doubling of the headroom to £21.7 billion. We have the highest levels of public investment in four decades. We are backing entrepreneurs and fast-growing companies with tax breaks to list and to hire here in the UK. Our planning changes will back the builders. Devolution for local growth will mean that local growth spreads outside London and the south-east—something so very close to my heart and to the hearts of many in this place. We are proud to be putting up the national minimum wage so that people have more money in their pockets, because the core problem affecting the retail and hospitality industries is that people do not have money in their pockets to spend on our high streets. Getting wages going up—and they are going up faster than prices—is the way to have people with more money in their pockets.

**John Slinger:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Did she notice yesterday that the Leader of the Opposition said that she did not want the national minimum wage to increase at all? Does my hon. Friend think that indicates that there might be a cold freeze in the air?

**Antonia Bance:** My hon. Friend reads my mind, as that is the point I was just about to make. I was so sad to see the Leader of the Opposition abandon what was one of the better policies of the last Government: that there should be a fast-rising national minimum wage at all times. I agreed with the last set of Prime Ministers before this one on very little, but one thing I did agree with them on was that it was right to maintain the machinery of the Low Pay Commission—a tripartite body where unions, businesses and academics come together with Government to look at the prevailing conditions in the country. Those at the commission get out there and visit businesses of all types in all regions, including hospitality and retail, and set the national minimum wage at a level that would work for workers and for businesses. It is an approach that this Government have continued, and I am sad to see that the Leader of the Opposition intends to abandon it and to abandon low-paid workers to frozen pay.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that under the last Conservative Administration, the minimum wage rose at the same time as we created 4 million new jobs and left unemployment at a record low? The difference now is that in only 17 months, unemployment has risen by 280,000 as a direct result of her Government's policies. Our caution on the minimum wage is that it is now at a level, with their economic policies, that means they are pricing younger people out of work.

**Antonia Bance:** I would not wish to try the hon. Member's generosity, but it seems to me that I have already been generous in my tribute to the work of the

1. [Official Report, 15 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 11WC.] (Correction)

[*Antonia Bance*]

previous Government in continuing to maintain the machinery of the Low Pay Commission—something that this Government have continued—and in continuing to make sure that the national minimum wage rose. I will admit that many people in my position feared greatly in 2010 that the Conservatives would come into government—admittedly, in coalition—and immediately tear up the national minimum wage. The fact that they did not was a great thing. The pinning to two thirds of male median wages was a good thing, and I am so sad that the Leader of the Opposition has departed from the consensus on this point.

The national minimum wage is set by a tripartite body. It is not too high, because businesses were in the room arguing their case. The commissioners went out on visits around the country to look at the prevailing economic conditions. The wage is set by consensus using the tripartite machinery, and it is important that we all understand that that has served this country well and has made extreme low pay a thing of the past. I am sad that the Conservatives have departed from this consensus.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The hon. Lady makes an excellent point about the need to see the minimum wage increase—people who live in my constituency of Harrogate and Knaresborough simply cannot afford to live or work in the area, and that is a real problem—but does she accept that it is not just the minimum wage that is the issue for employers, but the combination of increasing employer NICs and business rates? When I go out and speak to people, that is what they are worried about. It is not necessarily about the minimum wage, but the cocktail of measures that the Government have introduced.

**Antonia Bance:** The hon. Member need have no fear about the extent to which I talk to businesses in my constituency and more widely. I see at least one employer every single week—often not in retail and hospitality, as I represent a manufacturing constituency. I recognise the concerns, but I would say that in this country we need to have a functioning set of public services. We need an NHS that is not asking people to wait as long as it was when we took up office. In my constituency, waiting lists for those waiting over a year for an operation have fallen by 45%. That is absolutely incredible, and it was achieved because of the difficult decisions that our Chancellor of the Exchequer took to put money into the NHS. I know that many people regret that decision. They wish the ends—the reduced waiting lists—but they do not will the means. On this side, we will not dodge hard choices; we will the ends and we will the means.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage:** The hon. Lady is being incredibly generous in giving way. Given the focus on cutting waiting lists and tackling NHS challenges, how does the hon. Lady feel about the employer national insurance contribution changes, which also fell on GP surgeries, care homes and children's hospices? Those changes are proving to be an enormous burden on the NHS and are sucking up a lot of the extra money that the Government purport to be putting into it.

**Antonia Bance:** The hon. Lady makes her point well, and she has made it; there is no need for me to respond.

After 14 years of flatlining wages, wages are now growing faster than prices. That is incredibly important. I was so proud to see wages go up by more in the first 10 months of this Government than they went up in the first 10 years of the last one. The Budget did more on the cost of living, whether it be through frozen fares, frozen prescriptions, frozen fuel duty, £150 off energy bills or—my favourite policy—thousands of pounds in the pockets of the poorest families in the UK. They will spend that money on high streets, like those in my constituency: Crankhall Lane and Union Street in Wednesbury, and our shopping centre in central Tipton. That is where low-income families spend any extra pounds on food and on stuff for their kids.

**Paul Holmes:** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being characteristically courteous. She is entirely correct in outlining the choices and some of the policies that her Government have made, but does she not agree that those choices and policies will be delivered on the back of higher taxation? As a result, employers have less money to employ people, so the proceeds of growth do not mean that there will be better public services. The hon. Lady is right that her Government are spending more money, but that is on the basis of taxation, because of the policies that her Government are advancing, and not on the basis of growth or entrepreneurship.

**Antonia Bance:** I thank the hon. Member for his kind words, and for his intervention. It is absolutely clear that alongside investment in public services, there is investment in infrastructure, in house building, and in making sure that this is a good country in which to grow and scale a business. I am glad of those things. I am also glad that we took action to ensure that the poorest families are able to feed all of their children. The way to make the high street thrive is for people to have more money to spend. Let me repeat the statistic mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger). There are more people aged between 18 and 24 in work this year than there were a year ago, but NEET numbers are still too high. People familiar with the constituency I represent will not be surprised to hear that they are particularly high in my corner of the Black Country. This is in no small part due to the failures of the Conservatives in government, not least during the pandemic, when they kept the schools closed but allowed pubs to open.

Opposition Members keep calling on us to engage in further welfare reform to cut the welfare bill. It is interesting to me that when we do so—when we announce a clear, costed, proven, evidence-based plan to get young people back into work, as we did this weekend—they do not like it. It feels like history repeating itself. I remember the future jobs fund from 15 or 16 years ago, and the way it gave hope to a generation of young people kicked out of work as a result of a global financial crisis, through no fault of their own. Hundreds of thousands of them got jobs through the future jobs fund. It was particularly effective for the hardest-to-help young people, and in tough labour markets, in places like the one that I represent, but it was canned, basically on day one, by a Conservative Chancellor. I am so glad that our Work and Pensions Secretary is building on the legacy of the future jobs fund to help a new generation of young people.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Much like my hon. Friend's constituency, mine relies on its manufacturing industry, and our apprenticeship guarantees and support will make a huge difference to people there. However, having listened to my hon. Friend's history lesson, I am thinking back to the youth training scheme. I recently met someone who did a YTS apprenticeship at the age of 16, and is now about to take over as chief operating officer of the company for which he works. That is the difference that a good apprenticeship and investment in young people can make.

**Antonia Bance:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, as I have done since the first time we worked together, more than 20 years ago.

It is interesting to hear the advocacy for welfare reform. Today we have heard a lot about the difficulties with business rates, and I will not rehearse the arguments—they have been well made by my friends on the Front Bench—about the action that this Government are taking on business rates to help the hospitality and retail sectors, but I will make this point. We have heard repeatedly from Opposition Members that they would like to abolish business rates for retail and hospitality, yet they do not have a plan to do that. To pay for it, they will somehow find £47 billion worth of “savings”. The majority of that will come through indiscriminate cutting of the welfare budget. It is not clear to me how that is a credible plan, when the annual welfare bill went up by £114 billion on their watch.

Of course, Members would not expect me to speak in a debate like this without talking about my pride in our Employment Rights Bill and our plan to make work pay. I am proud beyond words to speak for hospitality workers and for seasonal workers who will benefit from that Bill. Earlier this week, I asked colleagues in the trade union movement to run the numbers, based on Government statistics, on how many workers will benefit from the reduction of the waiting period for protection from unfair dismissal from two years to six months: 6.3 million workers will benefit from that—from protection against being unfairly dismissed, without due process, for reasons that are not good enough—and 36% of hospitality workers will benefit as well. I am so very glad that we are making rules that will benefit disproportionately the workers most likely to be exploited at work.

**John Slinger:** My hon. Friend, who continues to make an excellent speech, has referred to unfair dismissal. I think it worth putting on record that much of the debate over recent hours, days and weeks has implied that employers will not be able to dismiss people. That is simply not the case. What we are talking about here is unfair dismissal, not dismissal. This is a right that absolutely has to be at the heart of the biggest uplift in workers' rights that any Government have introduced for a generation, or perhaps more.

**Antonia Bance:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Employers may continue to dismiss, as long as they do so for fair reasons and following a fair process, and good employers already do that.

My favourite measures in the Employment Rights Bill—this could be a very long speech, but I will bring it to a close—[*Interruption.*] I will! I will just say this: I am so proud of the ban on zero-hours contracts, and

I suggest to my hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench that we should have a nice short reference period for that when the consultation begins. I am so proud of the plans on sick pay, and on fire and rehire. I am so proud of our enhanced parental leave, the fair pay agreement and the school support staff negotiating body.

In conclusion, I often say that my goal is for people in my constituency to be able to take the family out for a curry on Friday night and not worry about the cost. I want that for all workers, including the hospitality workers who are serving and cooking that curry, and the seasonal workers who make it such a pleasure to be on the beach at Blackpool or down in Brighton, having that curry. That is why we need a Government focused on growth, new rights for every worker in the Employment Rights Bill, and a higher national minimum wage.

3.35 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As you would expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall talk about my faraway and far-flung constituency, but I will first say that what the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon), who is no longer in her place, said about carers rang a bell with me, because I am a carer for my wife.

The hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) talked about the jobs that he had as a young man. In this place, I try to effect an urbane and smooth image—not very successfully, I might say. But I can tell the House that owing to my father's rickety finances—I love him dearly—I had to work all the time when I was a student, and I had to do lots of the sorts of jobs that the hon. Member talked about. I remember being a kitchen porter, which is the lowest form of life in a big canteen—you get your backside kicked by every sous chef. For the record, I was very glad that I was a member of the Transport and General Workers' Union at the time. I went to my shop steward because a particularly obnoxious sous chef was a real bully, so I am grateful to that august former institution. That is something that the House did not know about me.

The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) was here earlier, but I am bound to say that the absence of the Scottish National party and Reform is surprising, because whichever side of the argument one takes, this is a colossally important issue.

I turn to my constituency. Much has been made of the importance of seasonal workers to hospitality, and what is said about that is absolutely true. In my conversation this morning with Mr Murray Lamont, the owner and manager of Mackays hotel in Wick, he stressed to me that these workers are crucial, particularly in the run-up to Christmas. He is very good employer indeed, but his business could not keep ticking on without those workers.

Mention has been made of Ebenezer Scrooge. For the interest of the Chamber, Mackays hotel in Wick is in Ebenezer Place, which is the shortest street in the United Kingdom, at 6 feet 9 inches. Think about that! If any hon. and right hon. Members find themselves in Wick, I recommend going to Mackays hotel. Mr Murray Lamont is a charming man.

Secondly, I want to talk about something that the Chamber will not know about: potato roguing. I have a reputation for talking about seed potatoes a lot in this

[*Jamie Stone*]

place, so I shall continue to earn it. When you grow seed potatoes, they have to be of the highest quality, as people in Lincolnshire or wherever, or indeed in Europe, buy them because they are the best seed potatoes, which come from my part of the world. If you have a dodgy spud in your bag of seeds—whatever the type of potato—that is no good at all. We have seasonal workers whose job is to walk down the lines of potatoes, identify those that are not the right species or that are diseased due to a mosaic virus, and pull them out. Let me namecheck another constituent. Mr James Gordon of Bindal farm, a potato grower of excellence, tells me that without those seasonal workers, he would be in trouble. He exports the best-quality potatoes to the south of England and across the channel.

My plea is a simple one. In this argument, some say this, and some say that, but at the end of the day, what matters to me and my constituents is that seasonal workers and their employers are given the help they need, whatever form that may take, and that such workers are recognised for playing an important part in the economy of one of the most remote and faraway parts of the United Kingdom.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to talk about potatoes all the time.

3.39 pm

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): In South East Cornwall, we truly value, and know the pressures of, seasonal work. It can be unreliable and involve unsociable hours, yet it is hugely valuable and remains a vital part of our Cornish economy. The Government are taking steps to make seasonal work more secure, and to increase fairness. Tourism is a key part of our local economy and supports many livelihoods. It is our wide range of hospitality venues, retail locations and small businesses, powered by hard-working and dedicated staff, that makes such an offer possible.

Seasonal work has helped families and local businesses for generations—work in our cafés and restaurants in Looe and Polperro, in our retail shops in Lostwithiel, and picking vegetables and flowers near Liskeard. There are more 18 to 24-year-olds in employment than there were a year ago, and the Employment Rights Bill strengthens good practice in the workforce, helps people into work and protects their wellbeing. I want to thank those involved in local businesses for their hard work, and for the always incredibly interesting visits that they regularly invite me to make, during which they tell me about their concerns and their hopes for the future.

**Jerome Mayhew:** The hon. Lady is right, but would she agree that there is a balance to be struck in every policy? Here, the balance is between employment rights on the one hand and business growth on the other. The sign of whether an economy has got it about right is when employment and growth go hand in hand. Does she share my concern that, as a result of the policies of the Government, unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, is going up month after month? Is that not a warning sign that the balance is not correct?

**Anna Gelderd:** I agree with the hon. Member on certain things, such as the importance of balance, but I will not make a habit of agreeing with him in totality

and, no, I think there is a huge number of other points to make about the economy, which I wish to focus on in my speech.

I spoke to a local publican last week, and his words struck me. He said that his workforce absolutely deserve support, and are the heart of his business, and it is important to remember that as we move forward with this work. The Conservatives, including the hon. Member, call for the Bill to be scrapped in its entirety, but I struggle to see how that shows respect for seasonal workers. The Conservatives would deny sick pay to lower-paid workers, and expect people to turn up when they are unwell, putting colleagues and customers at risk. The publican talked to me about that and several other things. I think that approach is wrong, unfair and out of touch. I believe we show our values by how we treat those who keep the economy moving—both the business owners and those in their workforce. Supporting workers to recover from illness, in particular, helps them to return to work sooner and stronger. Business owners know that—I hear that from them frequently—so I welcome the Government's action to improve employment rights in the sector, including for the seasonal workforce.

Tackling exploitative zero-hours contracts and one-sided flexibility is beneficial for employers. It reduces recruitment costs through increased staff retention, and levels the playing field on enforcement. These are good steps forward for workers and for businesses, and after years of stagnant productivity, our communities deserve them.

Seasonal work will always have a vital place in Cornwall, but families also need year-round employment, so that they can plan for their future and avoid hardships through the winter months. That means creating skilled, secure opportunities through projects such as the new Kernow industrial growth fund, which was secured by Cornish Labour MPs and part of this Labour Budget. It will give communities across Cornwall a path to long-term prosperity, as we work with them and the seasonal workforce in other ways.

Cornwall draws millions of visitors each year, and we must ensure that the system works just as well for the residents who welcome them, so I welcome this Government setting out how employment rights help boost productivity, and by doing so, ultimately support stronger economic growth and higher living standards. Seasonal workers deserve to be part of those improvements, and I will keep working with the Government to deliver just that.

3.44 pm

**Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): In constituencies like mine, seasonal, flexible and part-time working are central to the local economy. Seaside towns such as Bognor Regis and Littlehampton thrive on the cafés and attractions along the seafront and the pubs and shops on the high street. During the booming summer season, those businesses rely on seasonal workers to meet the demands of the tourists who flock to enjoy our wonderful stretch of Sussex coastline. Many seasonal workers are young people taking their first step on the career ladder during school, college or university holidays or long-term unemployed people looking for a route back into work, and even parents and pensioners who benefit from being able to work when it suits them to do so.

When writing this speech, I cast my mind back to my early jobs: chopping vegetables in my local Harvester; waitressing in every imaginable kind of environment on a part-time basis when restaurants needed me; and earning double or sometimes triple my wages if I was prepared to work on Christmas day or new year's eve, which, as a student, I welcomed. Then there were the pubs which employed me during my university career. All those roles are probably unviable now. It is the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors, which provide such vital jobs, that are bearing the brunt of the Government's damaging economic policies. After the Chancellor's first Budget last October, more than 89,000 hospitality workers lost their jobs—over 50% of all jobs lost in that time.

The Government tell us that the Employment Rights Bill, the darling of the trade unions, will make life better for working people. They are wrong. The Institute of Directors warns that the Bill is already undermining job creation, and research by FTI Consulting finds that 59% of SMEs will have to cut jobs. But do not take it from me, Madam Deputy Speaker. Listen to Ash, who co-owns Harbour Park, a seaside amusement park in Littlehampton. From ensuring the rides run smoothly to keeping visitors well fed and hydrated, local attractions such as Harbour Park rely on seasonal workers to open their doors every summer. After the Chancellor's disastrous second Budget a fortnight ago, Harbour Park will see its business rates rise by 72.6% despite the so-called transitional discount. In 2026-27, that will increase by a further 97.5%.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I should make it clear that I spent my career before coming into politics running a ledger business, so I am intimately familiar with a seasonal workforce and I employed about 1,000 people as part of my job. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the business rates—the fixed costs—going up, but the uncertainty in consumer confidence caused, both this year and last year, by the leaking leading up to the Budget, which knocks the people coming through the gate as well? Turnover is depressed at the same time as fixed costs are rising. It is an absolutely catastrophic combination for people who are trying to earn a living and employ others.

**Alison Griffiths:** My hon. Friend is right. The Business and Trade Committee had a number of businesses come to Parliament to tell us about the stasis that the leaks in the run-up to the Budget caused to their businesses. As he says, that feeds through to the general population, who know the costs businesses are having to incur and that they are getting to the point where they can no longer sustain them. People are concerned for their jobs. They know that, if they do not have a job, having more employment rights are no use whatsoever. He makes a valid and important point.

The increase in Harbour Park's costs amount to an extra £40,000, seriously impacting its ability to employ young people and give them a start in the job market.

Last weekend, I met Kathleen, who runs the Navigator hotel in Bognor Regis. She employs young people in the town to work when she needs them during the busy summer months, when tourists fill the hotel rooms, drink in the bar and eat in the restaurant. Kathleen told me that she started her business full of hope, but now, after the imposition of so many additional costs and

taxes, she works a full-time second job just to keep her business afloat, and to ensure that her 10 employees still have jobs to go to.

**Tom Gordon:** I do not believe the hon. Lady has yet got one of these devolution mayors, although she can correct me if I'm wrong. We have one in York and North Yorkshire, who is now looking at how they might implement a tourist tax. Will the hon. Lady give her thoughts on the impact such a tax would have? When I met the Harrogate district chamber of commerce and spoke to the hoteliers in my area, they were concerned about how it would suck many tourists out of towns like Harrogate and pass them off to other areas. It would be an additional cost—I wonder what her thoughts on that might be.

**Alison Griffiths:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, which takes me back to the conversation I had with Catherine this weekend. I hope she will not mind me saying this: she was so emotional that she was almost in tears at the prospect of a tourist tax being imposed by a Sussex mayor, who will come in next year—actually, that has been delayed into another year as well, hasn't it? The rapid roll-out is not going quite so well. The emotion and fear that I heard in Catherine's voice when we talked about that tax will not leave me for a long time. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising what a pernicious tax that could be.

**Dr Arthur:** I am really looking forward to a tourist tax coming to Edinburgh next year. Like local authorities in England, we benefit greatly from tourism—it is fantastic for the city—but it does have impacts on the operation of the council with things like litter and so on. The tourist tax will help the council to make the city better for both citizens and tourists; the idea is that it will actually drive tourism and bring more business to the city. I am sure the hon. Lady is well travelled—she has probably been to many places across Europe without ever thinking twice about paying the tourist tax, and she will have benefited from how that money is invested in those local economies. What is different about English towns and cities that means a tourist tax just is not going to work here?

**Alison Griffiths:** I am delighted to answer the hon. Gentleman's question, because there is a very important difference. Right now in the UK, the tourist economy is being hammered by the increased minimum wage, the Employment Rights Bill and high energy costs—I could go on. Businesses on our high streets are suffering, in particular seasonal businesses, which are having to bear the brunt of the Employment Rights Bill. If you had met the hotel owner in Bognor Regis—a tourist town—I think you would really be questioning what you are saying.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I have no desire to meet your local businesses, Ms Griffiths. You are obviously directing your comment at the hon. Gentleman.

**Alison Griffiths:** My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that if it was one single tax instead of multiple taxes, it is quite possible that the tourist tax would be a good idea.

[Alison Griffiths]

However, in the current context of multiple taxes drowning our businesses into oblivion, it is not a good idea.

If the unemployment rights Bill passes, Ash and Catherine will have to offer guaranteed hours to their flexible seasonal workers even during off-season troughs. With increased employer national insurance contributions and the national minimum wage rising again, these fixed schedules will make hiring people unviable. Far from protecting people who work seasonably and flexibly, by forcing businesses to provide guaranteed hours throughout the year the Employment Rights Bill will threaten their jobs.

The Government should be supporting businesses such as Harbour Park and the Navigator Hotel, which give young people their first job and keep coastal towns like Bognor Regis and Littlehampton alive. Instead, the Government are putting them in a vice. Ministers must change course and withdraw the Employment Rights Bill, reverse the tax hikes and back the flexible seasonal jobs that our communities rely on—before more businesses close and more workers lose their jobs.

3.55 pm

**Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): As the late great Andy Williams sang, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year” but I am afraid that is not true for farmers, business owners or those in retail, hospitality or leisure. Following the Chancellor’s Budget just two weeks ago, there are only two lines in that song that resonate—“scary ghost stories” caused by the Chancellor’s announcements, and memories of “tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago” before Labour got in.

One of the many problems with the Government’s approach to working is that they start with the premise that any flexible or part-time working, including zero-hour contracts, is by nature wrong and unfair. In actuality, it simply reflects the needs of the market and businesses at any given moment, as well as personal preference. Take food production as an example; it should be obvious, but that work in that sector is often seasonal and cyclical. The labour demands of farming and horticultural businesses are variable and difficult to forecast with 100% accuracy. Crop conditions, weather conditions and customer demand all contribute to the inherent unpredictability in food production.

On Monday night, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs voted against an amendment from the other place to insert a proper definition of “seasonal work” into the Employment Rights Bill, and Reform did not even bother to show up. The Government have instead proposed an amendment to “consult”. This is another issue that the Government hope they can just kick into the long grass and hope we will forget about.

That difficulty with forecasting also spills into the hospitality sector, as has been acknowledged. With benefits ballooning and the tax bill for the working man increasing day by day, everyone is feeling the pinch. They are all tightening their belts, so it becomes incredibly hard to forecast the current level of need. I was speaking to one of my local hospitality businesses, which has already been hit by a £900,000 NICs bill this year alone. The business was explaining the impact of NICs and

what it means in reality. I think we throw around large numbers but do not actually understand the intricacies of them.

The Chancellor said to the Treasury Committee that she does not see the link between the NICs increases and unemployment. I fail to see how she cannot see that link. Let’s do a NICs 101: NICs are paid on a month-by-month basis, and are triggered when someone earns £417 a month. If a student or anyone else worked for just one month and did more than 35 hours in the month at minimum wage, the business would then have to pay an additional 15% of national insurance on every pound above £417. Cash is king, and if that is to be rolled out, it is no wonder that businesses are questioning whether they can take on any other employees.

**Jerome Mayhew:** My hon. Friend makes an important point, although it is not just, or even primarily, about the increase from 13.8% to 15% on the overall rate, but that it kicks in at £5,000, down—from memory—from £9,200. That has a particular impact on those employed part-time, youth employment, and lower-wage employment, because it means that employers start paying NICs much earlier in the pay journey. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is exactly why we are seeing youth unemployment rising as well as general unemployment?

**Sarah Bool:** My hon. Friend makes a valid and correct point. We have started to see a rise in unemployment in South Northamptonshire among 16 to 25-year-olds exactly because of that.

The business owner I spoke to said that the problem is that the business starts paying at a certain level, but that increase pushes up across all wages across all levels of the business. Suddenly businesses are finding themselves drowning in the amount of money they are having to pay. That will stifle the market. We even talked to some of my hairdressers—they have been mentioned numerous times to the Minister—who said that the impact of NICs means that, according to the British Hair Consortium, there will be no new apprentice starts in 2027. That is staggering and appalling, when the Government are talking about all the opportunities for the young.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My hon. Friend may be aware that just across the channel in France, high regulation and high tax has led to consistent, long-term high youth unemployment. Speaking of Andy Williams, another song says that there is a “lesson to be learned” from this, and we do not have to look too far to learn it.

**Sarah Bool:** As always, my right hon. Friend makes a valid point. Andy Williams is getting a lot more airtime today than any of us imagined.

**Simon Hoare:** I am afraid that I do not know anything about Mr Williams, so I cannot add to the lovefest. I wonder whether my hon. Friend has reflected, as I have, that in households that have been workless for quite a long period of time, temporary seasonal intro-jobs often show our young people the value, importance and benefit of work and what it can do for their families and communities. When those opportunities are reduced, so the opportunity and potential for social mobility is curtailed.

**Sarah Bool:** Absolutely. We need to encourage that next generation through to the workforce, and I cannot see that they are getting any of those opportunities at the moment. The Government are so proudly trying to promote that, but let us look at the impact and the figures. There can be no denying that they are achieving none of what they hope to achieve in future.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Across these Benches in the mainstream parties, we have to develop solutions to the problems we face, partly because we know that in our Chamber we have the likes of Reform. Our country is in debt to the tune of £2.7 trillion and we spend around £105 billion each year to service the debt before we spend any money on anything else. We therefore have to think, in that difficult situation, about how we come up with solutions.

If we are to fund our public services to get people back into work, which helps to grow the economy, and are to do the other things that we want to do as a country, what is the right way of raising the funds that allows our country to pay down our debt and the amount we spend each year to service our deficit and to bring the change that people want in delivery of public services? I ask the hon. Lady please not to say “Welfare reform.” I agree that we need to do welfare reform—*[Interruption.]* If I may, I agree that we need to do that, and the Milburn and Timms reviews will be critical to taking forward an effective welfare reform package, but what else would she do?

**Sarah Bool:** At least the hon. Member has acknowledged that we have to repay debt, unlike the Green party, which suddenly believes that repaying debt interest is not a viable or true alternative in this world. The hon. Gentleman denies talk of welfare, but it is a fundamental element. *[Interruption.]* I am glad to see that he agrees with that, but there is so much more. Why is the Labour party increasing the welfare bill?

The Government have to grow the economy and that means supporting businesses, giving them opportunities, reducing tax and putting money in our pockets to do that. Unfortunately, we can see from everything that has come from the Government so far that the economy is not growing. Watch this space, but that is a problem that we will struggle with.

South Northamptonshire has 95 pubs, which are crucial to our rural community and to our economy. They are a great example of a place where young people can start their first jobs. At The White Hart in Hackleton, a young girl with Down’s syndrome, who could not get a job outside the village because of transport issues, took her first job. That job will be threatened by all the measures from this Government.

**Jerome Mayhew:** The Centre for Policy Studies has undertaken an analysis of all the impacts of both the previous Budget and the one last month on the cost of employing 18 to 20-year-olds. The shocking figure is that it will cost an employer £4,000 a year more to employ a single person between the age of 18 and 20. Given that, is my hon. Friend surprised that employers, just like the pub that she has mentioned, are taking rational decisions not to give young people jobs?

**Sarah Bool:** I agree entirely, and I am devastated to hear that, because that is exactly not what we need for society and for the young generation.

Research from the Taxpayers’ Alliance showed that in 2024 the average pub paid almost £100,000 per year in taxes on the sale of alcoholic drinks alone. When we add to that the coming changes to business property relief and the recent increase to employer NICs, we see that hospitality is really being smothered. But there is a way out. There is no need for an enforced and permanent dry January. The Conservatives have a plan, and it includes the abolition of business rates for hundreds of thousands of high street businesses.

The Government often deny it, but pubs and shops have seen their business rates bills more than double under this Government. We say that what is needed to bring back the festive cheer to our high streets is not more Government, but Government getting out of the way and allowing businesses and entrepreneurs to flourish. There is a big difference between business and the Government. Businesses, as has been mentioned, take risks with their own money. They provide jobs and they grow the economy. They are brave, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinanage) said earlier, but this Government just risk taxpayers’ money, destroy jobs and contract the economy.

Particularly, I look to my farming community. I have 550 farms, and they are the driver and the lifeblood of South Northamptonshire. One of their biggest issues, alongside things like NICs, is the inability to plan. A lot of discussion has been had about helping our companies grow for the future, but part of that growth requires the ability to make long-term plans. Under this Government, we have seen the removal of the sustainable farming incentive, and capital grants have gone on and off. There is also the double cab pick-up tax and the fertiliser tax. When we add in the employer national insurance tax and the changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief, we have to ask how farmers are possibly supposed to plan or invest in the future.

**Simon Hoare:** On my hon. Friend’s point, how can businesses be expected to plan, having been told in the 2024 Budget that the tax rate was a one-off, and in 2025 that there was an unforeseen second tax rate but with no further plans? That is not a promise that one can necessarily rely upon. The presumption is that there will be more next year. How can businesses, whether they are agricultural, industrial or whatever, be expected to plan for growth, investment and job creation when they have absolutely no idea of the trajectory of the tax take that the Treasury is hellbent on introducing?

**Sarah Bool:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. The importance of the construction industry was mentioned earlier, along with the plan to give more construction apprenticeships and jobs to young people, but for those jobs to be offered, we need people to be investing in the first place. Companies are not doing that, because they cannot make those decisions. They do not know where the money is coming from. They do not know when the money will next be taken from them. We are not creating an environment in which they can grow. I do not see anyone on the Government Benches disagreeing with me on that, so I think my hon. Friend’s point is well made.

**Graham Stuart:** What seems to be missing on the Government Benches is any recognition of the growing anger among young people at the fact that they are being shut out of the jobs market. It is the most damaging time in someone's life to be barred from work when they are young. The Minister does not seem to be an Andy Williams fan, but The Clash sang under a previous Labour Government:

"Career opportunities are the ones that never knock".

Not under Labour.

**Sarah Bool:** Absolutely.

In Prime Minister's questions earlier, I asked about the fair choices that this Government say they have made. I think those choices are fundamentally unfair. The Government are trying to introduce a digital ID scheme, unfunded by the Government, that could cost at least £1.8 billion, yet most of the public do not want it, given that 3 million people signed the petition against it. The Government then talk about inflicting tax hits on all our businesses. It is just madness. There is absolutely no sense of direction from this Government. This is not a pro-growth Chancellor but a no-growth Chancellor. That will be the legacy.

I never thought that a Christmas song could sum up a Government's economic approach, but if we look at "We wish you a Merry Christmas", it appears that we are in the "we won't go until we've got some," phase from this Government, whether they are demanding figgy pudding or, in this instance, tax. I am really hoping, though, that they will see the light and eventually help businesses to unlock, to reach their potential and to have a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

4.9 pm

**Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con):** I am fortunate to represent a beautiful part of the Somerset coast. Burnham-on-Sea, Berrow and Brean all have lovely sandy beaches and are visited by many holidaymakers every year. Seasonal tourism is not just part of the local economy; it is the bedrock of those communities. Our motion regrets the many measures introduced by this Government that hit both the economy at large and have had a particularly bad impact on those areas that are dependent on hospitality and tourism. The effects are even worse for businesses that employ seasonal workers.

I have said before that, although the Government were elected on a promise to go for growth, most of their actions over the past 17 months seem designed to achieve the opposite. Before the election, many businesses backed this new Government. They believed the Chancellor's prawn cocktail offensive. They thought this Government would be a reincarnation of the Blair Government, who, at least in their early years, managed to control public expenditure. Instead, they seem to be the very worst of Wilson, Callaghan and Healey.

The reality is that, rather than implement the modest tax rises and spending increases contained in its manifesto, Labour increased taxes by £40 billion last year and a further £26 billion this year. That is a huge increase in taxes on businesses and hard-working families to pay for more welfare spending. All the businesses I speak to

in my constituency are suffering. They have lost any faith they ever had in this Government, and who can blame them?

The Globe Inn in North Petherton is a fantastic local pub. This year, it will not pay any business rates, but it will pay £5,000 a year from 2029-30, so it will have to sell 10,000 extra pints just to pay the Government's higher taxes. That might not sound a lot to Labour Ministers, but I can assure them that, for a small business with a tiny profit margin, any additional cost can have a hugely negative impact.

It is not just business rates that are going up.

**Jerome Mayhew:** It is easy to make the mistake of talking about SMEs as though they are corporate entities when, in many instances, they are not. They are often a husband-and-wife team working incredibly long hours and living above the shop. I was in my local pub, The Greyhound, the other day, which is run by the tenant and his wife. They told me that they were covering the shifts of the employees who they have let go because of the Government's tax policy changes. The cost of that is not just economic; it is hugely damaging to their relationship and to their whole way of life, and it is incredibly stressful. Does my hon. Friend accept that the damage caused by these changes is not just economic but societal?

**Sir Ashley Fox:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, which I agree with. The Globe Inn is not a husband-and-wife team but a mother-and-daughter team, and those extra costs bear heavily on the business.

It is not just business rates that are going up. There is also the hated jobs tax, which we heard about earlier, and the consequences of the anti-jobs employment Bill. On paper, guaranteed hours and scheduling rules sound as though they would protect workers, but for seasonal workers whose livelihoods depend on flexibility, immediate availability and quick uptake of short-term work, the measures risk doing precisely the opposite.

Let us take some examples. Forcing employers to offer guaranteed hours after a short reference period will make businesses reluctant to take on seasonal staff at all. I know this from experience: in Burnham-on-Sea, the number of visitors who turn up very often depends on the weather. If there are two or three weeks of very good weather, businesses will need lots of seasonal workers. In this great country of ours, that could be followed by many weeks of rainy weather. What would the Minister say to employers who are contractually bound to offer work to employees who are not required because tourists are not there?

**Alison Griffiths:** Harbour Park in my constituency would be required to pay people, rain or shine, at times when it receives no income from visitors. Does my hon. Friend agree that this measure will cause many businesses acute hardship?

**Sir Ashley Fox:** My hon. Friend is correct. In fact, what will probably happen is that many businesses will offer less work. That tells us that these regulations have been drawn up by people who have never run a business. When a farm, holiday park or festival operator knows that it might be legally required to provide fixed hours even when demand disappears with a change in weather or tourist numbers, the safest option will be not to hire so many people. It should not surprise the Government

when that is what businesses decide to do. Seasonal workers could see fewer opportunities, shorter seasons and more competition for every shift.

Secondly, the strict advance notice rules and penalties for changing shifts might offer security for longer-term part-time workers, but seasonal work often depends on rapid, last-minute scheduling. If a grower cannot schedule pickers until they know the fruit is ready, or an events company cannot bring in extra hands until bookings spike, they may be forced to reduce the number of workers they engage at all.

The added liability on agencies will shrink the pool of temp placements, on which many seasonal workers rely. It is natural that agencies will become far more cautious about taking on temps. No doubt some will pull out of short seasonal contracts altogether. That means fewer people will be in short-term work, fewer people will be building experience in their first jobs and fewer people will have the stepping stones to full-time employment. The Bill will act as a hammer blow to seasonal work. Employers will hesitate to hire, and workers will lose the very flexibility that makes seasonal work viable.

**Graham Stuart:** My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and he is entirely right about the impact on seasonal workers, but we should always look beyond the producers to the consumers. What will the impact be at music festivals and at all sorts of events—community events—all around the country? We will see higher prices and there will be less competition and choice. It is socialism in action—everybody losing, including society as a whole.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point with which I agree.

The combination of extra costs and extra regulations means that it becomes incredibly burdensome for small businesses to afford to take on staff. The above inflation increases to the minimum wage add further pressure, and that all has a disproportionate effect on industries such as hospitality and tourism.

My constituent Kathy owns a shop in Burnham-on-Sea, which she has run for 20 years, but the recent changes imposed by the Chancellor are making it harder and harder for her to operate. Kathy currently employs three 16-year-olds. Increases in the minimum wage and future changes to employment law will force her to stop the practice of giving youngsters their first job. There are only so many tasks someone of that age can be given, but now the salary increases and other changes will be prohibitive. Two of the three will be leaving, and Kathy tells me they will not be replaced. Is it any wonder that youth unemployment is rising? Many businesses will think, “Why risk it?”

Every Labour Government leave office with unemployment higher than when they started. Last July, unemployment was 4.4%; it is now 5%. That 0.6 percentage point increase may not sound like much to Labour Members, but it is an extra 282,000 people out of work and claiming benefits. I fear we have not reached the peak because while unemployment is rising, business confidence is falling. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor cling to their jobs, telling their nervous Back Benchers that it is them—and only them—who the markets trust. I have to say that that boast is not all it might appear. What it really means is that the alternatives

are so awful that they would tax, borrow and spend even more if Keir and Rachel disappear—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. The hon. Member knows better than to refer to Members by name.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

If the current Prime Minister and the current Chancellor were to disappear, all confidence in the Government would collapse. It seems that the Prime Minister has as much faith in his Cabinet as the rest of us have in him. It is unfortunate that the Government are comprised almost entirely of people of public sector, academic or union backgrounds. Precious few have ever operated a business. They do not understand how running a business works, and it shows.

There is another path that the Government could take, and it is not too late. I call on them to withdraw their Employment Rights Bill, to get rid of their “Benefits Street” Budget, and to lower taxes for hard-working people and businesses.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.20 pm

**Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair.

We have heard from Members from across the House who understand a fundamental truth: that the hospitality sector is the cornerstone not only of our economy but of our society. It is a great strength of our parliamentary system that we all represent unique districts that are all, in one way or another, replete with high streets and hospitality businesses—pubs, restaurants and hotels—which we all wish to support. Members on both sides of the House have observed the importance of binding our communities together, giving people a warm place to stay—a refuge from loneliness—and keeping our high streets vibrant. Those are places where life happens.

As we have also heard, hospitality performs a vital and arguably unique role in providing the next generation with that vital first step on the career ladder. I imagine that many of us had our very first experience of the world of work—that priceless exposure that helps us become world-ready—in retail or hospitality. I certainly did, and we have heard many other such examples. The sector does that precisely because it is a feature, not a bug, that it provides flexible seasonal work that allows young people to earn their first wage, combined with other responsibilities or opportunities, and, in so doing, to learn the important dignity of labour.

As we have heard from my right hon. and hon. Friends, pubs, hotels and restaurants in particular are hurting as a direct result of the Chancellor's choices, not just in last year's Budget but once again in this year's Budget, which was delivered from the Dispatch Box just a few weeks ago. More than a dozen venues from my South Downs constituency have contacted me in the last 24 hours alone, having heard about this debate. Ruth and Martin at the Cricketers in Duncton described to me how their rates are going up by £4,500 to £5,000 a year—that is money that they do not have. The Fox Goes Free in Charlton has been a public house,

[*Andrew Griffith*]

continuously serving the community, for over 400 years. Like every pub, it makes a huge contribution. Its business rates bill will increase by more than £13,000 next year. The House should bear that in mind when Labour Members talk about how they have introduced permanently lower business rates. That is a laughable idea. I have heard similar stories—and worse—from the Murrell Arms in Eastergate, the Half Moon Inn in Northchapel, the Labouring Man in Coldwaltham and the Onslow Arms in Loxwood.

**Graham Stuart:** Tom, the landlord of the Kings Head in Hedon, heard on Budget day that business rates would be cut for businesses like his. Instead, the rateable value of that pub, which provides such an important service to the people of Hedon and the surrounding villages, has gone from £9,000 to £32,000.

**Andrew Griffith:** My right hon. Friend is exactly right. I would not want to incur wrath by accusing anybody of misleading the House, but that is exactly the same story that I have heard from the Bridge Inn in Amberley, the Star and Garter in East Dean, the Bricklayers Arms in Midhurst and the Black Horse Inn in Byworth. That surely cannot be a coincidence; these cannot be isolated examples of those “permanently lower” business rates—

**Anna Dixon** *rose*—

**Andrew Griffith:** Of course I will give way. I look forward to hearing about how one should understand that statement about the “permanently lower” business rates that this Government have introduced, of which we cannot seem to find an example.

**Anna Dixon:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to come and walk with me down the high street in Saltaire, where property valuations mean that many businesses will have lower business rates in absolute terms. Has he explained to his local pubs that that property revaluation has been hanging around for many years, but his Tory Government did nothing to implement it? That is the main reason why some of his pubs might be experiencing increases—it is due to property valuation, not business rates.

**Andrew Griffith:** I hear the hon. Lady’s point, and I am glad she has found some examples—I note that neither in her intervention nor in her earlier remarks did she go so far as naming any of them, and I will happily take another intervention if she would like to do so. I have named many examples. The revaluation exercise on pubs is not some long-delayed exercise; it is a routine, frequent timeframe that the Valuation Office Agency goes through. This is not something that has been pent up for many years; it is just the process of revaluation.

When it comes to the rubber hitting the road of how much business rates are being levied on pubs, and how much cash will leave those stretched businesses that are struggling with all the different costs, what matters is the net effect of revaluation, this Government’s removal of the retail, hospitality and leisure relief that the Conservative Government put in, and of course the ongoing rate multiplier.

Every pub and hotel that I have spoken to in my rural constituency bears out precisely the figures from

UK Hospitality and the British Beer and Pub Association—we have heard about that many times today, and I know that they ran drop-ins earlier today for Members across the House. Tom Richardson at the Three Moles in Selham explained to me how the turnover basis of assessing rateable values has combined with the cost headwinds that this Government have amplified—I will be so kind as to imply that they did not all happen from 1 July 2024. Nevertheless, the choices that the Government have made, in particular the change in the national insurance rates and the changes to thresholds on national insurance, have enormously pushed up the cost of employment. On top of that, businesses are still waiting for the promised reduction in energy prices, whether for electricity or heating oil, because those prices have more than doubled in some cases.

Tottington Manor Hotel in Henfield has to find nearly £50,000 extra due to the changes that this Government have made to employment costs. It is no surprise—we heard this again and again from colleagues this afternoon—that pub and hotel owners are at the end of their tether. Nobody should want to preside over such a series of choices. One landlord told me that they have not been able to draw a wage from their pub for the last six months. Another told me how she was working seven days a week, 16 or 17 hours a day, just trying to keep the pub open.

As we heard from many colleagues, the cost of hiring staff has become so prohibitive that owners are having to cut back. They are not able to hire, support or sustain staff, and they are taking more and more upon themselves, stretching their working day and taking on more tasks, creating one of the doom loops in which, it is sad to say, this Chancellor so specialises.

We heard that from many colleagues who made contributions this afternoon, including my hon. Friend and near neighbour the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), who spoke about the challenges on the island, particularly with seasonal work, and about how young people are hurting and how that is costing all of us in the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said that this Government are awash with policies, plans and visions, but words butter no parsnips and they do not provide the jobs that we need—least of all the Employment Rights Bill, which, as it comes down the line, will really hurt and disincentivise family businesses, with which the sector is replete.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) talked, as did others, about the cumulative effect of measures—tax rises, national insurance increases, higher energy costs and more red tape—rather than there being one single axe falling on the heads of businesses. We should listen to small enterprises when they say that it feels like the Government are not on their side. It is no surprise that pub after pub, hostelry after hostelry, is erecting a sign on the door saying, “No Labour MPs here”. I remember that the Minister said that he had not seen one of those signs, so I trust that people in his constituency will take that as a personal challenge to ensure that one such sign is brought to his attention in the very near future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) said that this Government are doing that most terrible of things: preventing young people from getting on the job ladder through their first chance

of work. The Government weigh down precisely the sorts of businesses that do such a good job of providing those opportunities, and that is difficult.

My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths), talked about the tourism economy. To all the challenges and headwinds that have come about because of the Chancellor's choices, we can add the bed tax, which will increase the cost for anyone holidaying in the UK. It will deter people from enjoying the wonderful vistas of Bognor Regis, Littlehampton or the South Downs, and simply encourage people to go to other countries on holiday, following in the wake of the many young people mentioned by hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth, who are leaving this country, such is the dearth of opportunity.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) talked about the degree to which the hospitality and pub sector is already over-taxed, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) made the really important point that all the burdens of family businesses fall back on families.

I am afraid to say that we are seeing nothing less than a full-frontal attack on seasonal work, and we see that no more so than in the unemployment Bill that was before the House this week. Like King Canute, this Government are legislating to outlaw seasonality and the rhythms of the tides. If a seaside café hires a student to wait on outside tables in the glorious sunshine, Labour wants the café to be forced to offer the student the same hours once the shutters come down in the autumn. It will mean the demise of strawberries and cream sellers in Wimbledon fortnight.

The Government's plans will even mean the death of Father Christmases and assistant elf helpers in shopping centres across the nation, because there is little demand for a Christmas elf in January, February or March. This is bureaucratic madness, yet Ministers press on, deaf to the cries of those who would most benefit from the choice—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members do not like what I am saying, but they do not have an answer. They should know by now that you do not protect workers by bankrupting employers; you do not support our high streets, communities, pubs and restaurants by taxing them into submission.

We Conservatives understand business. Unlike those in the current Cabinet, many of us have worked in businesses and enterprises ourselves. We stand with the risk takers in this country who create wealth, not the bureaucrats who seek to destroy it. That is why our motion supports seasonal, flexible and part-time working. We will take 250,000 high street businesses and pubs out of business rates entirely, paid for by the welfare reforms that the Government does not have the backbone to push through, and we will repeal all of the job-destroying measures in Labour's unemployment Bill.

We back the engines of growth in our economy—the providers of jobs. This Government seek to push them to the wall. I commend this motion to the House.

4.34 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden):** It is a pleasure to close this debate on behalf of the Government.

Let me start by saying that I will take absolutely no lessons on running the economy after what the Conservatives did during 14 years in government. Given that there have been so many references to songs and music today, I want to suggest a song that Conservative Members might want to reflect on. It is an Elton John classic: "Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word".

I noticed yesterday that the Conservatives produced a Christmas video in which they claimed that Santa's elves were seasonal workers—you couldn't make it up! May I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffiths), on his somewhat alarming AI skills? I would gently point out that if the Opposition's reference point for the modern economy is Father Christmas's workshop, that does explain a lot; although, frankly, I am not surprised. On Monday, the shadow Secretary of State repeatedly quoted figures on the supposed cost of the Employment Rights Bill from the Growth Commission. However, that commission boasts a Ms Elizabeth Truss as an adviser, so he will forgive me if I take any of his economic advice with a large pinch of salt.

Let me be clear. We on the Government Benches do not believe in pitting employers and employees against each other. No one wants a business to succeed more than the workers who rely on it for their livelihood. This Government will not indulge in the scaremongering so beloved by the Conservatives, and I will take this opportunity to clarify some of their misleading claims. But first, I want to acknowledge how difficult the past few years have been for small businesses, particularly in the hospitality, retail and leisure sectors. These sectors were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, by a botched Brexit, and by a cost of living crisis that has robbed the British people of their disposable income.

**Graham Stuart:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kate Dearden:** I will carry on and make some progress.

Let me respond to the points made by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). As many hon. Members reflected on this point, I will clarify that we are not seeking to return to or rejoin the customs union; we are focusing on trade deals with countries such as the US and India. My hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) demonstrated that so clearly in relation to our trade agreement with the US, which guaranteed thousands of jobs under Jaguar Land Rover. I will come to the point made by the hon. Member for Richmond Park about the youth guarantee later in my speech and respond to her reflections.

First and foremost, I pay tribute to all those running and working in small businesses, especially in such important sectors as hospitality and retail. I know from my own experience and my family's experience just how hard that is. My first job was in a café in the hospitality sector; it was where I developed through my first opportunities. I became a manager there, and I absolutely loved my job. It was a really important aspect of our community, including for local people's livelihoods.

My dad worked in the printworks growing up, and he was made redundant by his bosses under the watch of the Tory Government. I worked with my mum and dad, and took the opportunity that the hospitality sector

[Kate Dearden]

provided to them. It gave my dad the opportunity to set up a small business and run a café successfully for 14 years, and our family are so proud of that. He gave an opportunity to more young people in the community I grew up in, and the business was a really important aspect of our lives. I now have so many excellent businesses in my Halifax constituency, which I am proud to champion at the Dispatch Box and in government. That is why this Government were elected: to provide economic growth that will raise living standards and support vital sectors across our economy.

As the Minister for Employment Rights, I should say that this Government were also elected on a promise to make work pay. The UK's employment laws are mostly a product of the 20th century. They have not kept pace with how businesses now employ people, nor with how people experience working life today. The world of work has fundamentally changed in recent years; it is no longer the norm for employees to stay in one company or even a single sector for their whole career. New technology continues to rapidly transform how we work, where we work and when we work, and the rise of the gig economy has changed the certainty and stability that employment used to provide. The Employment Rights Bill takes steps to fulfil our commitment to bring employment rights into the 21st century.

Lots of hon. Members have spoken passionately about the Bill and its importance to them, as well as the experience that they bring to this House. My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) spoke powerfully about his personal experience of working in hospitality and about how he stands up for his constituents in the sector. He demonstrated the importance of the Bill in providing job predictability and security as a baseline.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) spoke about the fair pay agreement and her experience standing up for care workers in her constituency and across the country, as well as about the importance of statutory sick pay for thousands more people across this country and the importance of the fair work agency. It is essential that we get this Bill on to the statute book and ensure that people can see the benefits it will bring to them, particularly through setting up the enforcement powers of the fair work agency. My hon. Friend also mentioned overseas recruitment. What matters in UK employment law and enforcement is where the worker is based; if they are based in the UK, then in general they have access to UK employment law, and enforcement agencies can and do take action no matter where the employer is based. I would be happy to talk to her if she has any further questions about the set-up of the fair work agency.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) for her support. She made a passionate and to-the-point case for the importance of the Bill, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury. I agree with every word that they and my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) said about the importance of this legislation to working people and to brilliant businesses across the country.

The Employment Rights Bill will strengthen workers' rights and lead to growth. Many British businesses already offer their employees benefits and protections

that far exceed what is in the legislation. The Bill will encourage those seeking employment, including young people looking for their first job, giving them security that they will be treated fairly by their employer. As we have said, we are not springing these changes on businesses; we are working very closely with them as we implement these changes gradually over a number of years. We will be consulting and working with them closely.

Lots of Opposition Members mentioned zero-hours contracts. Many people in the UK value the option to work flexibly, but some employers have taken advantage of that flexibility. We are determined to tackle the issue of one-sided flexibility, which can leave people unclear about when they will next get paid work and how much time they need to keep available for work. Of course, some businesses—including those in the hospitality, retail, agriculture and tourism sectors—experience fluctuating demand across the year. There are ways for businesses to plan their work that gives their workers a degree of security, which is why flexibility is already built into the Bill to address issues of seasonal demand. There are several ways in which an employer could approach this issue while complying with the new right to guaranteed hours, depending on their circumstances.

The right to guaranteed hours does not force companies to make seasonal workers permanent, nor does it force them to give unnecessary hours to employees; it gives workers the right to choose certainty and stability in their contracts where they want it, and helps them to budget and plan for their lives. I recently visited a brilliant business in Manchester and heard from one of its employees about the difference that guaranteed hours made to him and his work, allowing him to plan his bills and family finances and giving him stability in his livelihood. Having guaranteed hours was absolutely vital to him; it changed his life, and this legislation will change the lives of many other people across the country who are looking for that certainty and stability.

**Graham Stuart:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kate Dearden:** I have lots to make progress on, but I will give way very briefly.

**Graham Stuart:** Would the Minister like to apologise to the more than 280,000 people who are not in work now, compared with the level of unemployment last year, and could she spell out how a business that, for example, provides catering at summer festivals and then ceases to have any festivals to service can guarantee hours to a workforce it does not need any more?

**Kate Dearden:** I have heard lots of Conservative Members reflect on unemployment. What they fail to mention is that the average unemployment rate over their 14 years in government was 5.4%, which is substantially higher than the current unemployment rate. As the right hon. Gentleman knows from Monday's debate, we have committed to consult on seasonal work. We will work with businesses, trade unions and all other stakeholders to get the legislation right—I will continue to listen and to work with them on the details. It is so important that we pass the Employment Rights Bill, so that we can consult and stick to our road map for implementing it. Many working people and businesses across this country want that certainty; they want us to crack on.

I will try to make some progress, as we are pressed for time. Several hon. Members—including the hon. Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) and for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage)—raised the subject of business rates reform, as did the shadow Secretary of State. This Government are determined to remove barriers to investment, helping our businesses to succeed, our high streets to thrive and our economy to grow. We are introducing permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values below £500,000 from April next year. This will give long-term certainty and support to the high street, in marked contrast to the previous form of relief, which created a yearly cliff edge and had to end entirely in April next year. We know that this tax cut must be sustainably funded, which is why from April next year, we are applying a higher rate to the most valuable properties—those with rateable values of £500,000 and above. Let me be clear: those properties represent less than 1% of all properties, but they include the majority of large distribution warehouses, including those used by online giants.

Some Members have spoken about the raising of employer national insurance contributions in last year's Budget. I have already mentioned the state of the finances we inherited from the Conservative party. That meant that we had to take difficult decisions to get the nation back on track, and one of the toughest decisions was to raise the rate of employer national insurance contributions, but we are protecting the smallest businesses from these changes, including many of those in the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors. These difficult but necessary steps will protect our public finances and ensure that we can continue to fund our essential services, such as the NHS and social care, and to invest in the economy.

Moving swiftly on, many Members have mentioned the visitor levy. Our mission is to kick-start economic growth and to devolve fiscal powers, and the levy is critical to that. Introducing a visitor levy provides mayors with a new lever that they can use to raise funds for reinvestment locally. We launched a consultation at the Budget so that the public, businesses and local government can shape the design of the power to introduce the levy that will be devolved to local leaders. They will decide how to introduce the levy and how it will be used to drive growth in their region. That is a historic step for English devolution.

I will reflect on some of the comments of the hon. Members for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), and for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool). I do not share their lack of enthusiasm for continued investment in this country under this Government.

**Dr Luke Evans:** The Minister's amendment to the motion refers to

“a comprehensive vision for productivity and success”

for small businesses. It is incredibly similar to the amendment that the Government tabled in the high streets debate, but interestingly, what has gone is a reference to a 25% cut in administrative burden. The Minister raised the issue, but did not comment on whether the Government are committed to that 25% cut. Where does that figure come from, and why has it disappeared from this amendment, when it was in a previous one?

**Kate Dearden:** The Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), mentioned in his opening remarks all the steps that we are taking to reduce those burdens, and all the policies that we are introducing to back our small businesses across the country. On the point that the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth made on investment, just last month J.P. Morgan announced its £3 billion tower. That is one of the largest financial services investments in recent years. Scottish Power has announced a £24 billion clean energy investment, which will create 2,000 jobs up to 2028. We are proud of that investment.

I will finish on the subject of the youth guarantee. Many Members have stressed the importance of employment for young people. There are more 18 to 24-year-olds in employment than a year ago. The Tories left the NEET rate rising and saw a colossal rise of almost a quarter of a million in young people out of work. We are determined to turn that around. NEET numbers are still too high, and lots of Members have rightly reflected on that. We want to give young people a brighter future, and that will be the impact of our youth guarantee. Our measures supporting young people to earn and learn are backed up by the evidence on what works. There is a national crisis of opportunity, and we are taking action in response—through the youth guarantee, the growth and skills levy, and, more widely, by interrogating the root causes of the issues, with the support of Alan Milburn.

To summarise, this Labour Government are on the side of working people and our brilliant businesses. We have boosted pay for millions of the lowest earners, and we are putting money back into people's pockets. We are making work pay again in a way that suits the 21st century, and that will create security and opportunity for everyone, no matter their background. Most of all, we have a commitment to a core British value: those who work should be rewarded. As we put it in Yorkshire, this is about a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. We are getting on with the job. We are focused on fixing the long-term damage to our economy, and setting Britain on the path to renewal. That is why I call on the House to support our amendment.

*Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)).* That the original words stand part of the Question.

*The House divided:* Ayes 98, Noes 325.

**Division No. 389]**

**[4.48 pm**

#### AYES

|                             |                         |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Andrew, rh Stuart           | Costa, Alberto          |
| Argar, rh Edward            | Cross, Harriet          |
| Bacon, Gareth               | Davies, Mims            |
| Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi       | Dewhurst, Charlie       |
| Baldwin, Dame Harriett      | Dinenage, Dame Caroline |
| Barclay, rh Steve           | Duffield, Rosie         |
| Bedford, Mr Peter           | Easton, Alex            |
| Bhatti, Saqib               | Evans, Dr Luke          |
| Blackman, Bob               | Fortune, Peter          |
| Bool, Sarah                 | Fox, Sir Ashley         |
| Bowie, Andrew               | Francois, rh Mr Mark    |
| Brandreth, Aphra            | French, Mr Louie        |
| Burghart, Alex              | Gale, rh Sir Roger      |
| Cartledge, James            | Garnier, Mark           |
| Cleverly, rh Sir James      | Glen, rh John           |
| Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey | Grant, Helen            |
| Cocking, Lewis              | Griffith, Andrew        |
| Cooper, John                | Griffiths, Alison       |

Harris, Rebecca  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Hussain, Mr Adnan  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Lamont, John  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Lowe, Rupert  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 Paul, Rebecca  
 Philp, rh Chris

Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Smith, Rebecca  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stride, rh Sir Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Trott, rh Laura  
 Tugendhat, rh Tom  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Whately, Helen  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wild, James  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Gregory Stafford and**  
**Mr Andrew Snowden**

### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
 Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Adam, Shockat  
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
 Akehurst, Luke  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Alexander, rh Heidi  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Ali, Tahir  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Arthur, Dr Scott  
 Asato, Jess  
 Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas  
 Atkinson, Catherine  
 Atkinson, Lewis  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Bailey, Olivia  
 Baker, Alex  
 Ballinger, Alex  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Baxter, Johanna  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Berry, Siân  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Billington, Ms Polly

Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Brickell, Phil  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burton-Sampson, David  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Calskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Campbell-Savours, Markus  
 Carden, Dan  
 Carling, Sam  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Chowns, Dr Ellie  
 Collier, Jacob  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creasy, Ms Stella

Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 Davies, Shaun  
 Davies-Jones, Alex  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Denyer, Carla  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Eccles, Cat  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Gosling, Jodie  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hanna, Claire  
 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  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Hussain, Mr Adnan  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jermy, Terry  
 Jogie, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kane, Mike  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kumaran, Uma  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell, Emma  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McDougall, Blair  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Mohamed, Abtisam  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Moon, Perran  
 Morden, Jessica

Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, rh James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Naismith, Connor  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Dame Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Payne, Michael  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Jon  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Joe  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Ramsay, Adrian  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reeves, rh Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, rh Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sandher-Jones, Louise  
 Scroggum, Michelle  
 Sewards, Mark

Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevenson, Kenneth  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Sir Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, rh Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Taiwo Owatemi and**  
**Mark Ferguson**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
 Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
 Akehurst, Luke  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Alexander, rh Heidi  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Ali, Tahir  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Arthur, Dr Scott  
 Asato, Jess  
 Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas  
 Atkinson, Lewis  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Bailey, Olivia  
 Baker, Alex  
 Ballinger, Alex  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Baxter, Johanna  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Brickell, Phil  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burton-Sampson, David  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Caliskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Campbell-Savours, Markus  
 Carden, Dan  
 Carling, Sam  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Collier, Jacob  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily

Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 Davies, Shaun  
 Davies-Jones, Alex  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Eccles, Cat  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Gosling, Jodie  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lillian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)).*  
 That the proposed words be there added.

*The House divided: Ayes 320, Noes 98.*

**Division No. 390]**

**[5.2 pm**

**AYES**

Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Hussain, Mr Adnan  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jermey, Terry  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kane, Mike  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kumaran, Uma  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell, Emma  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 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  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McDougall, Blair  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Mohamed, Abtisam  
 Moon, Perran  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Murphy, Luke

Murray, Chris  
 Murray, rh James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Naismith, Connor  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Dame Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Payne, Michael  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Jon  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Joe  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reeves, rh Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, rh Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Russell, Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sandher-Jones, Louise  
 Sowards, Mark  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevenson, Kenneth  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair

Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Sir Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, rh Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi  
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Bedford, Mr Peter  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Brandreth, Aphra  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Cartledge, James  
 Cleverly, rh Sir James  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Cooper, John  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Cross, Harriet  
 Davies, Mims  
 Dewhurst, Charlie  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Duffield, Rosie  
 Easton, Alex  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Fox, Sir Ashley  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Glen, rh John  
 Grant, Helen  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Griffiths, Alison  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Hussain, Mr Adnan  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard

Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Tami, rh Sir Mark  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Mark Ferguson and**  
**Taiwo Owatemi**

## NOES

Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Lamont, John  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Lowe, Rupert  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 Paul, Rebecca  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pritchard, rh Sir Mark  
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Smith, Rebecca  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stride, rh Sir Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Swaney, rh Sir Desmond  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Trott, rh Laura  
 Tugendhat, rh Tom  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Whately, Helen

Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
Wild, James  
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
Wood, Mike

Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Mr Andrew Snowden and**  
**Gregory Stafford**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes the Government's strong support for small and medium-sized businesses, including those employing seasonal workers; further notes that the Government's Employment Rights Bill will help seasonal workers by bringing the UK's outdated employment laws into the 21st century; welcomes the policy paper entitled *Backing your business: our plan for small and medium sized businesses*, which sets out a comprehensive vision for productivity and success; further welcomes action to tackle late payments through the introduction of the toughest laws in the G7, helping SMEs maintain cash flow during peak periods; supports measures to cut energy bills for SMEs through investment in clean power and reducing levies; commends investment in high streets via the Pride in Place fund, boosting footfall for seasonal trade; also notes consultations to reduce burdens on hospitality businesses; and further commends targeted support through the Business Growth Service to help SMEs access skills, finance and growth opportunities.

**Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I bring to the House an issue of grave concern. At Prime Minister's questions this afternoon, the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister how many more teachers there were since the Education Secretary came into office in 2024. The Prime Minister replied that there were "More than when the Conservatives left office".

The Department for Education's website makes it clear that the Prime Minister was wrong: there are 400 fewer teachers under Labour. This is more than an inaccuracy, and it is exactly why the public lose faith in our parliamentary democracy. Can you advise on how the Prime Minister can come to the House and correct the record?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. While the Chair is not responsible for the content of contributions made by Ministers, I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench have heard his comments this afternoon and, if an error has been made, I am sure it will be corrected as soon as possible.

## Conduct of the Chancellor of the Exchequer

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Before I call the shadow Chancellor to move the motion, I remind Members that, as "Erskine May" says:

"Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language. Parliamentary language is never more desirable than when a Member is canvassing the opinions and conduct of their opponents in debate."

The reason that matters in this particular debate, and does not really occur in other debates, is that this debate is on a substantive motion directly relating to the conduct of the right hon. Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves). In this debate, because it is on a substantive motion of this kind, arguments intended to criticise or defend the Chancellor's conduct relating to public finances are in order. Therefore, things may be said that the Chair would not normally permit in other proceedings. Those speaking on the motion should set out their arguments clearly. Intemperate abuse is out of order on this motion as much as on any other.

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

5.15 pm

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

That this House calls on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to apologise for misleading the country about the state of the public finances, rolling the pitch for raising taxes, breaking her promises and increasing welfare spending, including her claim on 4 November 2025 that the OBR would be downgrading their productivity forecast which, as the Chancellor said, had 'consequences for the public finances too, in lower tax receipts', when in fact on 31 October 2025 the OBR had submitted its forecast to the Chancellor that showed tax receipts would be £16 billion higher than previously thought, resulting in the Government's current balance target being met by a margin of £4.2 billion; further calls on the Chancellor to apologise for breaching the trust of the OBR, whose forecasts are shared in strict confidence until the Chancellor has given her Budget Statement; also calls on the Chancellor to apologise for the misleading briefings and leaks from HM Treasury in advance of the Budget Statement which caused uncertainty for families, businesses and investors; and calls on the Chancellor to apologise for breaking her promise after the last Budget that the Government was not going to raise taxes again, instead raising taxes in the 2025 Budget by £26 billion.

I will, of course, heed your remonstrations and remarks, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is said that astrologists are there to make economists look good and second-hand car dealers are there to make politicians look good. It is inconceivable that anywhere in the world there is any trade or career that could possibly make this Chancellor look good. Indeed, one need only look at the polls. The Ipsos poll on the Chancellor's approval rating shows that she has achieved minus 60%. That is a record low for a poll that was first commenced in the 1970s. A recent YouGov poll stated that the Chancellor was the least trusted on the economy, even more so than Jeremy Corbyn and, yes, Liz Truss—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. We do not refer to Members by name.

**Sir Mel Stride:** You are quite right, Madam Deputy Speaker; I meant to say the right hon. Member for Islington North and Liz Truss. The Chancellor is not so much the wilting lettuce as a complete liability. How could

*[Sir Mel Stride]*

this possibly have occurred? We have a Government who came to power with one of the largest majorities in the history of our country. One could almost see their majority from the moon. This has happened because of a huge failure on their part.

Let us take unemployment. Unemployment is now at a five-year high, back at a level last seen during the pandemic. The latest forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility show unemployment higher in every single year than in the forecasts from back in the spring. The International Monetary Fund tells us that inflation will be at the highest level of the G7 this year and next year too. Looking beneath the headline figures, the rate of inflation for food is at almost 5%. For a party that claims and professes to stand up for the poorest in our society, that is a disgrace.

When it comes to growth, we know from the OBR's latest forecasts that, for every year going forward, growth will be lower than the spring forecast set out. Our borrowing costs not so long ago reached a 27-year high, and we are now paying more on our borrowing than Greece.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the shadow Chancellor on finally working out what apologies are; I know he is demanding them from this side of the House. Before he carries on, will he apologise for the 15% spike in interest rates under Liz Truss, the thousands of pounds that were put on mortgages under Liz Truss, the billions that were cut from local governments under his Government and the fact that he ruined the health service under his Government? If people make mistakes they should apologise. When is he going to start?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I have had many things to say about the mini-Budget, both at the time that it happened and subsequently—and more recently too. Can I remind the hon. Gentleman that on the day of the general election, we had a near record level of employment and a near record low level of unemployment? We had the highest growth in the G7, and we had inflation bang on target at 2%. It is almost double that at present. The reason this Government have failed can be distilled to just two words: one is “deceit” and the other is “incompetence”. In the run-up to the last general election, the Labour party said that it would not put up taxes left, right and centre, and yet, within a few short months, they were to roll out £40 billion-worth of tax increases, including £25 billion by way of increased national insurance contribution taxes on employment.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Sir Mel Stride:** How could I resist?

**Graham Stuart:** My right hon. Friend is right to put his finger on the issue of trust. It is not the 280,000 people who are not employed now compared with last year; it is not the lost opportunities for so many young people in hospitality or, indeed, the so many other areas of failure, such as the reduction in numbers of teachers. The issue that is most corrosive for this Government is a loss of trust, because we can see their mendacity from Mars.

**Sir Mel Stride:** My right hon. Friend is right. To be more accurate, we can see it even from Pluto. He is also so right about the loss of jobs in hospitality; about 90,000 jobs have been destroyed, many of them the first opportunity to get on to the career ladder that young people would otherwise have had. That is as a direct consequence of the increase in national insurance. It was not just an increase in the rate; it was a reduction in the threshold at which that tax cuts in. That disproportionately affects those on lower income, in particular women, part-time workers and, yes, young people.

**Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Natalie Fleet** (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I will in a moment.

We have seen the consequences of that up and down our country. I have spent a lot of time speaking to employers—from the large employers down to those on the high streets. They are all struggling and they do so because of the decisions that were taken by this Chancellor.

**Natalie Fleet:** I welcome the debate and I thank the shadow Chancellor for giving way on the point about women. We are here to talk about the conduct of the most powerful woman in this country, who used her Budget to remove the rape clause, to take children out of poverty and to give justice to miners in my patch. That never would have happened without her. I welcome this moment to celebrate our Chancellor, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for it.

**Sir Mel Stride:** I thank the hon. Lady for that passionate intervention. The best way to get people out of poverty is through work. To the point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), the record of the last Government was exemplary. We had 4 million more jobs, and 800 new jobs every day under the last Conservative Government.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Were I not sat in a different place, I would be feeling déjà vu, because this appears to be the same debate that we had on the Budget just a week or so ago when I pointed out to the right hon. Gentleman that the problem we have is that two thirds of children growing up in poverty have a parent in work, when it was a third before the last Government got in. Will the right hon. Gentleman, who is a former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, like to, first, apologise for that and, secondly, reflect on why work was not a route out of poverty under his Government?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I just ask the hon. Gentleman what he thinks the effect of increasing taxes on hard-working people does for poverty. Any economist will say it drives poverty up.

There is also the question of the farm tax, with the changes under the inheritance tax regime. In the run-up to the general election, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, then in his shadow position, looked the National Farmers Union president Tom Bradshaw in the eye and said that, at least on that count, farmers had nothing to fear from a future Labour Government. Well, that lasted about five minutes before they changed and the Chancellor changed her position.

That will cause untold misery to farmers up and down our country. It will mean that farms that have been passed down generation to generation over many years will now fall into the tax net and potentially have to be broken up.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): We know that there are serious questions over this Chancellor's alleged experience in the financial services sector. We can see that she has no experience in either industry or commerce. Perhaps the worst of her detriments, however, is her clinical lack of empathy, seeming totally unable to connect cause and effect. That is why she has allowed the disastrous—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. May I respectfully remind the hon. Member that comments need to be about what is in the substantive motion and not wider matters?

**Dave Doogan:** Indeed. In terms of that conduct and those decisions that have been made, that is most evident in the egregious family farm tax—a betrayal of the producers of our food, no less—and the, let us call it, management of market-sensitive information before the Budget, which had a material effect on the economy of these islands.

**Sir Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman makes excellent points, and I will come to the issue of the market-moving effects of some of the comments made by the Chancellor. On the point that he rightly raises about the impact on people's lives, these are real jobs. These are people struggling with real businesses. These are farmers getting up early in the morning, going out, working and doing what they know to be right, yet they are weighed down by the decisions taken by the Government.

Labour said that it had no intention of means-testing the winter fuel payment. There was no mention of it in its manifesto during the last general election, yet within a very short period of time, that is precisely what it did. Before Labour Members get excited about excluding millionaires and multimillionaires from those payments, the reality is that about 80% of pensioners living below the poverty line were impacted by that decision, which would have only entrenched and driven up poverty.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): One concern that I have is the repeated pattern seen with the Budget. At the time, the Government sat on an impact assessment that showed that 100,000 pensioners would be pushed into poverty and 50,000 into absolute poverty. That was the Government's own assessment, but they did not release it to the House or the country before pushing through the policy, which we have now seen in the Budget. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a pattern of behaviour rather than a one-off mistake?

**Sir Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government talk a good game on poverty, but when it comes down to what they do, we see something entirely different.

**Sorcha Eastwood** (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): On the point about what poverty means to our constituents, we are sitting in Northern Ireland with the local growth fund and the Treasury refuses to understand that the way we do things is different. We do not need 70% capital funding; we need it the other way around. That,

to me, speaks to some of the substantive motion that I am comfortable to speak to, which is that it sometimes feels that the message is not getting through. Whether it is on the farm tax or the winter fuel allowance, our constituents need a Government who will listen. They promised to listen, but so far that has not been reflected.

**Sir Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right.

There is another change to the inheritance tax regime that will be equally as destructive as the agricultural property relief changes, and that is the business property relief changes—the tax changes relating to family firms up and down the country. I have met many of them. These are sometimes substantial businesses that have gone from having a bright outlook under the last Government to suddenly being concerned about the provisions they will now have to make to avoid being broken up as a consequence of the ruinous changes to the inheritance tax regime for those businesses. This is destroying investment, jobs and growth. That is the story of the Labour party.

**Gareth Snell:** On the right hon. Gentleman's new-found concern for pensioners in poverty, the one time that the triple lock was suspended was under the Conservatives in 2021. I believe that he is on record as saying that it was unsustainable and should be replaced with a double lock. Is that still his position or does he support the triple lock?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I invite the hon. Gentleman to look back a bit further in time, before the triple lock was introduced by the Government of my party, to the time when his party was last in office. Under the last Labour Government, pensioner poverty was the fourth highest in Europe. That is why we brought in the triple lock—to clear up the mess that his party had created.

Labour also said, during the run-up to the general election, that unlike all socialist Governments in the past, it would not borrow and spend massively, yet the plan set out in its first Budget last autumn was to spend around half a trillion pounds more across the Parliament than under the plans it inherited. That was added to further in the recent Budget. Billions of pounds more are to be borrowed and spent. The consequences of that are that inflation has been stickier and higher for longer, as I have set out. It will be the highest in the G7 this year and the highest in the G7 next year. The consequences of that are that the Bank of England has had to keep interest rates higher for longer than it otherwise would have. The consequences of that—[*Interruption.*] Yes, there should have been more reductions—if the Government had not fuelled inflation, we would have seen interest rates coming down faster.

The reality is that increased borrowing costs have heaped pressure on people with mortgages and on businesses, and have added to the cost of servicing the huge national debt, to which the Government are readily further adding such that we are now spending £100 billion a year just to service our national debt, and that will rise to £140 billion, according to the latest Office for Budget Responsibility forecast. That is more than double what we spend on defence. If debt servicing were a Department, it would be the third largest in Whitehall, but not one looking after public services or providing the additional teachers, which, apparently the Prime Minister does not realise are not there. This is money being spent simply on paying for the profligacy of the Labour party.

**David Pinto-Duschinsky** (Hendon) (Lab): I want to help out the right hon. Gentleman, because he seems a bit confused. On his party's watch, the debt service exceeded £100 billion. When it took over, the debt service was only £30 billion, so his party tripled it. Will he apologise for mortgaging our children's future as a result of the Conservative party's inability to manage the public finances?

**Sir Mel Stride:** May I give the hon. Member a basic lesson in economics? In 2010, when my party came into office, we inherited a deficit at over 10% of GDP—as any economist will say, that is the amount of money being added to the debt every single year. It was over 10% on the watch of the Labour party, and that is the story of increased debt.

The debt pile as a percentage of GDP was coming down just before covid. Along with just about everybody else in the political firmament at the time of covid, the Labour party urged us to spend ever more to support the economy and to support jobs. That is precisely what we did, and of course that came with a fiscal cost.

**Gareth Snell:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Mel Stride:** Three times might be a bit too much—we will come back to the hon. Gentleman later.

**Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): After the global financial crisis, which hit every country in the world, the Conservatives inherited a growing economy in 2010. I remember that it said it would wipe the deficit by the end of the 2015 Parliament, but that simply did not happen. We acknowledge the huge pressure that covid put on the economy, but we are taking steps to get the deficit and borrowing down, because it is a huge burden on the economy.

**Sir Mel Stride:** The steps, as the hon. Gentleman terms them, that his party is taking to get the deficit down are to borrow ever larger sums of money—half a trillion more than was laid out in the plans that his party inherited, and that has been added to further by the Chancellor at the last Budget.

You will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that after her first Budget, the Chancellor said that she would not be coming back for more tax, which brings me to the issue of her being misleading. That was clearly a misleading statement, because the recent Budget sets out that £26 billion more will be raised in tax in the year 2029-30. But £26 billion is not the extent of the increased tax rises. Because the Government have fuelled inflation, for the reasons that we have been discussing among ourselves, fiscal drag has dragged in a total of £38 billion of additional taxation in that year. The Labour party must start to understand that if it taxes and taxes and taxes the economy, it will get less growth, less productivity and less employment, and that is precisely what we are seeing.

The Labour party also said—if you recall, Madam Deputy Speaker—that the Chancellor would not be taxing hard-working people. Well, that simply was not true. By freezing the income tax thresholds for those extra years, the Chancellor is increasing taxes by £7 billion, which is a direct contradiction of what she said—with great gusto—in the previous Budget. She said that she would not do that because it would hurt hard-working people and that she would stick to her promises. Clearly, she did not mean it when she said it.

**Graham Stuart:** I wonder how best this behaviour can be described—as a falsehood, an untruth, a fib, a lie or a whopper, or are there other synonyms that better describe the repeated failure to do what one promises?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I thank the right hon. Member for that observation. I have been cautioned by the Chair as to the language—"misleading"—that I use, but it was clearly misleading for the Chancellor to come to the House and say that she would not be putting up taxes and that this was a one-off, as she used the expression "wipe the slate clean", and yet be back for £26 billion more only a matter of months later.

The Chancellor also said that she would control welfare spending. Well, how did that go? The first thing that Labour did was to scrap the reforms that we had brought in—in fact, from when I was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—that the OBR had scored as 450,000 fewer people going on to long-term sickness and disability benefits with a multibillion pound—

**David Pinto-Duschinsky:** Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I think I have a jack-in-the-box over there. A jack-in-the-box is great to observe, isn't it? I am not sure that is the case with the hon. Gentleman, but I might take what is probably the fourth intervention from him momentarily.

The Government scrapped our plans, with the result that 450,000 people who would not have gone on to those benefits are now heading exactly in that direction. They U-turned, of course, on the botched attempt to bring in their own reforms because perhaps some Labour Members sitting here this evening refused to back them. That cost about £5 billion.

We have seen that the terms of reference for the Timms review, which is looking at reform of personal independence payments, make it explicitly clear that there will be no attempt to manage down any of the forecast numbers for that benefit within the OBR's forecast. Labour has given up on welfare reform.

**David Pinto-Duschinsky:** Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Sir Mel Stride:** Momentarily—I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will come to him.

What Labour has done in the meantime with this Budget is to take entirely the wrong decision, which is to tax all those hard-working people to the tune of £7 billion—a high proportion of that to transfer straight across to those who are on benefits, including scrapping the two-child cap. Those are the wrong priorities. They are about the socialist obsession with redistribution, and nothing to do with driving the incentives in the economy that grow it and make everybody better off.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): We heard from Labour Back Benchers about the previous Government's borrowing, but that was for the country as a whole—for example, covid recovery loans. We have seen with this Budget what I would call career recovery loans, which are for the benefit of two people: the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister.

**Sir Mel Stride:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In her heart, I do not believe that the Chancellor really thinks the right decision was to scrap the two-child benefit cap—I genuinely do not. This is a case of the political or fiscal tail wagging the welfare dog; it is as simple as that. The Front Bench has given up on any serious welfare reform.

Of course, the Chancellor has reassured us by telling us that she has rebuilt her headroom. She has doubled the headroom against her fiscal target, though it should be pointed out—

**David Burton-Sampson** (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I will in a moment.

It should be pointed out, of course, that that is a fiddled fiscal target. It is not the fiscal target that we were working to—the same definition of debt. It is not net public sector debt at all; it is something different. In fact, if we were to apply the targets that we were running to, which were much more stringent, to the figures in the forecast that we see from the recent Budget, those targets would be underwater in every single year of that forecast.

We should acknowledge that there is now real risk to the stability of our economy, even with an apparently doubled fiscal headroom. The first risk is in defence spending. Although within the numbers, there is the ambition to reach 2.7% of GDP by 2027, there is nothing beyond that. Of course, the Government know that they will have to spend more on defence, and that every increase of 1% of GDP in defence spending is about £25 billion—more than the entire fiscal headroom that the Chancellor has set aside.

The Chancellor knows that part of the problem she had with the forecast—although other things moved strongly and positively in her direction—was the productivity growth downgrade by the OBR from 1.3% to 1%. The trend for productivity over the past 15 years has been just 0.5%. If the OBR decides in a couple of years' time to return to an assumption of trend growth in productivity, that will wipe out £28 billion of headroom. It will destroy all the headroom and more.

Similarly, on the path of interest rates, a 1% increase in interest rates across the forecast would cost £16 billion. In relation to particular spending pressures, such as special educational needs and disabilities, there is of course a £6 billion cost pressure, because that spending will be taken from local authorities and put on to the Government's books in 2028. How that additional cost will be met is not in any way accounted for. Similarly, apparent efficiency savings of £4 billion in 2029-30—the target year—are very handy if one is trying to hit a fiscal target, but there is no explanation whatsoever of where or how those efficiency savings will be found.

My final point is that the tax increases set out by the Chancellor are all back-ended. That is when the frozen thresholds kick in. We are expected to believe that, in the run-up to a general election, a party that has shown no resolve, backbone or capacity to take difficult decisions will suddenly find some backbone, stick to its guns and deliver those tax increases. That simply will not happen.

**Dr Luke Evans:** Nowhere is that more evident than in health, with the abolitions and redundancies in integrated care boards. Given that those redundancies cover 50%

of ICB staff, we now understand that the funding is just being reprofiled into later spending in 2028-29. Is that not exactly the kind of example that my right hon. Friend is talking about? Labour will encounter real problems in the next couple of years as it tries to drive through its agenda.

**Sir Mel Stride:** The reality is that back-loading tax-paying and squeezing spending, as the Government are doing, simply pushes off the inevitable. The evidence shows that, despite its huge majority, Labour does not have the backbone or a plan to control spending and take difficult decisions, even on tax.

The Chancellor is like Mr Micawber in Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield", who was just waiting all the time for something to turn up. Mr Micawber, as those who are familiar with the story will recall, not only ruined himself through his inability to manage his own finances, but ended up ruining another person, too. The Chancellor, with her inability to manage the public finances, will, I am afraid, be the ruin of our nation. For most of us, Christmas will be not so much a question of "Great Expectations", but one of "Bleak House". I give way to the hon. Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), who has been very patient.

**David Burton-Sampson:** The shadow Chancellor wants to talk about fiction, so let us talk about the Liz Truss Budget. Before we do, though, imagine if the Chancellor had turned up to deliver her Budget with headroom of £4.2 billion—£2.2 billion below what is set out by the stability rules. That would have been fiction. But she did not do that; she took the fiscally responsible decision to create headroom of £21.7 billion, which covers us for future financial shocks. Does the shadow Chancellor not agree?

**Sir Mel Stride:** Well, no. The reason there is the obsession with fiscal headroom is that this is the Chancellor who set up too little back in the day, blew it all, had to rebuild it, blew it all, and has had to rebuild it again. That is why the markets are so sensitive to fiscal headroom. The fact that the Chancellor is now saying that she needs £22.5 billion as fiscal headroom against her primary current Budget target is evidence of the fact that she had woefully too little back at the time of the first Budget, when she had £9.9 billion. That is the moral of the story.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The political reality is that this Government have been dead in the water since they failed to get their very modest reduction in the rate of growth of the benefits bill through Parliament earlier in the year. We saw the ridiculous nonsense in the Budget when, having sacked and suspended Back Benchers after the previous Budget because they voted to end the two-child limit, the Chancellor came back with this great triumphal announcement that she was going to do it for them. May I entreat my right hon. Friend to give way one more time to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) so that he can give us an explanation of his socks?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I think the less said about the socks the better, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Gareth Snell:** They're more interesting than your speech.

**Sir Mel Stride:** Yes, not bad, but I have to say that the tie runs in a close second—that is pretty shocking too.

I now turn from the substance of the Budget to the chaotic pantomime that we had in the run-up to the Budget? We had every possible kite flown by the Treasury as to which taxes were potentially going up. We had so many kites that they blotted out the sun, and the long shadow of all that chaos swept across businesses who stopped investing, and consumers who stopped spending. Members should not take my word for that; Andy Haldane, the former chief economist at the Bank of England, observed that all that speculation made businesses and consumers “hunker down”. It had real economic consequences.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way on that point?

**Sir Mel Stride:** I will take one final intervention, and there is none better than my right hon. Friend.

**Dr Murrison:** My right hon. Friend is being very generous. The truth is that through dither, delay and changing their mind, the Labour Government in the run-up to the Budget had a real impact on people’s lives. Does he agree that pensioners in particular were encouraged to withdraw funds from their pension funds, which will have an impact on them for many years to come? What does he think of the remarks of Michael Summersgill, the chief executive officer of AJ Bell, who said that millions and billions of pounds were withdrawn from pension funds precisely because of the changing mind of the Chancellor of the Exchequer expressed before the Budget?

**Sir Mel Stride:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why that behaviour was so irresponsible. There are people who would have drawn down on their pensions because they were extremely concerned about what was being briefed out by the Treasury as to what changes may be coming down the line, and about their ability to do so after the Budget. We also had people leaving the country because they were worried about an exit tax, which was another kite flown by the Treasury. That grossly irresponsible behaviour had real-life impacts in the real economy.

When it comes to misleading, there is much to consider in the complete mismanagement of the run-up to this Budget. That is not just my view. Indeed, a member of the Cabinet was quoted in the press saying, “the handling of this Budget has been a disaster from start to finish.”

The impression that has been given is that there was a deliberate attempt to paint an inaccurate picture of the public finances, designed to give political cover for Labour’s plans for more taxes and more welfare spending. The Chancellor delivered a pre-Budget statement in Downing Street on 4 November in which she said that the OBR would be downgrading its productivity forecast, meaning lower tax receipts, but she failed to mention that in reality the OBR’s forecast had already shown her four days earlier that overall tax receipts were £16 billion higher—not lower—than previously thought. To quote the OBR’s Budget report:

“In isolation, the reduction in productivity growth could have lowered revenues by around £16 billion in 2029-30. However, the boost to receipts from higher inflation and changes to the composition of nominal GDP growth...more than offset this.”

Ministers have pointed out that there was a need to increase headroom, but that was not the justification for tax rises that was being made before the Budget, and it is an admission that the headroom that the Chancellor left in her first two fiscal events was inadequate and irresponsible. Crucially, it also fails to acknowledge that a significant proportion of the increase in taxes was used to fund policy decisions to spend more on welfare.

On 14 November, the media were briefed that a plan to increase income tax rates had been dropped following an improved forecast from the OBR. We now know that that was simply untrue. The finalised pre-measures forecast came weeks before this, on 31 October. That is why it is vital that the Financial Conduct Authority investigates the briefings and leaks that went on, and I have written to it again this week on that matter. Even after the Budget, in a *Guardian* interview, the Chancellor said that income tax rises had remained on the table well into November,

“because we didn’t know the size of the downgrade, the productivity”. Again, that is simply untrue.

We now know that at no point was there a deficit of the scale suggested to the media. We know that because the OBR felt it necessary to take the unprecedented step of publishing its forecast rounds in full. The question remains as to why Ministers seem to have been so unconcerned about what was appearing in the press, when the OBR has now revealed that the alarm was being raised before the Budget. The reality is that the briefings and leaks were a smokescreen designed to distract from the real reason that taxes were going up, the utter weakness of this Labour Government and the need to buy off their Back Benchers with yet more welfare spending.

In the process, the uncertainty and speculation fuelled by the Treasury had an impact on families and on growth. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) rightly pointed out, people made decisions about their finances. They locked in higher mortgage rates, and businesses put off making investments and hiring workers. The British public have been left worse off and they have been misled. They deserve an apology, and they deserve much better than this weak and irresponsible Government.

5.52 pm

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):** I thank the Opposition for giving me another opportunity to remind Conservative Members how the Budget cut the cost of living, cut NHS waiting lists and cut Government borrowing.

I have seen the shadow Chancellor across the Dispatch Box so much in recent weeks, on what feels like a daily basis, that I might almost miss him over the recess—almost. No matter how many times I have seen him across the Dispatch Box, he has shown that he does not want to talk about the fact that this Budget takes £150 off energy bills, freezes rail fares and prescription charges, lifts 550,000 children out of poverty, increases our headroom to £21.7 billion, and gets debt falling and cuts borrowing in every year. This Budget invests in our NHS, our defence, our roads and our railways, and in every region and nation of the UK. The Conservatives do not want to talk about the substance of the Budget because they can see that the Chancellor has delivered a Budget that delivers for working people.

**Dave Doogan:** I did not expect the Minister to give way. He says that energy bill payers in the UK are now £150 better off, forgetting that energy bills are currently almost £600 higher than Labour promised they would be at the election. Ofgem has come in with an additional £108 for infrastructure charges. Energy bills will go up again in January and again in April. Does he want to reflect on what he has said? Is that really the record on which he is standing?

**James Murray:** I am unclear whether the hon. Gentleman supports our £150 off energy bills and our extra £150 off for those 6 million households on the lowest income. That will benefit people right across the UK with the cost of living challenges they face. We know that that is what matters to people right across Britain.

Instead of focusing on what this Budget means for people across Britain, we heard the shadow Chancellor's comments on a motion that focuses so much on process. While I accept that process is very important, it has been covered extensively in recent weeks—indeed, most recently by the Chancellor in the Treasury Committee this morning—so let me put on record our response to the motion and to the comments that the shadow Chancellor made about process.

Let me begin by again addressing the speech that the Chancellor made on 4 November. When the Chancellor addressed the country that morning, her purpose was simple: to give the British people an honest sense of the circumstances we were facing and the principles that would guide her as she took decisions at the Budget. She wanted to highlight the challenges that our country was facing and her priorities in the face of those challenges, and that is exactly what she did.

Following the OBR's review of productivity—the review of the impact of 14 years of the Conservatives being in power—the Chancellor knew that we faced a downgrade. To understand the scale of the impact, members of the Opposition need only to consult the Budget document. There, they will see that the OBR's productivity review, which covered the Conservatives' time in office, reduces

“the amount of revenue the OBR expects the government to collect by around £16 billion in 2029-30.”

**Graham Stuart:** I think it is the dishonesty that is catching at everybody's throat. A year ago at the Budget, the Chancellor said that she was not going to freeze income tax thresholds because—I think I quote—it would be an additional tax on working people, and therefore in breach of the Labour manifesto. A year later, she did exactly that, and then claimed that it was not a breach of the Labour manifesto. That is rank dishonesty. That is why Madam Deputy Speaker is allowing language that would not normally be used in this Chamber: because this motion and this Government mean we have to address issues that normally do not occur.

**James Murray:** The right hon. Gentleman is mistaken. We have kept to our manifesto commitment not to raise the rates of income tax, national insurance on working people, and VAT. We also said in our manifesto that we would keep taxes on working people as low as possible, and we have been able to do that only because of the other fair and necessary choices that the Chancellor made on taxation.

**Graham Stuart:** Will the Minister give way?

**James Murray:** I will give way if the right hon. Gentleman will tell us whether he supports our changes to council tax on high-value properties.

**Graham Stuart:** On the issue of the manifesto, will the Minister confirm that it does not say that it would not raise the income tax rates? It just says that it would not raise those taxes. The word “rates” is not in there. It is that that is misleading. It is that that makes everyone outside throw things at their television, because they are disgusted by a Government who cannot face up to simple truths!

**James Murray:** The word “rates” is definitely in there. The manifesto talks about the income tax rates and additional, main and higher rates of income tax, and it is very clear that we were talking about the rates of tax on working people. As I said, the manifesto also says that we will keep taxes on working people as low as possible. I note that the right hon. Gentleman did not take my suggestion to comment on some of the other tax choices we took at the Budget—the fair and necessary choices. The Opposition are picking and choosing what they want to refer to in the Budget. The Budget is a package. If they do not like it, they should explain what they would do instead.

**Sir Mel Stride:** On the matter of picking and choosing, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that on 4 November, the Chancellor did point out that there was a downgrade in productivity; we now know that to be £16 billion, and she knew that at the time. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept, however, that she did not mention—it was omission—the upgrade to the number, which was twice as much as that £16 billion, and that she thereby gave an inaccurate reflection of the state of the public finances at that time?

**James Murray:** The Chancellor set out the productivity review that was under way by the OBR. In fact, if the right hon. Gentleman consults the OBR document published on Budget day, he will see in black and white that the productivity downgrade reduced tax receipts by £16 billion. The Chancellor was clear in her speech on 4 November that this, combined with the clear need to increase headroom to build resilience in public finances, would require everyone to contribute, and that is what happened.

**Sir Mel Stride** *rose—*

**James Murray:** The right hon. Gentleman had a very long time to comment earlier in this debate—I may give way to him later.

**Dr Murrison:** The Minister is a reasonable man, and I imagine that he would subscribe to the Government's much-vaunted duty of candour that they are selling in their Public Office (Accountability) Bill, which is currently in Committee. The Bill is so important to the Government that the Prime Minister himself had to introduce it on Second Reading. Will the Minister examine what has happened over the past couple of months? Does he really believe that the Treasury, and in particular the Chancellor of the Exchequer, can truly be said to have discharged that duty of candour in their dealings?

**James Murray:** As the right hon. Gentleman should know, this Government take our responsibilities to public office incredibly seriously, and we have made sure we focus on that in the way we conduct ourselves in office. In speaking to people on 4 November, the Chancellor was setting out the challenges that we knew we were facing and the principles that would guide her in approaching decisions ahead of the Budget. It was important to set out the priorities she would have in taking her decisions on Budget day.

**Sir Mel Stride:** The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. Does he accept that on 4 November, the Chancellor knew that there was an upgrade to the state of the public finances of around £32 billion due to additional tax, inflation and other factors? If he does accept that, could he explain to the House why no mention whatsoever was made of that fact by the Chancellor?

**James Murray:** What the Chancellor knew when she gave her speech on 4 November was that headroom stood at a precarious £4.2 billion, and that was before previously announced policy measures had been accounted for. As I have said before in this House, and as Professor Miles of the OBR said to the Treasury Committee, that was a very challenging fiscal situation. If I had been at this Dispatch Box trying to justify a headroom of £4.2 billion or less, that would have been completely indefensible. Doing nothing was not an option—£4.2 billion of headroom would have been insufficient and deeply irresponsible.

In her speech at the beginning of November, the Chancellor was clear that she would seek to build more resilient public finances, with headroom to withstand global turbulence. She set out her priorities for the Budget, and those priorities were exactly what the Budget delivered. The apparent astonishment of Conservative Members that a Government could set out circumstances honestly, explain their approach and then deliver as promised is very telling—it must be an alien concept that they never considered during their time in office. As the Chancellor set out on 4 November and then delivered in her Budget, she wanted to cut NHS waiting lists, and that is exactly what we are doing. Waiting lists are already down by 230,000, with an extra 5 million appointments delivered since the election and 250 new neighbourhood health centres on the way.

**Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): One of the things I am most proud of—having stood on doorstep after doorstep in Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley at the general election, hearing people tell the dreadful stories of how long they and their relatives had been waiting for hospital treatment—is the 45% fall in people waiting more than a year for their operation in the Black Country, in our hospital trusts. I am glad the Chancellor made the decisions she did in the last Budget that have enabled that.

**James Murray:** I thank my hon. Friend for talking about the experience of her constituents. She is absolutely right that the NHS is so important to all of us, and it is so important for the Chancellor to protect it in the Budget. The decisions she took protect our investment in the NHS in order to get it back on its feet, which will improve people's experiences right across the country.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): On the topic of the NHS, the point I made in the previous debate is really important. The investment in the NHS is not just an investment in buildings; it is an investment in people, including working people. I have lots of people in my constituency who are self-employed—sole traders, as we call them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those people having to wait years for an NHS appointment is bad for the economy and bad for their pockets?

**James Murray:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that although improving the NHS is a clear priority, because of all of our experiences and because of our reliance on it to keep ourselves and our families healthy. Investing in the NHS is also an economic investment, because people being out of the workforce due to ill health is a serious drag on our economy—that is the situation we inherited from the previous Government. Our investment in the health service and our desire to get the NHS back on its feet is the right thing to do, not just for families across the country but for economic growth.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

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

**Steff Aquarone:** On the same topic, the way this Budget was handled has undermined public confidence in North Norfolk in many ways, few more so than the fact it produced radio silence on our long-pledged dental school at the University of East Anglia. Does the Minister agree that if the Treasury had spent a little less time on its fiscal fandango and more time on delivering dentistry improvements in North Norfolk, this Budget might have gone down better with many of my local residents?

**James Murray:** I would take the hon. Gentleman more seriously if he spent a little less time opposing the decisions we take on tax to fund public services, because we are taking fair and necessary decisions on tax precisely to fund the NHS and the other public services on which we all rely.

I have set out at length what we are doing to protect the NHS, but the Chancellor's second priority going into the Budget was to tackle the cost of living, and that is exactly what we are doing. At this Budget, the Chancellor chose to freeze rail fares for the first time in 30 years, to extend bus fare caps, to freeze prescription charges, to increase the basic and new state pension, to raise the minimum and living wages, to extend the fuel duty cut, to help more than half a million children who would otherwise live in poverty, and to save the average household £150 off their energy bills. As the Bank of England deputy governor told Members yesterday, this Budget will reduce inflation by between 0.4% and 0.5%.

The Chancellor's final priority going into the Budget was to cut our national debt and Government borrowing, and that is exactly what we are doing.

**Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): The Conservatives have spent a lot of this debate saying that apologies are due from the Government, yet under them £11 billion

of taxpayers' money was lost in covid fraud. Does the Minister agree that if an apology is due from any party in the House, it is them?

**James Murray:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Sorry seems to be the hardest word to say for Opposition Members when it comes to covid fraud, the state in which they left the NHS, the Liz Truss mini-Budget and everything they did to public services and our economy, writing off the next generation and vast swathes of our nation. They should stand up and say sorry.

The priority for the Chancellor at the Budget was also to make sure that we cut our national debt and Government borrowing. Because of choices that the Chancellor made at the Budget, borrowing will fall as a share of GDP in every year of this forecast. Net financial debt will be falling as a share of GDP by the end of this Parliament, and will be lower by the end of the forecast than when we came into office. As I have said already, our headroom now stands at £21.7 billion, meeting our stability rule a year early, giving businesses the confidence to invest and leaving Government freer to act when the situation calls for it.

Whatever mischief the Conservatives try to make and however personal they make their attacks, the truth is that the Chancellor was clear about the challenges the country faces. She set out her priorities in taking those challenges head-on, and she delivered a Budget that meets the priorities of the British people now and in the future.

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): As usual, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is out here defending the Chancellor. I feel quite sorry for him. He has reeled off a number of policies that his Chancellor and his Government have made a choice about, but before the election, the Chancellor said that those choices would be on the back of a fully costed manifesto. Instead, taxes have gone up to pay for those choices, and that means that the manifesto was not fully costed. The motion therefore is correct, is it not, that the Chancellor misled the country before the election and in this Budget?

**James Murray:** The hon. Gentleman said he feels sorry for me—he needn't. I am proud to be defending a Labour Budget in this Chamber. Frankly, I might repay the sympathies to him: I feel sorry for him to be stuck on the Opposition Benches, where I fear he may be for a long time.

The other point of process in the motion, to which the shadow Chancellor referred in his comments, is speculation ahead of the Budget. Let me start by addressing the premature publication of the "Economic and fiscal outlook". We know that the EFO is a highly sensitive document, which is obviously not meant to be published until after the Chancellor has finished presenting the Budget to the House. The fact that it was accessed online before she began her Budget speech was a serious matter.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): The Minister refers to the accidental or deliberate release of this information, but we know that on 14 November the press were briefed, clearly with incorrect information. Will he confirm to this House today who gave authority

for that press briefing to go ahead, which misled not only the press, but the country?

**James Murray:** I think the hon. Gentleman is incorrect in what he said. He said that I may have implied the premature publication was deliberate; I certainly did not. It is none the less a serious matter, which is why we are responding to it with the commensurate seriousness that it deserves. We know that the OBR rightly took responsibility for this mistake, and soon afterwards—while we were discussing the matter at these Dispatch Boxes last Monday—its chair, Richard Hughes, resigned. That, of course, is a matter for Mr Hughes, and is his decision. The Chancellor wrote to him to thank him for his professionalism and dedication. Many Members and I have made clear our gratitude for his work as a public servant. Nonetheless, it was a serious breach, and the Government are acting with seriousness in response.

**Chris Vince:** I read the OBR report with interest. One of its recommendations that caught my attention was this:

"We recommend that the process for publishing the EFOs...should immediately be removed from the locally managed website and conducted in an environment more appropriate to the nature of the task".

May I ask the Chief Secretary, or his Treasury colleagues, to find out whether "immediately" means that that has been done?

**James Murray:** My hon. Friend is right to point out that the OBR's report contains a series of recommendations. It was, in fact, published within a few days of the premature publication. We are acting on its recommendations, including the recommendation that we should determine whether this has happened before, at previous fiscal events. While the OBR indicated that it might have happened earlier this year, at the time of the spring statement, it did not look into previous fiscal events, either under this Chancellor or under Chancellors in the last Government. We are looking into that to find out what happened.

More widely, beyond the EFO and the OBR, we put the utmost weight on Budget security, as I told the House last week. That is why, as I have told the House, a leak inquiry is under way, with the full support of the Chancellor and the whole team at the Treasury. In addition, the permanent secretary to the Treasury will conduct a review of its security processes, which will inform future fiscal events. The Budget security review will happen in the new year, and we will publish the outcome once it has concluded. More immediately, however, while recognising the seriousness of what happened with the OBR's forecast, we remain fully committed to working with an independent OBR, and we recognise its vital role as a core part of our fiscal framework. The Government will soon launch a competitive external recruitment process to appoint a new chair, subject to the consent of the Treasury Committee. In the meantime, Professor David Miles and Tom Josephs will jointly lead the OBR until the new chair is in place.

I am happy to come here every day to explain the decisions that we took in the Budget in the interests of the British people. It is clear that the Conservatives do not want to talk about £150 off energy bills, freezes in prescription charges and rail fares, our investment in

[James Murray]

our NHS, and the fact that we are cutting debt. They do not want to confront the fact that this is a Budget that not only delivers for Britain, but does so in challenging times. It is a Budget that invests in Britain, supports the NHS, helps people with the cost of living, and gets our debt and borrowing down. It is a Budget delivered by a Chancellor who takes challenges head-on, makes the right decisions for our country, and meets the priorities of the British people. It is a Budget from a Government who will not let Britain's future be defined by the failures of Governments past. This is a Budget that we are proud of, and we reject the Opposition motion.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

6.12 pm

**Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD):** It is a real delight to speak in this debate, because I honestly thought that I would not get the chance. There was a risk, I thought, that the shadow Chancellor might even filibuster in his own Opposition day debate, much as I enjoy his poetry readings and so forth.

We all know that the Budget process was a bit of a mess. It had more leaks than a sieve, lots of flip-flopping, and all the rest. By the time we got to Budget day, many of us were relieved that the process was over. But let us not pretend that this was all new. Previous Budgets had involved a number of leaks, and we all know that the Liz Truss mini-Budget must surely be the gold standard for sidelining the OBR.

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** What with the Chancellor's flip-flopping on the Budget, the various leaks and the misleading comments about the state of the public finances, Labour is beginning to look as incompetent as the Conservatives in its running of the economy and the Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that Labour has let the public down, and must start being transparent with us all?

**Daisy Cooper:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I agree with him: transparency is critical. On transparency, we Liberal Democrats think that it is time to overhaul this entire process. Colleagues will know that when Sweden faced a similar crisis in its Budget process in the 1990s, it overhauled the process, and it now has a system in which a draft Budget is published. There is a lot of time for it to be debated, and amendments can be tabled by Opposition parties before the process is concluded. The public would welcome such transparency; it would then be incumbent on the Government and all Opposition parties to set out how they would fund their pledges, raise revenue and manage Government spending.

These debates over the last few weeks have raised questions about the role of the OBR, and I want to put it on the record that we Liberal Democrats think that we should keep the OBR. It plays an important role as an independent organisation that can scrutinise the Treasury, but there is scope for more democratic accountability, and to tease out the divergence between forecasts by the OBR and the Treasury.

I am slightly perplexed to see that the Opposition day motion focuses on process, not policy, and that it promotes spin over substance. This Budget has levied stealth taxes on households and on our high streets, and has fundamentally failed to galvanise growth. Maybe it is obvious to people at home why the Conservatives have not tried to focus on the substance: because those stealth taxes were started by the Conservatives and have been carried on by Labour. The Conservatives failed to fix the business rates system, and Labour has not taken forward fundamental change. It is clear that both parties continue to refuse to go for growth with Europe.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) asked a very reasonable and legitimate question about why the Treasury has not said whether it will provide funding for dental training places in his county and for his constituents. That was a legitimate question to ask, so I was disappointed that the Minister tried to say, in response, that we have not supported his tax rises, when we Liberal Democrats have repeatedly, over the last year and more, set out the different ways in which we would raise taxes, including by reforming capital gains tax, looking at other taxes and a windfall tax on the big banks, as recommended by the Institute for Public Policy Research and endorsed by independent economists. We have also set out how getting a customs union with the European Union would boost public finances by £25 billion a year. [Interruption.] I understand that the Minister and those on the Treasury Bench who are chuntering right now may wish to level their accusation at the Conservative party, but that does not stack up when talking to the Liberal Democrats.

**Dave Doogan:** Is the hon. Lady as frustrated as I am to hear the normally temperate Chief Secretary to the Treasury chuntering, "Do you agree with our taxes?", as though there is only one way to raise fiscal revenues, and as though if we do not agree with Labour, we have got it wrong? That would be ironic, because there are many ways to raise taxes. Is she, like businesses across Scotland, concerned that this Government have taken £66 billion out of the real economy, with no care for what that will do to growth?

**Daisy Cooper:** I am concerned about the impact of this Budget on businesses, and particularly about business rates.

We have been very clear that we are trying to be a party of constructive opposition. In last year's Budget, it was clear that the jobs tax would raise £10 billion, once we had adjusted for spending, for rebates for the NHS and education, and for changes to behaviour—not the £25 billion that the Government claimed. We set out a number of proposals that could have raised that £10 billion. We Liberal Democrats welcomed the Government raising remote gaming duty in this Budget, because that was in our manifesto at the last general election. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) that there are other ways of raising taxes, and we hope that the Government look at some of our proposals, including our ideas for reforming capital gains tax, which would be a fairer way of raising revenue. It would raise more money from the 0.1% of the population who are super-wealthy.

**Graham Stuart:** Let me make a point before the hon. Lady makes it herself: the jobs tax is a peculiarly misconceived tax. It is a £25 billion or £26 billion hit on

the real economy, with all the lost jobs that we have seen as a result, and it does not even raise much money. Looking at all the negative impacts in the round, it may actually raise even less than £10 billion. There is a £25 billion or £26 billion hit, and the measure potentially raises less than £10 billion. It is economic madness, and it shows why the Government need to think more deeply.

**Daisy Cooper:** I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the jobs tax has been damaging. I say to Treasury Ministers that the combination of the jobs tax and higher business rates bills will have a profound impact on the very small businesses on our high streets, and our high streets are critical to our communities. Most ordinary folk do not follow the statistics on growth, unemployment, GDP and everything else; when they walk out their front door and look at their high street, they decide how they would answer the question, “Is the economy working in our area?”. It is so vital that we support our high streets.

On that point, I genuinely urge Ministers to look again at the multiplier for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. They talk in a very technical way about one element of the bills and continue to say that the rates are coming down. They have come down by 5p for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, but Ministers gave themselves the power to reduce them by 20p. However, businesses heard “lower business rates”. They did not think about the technicality of how the rates are calculated; they just heard the word “lower”, and made decisions on that basis—but bills are now higher, and they are really struggling.

I have said it before, and I will say it again: we cannot tax our way to prosperity; we have to grow our way to prosperity. We hope very much that, as Ministers move ahead on this debate, they not only reform the OBR and Budget process, so we have more transparency in this House, but think again about going for growth with Europe.

6.21 pm

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this Opposition day debate. I would say that it is the first time I have spoken in a while, but I did so about two hours ago. [*Interruption.*] I am already getting heckled.

I thank both my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the shadow Chancellor for their different but equally engaging styles of beginning a debate. I was a little disappointed the shadow Chancellor did not give me any Shakespeare quotes, but he did refer to Dickens at the end.

**Gareth Snell:** On Dickens, whom the shadow Chancellor mentioned, Mr Bumble, a minor parish official, was described as having

“a great idea of his oratorical powers and his importance”.

Does that suggest to my hon. Friend anyone in the Chamber?

**Chris Vince:** I thank my hon. Friend, but I must disagree with him, because my next point was to say, in all sincerity, that I am a little bit disappointed with the Opposition motion, which I feel is particularly targeted at an individual. I recognise that the motion is about the Chancellor’s position and does not name her, so there is an attempt to talk about the role that she holds, rather than the individual. However, I just do not like the way

that the motion singles out a particular person. I think it could have been worded in a way that made it more about the Budget process—but that is my view. I say that because I feel very strongly about the importance of political debate, but as I hope the Opposition have seen, I always try to avoid political attacks on individuals, and to be honest, the motion makes me feel uneasy.

**Dave Doogan:** I share the hon. Gentleman’s appreciation of the fact that the motion is about the post and role of a Minister, not about a local MP and a person. However, while he is dishing out sympathy and empathy, can I encourage him to think of his constituents and mine who are disabled, who thought for the longest time that they were going to lose their livelihood until the Government U-turned on that policy? Can I encourage him to worry about family business owners, who now have no idea how they will afford to pass their local growth-generating business on to the next generation—not to mention farmers, who are now scared to die?

**Chris Vince:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I do not think I could ever be accused of being devoid of sympathy. I became an MP because I genuinely and passionately care about making a positive difference to people’s lives. In fact, as Members across the House know, I previously worked in the charity sector and as a teacher. I got involved in those jobs because I wanted to make a positive difference to people’s lives.

One of the big things in the Budget—before I go completely off my speech—is the scrapping of the two-child cap. I recognise the concerns raised by Opposition Members about increased welfare spending—although, it went up on their watch too—but when I am presented with the statistic that over 1,000 young people will be taken out of poverty as a result of that policy, I find it very difficult to ignore.

On a lighter note, I would like to state—there will be collective relief across the House—that no members of my immediate or extended family have ever worked for the Treasury or the OBR. That said, like many Members across the House, particularly on the Labour Benches—I am glad that the deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), mentioned this too—I value the work done by the OBR and, in particular, its independence. Of course, as many Members have mentioned, it is extremely disappointing that the OBR’s “Economic and fiscal outlook” was prematurely accessed by external users before the Chancellor’s speech on Budget day. I am really pleased that the OBR responded to that very quickly. In its own words:

“It is also important to note that the EFO contains market-sensitive information, i.e. information that is not public and could have a material impact on financial markets. This is why, in the run-up to the delivery of the Budget, any leaks concerning the OBR’s forecasts, whether accurate (as in this case) or inaccurate, whether inadvertent (as in this case) or deliberate, are to be greatly deplored.”

This is a good Budget for residents and families in Harlow, with rail fare freezes; prescription fee freezes; additional investment in our local NHS, which I have covered previously, and which had sadly been neglected; a rise in the minimum wage; a rise in the state pension—yes, a brief mention of my mother, who is delighted—and, for the vast majority of residents in Harlow who do not own a property worth over £2 million, no increase in tax.

[Chris Vince]

We saw in 2022 what happens when the OBR is bypassed in the Budget-setting process, but we must ensure that the IT that backs up this non-departmental public body is fit for purpose and that such mistakes do not happen again.

**Graham Stuart:** I think it was Gladstone who said that the first duty of a statesman is to be honest. Is the hon. Gentleman, who I think would be recognised across the House as someone for whom honesty is a natural state, entirely comfortable with the Chancellor cherry-picking the confidential briefing from the OBR in that 4 November speech and not setting out the full circumstances that she was then aware of?

**Chris Vince:** The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the OBR was very confident that the Chancellor did not mislead in the statement she put out, and I am confident about that.

The Chancellor was consistent in her priorities for this Budget: tackling the cost of living crisis, bringing down waiting times and cutting borrowing. It cannot be right that £1 in every £10 is being spent on interest payments alone. We cannot go back to the austerity we have seen, with schools and hospitals that would literally fall apart.

I would like to finish with two quotes. The first is from Margaret Thatcher:

"I always cheer up immensely if an attack is particularly wounding because I think, well, if they attack one personally, it means that they have not a single political argument left."

And finally, to quote Dickens:

"charity begins at home, but justice begins next door".

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee, Dame Harriett Baldwin.

6.28 pm

**Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con):** I am the former Chair of that Committee, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I appreciate the chance to make a couple of additional points.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride) set out an extensive case. In the speech I made right after the Budget, I mentioned that shenanigans had happened with regard to the Budget. I think we are beginning to find out a bit more about what those shenanigans were. The OBR has published a full analysis of the error that led to it publishing the Budget before it was delivered by the Chancellor.

On 1 December, the chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility rightly resigned for that technical breach. I think he showed real leadership, and I thank him for his service. However, it has distracted us from a much more serious breach that happened. The Chancellor clarified this morning in evidence to the Treasury Committee that there are, apparently, two categories of leaks from the Treasury: authorised leaks and unauthorised leaks. We are going to hear a report from the permanent secretary about the unauthorised leaks, but I think the authorised leaks also need focus.

Let us face it: this all started in the run-up to the general election, when the Chancellor promised many, many times not to raise taxes. Then, in what was probably

one of the greatest robberies since Ronnie Biggs and the great train robbery, she managed to increase taxes by £40 billion a year in her first Budget, before increasing them by a further £26 billion a year in this recent Budget.

**Sean Woodcock:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I would love to, but I am going to try to really race through what I have to say.

There is a track record here of saying one thing and then doing another. What we see is a revealed preference from our Chancellor for tax hikes. She was unable to deliver the welfare reforms she sought, and she has been unable to deliver much in the way of savings from any Department, so she is always going to go for tax hikes. We have seen that in her behaviour, despite her assurances to the contrary.

I just want to point out how damaging all this speculation has been to decision makers in the British economy. These authorised leaks have led to changes in behaviour across the UK economy; people have made real-world, real-life decisions. Now we know that at every fiscal event during this Parliament the Chancellor will have a default position to tax more: to tax homes more; to tax cars more; to tax pensions more; to tax savings more; to tax jobs; to tax the farm that farmers want to pass on to their children; to tax anything she can justify.

That is the lasting legacy of this period of shenanigans, selective leaking and manipulating behaviour. I believe it has done lasting damage to our Chancellor, and we are right to condemn her conduct today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. We will start the winding-up speeches at 6.40 pm.

6.32 pm

**Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. This is clearly a serious moment for our country—perhaps the most serious moment in a hundred years. We are threatened by existential crises: the affordability crisis, with the far right on the march; the climate crisis, with a planet that is burning; and a military crisis in Europe. Any one of those crises would pose a massive danger. On top of that, we are a nation that is deeply divided. The question for this House is whether the Budget will help us to meet those challenges. That is why I am surprised that the Opposition's motion focuses so much on process, rather than on the things that actually matter to the country.

I have seen hard budgets before, in this country and elsewhere. When I lived and worked in Somaliland, it experienced the most serious drought in living memory. The choice in that budget was between feeding children and paying soldiers. I have seen hard budgets and Chancellors having to make difficult decisions. Now, as then, we are facing a difficult, existential and dramatic moment for our country.

The point about this Budget, and about this Government, is to help us to meet those moments. How do we make life affordable? How do we stop the planet burning? How do we prepare for war so that we can prevent it?

Those are the questions before us, and those are the questions the Chancellor addressed in this Budget. That is why we are here: to take each of those challenges in turn.

The first challenge is affordability. Yes, that is about taking £150 off people's energy bills, but it is also about creating good jobs across the country by building the homes that we need. It is about increasing social security payments for the poorest people in this country so that children do not go hungry.

The second challenge is the climate. Of course that is about the investment we are making publicly and reducing emissions, but it is also about leadership. That does not just mean political leadership, with us saying to other nations, "Yes, we are doing our part to reduce emissions"; we can also sell our innovations around the world and help other countries reduce their emissions as well.

Finally, and most importantly, given the news that we are hearing from across Europe, this nation must prepare for war in order to prevent it. I remind Conservative Members that it was a Prime Minister from their Benches—perhaps this nation's greatest Prime Minister—who spoke of the dangers of not preparing for war, of the years that the locust hath eaten, and of the things that his generation did not do. He spoke of those dangers, yet the most dramatic and destructive war in the history of humankind followed. I say politely and with good will to Conservative Members that perhaps those are the things they could have focused on today; perhaps that is what is important at this moment for our country.

6.35 pm

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Britain is hurting: families are cutting back, bills are soaring, and inflation is twice the Bank's target. Just last month, the Chancellor claimed that she had no choice but to raise taxes on working people, and in true Harry Enfield style she blamed the Tories, the Tories, the Tories—and, of course, the OBR.

On the subject of honesty—the thread that runs through today's debate—it is worth me returning to my earlier exchange with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, in which I said that the Labour manifesto did not specify that it was the rates of the taxes that would rise. I was quite wrong, and the Minister was correct. I would like to apologise to him and the House for getting that incorrect.

The OBR told the Chancellor in October that tax receipts were £16 billion higher than expected. She knew that but suggested otherwise. That is not spin or sophisticated political communications; it is deceit, and it does matter.

**Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Graham Stuart:** I have very limited time, so forgive me but I will not.

It matters because the Chancellor has a nearly £3 trillion debt to service, and because trust is everything. Because the policies that are being implemented and the promises that were made by the Chancellor are at such variance, the markets—unlike in any other western nation, I believe—have put a higher and higher cost on borrowing for this country. That has very real-world impacts. Investors

from Beverley to Berlin need to believe what the Chancellor says. After all, "credit" comes from the Latin "credo", meaning "I believe". If that belief falters, borrowing costs rise and more of our taxes go to paying lenders instead of funding the priorities of the British people. When trust goes, growth goes. Investors hesitate, businesses hold back and families feel the pinch.

The Chancellor appears to have learnt nothing from last year's Budget of broken promises. It was a Budget that brought higher unemployment, fewer businesses and lower growth. She did not learn from that first exercise. As the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) pointed out, the weakness of the jobs tax is not just that it will hurt growth; it does not even raise much money. It was peculiarly poorly thought through.

This year's Budget repeated more of the same. The British people know that the way to tackle the cost of living is by getting people into work, not increasing the number of people on welfare; and by creating opportunity, not dependency. But Britain has a Chancellor who talks about helping working people while making it harder to work, to save and to succeed—and throwing the OBR under the bus while she is at it. That is not a vision for the future, and it is certainly not leadership; it is fantasy dressed up as policy, and the people of Beverley and Holderness can see right through it.

Labour came to power promising change. Unfortunately, change has been delivered, but it is not what we were promised. We have 280,000 more people on the unemployment register, more than 200,000 businesses have closed, and 5,000 people are signing off sick every single day, because of the decisions made by this Labour Government. People are angry about the impact of Labour policy, but my constituents tell me that they are particularly angry about feeling misled. I hope I have shown my own candour in addressing my earlier error, for which I apologise again. Can we Members of this House try to speak honestly and accurately, and not gaslight or mislead?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call James Wild to wind up.

6.39 pm

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): This is a rare and serious conduct motion that calls on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to apologise for misleading the country about the state of the public finances, breaking promises on tax and breaching the OBR confidentiality process—in short, for not being straight with the British people.

I was expecting to refer to more contributions this afternoon, but it has been a slightly curtailed debate. *[Interruption.]* We had the comprehensive introduction from my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor. The hon. Members for Harlow (Chris Vince) and for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) were surprised and disappointed that the Chancellor is being held to account not for her personality, but for her conduct. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) just said, this debate is about honesty, trust and confidence and what happens as a result, and about the "shenanigans", as my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) put it.

On Times Radio this morning, the shadow Chancellor was asked why this debate matters. It matters because the deliberate briefing and misrepresentation of the

[James Wild]

Budget has damaged workers, savers, pensioners and investors. Let us start with the simple truth: this Government and the Chancellor spun false narratives about the public finances to justify their political choices to increase welfare spending.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): During the Budget debate, I asked the shadow Chancellor whether he would address the fact that, on multiple occasions, he referred to the public finances in a fantastically negative tone that appeared far from the truth that was revealed at the Budget, suggesting at one point that there was a £40 billion black hole in the public finances. As the shadow Minister says that we were not being straight with the public about the state of the public finances, will he take this opportunity to apologise on behalf of his colleague for doing just that?

**James Wild:** If the hon. Gentleman had been here for the whole debate, he would have had the opportunity of the opening 45-minute speech to put that to my right hon. Friend.

What happened as a result of all the policy kites that were flown? Pensions were drawn down, fewer mortgages were approved and investment was paused. That is not my verdict; the Bank of England warned that the economy was heading for slowdown as a result of the uncertainty, the British Chambers of Commerce said that that uncertainty affected investment and recruitment, and hundreds of thousands of people drew down their pensions. Those are the real impacts of that activity—the shenanigans—and there is genuine anger across the country at the damage such uncertainty caused. The Chancellor must take responsibility because she is responsible for that uncertainty.

People are already cynical about politics, but what could do more to undermine trust than abusing the OBR process to cook up a story to make a case for higher taxes that were not needed? It is the Chancellor who is at the centre of misleading the country. On 4 November, she staged that unprecedented press conference to roll the pitch for tax rises.

**Luke Murphy:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**James Wild:** I will not. In breach of the confidentiality rules, the Chancellor warned that the OBR productivity downgrade meant lower tax receipts. Indeed it did, but the OBR report makes it clear that that downgrade was more than addressed by higher tax receipts. In other words, there was no black hole. The Chancellor had the numbers and she knew the position. Now we know what she said was simply not true. Instead, she crafted a narrative to justify decisions to increase taxes to fund higher welfare spending.

On 13 November, the *Financial Times* reported that the Chancellor had decided against the much-briefed income tax increases. The next day, after the gilt market had responded badly, journalists were briefed that the tax rises would not happen thanks to an improved fiscal forecast. Yet that is not what the OBR pre-financial measures said. Little wonder the OBR took that

extraordinary step of publishing the forecasts, exposing the truth that there was no giant deficit, as briefed to the press.

The OBR said it took that action to address misconceptions about the forecasts. Where might such misconceptions come from? We do not need to be Sherlock Holmes to identify the Treasury as the culprit.

**Luke Murphy:** The OBR told the Treasury Committee, on which I sit, that the narrative that the Chancellor set out on 4 November was consistent with the forecast at that time. When the OBR made that point, was it right or wrong? Are you questioning what the OBR said?

**James Wild:** I am sure that Madam Deputy Speaker is not questioning anyone. I am pointing out that the Chancellor said that there was a big £16 billion downgrade from the productivity—that was all offset—but she did not mention that—[*Interruption.*] If the Minister wants to intervene to say that she did mention that on 4 November, I will give way. She did not. She did not at all.

Yesterday, when the Chancellor was asked in the House if she had authorised or allowed confidential details of the Budget or forecasts to be briefed to the press, she gave a categorical no. If the Chancellor did not license briefings, can the Minister give a cast-iron commitment that no other Ministers, special advisers or officials in the Treasury or No. 10 briefed or authorised briefings about potential measures or the forecasts? Frankly, if you believe that all of those were unauthorised briefings, the Treasury is utterly out of control and I have a bridge to sell you. There is a leak inquiry, but the permanent secretary said today that it centres on 13 November, not on the tsunami of tall tales on potential Budget measures. Why might that be, I wonder. Nothing less than a full inquiry, with the findings made public, will do.

That brings us to the broken promises referred to in the motion. A year ago, the Chancellor delivered the biggest tax-raising Budget in modern history, hitting the British people with £40 billion of tax rises. Then in this Budget, taxes were increased yet again, by £26 billion, despite the Chancellor promising not to come back for more. Life comes at you fast. A year ago, the Chancellor also said that extending the freeze on income tax thresholds

“would hurt working people. It would take more money out of their payslips.”—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 821.]

Do Labour Members remember her saying that? I certainly do. She said that she would not freeze the thresholds. Then what did she do? Oh, she froze the thresholds. She imposed a three-year extension, with £23 billion coming out of the pockets of 1.7 million people who will pay higher taxes for her failures. As the motion says, the Chancellor should apologise for breaking her promise not to raise taxes again.

What Chancellors say matters. The public and the markets need to believe them, and to trust that they are not being misled. That is not the case around the events of this Budget. That is why this motion calls on the Chancellor to apologise for the misleading picture she presented of the public finances, for the Treasury briefings that did so much damage to businesses and to people, and for breaking her promise not to increase taxes.

Frankly, in the face of such a charge sheet, an apology is the very least that the British public deserve. I commend this motion to the House.

6.47 pm

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):** I thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray), for his earlier remarks, which framed today's debate rather well. As he set out, we have here an Opposition day debate, a chance for Members to really interrogate Government policy, to challenge our decisions, to say what they would do differently and to paint a picture of the kind of country that they would build if they were in charge. Oh, what a sight it would be! In short, an Opposition day debate is a chance to be a serious Opposition, but as my right hon. Friend set out in his opening remarks, they have not chosen to do that, instead preferring to rehash their already discredited complaints about process, which we have already addressed extensively, rather than talk about the Budget.

**Gareth Snell:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dan Tomlinson:** I am going to make some progress, if that is okay, because my hon. Friend will know that many other Members have not yet spoken and I might give way to them later.

It is worth recounting just how many times Conservative Members have chosen in the last few days to major on process rather than policy. They are very interested in what was said by whom and on what day, so let us recount it. On Wednesday 26 November, the Leader of the Opposition, in response to the Budget, raised process multiple times, introducing to *Hansard* the somewhat intriguing phrase "fiscal fandango". No, me neither! Admittedly, this was immediately after the OBR had dumped the Budget just before the Chancellor stood up, so that is fair.

But then the Tory process *paso doble*—two can play at this game—really began. Thank you, everyone! On 27 November, the shadow Chancellor raised process in a Budget debate. On 2 December, the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury raised it in a Budget debate. On 3 December, the Leader of the Opposition raised it at Prime Minister's questions. This was the same day that the Opposition called an urgent question on the resignation of the chair of the OBR, which had coincidentally happened during a statement two days earlier by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the OBR and its forecast. Yesterday, the Opposition Front Bench raised this at Treasury orals, and today we are having an Opposition day debate on the same topic after the Chancellor took questions on it this morning in the Treasury Committee.

All this political dancing has denied the Opposition the chance to scrutinise the Budget. I am not sure how much of it they have read. Let me remind them that the Budget will cut the cost of living, raise pay for those earning the least and invest in our NHS. It meets our fiscal rules and delivers £21.7 billion of headroom. It is a Budget that delivers on the promise of this Government and delivers for the British people. By contrast, the Opposition are stuck in the past, playing the songs of old again and hoping for a new audience.

**Shaun Davies:** There are 4,600 reasons in my constituency why this Budget is the right thing to do: 4,600 children who will be lifted out of poverty by the Budget. On the basis of the Opposition's remarks, it is my understanding that the Conservative party would plunge those 4,600 children back into poverty as part of a £46 billion welfare cut if it were to win the next general election—as well as potentially scrapping the triple lock. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is morally bankrupt?

**Dan Tomlinson:** I agree with my hon. Friend, who is a strong advocate of ensuring that we do all we can to support people, lift people out of poverty, and grow our economy and our towns and cities across the country.

By contrast, the Opposition are stuck in the past, playing the songs of old again and hoping for a new audience. After a year and a half on the Opposition Benches, the Conservative party knows that all it has to offer the country is the same as it offered before: a reheated and not renewed set of Conservative policies, tax cuts for the wealthy, wages held down for the poorest, cuts to public services and a rise in child poverty.

The problem is not just that the Conservative party is playing the old tunes but that half the old band has jumped ship to join the more extreme party, which has not even bothered to show up to this debate. I do not know how the band will manage to perform without the likes of the hon. Members for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) and for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), Jonathan Gullis, Dame Andrea Jenkyns, Nadine Dorries, Ann Widdecombe, Sir Jake Berry, Mark Reckless, Maria Caulfield and Marco Longhi—those are just the Tory-to-Reform switchers I have heard of. There are many more who I think are probably as well known as I am, so I do have a soft spot for them. For completeness, let me remind the House of their service and their defection, too: Lia Nici, Chris Green, Anne Marie Morris, Graham Simpson, Adam Holloway, Alan Amos—

**Graham Stuart:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last time I checked, this debate was supposed to be about the conduct of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I know the Minister is relatively new to the Dispatch Box; perhaps he may need a little guidance.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am sure the Minister has heard it and will return to his speech.

**Dan Tomlinson:** Indeed; I heard the point of order loud and clear. It is worth remembering that this is an Opposition day debate—I think it is within the remit to talk about the Opposition and the fact that they have lost all their players to the other team.

I also think it is time to move on from talking about process, because on this side of the House, we have a country to run, an economy to build and public services to mend. Instead of this subject, we could have talked about whether it is right to raise wages for those on the lowest incomes, but the Opposition did not want to bring that up. Maybe that is because wages have risen faster in the first 10 months of this Government than they did in the first decade of the Conservative Government, or maybe it is because it turns out that their latest policy is a real-terms cut to the living wage. We could have talked about the cost of living, but again, the Conservatives did not choose that as a topic because its mini-Budget

[Dan Tomlinson]

crashed the economy and added thousands of pounds to mortgages, and since this Government have come to power, the Bank of England has cut interest rates.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): The Minister makes a point about the previous disastrous mini-Budget of September 2023. The shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride), said at that time,

“I welcome much in this statement. There is a great deal that will help millions of families and businesses up and down the country.”—[*Official Report*, 23 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 942.]

Does the Minister agree that the reason the right hon. Member focused on process is that his judgment on policy is so poor?

**Dan Tomlinson:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Too many Conservative Members defended the mini-Budget, which crashed the economy and added thousands of pounds to mortgages. In contrast, since this Government have come to power, the Bank of England has cut interest rates five times, taking £1,200 off a typical two-year fixed rate mortgage. At this Budget, we cut £150 from the average energy bill, froze rail fares and prescription charges, and extended bus fare caps and fuel duty cuts, but the Conservatives do not want to talk about that either. They could have chosen in their Opposition day debate to talk about fiscal stability and increased headroom, but again, they chose not to do that because of the £21.7 billion of headroom that the Chancellor secured at the Budget, which will help protect our country from global shocks and unforeseen challenges.

Of course, the Conservatives do not want to talk about child poverty either because they know that this Budget has lifted 550,000 children out of poverty, whereas the last Government were content to leave them, preferring instead to rebrand the hungry children who they let down while in power as benefit scroungers. They should be treated as our future, not as our opponent.

I have a couple more minutes, so let me address some of the points made during the debate. I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), for engaging on policy. We have had conversations on business rates already this week, and I am sure that we will have more. We have begun the work to rebalance the system with a £900 million switch from the highest value properties to those on the high streets.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for his Thatcher quote. It was a good quote that bears repeating. She said,

“I always cheer up immensely...if they attack one personally, it means they have not a single political argument left.”

I thank the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) for going through every single tax change and saying that she opposes them all. That is the sort of opposition we have got used to. Rather than constructive opposition, which comes forward with proposals that would raise revenue in a fair way, such as the changes on electric vehicle excise duty, which will stop us losing £12 billion of fuel duty revenue in the coming years, we just hear, “No, no, no,” over and over again. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for

Loughborough (Dr Sandher). His experience in economics is richly valued in this place, and I enjoyed his speech, as I always do.

Finally, it has been a short debate, has it not, Madam Deputy Speaker? I am glad that the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) took the time during the debate to read the Labour manifesto—that was much appreciated—and that he was able to clarify for the House that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary was right to say that we have stuck to our manifesto commitment.

**James Wild:** To bring the Minister back to the debate, it is about honesty and the real-world consequences of the briefing that happened around the Budget. Does the Treasury accept that hundreds of thousands of people drew down their pensions, which is an irrevocable decision—yes or no?

**Dan Tomlinson:** What the Treasury does accept is that at this Budget, the Government had to make the decisions to ensure that we could increase our fiscal stability and get borrowing falling in every single year. The previous Government were not able to control our public finances, and yet in every year of this forecast, borrowing will be falling, and we have more than doubled our headroom to £21.7 billion.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

**Dan Tomlinson:** Go on—that’s helpful.

**Dr Arthur:** I always try to be helpful, and I thank the Minister for giving way.

There was a lot of speculation about the Budget, but a lot of that came from the Opposition Benches. Every single clickbait headline was repeated in the Chamber to fuel speculation. It was incredibly damaging—does the Minister not agree?

**Dan Tomlinson:** I agree that the Opposition are incredibly damaging for the economy.

The clean-up operation of the disaster zone that was the last 14 years is well and truly under way. Our economic plan is working, with growth up, employment up, interest rates down and borrowing falling, with a Labour Budget focused on the British people delivered by a Labour Chancellor making the fair and right choices. We reject this absurd monologue of emotion from the Conservatives, and we will stick to our plan for a better Britain.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 90, Noes 297.*

**Division No. 391]**

**[6.59 pm]**

#### AYES

Andrew, rh Stuart  
Argar, rh Edward  
Bacon, Gareth  
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi  
Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
Barclay, rh Steve  
Bedford, Mr Peter  
Bhatti, Saqib  
Blackman, Bob  
Bool, Sarah  
Bowie, Andrew

Brandreth, Aphra  
Burghart, Alex  
Cleverly, rh Sir James  
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
Cocking, Lewis  
Cooper, John  
Costa, Alberto  
Cross, Harriet  
Dewhurst, Charlie  
Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
Evans, Dr Luke

Fox, Sir Ashley  
Francois, rh Mr Mark  
French, Mr Louie  
Gale, rh Sir Roger  
Garnier, Mark  
Glen, rh John  
Grant, Helen  
Griffiths, Alison  
Harris, Rebecca  
Hayes, rh Sir John  
Hinds, rh Damian  
Hoare, Simon  
Holden, rh Mr Richard  
Hollinrake, Kevin  
Holmes, Paul  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hudson, Dr Neil  
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy  
Hussain, Mr Adnan  
Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
Jenrick, rh Robert  
Lamont, John  
Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
Lopez, Julia  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, rh Kit  
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew  
Mohamed, Iqbal  
Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
Moore, Robbie  
Morrissey, Joy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Morton, rh Wendy  
Mullan, Dr Kieran  
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
Norman, rh Jesse

Obese-Jecty, Ben  
Paul, Rebecca  
Philp, rh Chris  
Pritchard, rh Mark  
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Rankin, Jack  
Reed, David  
Robertson, Joe  
Rosindell, Andrew  
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*)  
Stephenson, Blake  
Stride, rh Sir Mel  
Stuart, rh Graham  
Swann, Robin  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Thomas, Bradley  
Timothy, Nick  
Trott, rh Laura  
Tugendhat, rh Tom  
Vickers, Martin  
Whately, Helen  
Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
Wild, James  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Jerome Mayhew and**  
**Gregory Stafford**

### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Akehurst, Luke  
Alaba, Mr Bayo  
Alexander, rh Heidi  
Ali, Rushanara  
Ali, Tahir  
Anderson, Callum  
Arthur, Dr Scott  
Asato, Jess  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Bailey, Olivia  
Baker, Alex  
Ballinger, Alex  
Bance, Antonia  
Barker, Paula  
Barron, Lee  
Baxter, Johanna  
Beales, Danny  
Beavers, Lorraine  
Begum, Apsana  
Bell, Torsten  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Billington, Ms Polly

Bishop, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
Blake, Rachel  
Blundell, Mrs Elsie  
Bonavia, Kevin  
Botterill, Jade  
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Brickell, Phil  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Burton-Sampson, David  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, Ian  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Irene  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Carns, Al  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Collier, Jacob  
Collinge, Lizzi  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Cooper, Andrew  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Costigan, Deirdre  
Cox, Pam  
Coyle, Neil  
Craft, Jen

Creasy, Ms Stella  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
Davies, Shaun  
Davies-Jones, Alex  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Dean, Josh  
Dearden, Kate  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Dodds, rh Anneliese  
Dollimore, Helena  
Dowd, Peter  
Downie, Graeme  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eagle, Dame Angela  
Eagle, rh Maria  
Eccles, Cat  
Edwards, Lauren  
Efford, Clive  
Egan, Damien  
Ellis, Maya  
Eshalomi, Florence  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
Ferguson, Patricia  
Fleet, Natalie  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foster, Mr Paul  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Foy, Mary Kelly  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gelder, Anna  
Gemmell, Alan  
German, Gill  
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
Glendon, Mary  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Gosling, Jodie  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
Hack, Amanda  
Haigh, rh Louise  
Hall, Sarah  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hamilton, Paulette  
Hardy, Emma  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hatton, Lloyd  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayes, Tom  
Hazelgrove, Claire  
Hendrick, Sir Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
Hume, Alison  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hurley, Patrick  
Hussain, Mr Adnan  
Hussain, Imran  
Irons, Natasha  
Jarvis, Dan  
Jermey, Terry  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, Kim  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Lillian  
Jones, Ruth  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kane, Mike  
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
Khan, Afzal  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kumaran, Uma  
Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
Lamb, Peter  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell, Emma  
Lewin, Andrew  
Lewis, Clive  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
MacAlister, Josh  
Macdonald, Alice  
MacNae, Andy  
Madders, Justin  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McCluskey, Martin  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McDougall, Blair  
McGovern, Alison  
McIntyre, Alex  
McKee, Gordon  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
McNally, Frank  
Midgley, Anneliese  
Miliband, rh Ed  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mishra, Navendu  
Mohamed, Abtisam  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Grahame  
Morris, Joe  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, Chris  
Murray, rh James  
Murray, Katrina  
Myer, Luke  
Naismith, Connor

Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast  
by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Dame Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Payne, Michael  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Jon  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Phillipson, rh Bridget  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Joe  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, rh Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie

Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Russell, Sarah  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sandher-Jones, Louise  
 Sowards, Mark  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevenson, Kenneth  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris

Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David

Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

#### **Tellers for the Noes:**

**Mark Ferguson and  
Taiwo Owatemi**

*Question accordingly negated.*

### **Business without Debate**

#### **DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### **COMPETITION**

That the draft Enterprise Act 2002 (Mergers Involving Newspaper Enterprises and Foreign Powers) (No. 2) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 30 October, be approved.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

That the draft Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging and Packaging Waste) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 3 November, be approved.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Resident Doctors: Industrial Action

7.12 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** With permission, Madam Speaker Deputy, I shall make a statement on industrial action by resident doctors. I thank you, Mr Speaker, business managers and the official Opposition for facilitating this evening's statement.

As we head into winter, our hospitals are running hot and the pressures on the NHS are enormous. Flu season has come earlier, with a sharp rise in cases and the peak still to come, and this year's strain is more likely to affect older people more severely. Already, the number of patients in hospital in England with flu is the highest on record at this point in the year. It is 50% higher than this time last year and 10 times higher than in 2023. Some 95% of hospital beds are occupied, growing numbers of staff are off sick and we are already seeing the pressure in our A&E departments. It is against that backdrop that the British Medical Association is threatening to douse the NHS in petrol, light a match and march its members out on strike. This represents a different magnitude of risk to previous industrial action.

The BMA resident doctors committee is in dispute on two issues: pay and jobs. On pay, resident doctors have already received a 28.9% pay rise—the highest in the public sector. For a first-year resident doctor, that is the equivalent of a £9,400 pay rise. I have been consistent, honest and up front with resident doctors that we cannot go further on pay this year. There is a gap between what the BMA is demanding and what the country can afford. Nor would further movement on pay be fair to other NHS staff, for whom I am also responsible and many of whom will never in their careers earn as much as the lowest-paid doctor. As I have made clear to the BMA and other trade unions, I am open to discussing multi-year pay deals with any trade union if we stand a chance of bridging the gap between affordability and expectations.

On jobs, I have much more sympathy with the BMA's demands. I have heard the very real fears that resident doctors across the country have about their futures; it is a legitimate grievance that I agree with. My Conservative predecessors created training bottlenecks that threatened to leave huge numbers of resident doctors without a job. In 2019, there were around 12,000 applicants for 9,000 specialty training places. This year, that number has soared to nearly 40,000 applications for 10,000 places.

It used to be the case that UK graduates competed among themselves for specialty roles; now, they are competing against the world's doctors. That is a direct result of the visa and immigration changes made by the previous Conservative Government post-Brexit, and it is compounded by the Conservatives' decision to increase the number of medical students without also increasing the number of specialty training places.

Taxpayers spend £4 billion training medics every year—we then treat them poorly, and some leave to work abroad or in the private sector. It is time that we protect our investment and give bright, hard-working UK medical graduates a path to becoming the next generation of NHS doctors. Our 10-year plan for health set out our commitment to provide that path. It pledged

to introduce 1,000 extra specialty training places and prioritisation of medical graduates from the UK and Ireland.

Today, in an offer to resident doctors, I can announce that I am able to go further. I want to thank Sir Jim Mackey, the chief executive of the NHS, and his team, who have been going trust by trust to see how many extra places can be funded and are needed. Thanks to their hard work, I am in a position today to be able to offer 4,000 specialty places for resident doctors, starting with an additional 1,000 for those applying this year.

In the Department of Health and Social Care, we have been working intensively on UK graduate prioritisation. The barriers have been legal ones, so I have been working intensively with my team to see how quickly we could introduce legislation. Thanks to their efforts, the co-operation of colleagues across Government, and my counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, I can notify the House tonight that, subject to the agreement of resident doctors, we intend to introduce urgent primary legislation in the form of a Bill to be presented to Parliament in the new year.

The legislation will prioritise graduates from UK medical schools over applicants from overseas during the current application round and in all subsequent years. The reforms will also prioritise doctors who have worked in the NHS for a significant period for specialty training. This will not exclude international talent, who will still be able to apply to roles and continue to bring new and vital skills to our NHS, but it will return us to the fair terms on which home-grown medics competed before Brexit. The impact of these changes is that instead of four doctors competing for every training post, it will now be fewer than two doctors for every place. That is a good deal for doctors.

Following discussions with the BMA, we are also addressing the specific costs faced by resident doctors that do not apply to other NHS staff. Although I cannot go further on pay this year, I am able to offer today to put money back in resident doctors' pockets by reimbursing royal college portfolio, membership and exam fees, with the latter backdated to April. The allowance for less-than-full-time resident doctors—many of whom are parents and carers—will be increased by 50% to £1,500, helping to close the gender pay gap.

In recent days, I formally made this offer to the BMA resident doctors committee. The BMA will now survey its members in the coming days on whether to accept this offer and end its dispute with the Government. The BMA told us that it will survey its members quickly and give us less than 48 hours' notice of whether the strikes are going ahead. That presents serious operational challenges for NHS leaders, who need certainty now as to whether they are cancelling patient appointments and cancelling staff annual leave to cover strikes.

In my determination to prevent the havoc that strikes would cause this Christmas, I therefore made one more offer to the BMA, which I will now share with the House, the country and frontline doctors. So that the BMA could run a genuine ballot of its members and call off next week's strikes while that ballot ran, I offered to extend its strike mandate. This would have allowed enough time for the BMA to reschedule next week's strikes for the end of January, were the offer to resident doctors rejected in a ballot. It would have avoided the chaos that looming strike action threatens at the most

[Wes Streeting]

dangerous time of year by removing the spectre of strikes next week. I knew that extending the BMA's strike mandate would leave me open to attack from political opponents; that was a risk I was willing to take to stop the Christmas strikes going ahead. Madam Deputy Speaker, I must report to the House that the BMA's leadership said no.

In the coming days, as the NHS prepares for strike action that may or may not happen, there are patients whose operations will be cancelled. There are NHS staff who will have to tell their families that they will not be home for Christmas because they have to cover for their resident doctor colleagues. This was entirely avoidable—no one should be in any doubt that the BMA has chosen to play politics with people's lives this Christmas, and to continue holding the spectre of strikes over the NHS. I ask resident doctors to bear that in mind when they cast their votes.

The power to end these strikes now lies in the hands of doctors. Resident doctors face a choice: to continue the damaging industrial action in which everyone loses, or to choose more jobs, better career progression, more money in their pockets and an end to strikes. The deal that is on offer would mean emergency legislation to put our own home-grown talent first; to increase the number of extra specialty training places from 1,000 to 4,000, with a quarter of those places delivered now; to reduce the competition for training places from around four to one to less than two to one; to put more money in doctors' pockets by funding royal college exam fees, portfolio fees and membership fees, with exam fees backdated to April; and to increase the less-than-full-time allowance by 50% to £1,500. It is a chance for a fresh start, to end this dispute and look ahead to the future with hope and optimism—a chance to rebuild resident doctors' working conditions and rebuild our NHS. I urge every resident doctor to vote for this deal, and I commend this statement to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the shadow Health Secretary.

7.24 pm

**Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and sincerely thank him for making me aware last night of his intention to come to the House today and make a statement. Given that the next set of planned industrial action is due just a few days before Christmas, and at a worrying time when winter pressures are increasing early, with more flu patients needing hospital beds, we all want to see an end to these strikes. We on the Opposition Benches offer our thanks and gratitude to all those in the workforce who have worked so hard to try to minimise the impact of the strikes so far.

In his statement, the Secretary of State talks about the competition for places. This is not new information. He said himself that the figures have soared in the last two years. Why is it only now that he is addressing it, so close to a damaging strike? He could have dealt with this issue back in the previous talks with the unions, but he did not. I have said, though, that I want us to be constructive in opposition, so I welcome the work that he has done to offer more places to UK doctors. Depending

on the detail of the legislation, we will help to secure that aim. I make this offer to work with him to ensure that we get there.

On the 4,000 places that the Secretary of State has announced, and the 1,000 specifically announced for this year, can he tell the House in which specialisms those places will be? Can he break it down into GPs, surgery, obstetrics, anaesthetics and so on? Is he confident that there are enough trainers and that there is enough capacity in the training settings he has chosen? GPs are trained in general practice and in hospitals, and there is community training for some specialists, such as paediatrics. When will these places be available for applications? Will he also look at replicating the Australian model of placing any international doctors in areas of the country with the greatest need? We know we need to address those issues.

All of this is dependent on the BMA accepting the offer, but what if it does not? After all, its track record speaks for itself. We warned that giving pay awards with no conditions would encourage the BMA to come back for more, and it has. If its members rejects this offer, what are his plans to manage and deal with the situation? As the Secretary of State has said himself, the NHS is under pressure from combined flu and RSV, so what is he doing to ensure that those who are eligible for the vaccines actually have them? What additional resources has he made available to manage the strikes if they happen, and for winter pressures if they do not?

Does the Secretary of State recognise that if the BMA membership reject this offer and carry on with the strikes, his Government's own Employment Rights Bill will make things much worse next year? Will he think again about the reductions in the minimum thresholds for strikes and reintroduce the minimum service levels? Does he expect that this new legislation and the announcements he has made today will have any implications for the Equality Act 2010? If so, what are they, and how will he address them? Will he have to disapply the Act?

These strikes must end. The BMA is behaving appallingly, but if the Secretary of State does not deal with those issues around thresholds and minimum service levels, it will only get much worse, with unions like the BMA causing more issues. It is patients—our constituents—and their families and loved ones who will suffer.

**Wes Streeting:** First, I thank the shadow Health Secretary for the constructive terms on which he has agreed to work with the Government. That should give resident doctors across the country who receive their survey the confidence of knowing that, should they vote for this deal, emergency legislation will be introduced in the new year. We will be able to work at pace, because with the majority that the Labour party has in this House, and with cross-party support in the other place, we can make sure that we expedite the legislation and achieve our goal of making the changes for international medical graduates that we have always intended to make, and that we committed to well in advance of today. By expediting those changes, there will be a direct impact on people applying for speciality places now and those who, even in recent weeks, have experienced the disappointment of not receiving the training place they had hoped for. We can keep that hope alive. We can improve the number of specialty places available if resident doctors vote for this deal, so I urge them to do so.

The shadow Health Secretary asked why we had not dealt with this before. I am tempted once again to revert to my usual analogy of the arsonist heckling the fire brigade, but given the constructive terms on which he has offered to work with us on this, I will pull my punches a little. I will say, however, that putting together the 1,000 extra places now, and bringing together the legislation urgently, requires significant operational detail. He is right: we have to ensure that we have enough trainers. Jim Mackey and his team have literally been working trust by trust to ensure that we can give the shadow Health Secretary, the House and resident doctors an assurance that we can facilitate those extra places.

When it comes to the legislation, the shadow Health Secretary will know, and people will appreciate, that this is fiendishly complicated. I have had to secure agreement from business managers, as we have a packed legislative programme. We have had to make sure that the Bill would be legally watertight and consistent with both domestic law and our international treaty obligations, and I have needed support from my counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I must thank them sincerely for the spirit in which, regardless of party, they have worked with this Government; we can give resident doctors that assurance.

As for what will happen if the strike goes ahead, let me say first that the shadow Health Secretary was right to say that frontline staff and NHS leaders did a superb job of managing previous rounds of strike action. In fact, during the last round we did indeed maintain 95% of planned care, and I believe—we will see when the waiting list figures are published in January—that the impact on waiting list progress will therefore not have been as severe as it might have been. However, I must be upfront with the shadow Health Secretary and the House and point out that there is a very different degree of risk this time. While we are aiming to maintain 95% of elective activity, I cannot guarantee that. I cannot give that assurance in all good conscience, given the level of pressure that we are under.

I offered to extend the mandate, so that the BMA could reschedule the same amount of strike action for January, if its members reject this offer, and I do not understand why the BMA would not do that. I find it inexplicable. As a Labour MP, I have spent a lot of time in rooms with trade unions and negotiating, and I honestly cannot think of a single other trade union in this country that would behave in this way. I am shocked by it. I am shocked because of the risk that it poses to patients and the pressure that it places on other NHS staff, and shocked because it threatens the recovery of the NHS that we all care about.

I would say this to resident doctors who are following these exchanges: listen to what the Conservative party has said about trade union laws, and about their rejection of the deal that we struck within weeks of coming into office. There is not a more pro-NHS, pro-doctor Government waiting in the wings. There is a Labour Government who are committed to the NHS, and committed to the NHS workforce, who have gone further than any other Government before on pay, on terms and conditions, and on the pace at which we are improving them. These were never grounds for strike action before, and they are certainly not grounds for strike action now. I appeal to resident doctors, over the BMA, to do the right thing, to vote for this deal, and to work with a Government who want to work with them.

**Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I have always been a massive advocate for all medical and nursing staff, and I absolutely understand what a difficult job our healthcare workers do, but given that flu is running rampant across the country and most NHS staff—including resident doctors, but also nurses and other staff—are suffering at this moment, will the Secretary of State join me in urging the leadership of the BMA and the doctors to see sense and put patients first at this difficult time?

**Wes Streeting:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. She brings considerable frontline experience to this House, having worked in the NHS and dedicated her life to it. I am pretty sure that as well as speaking for her constituents, she speaks for so many other NHS staff. I do not want to see nurse pitted against doctor, or NHS staff pitted against each other. I do not want to see people resenting each other at a time when we should be pulling together to get the NHS back on its feet, and to make sure that it is well down the road to recovery. That is why, even at this late stage, I urge the BMA to think again. There is nothing to stop me extending the strike mandate tomorrow and giving Jim Mackey and NHS leaders the opportunity to stand down planning for strikes next week, even at this late stage. It would be an extraordinary gesture of good will, and it would be a Christmas present for the country. It would benefit doctors, resident or otherwise, and all NHS staff. Most importantly of all, it would benefit patients. I hope that message is heard in good faith by the BMA, even now.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. People will be hugely alarmed at the threat of more industrial action right before Christmas, and we cannot forget how we got here. We know that the previous Government under-resourced the NHS. It was overburdened, people felt underappreciated, and the whole system was being held together by the good will of the staff.

Having said that, the timing is terrible, because we have the worst winter flu outbreak in decades, right before Christmas. We have to urge the BMA to work constructively to resolve this dispute in a way that is fair for both patients and taxpayers. Given that resident doctors received a 29% pay rise last year, I think most of the public feel that pushing for another 28.9% this year is unaffordable and unreasonable.

The Secretary of State touched on resident doctors' legitimate concerns. The previous Government increased medical school places without increasing the facilities to deliver the necessary specialist training placements, so this was a predictable bottleneck that we are now up against. Waiting lists are long, we need more doctors, and we have doctors who have been trained largely at the taxpayer's expense struggling to find work. We very much welcome the extra 4,000 placements that were announced today, which are hugely necessary. Can we ensure that they will address the acute shortages in general practice and psychiatry? To put those 4,000 places in context, 10,000 doctors applied for 500 psychiatric training places last year, and the Secretary of State said that about 40,000 doctors have applied for 10,000 places this year. Is there work to try to increase places as quickly as possible in the next few months and years?

[Dr Danny Chambers]

At Winchester hospital, one in five beds is taken up by people who do not have any social care packages. That is not good for them, because they are stuck in the hospital, and we want to get them home for Christmas, but it will also affect the flow through the hospital right now, during a winter flu crisis.

We welcome this action and urge the BMA to call off the strikes, but can we address the legitimate grievances that the Secretary of State has mentioned?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for his support, as well as for the constructive challenge. He is absolutely right to describe the challenge that we inherited, and we are seeking to deal with it. We have taken a number of steps along the way. For example, we promised to recruit an additional 1,000 GPs to the frontline in our first year. We expanded the additional roles reimbursement scheme in order to do that, and we were actually able to recruit an extra 2,500. The international medical graduate dimension of the deal means that the extra speciality training places go even further.

Although I would never pretend that the steps we have taken in our first 18 months in office have solved everything all at once—there is no shortage of things to solve—I say to those BMA members considering how to cast their vote that we have delivered a 28.9% pay rise, have taken action on international medical graduates through urgent legislation, and have expanded speciality training places. This is real progress. It is meaningful change in people's pockets and to their lives, working conditions, career progression and prospects.

The BMA should please not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We have a lot of fires to put out on a lot of fronts as a Government, and that does take time. We are committed—and I am personally committed—to working constructively with the BMA on things like workforce planning to address those issues, if it is willing to work with us. That is all I ask. It is all I ask from any part of the NHS workforce. It should work with us constructively, understand our constraints, work through the challenges with us, and we will all get to a better place and create a rising tide in the NHS that lifts all ships.

**Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. My residents in Gloucester are rightly worried about strike action in the run-up to Christmas, and the impact that it will have on waiting lists in my patch in Gloucester. I am not surprised that there is no one here from the Reform party to hear about the challenges that our NHS is facing, and I am really shocked that there is nobody from the Green party, but there we go. Can the Secretary of State confirm that there will be resident doctors sitting at home in Gloucester tonight who will want to vote for this deal, who will not want to go on strike next week, and who want to get the NHS back on its feet? The BMA should do the right thing, and call off the strikes next week. It should listen to its members, and let us together get on with the work of repairing our NHS and the damage the Conservative party did.

**Wes Streeting:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I was about to say that it is always a disappointment when Reform and Green Members do not appear in the

Chamber, but I would not want to be accused of misleading the House. I am sure they had a better offer, and there is a Christmas party up the road.

In all seriousness, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The tragedy of the past couple of rounds of industrial action is that each round costs about a quarter of a billion pounds. Each round, despite the best efforts of NHS leaders and frontline staff, does cause disruption, and we all lose when that happens. One of the things that is really hard for staff is that they are also confronted in a very real way with the impact of the state of the NHS on their patients. They are not in it for themselves, but because they believe in public service and want to improve the health of our nation. We are so much better able to achieve our shared goals if we work together, and we can grasp that opportunity if doctors vote for this deal, we draw a line under this dispute, and we try to reset the relationship between me and this Government on one hand, and the BMA's leadership on the other.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): This is just not the time for a strike. As much as we have huge sympathy with many of the grievances of resident doctors, we understand that the next few weeks will be critical for how the next few months will be for the NHS, so I echo calls for the BMA to listen to reason. However, I spare a thought, and I hope the Secretary of State does, for the overseas doctors we rely on so heavily, because there is an acute workforce shortage. How, through this plan and this legislation, will the Secretary of State avoid creating a two-tier system that risks undervaluing the critical work that overseas doctors do to prop up our NHS?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for that contribution, which is really important on two fronts. First, she is absolutely right that this really is not the time for this kind of disruption, and I think the BMA knows that. I do not think that those I am dealing with are bad people. I think they are frustrated with me and this Government—they do not think we have gone far enough—and I am equally frustrated with them, and the fact that they do not recognise how far we have come, and how fast, but that is the nature of the dispute. With the extended mandate, there is an opportunity for us all to park this and, in the worst-case scenario, revisit it in January. I hope, even now, that the BMA will seize that opportunity. I think it would do it the world of good in the eyes of the public, and in the eyes of its members and the wider NHS family.

I am really glad that the Chair of the Select Committee raised the point about international medical graduates and the overseas workforce. The NHS has always been an international employer. We have been so fortunate as a country that, since 1948, people have come from around the world to help us build and sustain a national health service. Without them, it would collapse, and we never want to be a country that closes the door to international talent.

What is extraordinary is that many of those overseas doctors, when they see the competition ratios and compare our approach to that of their home country and other countries, think we have lost the plot. They cannot

believe we do not already do this, so I think they will understand what we are doing and why. I hope they will be reassured that international recruits who have given service to the NHS will also be able to apply for specialty places, because we want to recruit and retain great talent, but they will also recognise how this is a game changer for the ratios for homegrown talent. I think they will understand that. I think they will respect that. Not least, I have been at pains as Health Secretary, given some of the ugly rhetoric that has come from one corner of this Chamber, to emphasise that, while some people in this House might tell those international recruits to go home, as far as we are concerned they are home.

**Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): My mum, a former shop steward, always drummed it into me that there are no winners in a strike. Never is that as stark as in the situation we are facing now. There will be healthcare workers in my constituency, already under tremendous pressure, who will be looking at the situation coming up in the next few weeks with dread. That includes resident doctors who will be looking at that uncertainty and wanting some surety as to where they should go. The Secretary of State has been incredibly reasonable and has set out a plan that I plead the leadership of the BMA to get on board with. Call off these strikes to get us through winter and through this difficult period for the benefit of patients and for the whole NHS. Will the Secretary of State join me in echoing that plea?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I hope that point is not lost on the BMA. On the Labour Benches, we are the party of labour. We were created by the trade union movement to represent the interests of working people. That has been our calling for more than a century, since this party was founded. We have shown through our actions, not just our words, that this is a party in government who are committed to defending and extending the rights of working people, to improving pay and conditions, to clamping down on exploitation, and to making sure that this is a Government with and for the people.

The BMA has a willing partner with this Government. I sometimes feel like the Government have changed, the policies have changed and the approach has changed, but the BMA's tactics towards us have stayed the same. I understand their cynicism about politics and their grievances with the situation they are working in, but I ask them also to recognise the progress we have made when we work together. There is an opportunity confronting them now to make further progress and I urge them to seize it.

**Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): These strikes will have a massive effect on my constituents in Farnham and Bordon. I am already getting emails from constituents who are concerned about the fact that their operations will be cancelled. The BMA is being entirely irrational and it holds the lion's share of the blame for this situation, but the Secretary of State also has to take some responsibility for what is going on. If he gives the doctors a 29% pay rise with no strings attached, it is absolutely no surprise that they come back for more. I welcome the 4,000 extra places. I would like to press him on exactly where those 4,000 places will come. Would it not be better to have published that in the workforce plan, which is continually delayed by his Department? When will that workforce plan actually come about?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the first bit. As for the rest of it, let me just say that the NHS workforce plan we inherited came in the 14th year of the Conservative Government. It was so absurd—it was so absurd—that on its trajectories for the increase in staffing numbers, within this century, 100% of the public would have to work for the NHS to sustain that level of workforce growth. And that is against the backdrop of AI, machine learning, genomics and the revolution in life sciences and medical technology that will change the NHS workforce and change the face of medicine.

We are working with the royal colleges, think-tanks and trade unions to make sure that in the new year our workforce plan is more credible. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we are taking a bit longer with the workforce plan than I had originally intended. We are doing that because I was asked to do so by the partners that we will need, to ensure that the modelling and assumptions underpinning the workforce plan are good. I am always prepared to take a little bit more time to get it right, than to rush something out. That is the spirit in which I have engaged in workforce planning.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): With a 28% pay rise and 4,000 extra specialty training places, it is starting to feel like the BMA resident doctors committee is deeply committed to not taking yes for an answer. It is not just about the services; it is about the parent who wants their kids to have their elective appointment before Christmas. It is real people in my constituency and across the country who are suffering, so I urge the BMA to come to the table and be reasonable. While we are looking at the training crisis, will the Health Secretary look at the specific areas where we have real training crises, such as mental health, GPs, sexual health and palliative care? There are a lot of areas in the NHS where this deal can be a win-win, as we can both open up the extra training places and solve some of the workforce crises that we know about right now.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do wish the BMA would take yes for an answer sometimes; I would like it even more if the BMA gave yes as an answer to me once a while, but that has not happened in a little while. He is right to talk about the need for workforce planning. The workforce plan, which is in production, is all about making sure we have the right people in the right place at the right time. He mentioned mental health specifically. Our manifesto committed to 8,500 extra mental health workers over the course of this Parliament, and I am happy to report that we have already delivered well over 6,500. There is lots done, but more to do.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I find it rather shocking that when the Secretary of State for Health has offered the BMA leadership an opportunity to strike a few weeks later, they have turned it down, presumably because they prefer to strike at Christmas, when, frankly, lives will be lost as a result. Am I missing something here? Why is it, according to the Secretary of State, that the BMA leaders seem to be so determinedly militant? Does he think that in reality, they simply do not represent the views of their own membership?

**Wes Streeting:** I will say to the right hon. Gentleman that we are doing everything we can to mitigate against harm during the proposed strike dates, but I cannot in

[*Wes Streeting*]

all honesty and integrity assure him that no patient will come to harm next week should the strikes go ahead, because the situation is so dire. I really urge the BMA to reflect on that overnight and into tomorrow and to ask themselves—perhaps their members will also ask this of their reps—whether it is really necessary to strike next week, given the offer of an extension to mandate.

To the right hon. Gentleman's final point, when I was the president of the National Union of Students, I was once asked by a Labour member of a Select Committee that I was appearing before whether I was speaking for my members or for my activists. There is sometimes a difference between the two. I know that lots of people have campaigned hard for pay restoration and that many people are involved in the Doctors Vote campaign in pursuit of that aim. I think there are many doctors, however, who recognise that there has been real progress on pay and that what we are putting forward now is meaningful progress on jobs, too. I say to all members of the BMA: do not let the perfect be the enemy of good, especially when the stakes are so high.

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I congratulate our own frontline team, because this is a great deal. I came to Parliament partly to speak up for our NHS, and I have spoken in many debates. I have also trained many surgeons over the years, and I know that my fellow surgeons will be up for this deal. College presidents will support it, and I urge all resident doctors to support it, too. I will just issue a word of caution from my son, a resident doctor, who is up there in the Gallery: if we increase the number of trainees, we will also need to increase the number of consultants and GPs. If we do not do that, we will simply push the bottleneck down the road.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the need to address bottlenecks and to do adequate workforce planning. He draws attention to his son, in the Gallery, who is a resident doctor and no doubt a voter—it is almost tempting to break the rules and start appealing to voters in the Gallery for a yes vote in the survey.

I would say one thing to any resident doctors who are watching, and not just the immediate members of my hon. Friend's family. I do listen carefully to what resident doctors say and how they feel, so I know there will be some who are listening to my hon. Friend and thinking, "It's all right for you and your generation—you've had it easy. We are fed up with these consultants and college presidents telling us what to think and feel." I hope that they know the extent to which my hon. Friend has fought their corner and spoken up for their concerns—not just on the Floor of the House, but in meetings with Ministers. He keeps us anchored in the sentiment and experiences of all parts of the profession, especially resident doctors. I know that my hon. Friend feels a real commitment to ensuring that resident doctors have a bright future and a bright career. I hope they will heed his advice, just as I do.

**Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Given the seriousness of the pending strikes, it is understandable that the Secretary has decided to focus his comments today on the BMA and this upcoming

strike. I ask the Health Secretary this question constructively: what assessment has he made of the impact of the giveaways he has just announced on the likelihood of future strikes and on other NHS staff, particularly nurses, who are already feeling hard done by following last year's pay rise?

**Wes Streeting:** That is a very thoughtful and appropriate question. Just to reassure the House, the Minister of State for Health and I have been working with Agenda for Change unions, particularly Unison, the Royal College of Nursing and GMB, to ensure that we are dealing with the structural reform of Agenda for Change that they are seeking. We have been exploring how we can deliver fairer pay for other parts of the NHS workforce and an improvement to the conditions and status of the nursing profession specifically, while maintaining fairness for all NHS workers. That is one of the considerations I have had to bear in mind when it comes to what we can offer the BMA and resident doctors. I have been very clear with the resident doctor reps about that privately, and I am happy to restate that publicly.

Doctors have not had a bad deal from this Government, frankly, and I have a responsibility to all parts of the NHS workforce, especially those who are lowest paid and who often lie awake at night worrying about their bills.

**Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): On international medical graduates, I commend the Secretary of State. It is something we have discussed in the past, and bringing forward emergency legislation is absolutely crucial here, so I thank him for that. I also want to mention trainers in the NHS. I can reassure the Conservatives that we will make this happen. I have been a GP trainer for 25 years. We will work to make this happen; that is what we do in the NHS.

I have many resident doctor friends who do not like this action. Can we urge those doctors to talk to their fellows and try to call off this strike? It is not generally well supported among resident doctors, and it is something that we can change.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend makes a really good point. Sometimes during ballots people who are opposed to industrial action choose not to cast a ballot at all because they know that the turnout threshold is material. In the coming days, it is absolutely vital that every resident doctor makes their voice heard. This is their chance to tell me and their reps how they want to proceed on this deal. I respect the fact that the resident doctors committee has chosen today to present the deal in neutral terms to its members so that they can make a choice. I really do respect that. Now I urge resident doctors to make their views known and take the opportunity in front of them so that we can move forward together to make real changes to their lives.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I do want to finish this statement shortly, so could Members keep their questions and answers short? I call Andrew George.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the manner in which he has been handling the issue. However, I want to ask him about

the way he summarised the position at the end of his statement. He presented it as a choice between striking and having more jobs and the other parts of the offer. I seek clarity on the matter. Is he genuinely saying that he is going to withdraw that? Was that purely for oratorical effect, or is that his negotiating position?

**Wes Streeting:** I regret to say that if the BMA rejects this offer, we will not proceed with it at this time. I wish that we were not in this transactional lock. I wish we could just move forward together in a spirit of partnership, with a bit of give and take. That is not where we are, and I think I would be crucified by the public if I were to take a different approach. It would be the wrong thing to do and it would incentivise people to strike further, and I cannot tolerate that any longer.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): Our constituents will consider it absurd that we spend billions of pounds every year on training doctors who will never work in the NHS. I am pleased that we are grappling with this issue, just like the Secretary of State is grappling with many others. He has shown that by working constructively through the issues, we can, hopefully, reduce industrial action. I contrast that with the comments from the shadow Secretary of State, who talked about bringing back the minimum service level laws. Will the Secretary of State remind the House that those laws were so unworkable that no public sector service ever actually used them? In fact, we had the highest levels of industrial action in 40 years under the previous Government.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend has so much expertise on health and on employment rights and trade union law, and he is right. That is why this Government have chosen a different approach. We want to work with all our trade unions, we want to work with the BMA, and we can still do so if we hit the reset button and each of us commits to building a more constructive relationship.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Secretary of State and I fully support his stance on the resident doctors' strike action. "Stand firm" is the message that I send to him, and I ask that God bless him and his team.

This will be the 14th strike since March 2023 and it is expected to cause major disruption. With the recent influx of flu, some wards have 70% occupancy. That could put the healthcare system under extreme pressure. Accident and emergency in the Ulster hospital, Belfast city hospital and the Royal Victoria hospital are under intense pressure. If they did not have the doctors from India and Africa, we would be under real pressure. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the BMA about the impact this strike will have on emergency care and, ultimately, on getting patients back home before Christmas?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support. He is right to raise concerns about the impact on urgent emergency care. We will do our best to keep the show on the road, but I cannot make guarantees in the way that I would want to about the quality or timeliness of care. I place on record my thanks to my counterpart in Northern Ireland, Mike Nesbitt, as well

as to my counterparts in Wales and Scotland, for the constructive approach that they have taken in making this possible.

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I draw attention to my membership of the GMB and my chairship of its parliamentary group. The BMA is currently in dispute with its workforce over an offer of 2% for this year, which is below the inflation rate on the retail prices index and the consumer prices index. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a striking inconsistency between the heads of claim that the BMA has advanced and its own record as an employer?

**Wes Streeting:** I should also declare that I am a member of the GMB and Unison. I say to my hon. Friend that there is a striking inconsistency between what the BMA is demanding for its members and what it proposes to pay its own staff. There is a word for that. In the spirit of trying to engage more constructively, I will not use it. However, I urge the BMA to engage constructively with us and with its own staff. It certainly will not want to see me on the picket lines outside BMA House.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I am a lifelong trade unionist and a proud member of Unite and Unison. I was proud to stand on the picket line with resident BMA doctors in my Liverpool Riverside constituency recently. They talked about the challenges around fees, and I am sure that they will welcome the fact that more money will be put in their pockets. There was some inconsistency, however. Will the Minister clarify that all resident doctors of all specialisms will be subject to the fee waivers?

**Wes Streeting:** I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that the royal college fees that I outlined in my statement will be covered by us. That will be a material saving in resident doctors' pockets. Exam fees will also be backdated, recognising that many doctors will have already done those exams and paid the fees. I hope that that gives my hon. Friend and resident doctors in her constituency the confidence that this is a good deal and one that we can move forward on and campaign on together.

**Kevin McKenna** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I have worked so many Christmases and new years as a nurse in the NHS, and I know the weary dread with which so many colleagues are facing this threat of strike action, particularly against the background of a spike in respiratory illnesses. It will be devastating. In a good year without strikes, it would be bad enough.

I really commend the Secretary of State for the work he has done to address what have been long-running sores in the experience of resident doctors. Some of this is genuinely transformational, and what I know a lot of clinical colleagues have been after for so long. But healthcare is a collective activity. It is the multidisciplinary team that delivers healthcare, not individual doctors or individual nurses, so can I recommend that the Secretary of State keeps focusing on that collective improvement to the NHS, as I know he has been doing? I implore everyone in the BMA who is listening: let's just put this to bed now. It is time for everyone to have a healthy Christmas.

**Wes Streeting:** Of course, my concern is always patients, first and foremost, but it has been playing on my mind and my conscience that, going into this December, a lot of consultants, nurses, allied health professionals and other NHS staff are more tired than they would otherwise have been because they are putting in those extra shifts and extra effort both to cover the previous round of strikes and then to help the NHS to recover in that long tail that follows in the days and weeks afterwards. I really feel for them at the moment because of the conditions they are working in. I think all of us would breathe a sigh of relief—and also, frankly, express a great deal of gratitude, myself included—if the BMA were to take up the offer of postponing strikes until January. It is not too late. I urge it to think about that overnight and to do the right thing.

**Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his leadership, and also the NHS bosses up and down this country for theirs. They often do not get the praise that they deserve in this House. This situation is bad for patients and their families and also for NHS staff, but above all it is bad for trust and confidence in our NHS. We know that there are people in this House and across the country who want to attack the very principle of the NHS. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the BMA needs to take into consideration that this is about not just the deal on the table today but the very principle of our NHS?

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To be honest, the thing that causes me most anxiety is that, although I know that the NHS is on the road to recovery, we are surrounded by an enormous amount of jeopardy. We need, as much as we possibly can, to make sure that we are not inflicting avoidable damage or setbacks on our progress, and it feels like that is what this round of strike action represents. My hon. Friend is right to praise NHS leaders and managers. I know how emotionally invested they are in seeing their patients and their staff through this Christmas, and I urge resident doctors and the BMA to take up not only the deal but the opportunity to at least put off strike action to January.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for all his work on this matter so far, but I know that people in my constituency are going to be really worried about what might happen to them over the Christmas period. I thank all those hard-working NHS staff, be they nurses or doctors, who have continued to look after us and are facing a really difficult situation over this Christmas. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to urge the BMA to call off this strike and, in doing so, will he commit to continuing that dialogue with the profession so that it knows that he really understands the challenges it faces, the training opportunities it needs and the job opportunities it deserves?

**Wes Streeting:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. This is the point that I have impressed on the chair of the resident doctors committee. This deal is not the end of the conversation about jobs and career development in the NHS, because there are plenty of problems for us to solve. Although we cannot afford to go further on pay this year, what we have done so far—28.9%—is not

the extent of what the Government can and are willing to do on pay. It just requires a bit of give and take, and I think we will make much more constructive and meaningful progress if we work together. I have my part to play in that, and from my point of view, we need to reset the relationship. It has hit the buffers somewhat in recent weeks. I am willing to do that. We have people we can work with on the resident doctors committee, but I think we are going to have to grasp the olive branch as it is presented today so that we can make more progress in the new year.

**Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): People in Northampton are on a bit of a rollercoaster: they have seen the benefits of a Labour Government in the £16 million that has been secured for our new urgent care centre at Northampton general, but they will now rightly be worried reading the news. Will the Secretary of State send a message to my constituents to assure them that they will be kept safe should the BMA take this disastrous action?

**Wes Streeting:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on all his campaigning to secure investment in his constituency. One thing I can assure everyone in our country is that NHS leaders, frontline staff and I will do everything we can to mitigate harm during these strikes; I am afraid what I cannot do is guarantee that there will be no harm. That is the thing that keeps me awake at night at the moment, and that is the thing that the BMA should keep foremost in their minds when deciding whether or not, even at this late stage, to take up the offer to postpone strikes until January and take the mandate extension.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As a proud trade unionist, I know that trade unions are there to represent their members' interests and views, yet by pushing ahead with this strike action, the BMA appears set to ignore its members. The offer on the table is real and comes from a Government who are listening and making positive change. Would the Secretary of State urge the BMA to take stock, think again about patients and its colleagues, and pause action while its members are consulted on the new terms? It has nothing to lose from pausing, yet the NHS and the population have so much to lose.

**Wes Streeting:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The BMA has put the offer to its members in neutral terms, but the fact is that it is now going to run a hasty survey over the next few days in order to give us what will still be less than 48 hours' notice of whether or not these strikes will go ahead. If it took up the mandate extension, it could run a referendum properly and give its members more time to consider and discuss the offer in the workplace and with their families and reps. I do not see how more participation in the conversation and in the ballot could possibly be a bad thing.

As I have made clear to resident doctors, there are no downsides for the BMA in this. In fact, the only person who risks having a downside is me if, even after accepting the mandate extension, the deal is rejected and the doctors go out on strike again in January. This is not even a win-win scenario; this is a potential win-lose scenario, so I do not know why the BMA would not take it up.

This is a great offer for doctors. I know there will still be more to do, whether that is the implementation of the 10-point plan that Jim Mackey has come up with, my offer to work with the BMA trust by trust and employer by employer to see progress, or any of the other things we can do together. If we work together, we can get more done together. If we are working as partners rather than adversaries, we will all enjoy it a lot more and we will make more progress, and that is the opportunity that is available.

**Lizzi Collinge** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I am very concerned that flu has hit hard and hit early this year. Hospital bed occupancy for flu is more than 50% higher than it was this time last year and resident doctors are central to tackling that. I have to admit to being very shocked that the BMA turned down an offer that would allow it to postpone next week's strike. Does the Secretary of State share my worry that any strike action would make tackling this flu crisis much harder?

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It also costs us roughly a quarter of a million pounds each time the BMA does this, and we cannot afford to keep paying that. It may say, "Well, then just do a deal with us and you will not have to fork out," but then why would the rest of the NHS workforce, or the entire public sector or the entire economy, not go on strike? That is not constructive, and it is not going to get the NHS or Britain out of the enormous hole it was left in by the Conservatives. We are making real progress together, and I thank resident doctors for that. We will make more if we work together.

**Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The coming weeks are always the most dangerous time of year for the NHS, and it is important to note that the patient safety risks arising from the strike will be present not just during the strike period but in the weeks following it. Some of my most daunting, and indeed scary, times in the NHS involved working alongside resident doctors, nurses and others in the early hours of the morning in January and late December to try to ensure that ambulances could still be offloaded under the most difficult circumstances. In that spirit of one team working for patient safety, I urge the resident doctors to accept the offer that the Secretary of State has set out. Will he confirm that NHS England and local NHS leaders will have his full support in taking the difficult decisions that they need to take to keep patient flow going and emergency care going during this period if strikes do take place?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank my hon. Friend for what he says and for the experience he brings to bear. I hope his urging is heeded by the BMA. I can give him that assurance. I think its operational leaders will face some fiendish choices in the coming days and weeks if strike action goes ahead. They will have my full backing. Myself, the Minister for Health and the Minister for Care are working closely with both the NHS and the social care sector, but this will be extremely challenging, and that is why I urge the BMA to adopt that "one team, one NHS" approach that he urges them to adopt.

**Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I too thank the Secretary of State for the lengths he is going to for resident doctors. As somebody who worked in our NHS

before coming to this place, I know what a pressured time winter is for staff and patients alike. With strikes at this time of year, NHS staff will this week be taking calls from harried managers and cancelling plans to be with their families at Christmas to cover shifts, and of course patients will have their operations cancelled. Does he share my concern about the human impact of this planned strike?

**Wes Streeting:** That is the only thing I have been thinking about in recent days, and it is why I have offered to extend a strike mandate for the first time, even though the BMA has asked me to do that on previous occasions in different contexts. I think it is a sensible compromise, and it avoids that dreaded phone call to the NHS staff member who has to cancel their holiday plans for Christmas and go back to work. Most importantly of all, it avoids that dreaded phone call to the patient who has been gearing themselves up for that test or scan that they are worried about, or that operation or procedure that they have waited far too long for. Indeed, it avoids the dreaded situation of someone having to call 999 in an emergency uncertain about whether the ambulance is going to arrive on time and anxious about whether they will be waiting in a car park, in a queue, in the back of an ambulance or, indeed, on a trolley in a corridor.

It gives me no pleasure at all to acknowledge that the bleak situations I have described are in play today in the NHS. Activity is already being stood down, but even if this strike action were not looming, the NHS is not in a state that I would want myself, the people I love, the people I represent or anyone in our country to be treated in, because of the enormous pressures that it is under.

With that in mind, and after listening to the contributions we have heard from across the House from Members on both sides who are not anti-doctor or even anti-BMA, I urge the BMA to do the right thing—not just to adopt this deal, but even at this late stage to adopt the offer of mandate extension in order to put off till January the spectre of strike action, and to give their members time to think, vote and make a decision on whether to accept a deal that would make a meaningful material difference to their job prospects, to their careers and to the future of our national health service. It is not too late to change course. It is not too late for the BMA to change its mind, and there is never any shame in doing so for those who think that is right.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving us so much time on such an important issue.

## PETITIONS

### Pornography and Violence against Women

8.18 pm

**Jess Asato** (Lowestoft) (Lab): On the final day of the UN's 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, I present a petition on behalf of my Lowestoft constituents on the pornography industry and the serious and long-lasting impact it is having on our society, not least in fuelling violence against women and girls. Pornography

[Jess Asato]

that depicts performers as children or stepfamily members is abhorrent and fuels real world interest in the sexual abuse of children.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography distributed online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform—and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

*Declares that pornography use is fuelling sexual violence; violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography; and sexual coercion is inherent to the commercial production of pornography.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to extend safeguards applied to pornography offline to pornography distributed online; and to legally require all pornography websites accessed from the UK to verify the age and permission of every individual featured on their platform—and give performers the right to withdraw their consent at any time to the continued publication of pornography in which they appear.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P003147]

#### **Bank Closure in Penzance**

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the people of the Penzance area, 3,000 of whom have already signed a public version to oppose the closure of the Lloyds bank, which is located in the iconic market house in the centre of Market Jew Street. The decision has been taken without any local consultation whatsoever. The significant impact on the vulnerable, on businesses and charities with complex transactions, and on the digitally excluded has not been taken into account. The petitioners observe that Lloyds was bailed out to the tune of £37 billion of taxpayers’ money during the financial crisis, yet it treats the town in this manner without any consultation, leaving customers with a two-hour bus journey to the nearest branch in Truro.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of St Ives,

Declares that the decision by Lloyd’s bank to close its Penzance branch will have a severe and detrimental impact on older and disabled people, local businesses and on the digitally excluded; further declares that Lloyd’s has been established at the iconic Market House in the centre of the town for one hundred years and local people have appreciated the work of the staff and the service provided; and further declares that banking services should not be limited to being accessed electronically, by telephone, at Post Office counters and through the limited services and hours of Banking Hubs.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward measures to ensure a network of accessible full-time banks throughout the UK and in every market town, and to call on Lloyd’s to keep its Penzance branch open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003148]

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not having given notice of my point of order.

Earlier today, I raised a point of order with regard to correspondence that I had submitted to the Secretary of State for Justice. I said that I had written to the Secretary of State a week ago with regard to the Palestine Action prisoners who are on hunger strike at the moment, some of whom have been hospitalised, but received no response. This evening—I have just picked it up—a Ministry of Justice spokesperson has said in a press release:

“The Deputy Prime Minister has responded to and will continue to respond to correspondence on this issue”.

I have received no correspondence or any reply whatsoever. I have checked all my emails and consulted colleagues. May I, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, urge those on the Treasury Bench to take back the message that that is an inaccurate statement? We need an urgent response on behalf of the several Members who put their names to that letter.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins)**: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. This is a very important matter. I know that Mr Speaker has made his feelings known. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the right hon. Gentleman’s comments, and I will ensure that Mr Speaker is aware of his dissatisfaction.

## Cammell Laird Workers' Imprisonment: Public Inquiry

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

8.23 pm

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate on the historical injustice of the wrongful imprisonment of 37 Cammell Laird workers who, in 1984, occupied their workplace in protest at redundancies, privatisation and threats of closure. They were sacked, they lost their jobs, redundancy and pension rights, and they were sent to prison in an unprecedented assault on trade unionists. They have been fighting ever since to clear their names. It is my honour to be their voice in this place today. I note for the record that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice.

I will begin by recognising the work of those who helped to bring this debate here today: the 37 themselves. They are Billy Albertina, Eddie Albertina, Francis Albertina, Jimmy Albertina, John Albertina, Jimmy Barton, Christopher Bilsborough, John Brady, Michael Byrne, Thomas Cassidy, Thomas Culshaw, John Dooley, Lol Duffy, Colin Early, Nicholas Fenian, Joe Flynn, Andrew Frazer, Barry Golding, Paul Hennessey, Edward Kenny, Paul Little, Eddie Marnell, Jimmy McCarthy, Anthony McGarry, Philip McKeown, Michael Mooney, Aiden Morley, Sam Morley, Alan Prior, Francis Roach, Stephen Smith, Christopher Thompson, Tommy Webb, Tommy Wilson, Chris Whitley, George Whittaker and John Wright.

I want to thank several other people, including the previous MP for Birkenhead, my very good friend Mick Whitley, whose brother was one of the 37. I thank him for his tireless work and campaigning both in and outside Parliament. I thank, too, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) who led the Westminster Hall debate on this topic back in 2023, and has continued to support the campaign. I would also like to recognise the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) who has a long history of supporting the campaign as a GMB officer. He used one of his first written parliamentary questions as an MP to secure a commitment from the then Justice Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander), to consider a review into the jailing of the Cammell Laird workers.

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on again reading into the record the names of the 37. I hope I might put two sentiments of my own on the record. First, I pay tribute to the work of Eddie Marnell who, over many years as a member of GMB's north-west and Irish region and central executive council, championed their cause outside this House and, through the union, inside it. I also pay tribute to the work of my former colleagues at GMB; I can attest to the many hours that have been spent in support of that cause, and I understand that the union is due to meet the campaign again in the new year.

**Kim Johnson:** I echo my hon. Friend's support for Eddie Marnell. I look forward to the continued support of GMB going forward.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I also attended the 2023 debate in Westminster Hall with her and other Members, and I fully support the campaign. During the earlier statement on resident doctors, she referred to standing on a picket line. Like her, I have stood on the picket line along with nurses and others in Newtownards on many occasions.

The imprisonment and removal of redundancy packages would not normally occur in any instance where a workforce had decided to strike, and many of these workers never regained stable employment. Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a case to be answered in terms of the regaining of finance, and that more must be done to seek justice for the 37 workers who still suffer today and have not had justice?

**Kim Johnson:** I totally agree: justice does need to be served, and the 37 have been affected because of the financial demands put on them because of the action they took. They were striking workers, not criminals, and they should never have gone to prison.

I pay tribute to Paul Heron and Clare Lash-Williams, who are providing legal advice for the campaign, with the intention to launch a successful legal appeal against the original charges. I also thank GMB union for its support; I look forward to its continued support going forward.

In 1984, faced with sweeping redundancies and the decline of the shipbuilding industry, workers at Cammell Laird occupied their workplace, including a gas rig and a Royal Navy frigate, to resist job losses and defend their livelihoods and communities. Management's response, backed by the Government at the time, was swift and very heavy-handed. The workers were threatened with dismissal, the loss of their redundancy payment, and even police intervention. They were deliberately targeted to send a warning to others—an attempt by the state to break industrial action and demoralise workers taking strike action across the country.

The workers reluctantly agreed to end their occupation in September 1984 after weeks, when their water supply was cut off. They were immediately arrested for failing to turn up to court for an earlier judicial review hearing. They were convicted in their absence and sent to Walton jail, Merseyside's category A high-security prison. Their appeal at the High Court in October 1984 was presided over by Lord Lawton, who had been a member of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, had visited Hitler in the 1930s and had been selected to run for Parliament. He was a long-standing enemy of the trade union movement and would have been only too happy to uphold the unprecedented 30-day prison sentence for contempt of court, a grossly disproportionate punishment.

The whole case stinks of an establishment stitch-up. There were plenty of similar cases at the time, throughout the movement. Not even the National Union of Mineworkers leader, Arthur Scargill, was imprisoned, despite being convicted of the same charge. The only comparable case of an imprisonment of a large group of workers due to a national dispute was the Shrewsbury 24, and 47 years later, their convictions have finally been overturned by the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

When the 37 were charged with contempt of court and sent to a high-security prison, Liverpool city council was locked in a fierce battle with the Thatcher Government

[Kim Johnson]

of the time over a £30 million cut to funding from central Government, after the Government deemed the council to have set an illegal budget. The council remained defiant, adopting the mantra. "We would rather break the law than break the poor." More than anything, the council focused on building council homes and creating jobs—work unmatched by any other authority at the time. That was the political environment with which the Cammell Laird 37 had to contend.

The workers fought proudly not only for their jobs, but for the future of the shipyard. Their only crime—if it can be called a crime—was defending their livelihood. The strikers ensured that there was absolutely no damage to any property during their occupation. They even allowed Ministry of Defence inspectors into the occupation to inspect a frigate and to carry out maintenance work. Were they criminals? No. They were responsible trade union members, carrying out legitimate action at their own workplace, and respecting the property of which they were in control. For that, they were incarcerated in prison for 30 days.

The Justice for the Cammell Laird 37 campaign resonates deeply with my constituents in Liverpool Riverside, and with people across Merseyside. The 37 are widely considered to be heroes for standing up to Thatcher's policies of managed decline, which destroyed our industries and decimated our communities. Their struggle took place against the backdrop of the broader union fight-backs, and parallel injustices, such as Orgreave and Hillsborough, in which ordinary people paid the price for fighting back against a Government hellbent on crushing working-class communities. Four decades later, the fight for justice continues. Sadly, half of the 37 have died while waiting for their names to be cleared. Action is needed now to ensure that the surviving workers receive justice, because justice delayed is justice denied.

I grew up in Liverpool during the Thatcher years. The neo-liberal policies enforced on our city would define us for years to come. Liverpool in the 1980s was highly dependent on the docks for work. We suffered unemployment rates of almost 50%. Our communities were deeply aware that the fight for jobs was not just about improving the current situation, but about preserving jobs and workplaces for generations to come. Thatcher's privatisation drive resulted in British shipbuilders going from employing 62,000 workers in 1982 to just 5,000 workers five years later. In Merseyside alone, we lost 34,000 manufacturing jobs between 1978 and 1981 due to Thatcher's policy of managed decline. It was this hollowing out of industry that these workers were trying to defeat. They deserve full recognition and gratitude for the struggle they waged, and an apology for the disgraceful way that they were treated.

The Justice for the Cammell Laird 37 campaign, like the campaigns on the Shrewsbury 24 and the miners' strike, and so many other union struggles of the time, goes to the very heart of how Thatcher's Government responded to workers who dared to stand up for themselves. I remember the police brutality inflicted on striking miners at Orgreave, followed by lies and cover-ups by politicians, the police and the media. I am proud that this Labour Government have now committed to a full inquiry into Orgreave. It follows logically that there should be a public inquiry into the jailing of Cammell Laird

workers—a miscarriage of justice with many obvious parallels. However, the priority must be releasing the Government papers to help the legal team clear the names of the 37.

There is no doubt that this was a major miscarriage of justice, sanctioned at the highest levels of Government. No other industrial action resulted in so many men being sent to prison. The 30-day sentence was grossly unfair; by the time the men were released, they had lost their jobs, workplace rights, redundancy payments, and pension payments. Research by the GMB shows that at least one of the men could have lost £120,000 or more. Some were blacklisted for many years and struggled to find work afterwards, causing immense suffering and economic hardship. For that reason, we believe that there should be a public inquiry.

The limited records from the National Archives and Thatcher's private papers demonstrate that Ministers were determined to privatise the building of warships, cut the number of shipbuilding yards, and sell off the remainder of the state-owned yards. The Cammell Laird 37 knew that was what they were up against—a Government hellbent on privatisation at any cost. It is that systemic and ideologically driven undermining of the British shipbuilding industry by a group of Ministers determined to drive through the complete privatisation of British shipbuilders, regardless of the wider economic and social consequences, which warrants a public inquiry, so that the 37 and all those impacted can understand why the treatment they received was so uniquely punitive and destructive.

A public inquiry is not merely symbolic; it is essential. It is crucial to understand how and why a Government acting through Ministers and the court imposed such punitive measures on ordinary citizens for exercising their right to industrial action. We call for the actions of Ministers from the time to be investigated, and for all the remaining records to be made public. That includes the Ministry of Defence and British Gas contracts, and any Crown Estate leases relevant for a future appeal. Following a GMB campaign almost a decade ago, the European Parliament committee on petitions called on the UK Government to release all relevant papers, but that has never been actioned. More importantly, we want a formal Government apology to these workers.

The legal team believes that the court was given inaccurate information at the time of the initial prosecutions, and that the workers may not have been lawfully dismissed. It argues that Cammell Laird may have had no legal standing to bring the claims that led to the injunctions, and that the occupation may have occurred on land that was not under the company's control. These claims are groundbreaking, and, with the help of the Minister, we can ensure that the campaign's legal team has access to the appropriate documentation to finally bring about justice for the 37.

During the 2023 Westminster Hall debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), the Justice Minister at the time stated that

"this Department has conducted extensive searches of its records and those in the court and prison systems."

He also confirmed that he understood that

"nothing has been found in relation to the Cammell Laird strike action or the strikers themselves."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2023; Vol. 727, c. 301WH.]

He stated that other Departments, including the Cabinet Office, Home Office and the then Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, confirmed that they “do not believe” they hold any relevant records, which I find quite astounding. However, the Cammell Laird campaigners believe that an exhaustive search has not been undertaken. Papers must exist relating to the closure, and every effort should be made to identify and release them.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this debate. I declare for the record my membership of the GMB trade union. I was at that Westminster Hall debate, in which the Minister at the time said that a search had been undertaken. Given what my hon. Friend has said today about the highest levels of Government pushing this issue forward, it is very hard for us to believe that an exhaustive search was conducted at the time. During the debate, the then shadow Minister said that a Labour Government

“would release documents held by Government relating to the Cammell Laird prosecutions and carry out a review into the jailing of the striking workers.”—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2023; Vol. 727, c. 298WH.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be able to agree that very quickly indeed?

**Kim Johnson:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend, and I hope that when the Minister sums up, we will hear something direct in relation to that request. We need answers about who was behind the incarceration of the 37 Cammell Laird workers for contempt of court. Those men were not vandals or criminals. They were trade unionists defending their jobs, their pensions, and the future of the shipyard.

I would be grateful if, when the Minister sums up, he fully committed to the search for the truth—committed that the Government will release every relevant document, fully investigate the decisions that led to the imprisonment of those workers, and agree to meet the campaigners and the legal team to discuss what support they need to exonerate all those workers. Forty-one years on, the call remains the same: justice for the Cammell Laird 37. They deserve our recognition and gratitude for their courage in standing up and fighting back, and while this debate and whatever follows it will not undo the damage done to the lives of those men, their families and our communities, it will go a long way towards achieving justice. Jobs, not jail, must remain the guiding principle. Those men deserve our full support as they seek a formal Government apology and seek to clear their names. We will not rest until the truth is uncovered and justice is finally done.

8.40 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) on securing this debate, and on her characteristically powerful speech on this important issue. I join her in praising all the campaigners, and in particular the 37 whose names she read out. I also declare an interest as a proud member of the GMB trade union, and praise that union’s work on this important issue.

As we have heard, in 1984, 37 workers were involved in an occupation at the Cammell Laird shipyard at Birkenhead in a bid to stop compulsory redundancies. Those 37 men were sentenced to 30 days’ imprisonment for contempt of court after defying a judge’s order to leave a partially built gas rig. They were imprisoned for 30 days in HMP Walton. They were subsequently dismissed from their jobs, and lost their right to redundancy and a pension. I recognise that what those 37 workers suffered was a disgrace, and although this case occurred before I was born, I recognise the issues that it raises, and the profound effect it has had on those workers and the communities that my hon. Friend represents. I am deeply sympathetic to the case and the individuals affected by it, and recognise that due to the passage of time, some of those individuals have sadly passed away.

Before I turn to the specific question posed, I would like to emphasise that this Government are committed to tackling injustice and ensuring fair and progressive rights in the workplace, so that these types of malpractice never happen again. I am about to set out the many measures that the Government are hoping to introduce through their Employment Rights Bill, but first I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), who is in the Chamber, and who has done so much work on this issue, both in opposition and in government.

The plan to make work pay sets out the Government’s ambitious agenda to ensure that employment rights are fit for a modern economy, empower working people and contribute to economic growth. That plan will bring our employment rights legislation into the 21st century. The Government fulfilled their manifesto commitment to bring forward legislation within 100 days of entering office by introducing the Employment Rights Bill. As the House will no doubt be aware, the Bill is going through ping-pong. It is the first phase of delivering our plan to get Britain moving forward, and to create the right conditions for long-term, sustainable, inclusive and secure economic growth.

I stress that blacklisting is completely unacceptable and has no place in modern employment relations. Any individual or trade union who believes that they have been a victim of blacklisting can, and should, enforce their rights through an employment tribunal or the county court. The 2010 blacklisting regulations are reinforced by powers in the Data Protection Act 2018, which protect the use of personal data, including information on trade union membership and sensitive personal data. The Information Commissioner’s Office regulates the use of personal data and investigates data breaches. It has the power to take enforcement action, including searching premises, issuing enforcement notices, and imposing fines for serious breaches.

The question posed in this debate is whether there is merit in holding a public inquiry into the imprisonment of Cammell Laird workers in 1984. I recognise that this question has already been discussed in the Chamber; it is an issue of abiding parliamentary interest, and was the subject of a Westminster Hall debate in February 2023, before I was a Member of this place. That debate was brought by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), and was attended by hon. Members who have been in Parliament for some time, and who have long campaigned for justice in this area.

[Jake Richards]

Public inquiries are independent investigations into matters of significant public concern. They are established by the Government and led by an independent chair. They are usually asked to establish the facts surrounding a serious issue and consider the lessons to be learned from what has happened, as well as make recommendations intended to correct deficiencies for the future. For example, an inquiry may be established to look at the cause of a major disaster, accident or other event involving significant damage or loss of life.

The Government will consider whether a matter is sufficiently serious to warrant an inquiry, and an inquiry might take a number of forms. An inquiry could be established under the Inquiries Act 2005. Critically, although the Ministry of Justice owns the Inquiries Act 2005 and the Inquiries Rules 2006, Justice Ministers do not decide whether to set up an inquiry. That falls to the Department with policy or operational responsibility for the issue under consideration. Industrial relations and how they were historically dealt with are not a matter for me or the Ministry of Justice, and as such it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the potential merits of an inquiry.

As has been touched on, and as was set out by a predecessor in the Ministry of Justice in the Westminster Hall debate, document disclosure is a vital part of any inquiry, or any assessment of whether an inquiry is necessary. As the Government have previously disclosed, my Department has conducted extensive searches of our records within the court and prison systems, and nothing has been found in relation to the Cammell Laird strike action or the strikers. Other Departments have likewise previously confirmed that they do not hold potentially relevant material. I have heard what my hon. Friend has had to say, and tomorrow morning I will go back to my Department to make sure that those searches are done again, and I will send correspondence to the relevant Departments to ensure that they do those again, too.

It is important to note, as has been accepted, that inquiries do not determine civil or criminal liability. They are not a substitute for court proceedings, and they do not determine guilt or award compensation. The appropriate route for challenging a conviction and/or sentence is by way of appeal. Once the appeal route has been exhausted, it is possible to apply to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. Where a person believes that they have been wrongly convicted of a crime in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, a request can be made to the independent Criminal Cases Review Commission, which can investigate and, where appropriate, refer cases back to court.

**Kim Johnson:** The Hillsborough campaign fought for an independent panel, and it was through an independent panel that information was brought to light that enabled the campaign to move forward. Does my hon. Friend believe that an independent panel would help the 37 campaigners to move their case forward?

**Jake Richards:** I take the suggestion seriously. As I have said on document disclosure, which I think is the first step for the campaign, and in my hon. Friend getting what she is seeking, tomorrow morning I will go

to my Department and looking at this issue again. Her speech, this campaign and the Adjournment debate have meant that will happen. I can assure her that I will do that, and I take that seriously. We consider no options to be off the table.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): One of the areas that is worth exploring is the Cabinet papers and the discussions that took place. These Cammell Laird workers are the innocent victims of a political strategy that was devised in Cabinet to suppress all opposition to the introduction of monetary policies—monetarism—under the Thatcher Government during that period. The Minister may not have been born at the time, but I was. In any areas where there was resistance to the Government, the resistance was suppressed. I was a Greater London Council councillor, and the GLC was abolished. In Lambeth and in Liverpool, councillors were surcharged and removed from office. Individual trade unionists were suppressed in a way that was more brutal than we ever thought possible. The Government inflicted damage, having forced trade union action, and there was also the imprisonment. This is about the Cabinet discussions that took place at the time, and Nicholas Ridley and so on. As we saw in the Shrewsbury campaign, there is also the matter of the influence they had on the courts.

**Jake Richards:** I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's intervention. My point about the passage of time was not me being flippant about this serious issue. The Orgreave events occurred in my constituency, and I am pleased that this Labour Government have launched a public inquiry. I will not comment from the Dispatch Box on individual disclosure searches in different Departments and particular conversations; I am sure that he can appreciate that that would not be appropriate. I have given a commitment to look at this issue again when I go back to my Department tomorrow morning. I take that seriously, and will keep him and other Members updated.

One of the difficult aspects of the Cammell Laird workers' imprisonment is that we are talking about committals for contempt of court, which is a civil matter, rather than convictions for criminal offences. This is a technical issue, but it means that the case does not meet the criteria for a miscarriage of justice, which relates to wrongful convictions. That might appear to be an issue of semantics, but distinct processes apply in cases in which a person has wrongfully been convicted of a criminal offence, so it is important for us to be clear about the distinction between a miscarriage of justice and what we may term a historic injustice. The Law Commission is reviewing the law on contempt of court, at the Government's request. The first part of its report, on liability for contempt, was published last month. The second part will be published next year, and will include a review of the routes of appeal and the sanctions that courts are able to impose for different types of contempt.

I am deeply sympathetic to the case, to the campaign, and to the individuals who are affected by this. Industrial relations and how they were historically dealt with are not necessarily matters for the Ministry of Justice, but I have made a number of commitments from the Dispatch Box to looking at certain issues again as a result of this

Adjournment debate. That is this House working. I confirm those commitments, and I will report back to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside. I thank her for initiating the debate, and for the opportunity that she has given me to respond to it and take action as a result of it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

8.50 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 December 2025

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

## Kashmir: Self-determination

9.30 am

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for self-determination in Kashmir.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am grateful to be given the opportunity to have this very important and timely debate in this Chamber today, because for millions of Kashmiris across the world and the UK, the question of self-determination is not some distant, abstract foreign policy matter; it is about families torn apart, homes bulldozed, voices silenced, human rights abused and a people denied the most fundamental democratic right—the right to choose their own destiny; the right to self-determination. As someone who has campaigned on this matter for over a decade in this House, may I begin by saying very plainly that the world has failed the people of Kashmir and continues to do so?

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): My hon. Friend speaks with great passion. He says that the world has failed the people of Kashmir, and I agree. Does he agree that no longer should politicians in this place view the matter of Kashmir as some kind of bilateral issue between Pakistan and India? In fact, it is a matter for international law, and our Government and our country have a special historic duty not to wash their hands of the matter of self-determination for the people of Kashmir, which is their birthright.

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair)**: Order. Let me put down the marker now: interventions are interventions, not speeches.

**Imran Hussain**: I thank my hon. Friend for that timely intervention. He is right, and I will come on to the substance of the point he makes shortly.

Kashmir remains one of the world's most heavily militarised zones and longest unresolved international disputes. Today's problems have their origins in the unfinished business of partition in 1947, and it is important to start there—a moment in history when Britain played a direct and undeniable role. In 1948, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 47, which mandated a free and fair referendum to allow the sons and daughters of Kashmir to determine their own future and their own destiny.

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Lab): My hon. Friend speaks with great moral clarity. Does he agree that, given that the matter has been decided by the UN, lasting peace in the region cannot be achieved without dialogue that includes the voices and aspirations of the people of Kashmir themselves?

**Imran Hussain**: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a fine point. She is absolutely right. Let us make that point clear: only the Kashmiris themselves can determine their own destiny. It is not a matter for India, for Pakistan or for any other country.

As I was saying, the Kashmiris were promised a referendum 70 years ago. That referendum never happened. Their calls for justice have gone unanswered, their fundamental human rights have been violated, and their right to self-determination has been repeatedly denied. For more than 70 years, Kashmiris have continuously endured persecution, oppression and injustice. Throughout the period, draconian and repressive laws, including the Indian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the Public Safety Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, have been used to grant sweeping powers to the Indian security forces, allowing detention without trial, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. All three of those Acts are illegal under international law, yet we continue to have silence from the international community.

**Abtisam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on his continued advocacy on this subject. Does he agree that international humanitarian law is clear that the protection of civilians is not optional, that the UK has deep and historic ties to Kashmir and its people, and that we are therefore not fulfilling our obligations? Given that context, does he agree that we need to do more?

**Imran Hussain**: I absolutely agree. We have a deafening silence and lack of action. One cannot choose between human rights abuses. In Kashmir, we continue to see human rights defenders, journalists and political leaders being targeted relentlessly. Political prisoners are denied the right to a fair trial and used as an example of what happens when Kashmiris dare to speak the truth. That is not the rule of law; it is state-sponsored persecution designed to break the will of an entire people.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful contribution. Could explain he explain what actions the UK Government could best make to assist the Kashmiri people to get self-determination?

**Imran Hussain**: That is the very point that I am coming to. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) said, for decades successive UK Governments have hidden behind the policy and line that Kashmir is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. Let us start by saying clearly that Kashmir is not a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan but an international issue. The first thing the Government can do is start recognising it as that. The roots of the situation continue to be within UN Security Council resolutions that Britain helped to draft and promised to uphold.

When a people are denied their right to self-determination, when human rights abuses are systematic and documented and when—this is another point—two nuclear states sit on a knife edge, the world, and especially the UK, cannot wash its hands of responsibility.

**Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab) *rose*—

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Lady arrived after the start of the debate. I will allow her to intervene on the strict understanding that she remains for the entirety of the debate. That goes for any other Members who arrived after the start of the debate.

**Anna Dixon:** Thank you, Sir Roger, and please accept my apologies. I thank my hon. Friend, who is a great advocate, for taking an intervention. In the great city of Bradford we share a large British-Kashmiri community, whom I met recently. Will he join me in calling for greater international diplomatic efforts to try to bring a resolution to the situation and give the Kashmiri people the self-determination for which they have been waiting for so long?

**Imran Hussain:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will come to that firmly when I get to my asks. The international community cannot continue to ignore Kashmir for the whole number of reasons I have outlined.

Let us turn to the current situation, which has deteriorated sharply since August 2019 when the authoritarian, right-wing Modi Government unilaterally and unconstitutionally revoked articles 370 and 35A. That stripped Jammu and Kashmir of what little autonomy it had, in direct violation of international law, of commitments made to the people of Kashmir and of decades of United Nations resolutions. The consequences were immediate and devastating, with a 150-day communications blackout, mass detentions of political leaders, violent crackdowns across the valley, journalists silenced and civil society dismantled. It transformed communities into open-air prisons.

Families were separated, businesses destroyed, young people denied education and everyday life suffocated under curfews and lockdowns. Nearly six years on, the prosperity and normality that was promised never materialised. Instead, we see further repression and further deepening of the injustices. Now, with the domicile rules, we are seeing blatant attempts to permanently change the demographics of Kashmir. Let there be no doubt: the right-wing Modi Government have one aim, which is to try to quash the Kashmiri struggle for good.

This is a timely debate, as I said at the beginning. While we mark UN Human Rights Day today, let us be clear that Kashmir's human rights abuses are not isolated or occasional events; they form a systematic pattern of intimidation and control. Arbitrary detention, custodial torture, forced disappearances and collective punishment continue with impunity. Women have endured gender-based violence at shocking levels, with over 11,000 documented cases since 1989—an appalling statistic that speaks to the use of sexual violence as a weapon of repression.

Political prisoners remain behind bars without any due process. Khurram Parvez, a globally respected human rights defender, has spent years in prison for documenting abuses. Yasin Malik has been convicted in proceedings widely condemned for lacking fairness and transparency by every human rights organisation and now faces the death penalty. Many others, including Asiya Andrabi and Irfan Mehraj, remain imprisoned under draconian legislation. Political disputes are criminalised with one aim: to silence legitimate voices for self-determination. Kashmiris continue to suffer under a system that strips them of dignity, voice and agency.

In Azad Kashmir, where conditions are arguably much better and where there can be simply no comparison with the violence and bloodshed faced daily by Kashmiris on the Indian side, we have recently seen, very concerning, a region-wide lockdown triggered by deep public grievances and followed by the suspension of mobile internet and even landline services. Markets have been closed and transport halted. Heavy deployments of security forces have created real fear and uncertainty for ordinary people. Those events have tragically led to the deaths and casualties of many. The current dispute started with Kashmiri grievances and demands, at the core of which were basic rights such as the right to a decent education, decent healthcare, fair pricing for electricity, and basic human rights that should be granted to all people.

Of course, I welcome the de-escalation of the situation and the positive negotiations between the Pakistani Government, the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Government and the grassroots movement, the Awami Action Committee. I thank all colleagues who signed the letter from the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir, and I am grateful to those Governments for liaising with it. But let me make it absolutely clear that the human rights of Kashmiris must be respected and that all the reasonable demands of the Awami Action Committee must be met in full and implemented in full.

The central point of this debate is our moral, legal, historical and political duty. The United Kingdom is not a neutral observer in this conflict. Our decisions at partition, our diplomacy in the early decades and our vote for United Nations resolutions created obligations that remain unfulfilled to this day. We helped to shape Kashmir's unresolved status, and therefore we bear a share of the responsibility for resolving it. We cannot speak of human rights in other parts of the world while telling Kashmiris that their rights are a matter for someone else to address. That is completely absurd and a clear abdication of our responsibilities.

We cannot pick and choose when it comes to human rights abuses, yet for decades successive Governments have done just that. Governments of all stripes since the early '70s have relied on the easy line that this is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, which has allowed us to wash our hands of moral, legal or political obligations. Let me be clear: this is not a bilateral issue and never has been. At its heart are international law and the right of Kashmiris to self-determination.

Action is required. Silence is not neutrality; frankly, it is complicity. The world has allowed UN resolutions on Kashmir to sit gathering dust for decades, and that must end. The UK must match its words with action by raising human rights concerns at every diplomatic level, demanding the release of political prisoners, insisting on independent access for journalists and observers, and ensuring that any future trade negotiations with India contain binding human rights conditions. Trade cannot trump human rights, and economic deals must never come at the expense of the Kashmiri people's dignity, safety and democratic rights.

I have some simple questions for the Minister. First, do the Government and the Minister, who speaks for them, accept that the UK has a moral, historical and legal responsibility to support the full implementation of United Nations resolutions? Will he confirm that the UK Government's position is to support the Kashmiri

people's birthright to self-determination through a free and fair plebiscite? Will the Government commit to ensuring that future trade negotiations with India do not come at the expense of human rights, accountability or justice, as trade cannot be prioritised over the rights of people who have been oppressed for generations, or do we apply a different set of rules to Kashmir?

The key question that we, our Kashmiri constituents and everybody up and down the country who champions human rights are asking is: what is the Government's stance on whether this is a bilateral or an international issue? When political parties go out campaigning in our constituencies, big promises are made on issues such as Kashmir. Frankly, people are fed up with promises made by successive parties and Governments, all of which have gone on to betray the Kashmiri people.

Do the Government have the moral courage to stand by and defend their obligations under international law, to provide a case that moves away from the age-old wrong argument—that this is a bilateral issue—to one that recognises it as an issue deep-rooted in international law? That is the central question for the Government and the Minister. Along with hundreds of thousands of people watching, I would appreciate a straight answer.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Gentleman was generous in giving way, but he has eaten into the time available. Eight Members who wish to speak have submitted names: by my miserable mathematics, that works out at about four minutes a head. Anybody who has not put in their name ahead of the debate is unlikely to get called. I call Ayoub Khan.

9.51 am

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Thank you, Sir Roger. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for his passionate statement and for securing the debate.

We speak about a valley that has carried the weight of unfulfilled promises for generations. Kashmir is not a footnote in history; it is a living community whose rights were affirmed by the United Nations and yet remain suspended in political frost. According to UN resolutions, the people of Kashmir were promised the right to decide their own future through a plebiscite. That right has not expired with time; it still stands like an unopened door. As has been stated, we must be clear that Kashmir is not a bilateral quarrel, to be tucked quietly into the filing cabinets of the two states. It is an international issue rooted in international commitments.

Whether it wishes to or not, the United Kingdom sits inside the story. The partition that sculpted two nations also abandoned the Kashmiri people to a limbo not of their choosing. Our responsibility is not sentimental; it is legal, historical and moral. Economic partnerships must never become soft pillows under which we smother our legal obligations. Human rights abuses in Kashmir continue in the dark corners where accountability rarely reaches: sexual violence, disappearances, extrajudicial killings and detentions without trial or legal counsel.

Those are not allegations to be met with diplomatic murmurs; they demand consequences. The UK must move beyond symbolic gestures and consider targeted

sanctions, just as we have invoked international law in response to atrocities elsewhere, including the mass killing of Palestinians. Justice cannot be selective. The human reality along the line of control rarely makes headlines. Families divided by an invisible frontier, guarded by soldiers, live as if they are stitched to opposite pages of the same book, unable to meet, to mourn, to celebrate. That is unnecessary cruelty disguised as security.

I call on the Minister to reflect on one issue on which the Government can deliver: the transformation of the line of control from a barrier into a bridge. Let designated crossings be open for humanitarian movement and for families tied by history, culture and ancestry. The United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan can support and safeguard the crossings. Compassion can be supervised; it does not need to be suppressed.

The promise of a plebiscite is not a relic; it is the cornerstone of Kashmir's right to self-determination. The UK Government must recognise that this is no longer a bilateral matter, but a global obligation. When India, for example, threatens to undermine the Indus waters treaty through collective punishment, the UK should send a firm signal that the international community will not tolerate such tactics. We ask for action and not eloquence, for courage and not choreography, and above all, for the rights of the Kashmiri people to be finally honoured.

9.55 am

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing this important debate on such an important day. In south Asia, the long-drawn dispute over the state of Jammu and Kashmir remains a hanging fireball between two hostile nuclear neighbours, India and Pakistan, bringing human misery in the form of wars over the issue and continuing to threaten regional and global peace.

The international community has failed Kashmiris in Indian-occupied Kashmir for the last 78 years by not implementing the plebiscite determined from the United Nations Security Council resolution 47. Instead, for the past 78 years, we have seen the Indian Government take advantage of that failure by subjecting Kashmiris to unlawful killing, torture and multiple human rights violations.

Over half of my constituents in Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley are from south Asia, and the majority are Kashmiris. The treatment of Kashmiris in the Indian-occupied Kashmir has worried them for many years. As a born Kashmiri, seeing the level of brutality and oppression by the Indian-occupied Kashmiri forces is absolutely devastating. It is just as distressing that the Government are not taking matters into their own hands and pushing to make the plebiscite happen.

The United Kingdom now has to step up to right the wrongs against the Kashmiri people. United Nations resolution 47 not being implemented is unfinished business for this Government, considering that the resolution was determined when the United Kingdom was under a Labour Government. It was a Labour Government then and it must be a Labour Government now who help the Kashmiri people in their fight against the injustices caused by Modi and his Bharatiya Janata

[Tahir Ali]

party-led Government. The UK Government must now push for the long-overdue plebiscite and hold India accountable for the actions against Kashmiri people.

The silence of the international community cannot go on any longer and cannot be unrecognised. The world cannot afford to ignore the Kashmiri people any longer. It is a matter of humanity and justice. The goal for the Kashmiris has always been self-government and the right to self-determination. The right to self-determination is not a privilege; it is a fundamental human right, and the United Kingdom must do everything in its power to help Kashmiris towards that.

My role is not to take sides by being pro-Pakistani or anti-India. As a born Kashmiri, I believe that it is my duty to highlight the abuses of human rights violations to this House. Even after seven decades, people of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir are waiting for the right of self-determination promised by the United Nations. Notwithstanding over 25 United Nations resolutions calling for the solution to the dispute, India is still reluctant to grant Kashmiris the right of self-determination, and the world cannot stand by and allow that to happen.

The Scottish people were rightly afforded a referendum to express their desire for independence, and the UK had a referendum on remaining in or leaving the EU. Kashmiris are not begging for freedom, and neither will they beg for something that is their fundamental human right.

Seven decades later, the people of Kashmir are still waiting. This is not a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. The international community needs to take responsibility, and the British Government need to take responsibility. We should not have trade agreements with India while the abuses continue, because that will be seen as rewarding one of the biggest—if not the biggest—oppressors of human rights in the world.

10 am

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I will be brief, because a lot of colleagues want to get in. I compliment the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) on his superb presentation, which showed passion and knowledge of the issue.

The fundamental issue, of course, is the one that the hon. Gentleman hit on many times: this is not a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, but an international issue that comes from all that went on in the process of the decolonisation of British India in 1947-48. It was India that referred the issue to the United Nations for resolution, so India's constant denial that it is a UN matter fits rather strangely with Indian political history ever since that time.

The effects of the partition of Kashmir and the line of control have been beyond dramatic for both India and Pakistan. The partition encouraged massive levels of arms expenditure in both countries, doing enormous damage to the social infrastructure of both societies, in the '50s, '60s and ever since. It then encouraged both countries to develop nuclear weapons and to leave the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The inadequacy of British behaviour in the 1940s led to the militarisation of the whole of the subcontinent; the loss of thousands of

lives in successive conflicts between India and Pakistan, as well as with China; and, of course, the ever presence of nuclear weapons. If we look at India's and Pakistan's expenditure on defence compared with the expenditure that should be going on education and social needs, we begin to see the consequences of the issue.

Many people in this country feel very strongly about this issue. They are from Kashmir themselves, or they have grandparents, parents and many relatives in Kashmir; there is a very close relationship. They feel angry—the hon. Member for Bradford East put this well—that at every election, when party leaders happen to descend on Birmingham, Bradford or parts of London, they are given a note by their offices saying, "Say something about Kashmir, because it'll go down well." They do, and it does go down well, and that is the end of the story. Absolutely nothing has been done, by any Government, for a very long time to promote the idea that the people of Kashmir should be allowed to decide their own future.

That is not to say that there are not serious imperfections in both Azad Kashmir and Jammu Kashmir. The Indian military presence in Indian-occupied Kashmir is now the biggest it has been for a very long time. Successive laws have been passed, particularly by the Modi Government, to reduce the special status of Kashmir—which at least gave a nod towards the idea that it was an international dispute to be settled—and, essentially, to try to fully annex it.

I hope that, when the Minister replies, he will tell us that the Government recognise, first, that the issue should go to the UN, that the Government will push it at the UN as a permanent member of the Security Council, and that the Government will revisit the UN statements made in the 1940s and the many since. Secondly, I hope that the Government will do everything they can to encourage the self-determination of the people on both sides of the line of control in Kashmir. The idea that a beautiful place such as Kashmir, with such history and potential, should be divided and occupied by the military, and that resources go into the military and into what becomes a security state because of the tensions over the occupation of Kashmir is incomplete decolonisation. It is decolonisation that should have happened in the 1940s. Britain, because of its colonial history, has a very special responsibility to ensure that the people of Kashmir are able to decide their own future.

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** I am now setting a formal four-minute time limit on speeches.

10.5 am

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) on his continuing leadership on this issue, not just in this House but around the country.

It is quite disappointing. The last time we debated this subject in Westminster Hall was in March. I think about the many hours that we spend debating foreign policy issues in this place, and the fact that Kashmir does not often get the hearing it deserves and the prominence that it demands, given the issue's impact on

so many hundreds of thousands of our constituents throughout the country and its importance on the international stage.

I want to impress on the Minister, so that he hears it from all of us in this place, that the line that this is a bilateral issue is wearing thin. It really no longer holds water, not least because of China's increasing interest in the Aksai part of the region. If we are serious about taking a leadership role through our UN Security Council membership, saying that these issues are bilateral makes it look as if we are not interested and pushes it back to two peoples we know are looking for help and leadership on this issue.

What I find most disheartening is that I have many Kashmiri constituents and many wonderful Kashmiri local councillors, and they hold a hope in their heart that the resolution promised to them in 1948 would, at some point, become a reality that would allow them and their families in Kashmir that very basic and fundamental right of self-determination, but that light of hope is fading. Time is passing and the clock is ticking, and it seems we are getting further away from a peaceful resolution to allow for the self-determination of Kashmir than we have been at any point in my time in the House. That cannot be allowed to continue under any Government, but specifically not under a Labour Government, given that we not only have a fundamental commitment to the basic premises of human rights but put such things at the heart of what we do.

I want to press the Minister, and I hope he can provide some answers, because the issues around the UK's relationship with India are genuinely important. Since the previous debate in March, there have been three significant interactions with India: the trade deal delegation went out in October; Prime Minister Modi visited in July; and the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), visited India in November. Those are three high-level interactions with India.

Will the Minister confirm that in each of those interactions the issue of human rights in Kashmir was raised with Indian Government representatives? It would be wonderful if he is able to say what those representations were. I appreciate that he might not, but knowing that the Government are using every lever available to them, and every diplomatic and political opportunity, to continue to push for the plight of a group of people who are looking to us for leadership would give us some hope that the thing we all aspire to is not completely off the Government's agenda.

I want to press the Minister on something else. When I speak to representatives of the diaspora community in the UK, there is sometimes a feeling that direct engagement with the Government is not what it should be. There is a feeling that sometimes, as has been mentioned, the words "Kashmir" and "self-determination" are said, and there are tick points that have to be referenced in order to get through a meeting, but actually the commitment is becoming more skin deep.

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

**Gareth Snell:** No, I will not.

The Minister is a diligent man and takes these issues very seriously; will he outline what regular engagement there is between the Foreign Office and representatives of the Kashmiri diaspora in the UK? How are we making sure that the voices of people who have a deep and meaningful connection to Kashmir are heard at the highest levels of Government? Will he potentially commit to making statements, so that we do not have to do these things through Westminster Hall debates and the whole House can discuss these issues with the prominence that they deserve?

10.9 am

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing the debate.

I want to put on the record that the SNP fully supports the right of the people of Kashmir to exercise their fundamental human right to have a free, safe and legal vote on their own future. That vote has been mandated by numerous United Nations Security Council resolutions, and that vote must be not only free, fair and transparent, but conducted free from violence and intimidation, and under the auspices of the United Nations.

As we have heard from several Members, for almost 80 years the people of Kashmir have suffered persecution, oppression and injustice while the world has, at best, wrung its hands and issued ineffectual statements condemning India's actions or, at worst, shrugged, looked away and totally ignored their plight, allowing the world's largest military occupation to continue largely unchallenged and unquestioned. That decades-long military occupation has resulted in a catalogue of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, forced disappearance, arbitrary detention, media censorship, attacks on journalists and political activists, the targeting of human rights defenders and mass incarcerations. The security forces have also used rape and other forms of sexual violence as a way to control and punish Kashmiri civilians.

As we have heard, the ongoing repression took a sinister, unconstitutional twist in 2019, when the Indian Government unilaterally revoked articles 370 and 35A of the constitution. In the wake of those decisions, and in a move straight from the authoritarian playbook, the Indian Government acted swiftly to prevent the possibility of public protests by arbitrarily detaining hundreds of people, including journalists. They imposed a communications blackout and severe restrictions on the right of freedom of movement and assembly.

That move was not only unprecedented, unilateral and unconstitutional; it was a direct violation of international law and a flagrant breach of the commitments that India had made to Kashmiri people. It was a cynical and blatant attempt by the Modi Government to crush the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination once and for all. I echo the question posed by the hon. Member for Bradford East, when he asked where the international community has been for the last 78 years. Seven decades of issuing condemnatory statements denouncing India has made little or no difference to the lives of the people of Kashmir.

Whether we like it or not, the United Kingdom has a historical and moral obligation to take a lead in finding a just and lasting solution to the conflict. The UK

[Brendan O'Hara]

cannot pretend to be a neutral bystander, because history dictates that the UK is not. We need a resolution in line with the UN resolutions, and one that recognises the inalienable right of the Kashmiri people to determine their own future through a free, fair and transparent referendum. The voice of the Kashmiri people is the most important voice here, but I fear that, unfortunately, to date their voice seems to be the one that is being listened to least. That must not and cannot be allowed to continue.

10.13 am

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) on securing this vital debate and on his leadership. Many of us present spoke in this place about human rights violations back in March, so I am pleased that we are taking seriously the need to carry on a sustained conversation on this pressing matter.

The situation in Jammu and Kashmir was brought to my attention by a number of local councillors, including Majid Khan, Amjid Wazir, Javid Najmi and Waseem Akbar, and others such as Matloob Butt from Tunstall. I pay tribute to the community leaders who work tirelessly to raise awareness of a crisis that too often fails to make it into the media. When I spend time listening to members of our Kashmiri community, the message is so clear: our words have simply not been enough.

Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove is home to a large Kashmiri community who are deeply concerned about the conflict. Their family ties to the region are at once a huge source of pride and a profound concern. Many of my constituents spend their day-to-day lives knowing that their family members are experiencing ongoing restrictions on civil liberties, arbitrary detentions and a denial of meaningful political determination.

Over the past year, the Labour Government have demonstrated a renewed confidence on the world stage as a serious diplomatic power. It is my duty as a Member of Parliament to speak in solidarity with my constituents, and to urge our Labour Government to use their influence to take tangible action to promote self-determination in Jammu and Kashmir. Acknowledging the crisis is not enough. We can no longer pretend that conversation and debate alone can resolve this decades-long struggle. Now is the time to take seriously our role in resolving the conflict and take real, practical steps towards bringing about long-term peace and stability in the region.

10.15 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for bringing this issue to the House. He spoke to me last week, and I am happy to support him. Indeed, I think I have supported him every time he has brought this issue to the House, whether in Westminster Hall or the main Chamber.

The ongoing humanitarian and social situation in Kashmir has been sad to see. I support the very clear principle that the people of Kashmir should have the

right to determine their future. There is no doubt that the current situation in Kashmir is having a direct impact on that, and more must be done to support Kashmir and its people. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. He understands these things, and compassion and understanding are his forte. He will do all he can to ensure that his responses give us some reassurance.

Repressive policies continue to be carried out in Kashmir, including the use of arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings and other most serious abuses, including sexual abuse. Recently, in 2024 and 2025, there has been a reported rise in militant and counter-insurgency-related violence. This year, a report noted that between August '24 and July '25 there were some 53 militant attack-related incidents, in which some 42 civilians and 20 security personnel were killed.

Although Christians make up only 1% of the population in Kashmir, last week I took the opportunity to ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office about the significant impacts on faith in the region. There have been documented reports of harassment, threats and intimidation. Such incidents occur within a broader environment of religious tension that affects many communities, not only Christians. Will the Minister give us some reassurance that people in religious minorities are being protected?

This matters—it matters to you, Sir Roger, it matters to me, and it matters to all of us who hold these obligations—because all communities must feel safe, and self-determination depends on all communities feeling safe and politically represented. There is no point in self-determination if people cannot express their identity, which is at the very core of what the hon. Member for Bradford East referred to.

A genuine self-determination process thrives off leadership and free elections, which are the core needed for freedom, whereas Kashmir has witnessed the detention of political leaders, restrictions on civil liberty and interference in elections. Those things are entirely against the process of self-determination. This is where I believe that our Government, and our Minister, can be effective. There is also a role for the United Nations to play—maybe the Minister can give his thoughts on how that could work. The UN should be able to step in and provide leadership to help the process to get to a stage where self-determination can be supported and then put into action in an effective and clear way.

Self-determination in Kashmir is not only a principle of international law but a fundamental democratic right—the right of a people to shape their own political, social and cultural future. Until those essential foundations are restored and protected, the claim that Kashmir is experiencing or moving towards genuine self-determination cannot be sustained. For that reason, we must do more to get to the point where we can support the calls of the people of Kashmir for that. I look to the Minister for his commitment to give that support, to ensure that peace, faith and rights are protected in Kashmir.

10.19 am

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) on securing this debate, and on all the work he does with the APPG.

I speak on behalf of many of my constituents in Middlesbrough and Thornaby East, and particularly our vibrant Kashmiri community, who are deeply concerned by the escalating human rights crisis in Jammu and Kashmir. I draw attention to the latest UN assessment, issued on 24 November, which expresses grave concern about systematic human rights violations following the Pahalgam attack in April, which was an atrocity we all unequivocally condemn. The experts emphasise that respect for human rights is non-negotiable even when combating terrorism. Their findings are alarming: about 2,800 people including journalists and activists have been arrested under Indian national laws such as the public safety Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which have been made more stringent under Prime Minister Modi's BJP Government.

The UN reports torture, incommunicado detention, suspicious deaths and the targeting of Muslim and Kashmiri communities alongside punitive demolitions, forced evictions and arbitrary displacement, all in violation of India's Supreme Court rulings. Communication blackouts, blocked social media and restrictions on independent journalism have compounded the crisis. Beyond Kashmir, Kashmiri students in India face surveillance, hate speech is rising, and nearly 1,900 Muslims and Rohingya refugees have been expelled without due process.

The latest UN warning reflects a long-standing pattern of repression dating back to 1947. Since then, the region has endured wars, insurgencies, mass displacements and cycles of violent repression. The revocation of article 370 in 2019 further undermined autonomy, ushering in years of mass detentions and communication shutdowns.

The UN findings confirm what Kashmiris have long experienced: heavy-handed security measures, unchecked emergency powers and the silencing of dissent. The current ceasefire between India and Pakistan has not addressed the underlying issues. Suspended treaties and diplomatic contacts remain unresolved, and experts warn that without dialogue it is a question of not if, but when hostilities resume. Human Rights Watch highlights the wider impact of hostilities including hate speech, repression of peaceful critics and communal polarisation, echoing decades of Kashmir's troubled history.

The UK cannot resolve the conflict, but we cannot be indifferent to it—and we certainly should not be hiding behind the bilateral policy abrogation. We should press the Indian Government to end arbitrary detentions, repeal draconian laws and allow independent investigations. We should encourage both India and Pakistan to avoid actions that escalate tensions, and create space for dialogue. Above all, the voices and the rights of the Kashmiri people must be central to any peace process. The world is watching, and so are my constituents. It is our moral duty to act, uphold human rights and ensure that Kashmiri voices are heard.

10.22 am

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) spoke with great passion, but it is a passion that I fear clouded his recollection of some of the history. Under the Indian Independence Act 1947, the rulers of each of the princely states had the responsibility to choose between the two emergent nations, and Kashmir's ruler Maharaja Hari Singh had to decide whether to accede to India or

to Pakistan. As he was doing so, Pakistan's militia and troops invaded the part of Kashmir now known as Azad Kashmir. He then signed the legal instrument of accession to the dominion of India. That clarified the position of Kashmir in international law: Kashmir became a part of India.

It is also clear that Pakistan was the primary aggressor in the dispute. On 1 January 1948, India referred the situation to the UN Security Council. After much deliberation, the United Nations passed resolution 47, which my hon. Friend adverted to. However, again he showed a selective memory, because in fact the plebiscite had the precondition that Pakistan should secure the withdrawal of all its tribesmen and troops and Pakistani nationals from occupied Kashmir and put an end to the fighting in the state. That never happened, so the plebiscite that would have followed did not follow either.

The subject of this debate is the issue of self-determination, so I propose to examine the total lack of self-determination that the Kashmiri people actually have in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. As a constitutional entity, so-called Azad Kashmir, which is better known as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, is not just strange but unique. It has been given the trappings of a country with a President, Prime Minister and even a Legislative Assembly, but it is neither a country with its own sovereignty nor a province with its own clearly defined devolved authority from the national Government of Pakistan.

Under section 56 of the AJK interim constitution of 1974, the Pakistan Government can dismiss any elected Government in AJK, irrespective of the support they might have in the Legislative Assembly—no respect there, then, for self-determination. Strangely enough for an entity that purports to be a country, the constitution bars anyone from public office and prohibits them from participating in politics unless they publicly support the principle of Kashmir acceding to Pakistan. Imagine that—a country whose politicians can be politicians only if they say they do not want to be a country.

It will therefore come as little surprise to hon. Members when I say that all the major civil and police administrative positions in AJK are held by Pakistani civil and military officers. It may also come as no surprise to find that the putative country has no representation in the Parliament of Pakistan. The territory's local representatives are excluded from not just Pakistan's Parliament but even those Pakistani bodies that negotiate inter-provincial resource allocation or federal taxes—so much for “no taxation without representation”.

It is not a country. It is not a province. It is not a state. It is a satrapy. Were I not a British MP conscious of the fact that much of this mess is a legacy of our colonial past in the region, I might also describe it as a prize of war. But then, of course, that is precisely what Pakistan-occupied Kashmir is: a territory taken by force, not permitted even the freedoms of other Pakistani citizens—

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Order. Mr Mohamed, you have three minutes.

10.27 am

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing this debate. For some, Kashmir is seen as a geopolitical flashpoint, but for thousands of people in

[Iqbal Mohamed]

my constituency and across the UK, it is something far more personal and intimate. It is a place where their parents were born, the place where their children's grandparents still live and the place they call home, even from thousands of miles away.

My office has heard from many families who were gripped by fear as the recent violence escalated. One article described the situation bluntly:

"We were not able to step outside of our homes because of the intensity of firing from both sides. We could only hear loud bangs from inside."

Others shared the heartbreak of losing relatives in the clashes, and several wrote to me terrified because their elderly parents were visiting during the violence and became stranded, unable to return safely. These are not distant political events; they are lived experiences for people I represent.

The human rights violations that we have heard about from Members on both sides of the Chamber do not exist in isolation. The root causes go back decades to the 1947 partition and the unresolved question of Kashmir's political status, with incursions and human rights abuses from both the Indian side and the Pakistani side—a legacy of imperial decision making that continues to shape instability today. The violence is escalating, and the reports that India intends to impose Israel-style policies in Kashmir—demographic engineering, land dispossession and silencing of activists—only deepen the urgency.

The right to self-determination is not optional. It is enshrined in UN Security Council resolutions 47 and 51. For 77 years, this promise has been denied. As a permanent member of the Security Council and a nation that champions democracy and human rights, the UK must act. I urge the Government to lead on human rights, and demand and facilitate independent investigations into atrocities on both sides of the line of control; to push for and facilitate dialogue, and to use our diplomatic influence to bring India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri representatives around the negotiating table; to support and enforce the 18 UN resolutions since 1947, none of which has been fully implemented, and especially advocate for a free and fair plebiscite; and to provide humanitarian support as required to protect civilian life on both sides of the line of control.

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** I turn to the Front-Bench spokespeople. Mr Mathew, you have no more than 10 minutes.

10.30 am

**Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing this debate, and I thank all Members who have spoken so far with such eloquence, passion and knowledge.

The Liberal Democrats are deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir. This is not a new conflict, but a particularly long and devastating one that affects many in the UK, particularly those in communities with strong personal ties to the region. We have all learned from other long-running conflicts, such as in the middle

east, that unresolved disputes can lead to immense suffering. Now, in the season of good will, the UK Government must play an active role in advocating for peace and reconciliation between India and Pakistan by hosting a peace conference that includes the representatives of the area's population, including AJK. We urge both Governments to engage in a peace process that delivers a sustainable solution. The UK should work with the international community to provide diplomatic support for a just and lasting settlement.

The region remains one of the most militarised in the world, with widespread allegations of suppression and discrimination. With the UN reporting serious human rights abuses in Jammu and Kashmir in 2018 and 2019, and the revocation of article 370 in 2019, the subsequent restrictions on Kashmiri rights are deeply disturbing. When the world is on the brink of so many disasters, let us see peace in Jammu and Kashmir, a peace conference held, and a referendum organised. The UK must use its influence to support UN inspections and engagements in Kashmir so the people of the area can prosper in peace.

The Liberal Democrats believe in defending human rights and equality globally; we think that UK foreign policy should promote those values internationally. The UK must reverse its cuts to official development assistance and ensure that aid focuses on poverty and human rights, and indeed on ending wars. Where better to do that than in Jammu and Kashmir by utilising the soft power of our aid programme?

The Kashmir crisis is a long-standing issue that cannot be ignored. The UK must use its diplomatic channels to promote peace, hold human rights violators accountable and support those affected by the conflict. More importantly, it must see that those who stand with guns on both sides of this long-standing conflict do the same. We stand for a peaceful, just and humanitarian approach to resolving conflict. We also say, in all humility, humanity and love: let us put this conflict in the bin of history and remind both sides that, in the words of the late Jo Cox, there is so much more that unites us than divides us.

Happy Christmas, everyone. Let's hope it's a good one without any tears.

10.33 am

**Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I know this is a matter in which the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) has long taken an interest, as have many hon. Members here today. I thank him for securing this debate. Although we might not agree on the way forward to finding a resolution, it is undeniable that he spoke with passion and clear personal conviction. I thank him for his contribution, even though he might not thank me for mine. However, I have some questions for the Minister that he will be happy with, even if we might be looking for different answers.

I also thank the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for his contribution, which provided a clear and concise history and a reminder of the complex and confrontational timeline of events. It was helpful context and brought some balance to the debate.

I note the work of my colleagues, the hon. Members for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Sri Lanka,

I know that being an officer of a country-related APPG is no small task. The hon. Members' commitment to this area deserves recognition.

The position of His Majesty's loyal Opposition on Kashmir remains as it did when we were in government. It has been the long-standing position of the United Kingdom that it must be for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution on Kashmir. It is not appropriate for the UK to prescribe solutions. We are respectful of the governance of those two Commonwealth countries and are very conscious of history.

Of course, we have a strong interest in regional stability and peace, so it is right that all British Governments engage to encourage both India and Pakistan into dialogue to find a lasting diplomatic solution. Clearly, we never want to see inflamed tensions continue between the two. Can the Minister confirm that this remains the UK Government's position? What recent diplomatic efforts have the Government made on that front?

This has been a very difficult year in the region with the murderous, violent terrorism that took place in April, which is sadly part of a long-standing pattern of attacks on civilians and visitors to the region and minority communities. The House will be well aware of the consequences that this act of terrorism subsequently triggered across the border region. I know this period has also been hard for the diaspora communities, particularly those in the UK. That all underscores the importance of tackling terrorism and fostering peace and stability.

Can the Minister update the House on what practical steps the Government have taken on the security front since the spring? How will they continue to try to ease tensions between India and Pakistan? It would be helpful to know what recent discussions the Minister has had to this end with counterparts from our key allies. What measures are the Government taking to prevent scenarios that could cause tensions to escalate among communities in the UK?

The House will be well aware of the economic challenges in the region, including those particular to Pakistan. What steps are the Government taking to encourage steps to address the economic pressures in Kashmir, including reforms to ensure sustainable growth? Can the Minister set out the Government's position on official development assistance in Kashmir? Can he also tell us what assessment he has made of the level of investment by China in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, what the investment pipeline looks like, and China's long-term perspective and goals when it comes to the region?

This issue is for India and Pakistan. It is not for the House or this Government to prescribe actions to either of those Governments. What should motivate us all is a peaceful vision where Kashmiris enjoy stability and prosperity.

10.38 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. The fact that this is the fourth debate on Kashmir this year tells its own story; it shows the strength of feeling in this House and among our constituents. With your permission, Sir Roger, I will try

to make a little progress before taking interventions, of which I suspect there will be many, so I can leave some time for my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who made a powerful speech and, I am sure, wishes to make some concluding remarks.

As the whole House knows, Kashmir is one of the most sensitive and enduring challenges in south Asia. It is a flashpoint between two nuclear-armed states and a place where history, identity and geopolitics collide. As both my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford East and for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) demonstrate, even the history of the '40s remains a fraught question in this House and many other places. The dispute has endured for nearly eight decades, and it defines the security landscape of south Asia. As we have seen this year, the stakes are incredibly high, and miscalculation or escalation could have consequences far beyond south Asia. That is why Britain, while maintaining a neutral stance, urges dialogue and respect for human rights.

We also encourage restraint, and we are working with our international partners to support peace and stability in south Asia. I recognise that Kashmir is not just a territorial dispute, but a question of identity, rights and aspirations for millions of people. It is a matter that resonates deeply here in the UK, given our historical ties and the presence of vibrant British Pakistani and British Indian communities—I am proud to be joined this morning by representatives of those communities. About 1.6 million British Pakistanis and 1.8 million British Indians live here, many of whom have roots in Kashmir.

I reaffirm the UK Government's long-standing position on Kashmir, which is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. That principle is central to our approach, and it reflects our belief in diplomacy and our respect for human rights.

**Gareth Snell:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Falconer:** I will make a brief comment on the important points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) in relation to the UN statement of 24 November on alleged human rights abuses in Indian-administered Kashmir. The British Government take such statements seriously and are continuing to monitor the situation in Kashmir. We are clear about the importance of respecting human rights, and we wish to see any remaining restrictions lifted as soon as possible and any remaining political detainees released.

**Gareth Snell:** I thank the Minister for the tone in which he is responding. He says that the UK Government's position is that this is a matter for India and Pakistan, but that we encourage dialogue. Will he set out what practical steps the Government are taking to ensure that dialogue happens? What is the FCDO tangibly doing, short of determining an outcome, to get India and Pakistan to come to a conclusion?

**Mr Falconer:** As the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden) rightly said, this has clearly been a year of incredible tension between India and Pakistan. We have used our relationships with both countries, both of which are friends and have long-standing diplomatic, historical and political connections with the UK, to try

[Mr Falconer]

to ensure dialogue. It is clear from press reporting, let alone diplomatic reporting, that the tensions between those two countries continue.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** What plans do the UK Government have to take the issue to the UN? We must ensure the UN is seized of the issue in a way that it has not been. It has obviously tried to bring about a ceasefire when there has been conflict between India and Pakistan, but that is not enough; there has to be a fundamental resolution to the basic problem, which is the lack of a right to self-determination for the people of Kashmir.

**Mr Falconer:** As I was explaining to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), we talk directly to both India and Pakistan. As the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) knows, there is strong disagreement between India and Pakistan about whether this issue should return to the United Nations. As my hon. Friends the Members for Brent West and for Bradford East noted, at different times India and Pakistan have respectively thought UN involvement was helpful or not helpful. I do not wish to take a view this morning about whether a further reference to the United Nations is useful at this time, but it is critical in 2025 and into 2026 that there is dialogue between India and Pakistan. We have seen the extent of the pressure when dialogue breaks down.

**Barry Gardiner:** I am very grateful to the Minister for taking all these interventions. Does he agree that the cross-border terrorism—most of the terrorist camps are based in Azad Kashmir—is specifically designed to engender a crackdown on human rights in Jammu and Kashmir and to foment tension? Therefore, one of the things that his Government could do is press the Government of Pakistan to close those terrorist camps. We know where they are: the South Asia Terrorism Portal records 42 identified terrorist training camps located in Pakistan, and 21 located in Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. That report was updated in September.

**Mr Falconer:** The House will appreciate that I will be moderately circumspect on security questions in relation to the region, but clearly there was an abominable terrorist attack in May, and there continue to be terrorist attacks in Pakistan week in, week out—not, we suspect, related to Kashmir, but related to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and ongoing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is clearly a blight on south Asia that so many countries in the region believe their neighbours are hosting terrorists who threaten them. The UK seeks to help on this issue. It is vital, and it has clearly been a cause of the most recent breakdown in relations.

**Tahir Ali:** In 2020, our delegation from the APPG on Kashmir was refused entry to Indian-occupied Kashmir, and we were given full, free and unfettered access to the side of Kashmir administered by Pakistan. If India has nothing to hide, why does it not allow international and United Nations observers unfettered access to occupied Kashmir on the Indian side?

**Mr Falconer:** As I have said in other contexts, it is valuable for British MPs to be able to travel across the world to see the situations on which we report, but

British travel advice in relation to Indian-administered Kashmir, as well as in relation to the other side of the line of control, is complex. I encourage people, including MPs, to look at that advice before they travel. I have already helped colleagues who have got themselves into scrapes in 2025, so I would like people to warn me in advance.

**Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind):** The situation is exactly the same in respect of journalists. Does the Minister agree that journalists must always be allowed access to every part of the world so they can truly document the position, whether in respect of alleged terrorist camps or otherwise?

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Member came into the Chamber very late indeed. I call the Minister.

**Mr Falconer:** It is, of course, important that journalists can do their jobs across the world. I take from your tone, Sir Roger, a renewed clarion call to make a bit more progress before taking further interventions.

We do not advocate a specific mechanism for self-determination, but we support efforts that allow Kashmiris to shape their future. I hear colleagues' desire that British officials and Ministers be available to the very significant Kashmiri diaspora. I have sought this year to engage directly, including in Birmingham in June. If MPs would like me to meet their constituents in relation to these issues, I would be very happy to do so. I remind colleagues that I am the Minister with responsibility for Pakistan, and that the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) has responsibility for India. I am sure we would both be prepared to do diaspora engagements, where appropriate. Some of these questions are sensitive—in some areas, very sensitive—and I am always happy to engage on them with Members across the House. I recognise how deeply and personally they are felt, and how it is sometimes easier to have such conversations away from the *Hansard* record.

The UK Government stand firm in our commitment to human rights, peace and stability. We believe that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting solution to the situation in Kashmir, which must take into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. We will continue to encourage dialogue, condemn violence and support efforts that uphold dignity and human rights for all.

**Jim Shannon:** I made a specific request in relation to the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in Kashmir. What has been done to assist them?

**Mr Falconer:** I can confirm to the hon. Member that we make representations to both the Indian and Pakistani Governments on human rights, and the protection of minorities on both sides of the line of control, and indeed in both countries, is an important issue for the UK.

We want to see a future in which both countries enjoy peaceful relations, the Kashmiri people can live with dignity and security, and south Asia can thrive as a region of stability, growth and opportunity.

10.49 am

**Imran Hussain:** I thank hon. Members for their excellent contributions. The courage and conviction with which many have spoken will send one message to the British Kashmiri community. There are more than a million British Kashmiris—I am surprised the Minister failed to acknowledge that number. Listening to this debate will be not only more than a million British Kashmiris, but also all those who champion human rights. This issue is not isolated to Kashmiris around the world; it is an issue with international law and human rights at its heart.

**Ayoub Khan:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Imran Hussain:** I am not sure I am able to give way. Am I able to, Sir Roger?

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Yes, you are able to give way.

**Ayoub Khan:** We have constantly heard that this is a bilateral issue. The existence of UN resolutions clearly suggests it is not a bilateral but an international issue. Does the hon. Member agree?

**Imran Hussain:** I absolutely agree. That has been the central theme throughout this debate, and it continues to be the most pressing matter. I will come back to that point, but I first want to pay tribute to the hon. Members who have spoken in the debate. Those listening to the debate will at least know there continues to be hope, because there are Members of Parliament who have the moral conviction to stand on the right side and ensure voices of justice and of their constituents continue to be heard.

I am disappointed but also grateful to the Minister. He has given me the most time ever to sum up—10 whole minutes. But equally, that shows how little he said. That is not personal to the Minister, because he is following the Government line. As we heard from the Opposition as well, these lines are decades old. Frankly, just because lines are decades old does not make them right. We not only lack the moral courage required by the situation, but our silence continues to make us complicit.

**Barry Gardiner:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Imran Hussain:** No. My hon. Friend said many completely baseless things and therefore I will not give him any more time.

At the heart of the issue is the fundamental right of a people—promised to them under international law and supported by the international community at that time—for which they have had to wait decade after decade. The Minister was asked how the Government could contribute to making India and Pakistan move towards dialogue. Tragically, that is not possible unless the Government first acknowledge that it is not a bilateral but an international issue. Without acknowledging that, we are unable to take the matter to the UN, because that is not our position.

Not once did the Minister even confirm our support for United Nations resolutions. It is a strange state of affairs when we cannot stand in this House and say, “Actually, we support United Nations resolutions.” It is not the first time; tragically, we see more and more situations where the international rules-based order is under serious threat. We cannot pick and choose where

we say international law should apply. The double standards are now becoming so plain and bare, to be seen by all people. There may well have been a time when that could have been justified because people did not have social media and those truths were not exposed, and perhaps people and Governments could get away with it. That is simply not true now.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Imran Hussain:** I will take one or two interventions, but then I want to use the last two minutes to close this debate.

**Andy McDonald:** Can my hon. Friend help me with this conundrum? It has been suggested that somebody in a monarchical position in years past has decided to cede a territory to one country or another. Would that not therefore deny the people of that territory the right to self-determination? I am curious; I wonder what would happen in this country if there were an issue between France and Ireland, and yet the British people were not allowed the right to self-determination. Would that make sense?

**Imran Hussain:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right—the whole thing is absurd.

**Tahir Ali:** Many of my constituents would like this question answered: if Kashmir is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, does that bilateralism then apply to Ukraine and Russia or to Palestine and Israel? If not, then why does bilateralism apply just to Kashmir?

**Imran Hussain:** My hon. Friend makes the point that I was coming to about the international picture at the moment. Frankly, it continues to expose time and again the absolute double standards and disrespect for international law, along with the need to reform the United Nations from its current format. Furthermore, it continues to expose the absolute denial to accept certain injustices in the world.

**Mr Falconer:** I am rather shocked by the discourtesy of giving my hon. Friend 10 minutes, only for him to claim that it was because I did not have enough speech to give. I am very happy to provide further remarks on the points that my hon. Friend raises.

The question of whether this is a situation of interest to India and Pakistan seems to me inarguable—it was inarguable in the 1940s, just as it is inarguable in the 2020s. One of my colleagues mentioned the build-up of military forces in the region. Clearly, we must attend to the world as it is and to conflicts as we have seen them in 2025. I want to reassure my hon. Friend, because I know he pays close attention to these issues: we do not take a two-sides approach to international law. We remain deeply and profoundly committed to it, but we also believe in diplomacy. It is inarguable that in south Asia diplomacy between India and Pakistan is necessary. We want to see more of it. Kashmir has been disputed for such a very long time; no plausible analyst in the entire world would believe that the issue is resolvable without the involvement of those two states.

I am sad that my hon. Friend felt that, in my speech, I was not attending to some of the core questions of the conflict. I reassure him that, just as during my engagements with Pakistan and my colleagues’ engagements with India, we are very conscious of the diplomacy.

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Final remarks, Mr Hussain.

**Imran Hussain:** I am grateful to the Minister. The point that I made, and make again, is that he did not address the four very simple questions that I put to him.

In closing, I again thank all the hon. Members who have spoken passionately and have again shown the Kashmiri community and others that they have a voice in this place. We may not get the response from the Government, but there is an early-day motion that now has the support of over 40 Members from different parties. Later today I will also be giving the Prime Minister a letter signed by over 50 parliamentarians from across the parties. The voice of Kashmiris will never be silenced as long as I am in this place.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Government support for self-determination in Kashmir.

## Small-scale Fracking Ban

11 am

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** I now call Alison Hume to move the motion and I shall then call the Minister to respond. I have been given no notice of any other speeches with prior permission, so no other Member will be permitted to participate other than through an intervention. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates.

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of banning small-scale fracking operation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. It is also a pleasure to lead a debate on banning small-scale fracking—an issue that I have campaigned on since I was elected MP for Scarborough and Whitby. It has huge local, national and international significance.

The issue of small-scale fracking first came to my attention when Europa Oil & Gas applied to explore for gas at Burniston, just outside the picturesque North York Moors. The plans, published in full in March, include erecting a 38-metre-high drilling rig and proposals to carry out small-scale hydraulic fracturing, which Europa calls “proppant squeeze”. The planning application is due to be heard by North Yorkshire council’s strategic planning committee imminently, making this debate extremely timely.

**Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Like her, I have fought against fracking for years, but Reform UK wants to drill into our beautiful countryside in York Outer, destroying towns and villages and allowing house prices to plummet in the process. They want to drill into and vandalise our beautiful York and North Yorkshire countryside. Does my hon. Friend agree that Reform poses a danger, that it would totally ruin York Outer and Scarborough and Whitby, and that it must be stopped?

**Alison Hume:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend that Reform’s plans are a threat to our beautiful countryside, and our constituents do not want them.

Europa’s plans have been widely opposed by the local community. In response, campaigners launched a petition that has garnered more than 10,000 signatories calling for a Government ban on small-scale fracking. Fracking—short for “hydraulic fracturing”—is the process of injecting fluid at high pressure into an underground rock formation to release the gas or oil inside.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. The Government must commit to ensuring that local people have the final say. In terms of buying property or businesses in a certain area, fracking should be unable to go ahead without the say-so of the entire local community and the Government must abide by that decision. Does the hon. Lady agree?

**Alison Hume:** I completely agree with the hon. Member. We must listen to our local communities, who are telling us loud and clear that they do not want fracking on their back door, in their beautiful fields or in the countryside.

Since 2019, there has been a moratorium on fracking across the UK—a decision taken after Lancashire was rocked by an earthquake caused by fracking operations at Preston New Road. However, not all forms of fracking are currently covered by the moratorium. The Petroleum Act 1998 uses a fluid-based definition for fracking. Section 4B(1)(b) describes it as

“the injection of...more than 1,000 cubic metres of fluid at each stage, or expected stage, of the hydraulic fracturing, or...more than 10,000 cubic metres of fluid in total.”

The volume of liquid proposed for the Burniston site is under that threshold, so despite the intent of the plans being exactly the same—to explore for and to extract gas by injecting a substance into the rock at pressure to cause it to fracture—the current legislation actually allows Europa to do exactly what the moratorium should be there to block. It is clear that the volume-based definition has created a legal loophole for oil and gas companies to evade the Government’s ban on fracking and proceed to do so under a different name—in this case, “proppant squeeze”.

The Burniston application is not the first time that planning permission has been sought in England for proppant squeeze. Between 2016 and 2019, Egdon Resources applied several times and was eventually granted planning permission for a proppant squeeze in north Lincolnshire, with a hydraulic fracture plan approved in May 2021. In November 2024 another company, Rathlin Energy, also applied to the Environment Agency for permission to carry out similar work at West Newton, an oil and gas site in East Yorkshire.

There is no evidence that the volume of fluid used can accurately determine the risk of seismic events. However, the volume of fluid proposed for use at the Burniston site in my constituency surpasses the highest daily fluid amount in the week leading up to the 2019 earthquake that triggered the existing moratorium. Seismologists have warned that our country’s geology responds unpredictably to even small injections, underscoring that any fracking has risk, regardless of fluid volume.

**John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab):** Parts of Derbyshire are threatened by fracking because they fall within the Bowland-Hodder basin. We have a complex limestone geography, historical mine workings and natural cave systems. Fracking could undermine sub-surface stability and cause earthquakes, as it has elsewhere. Reform is promising to end the moratorium on fracking. That threatens the character of our natural landscapes and would further pollute our rivers. The last time I looked, we were in the middle of a climate emergency and the last thing that we need is more fossil fuels. Does my hon. Friend agree that a national ban on all types of fracking is the only way to protect our landscapes and environment?

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Order. I will place this on the record: Mr Speaker deprecates prepared interventions. Interventions are supposed to be a comment on what is being said at the time. I understand that even Members from areas as far from Yorkshire and Derbyshire as Northern Ireland have constituency interests in this topic, but what you say really must relate to the debate.

**Alison Hume:** Thank you, Sir Roger. I appreciate your advice. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) for his intervention; he

makes a good point that our English countryside, wherever it is, needs to be protected. The only way to do that is to ban all forms of fracking.

A 2020 summary of the findings of studies commissioned by what was then the Oil and Gas Authority into seismicity resulting from the operations at Preston New Road emphasised that

“it is not yet possible to accurately predict the seismic response to hydraulic fracturing, if any, in relation to variables such as site characteristics, fluid volume, rate or pressure. Where induced seismicity has occurred, mitigation measures have shown only limited success, and there can only be low confidence in their effectiveness currently.”

In other words, all forms of fracking carry significant risk in relation to seismicity, irrelevant of the volume of liquid proposed.

Other environmental concerns with fracking remain; they are exactly the same for proppant squeeze: potential groundwater contamination from methane migration or the chemicals in frack fluid, methane leaks, flaring and air pollution. Of course, as hon. Members have already drawn attention to, fracking at any volume also leads to more greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to climate change. Clearly, the regulatory loopholes around fluid volume are arbitrary and unhelpful. Proppant squeeze carries the same intent and the same risks as higher-volume fracking. It is fracking in all but name.

It is the legal opinion of Estelle Dehon KC that the wording of the Petroleum Act 1998 should be changed to include proppant squeeze. She writes that the current definition has

“caused confusion and proved difficult to apply”,

and instead suggests adopting “a simple, broad definition”, which

“avoids imposing unscientific volume or rock-formation-based criteria, and thus captures both high and low volume hydraulic fracturing”.

Ms Dehon highlights that many jurisdictions have adopted a broad approach, particularly countries in Europe and Latin America, and multiple US states, where fracking and extractive industries are significant. In her view, and mine, that shows that such a definition is workable. Given the arguments presented today, could the Minister confirm that he will review the current definition of fracking to include those applications for lower volumes of fluid?

At the Labour party conference this year, I was thrilled to hear the Secretary of State confirm that he wanted to legislate at the earliest opportunity to ban fracking for shale gas permanently in England. I was glad to see on 26 November the Government bringing forward new measures in the North sea future plan to implement our manifesto commitments to manage existing oil and gas fields for their lifespans, and not to issue new licences to explore new fields. That is welcome news from a Labour Government committed to showing global climate leadership.

However, I would argue that the proposed ban on fracking is not permanent and does not go far enough. There remain a total of 66 oil and gas licences in England, many of them unused. Under current plans, oil and gas companies will continue to apply for planning permission where there are existing licences and, with the loophole in place enabling companies to propose

[Alison Hume]

fracking projects at smaller fluid volumes, they may be able to carry out the exact operations that the Government are attempting to outlaw.

As I have laid out today, if the Government want to ban fracking, they must be comprehensive and must amend the definition of fracking to include smaller-scale volumes of fracking. They must also deal with the issue of existing licences by introducing a ban on granting planning permission for fracking.

**Mr Charters:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On these planning applications, we must incorporate the fact that fracking leads to water scarcity—and our region has had a hosepipe ban that has only recently been lifted. Would my hon. Friend agree that, when it comes to these planning applications, we must understand the impacts on water scarcity?

**Alison Hume:** I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent intervention. Indeed, the hosepipe ban in Yorkshire has brought to everybody's attention that our water is precious and must not be contaminated by any form of fracking.

There are various ways that the Government could amend legislation to prevent oil and gas companies from applying for new permission to frack. If I may, there are two main changes that I would like the Minister to consider. First, we could consider revoking the current provisions in the Petroleum Act 1998 and the Infrastructure Act 2015 and replacing them with a flat prohibition either on the grant of any licences permitting fracking or on any person carrying out fracking. Secondly, might he consider amending the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to include a general ban, ensuring that no application for planning permission that uses the technique of fracking may be granted by a local planning authority or by the Secretary of State?

More broadly, this Government are committed to restoring the UK's position as a global leader when it comes to climate action; among various pledges, we have committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to achieving net zero by 2050. Banning all fracking operations to prevent damaging greenhouse gas emissions would ensure that this policy is in line with our climate commitments. Would the Minister consider introducing a comprehensive ban on fracking so that Government policy fully reflects those obligations?

When it comes to fracking, the case is clear: so-called small-scale fracking, or proppant squeeze, is no different in intent or risk than larger-scale operations; it can lead to earthquakes and environmental damage, and contributes to climate change. The loopholes that exist in current legislation are arbitrary, unscientific, and undermine both the Government's moratorium and any future ban on fracking.

The moratorium signalled a fundamental change in the UK, shifting focus on to energy alternatives; a total ban will encourage investment in renewable energy, promote green jobs and reinforce public trust in the Government's green growth mission. If this Government want our legislation to be clear and consistent, and want to safeguard the national environment, listen to the concerns in all our communities and meet our climate commitments, they must introduce a comprehensive ban on fracking based on intent and process, and which disregards fluid volumes.

Today, I urge the Minister to act to ban all fracking and I call on the Government to close the loopholes in the Petroleum Act 1998 by changing the definition of fracking to include small-scale fracking and to amend legislation to prevent new planning applications under existing licences. By introducing those changes, this Government can demonstrate deeds, not words on their commitment to a total ban on fracking, and we can ensure that policy is truly aligned to our climate obligations. I thank those hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, and look forward to the Minister's comments.

11.15 am

**The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks):** It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) for securing this debate, for her fantastic speech and for all her campaigning on this issue and many others since she was elected. She is a fantastic champion for her community. I also thank her for all the conversations we have had on this issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby noted the importance of this Government's climate commitments. I think it is useful to restate those for context. In the face of a fractured consensus—pardon the pun—this Government are absolutely committed to tackling the climate emergency. That is why our clean power mission and everything we are doing in Government is about getting us off the rollercoaster of fossil fuels as quickly as possible. It also means managing the role that oil and gas plays in the country at the moment.

Just a fortnight ago we published our response to the consultation on the future of the North sea—our “North Sea Future Plan”—which includes not just the future actions in the North sea, but our approach to the onshore oil and gas sector. We have set an ambitious and pragmatic approach to cease new oil and gas licensing and explore new offshore and onshore fields while managing existing fields for their lifespan; I will come back to that point later. That is all about helping manage our transition from fossil fuels—what we have to do for climate change—but also how we invest in what comes next and the clean energy that will bring down people's bills and deliver our energy security.

I have listened closely to the points made by my hon. Friend in today's debate, and in the correspondence that I have had with her and our other meetings. My Department has also been aware of these concerns through correspondence from other Members in this place and the recent e-petition that was considered. I want to be clear on this Government's position towards hydraulic fracturing—both high-volume hydraulic fracturing for shale gas and more conventional low-volume hydraulic fracturing.

Regarding high-volume fracturing for shale gas, the Government have committed to end fracking for good, as my hon. Friend noted. On 1 October, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced legislation that will be introduced soon to end new onshore oil and gas licensing in England, including new licences that could be used for high-volume hydraulic fracturing for shale gas, which is commonly understood as fracking.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) made a powerful point about our opponents in this debate. The idea put forward by Reform that we should not only not continue with our moratorium, but

embrace fracking as a form of energy and start doing it all across the country, goes into the bucket with so many of their policies that are backward, dangerous and ill-conceived. We will absolutely reject that approach and we will legislate to make sure that our commitment will stand in the statute books for the future.

There is already an effective moratorium on high-volume hydraulic fracturing for shale gas—fracking—in England, and that will continue to apply to all existing licences. That is in place because of concerns that were raised around the prediction and management of induced seismicity in that type of fracturing. There are similar restrictions in place in other parts of the UK; taken together, that existing moratorium for currently licensed fields and the end of licensing for new fields means that no fracking for shale gas takes place anywhere in the country, and no new licences will be granted that could be used for that in the future.

The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby is about low-volume hydraulic fracturing, which has been the focus of today's debate. I want to be clear that this Government make policy based on evidence. Although I have listened very closely to her points today and in the past, the evidence base is not there at the moment to suggest that low-volume hydraulic fracturing activities have the same associated risks as fracking for shale gas.

A small number of those activities take place—including, for example, proppant squeezes at volumes lower than the thresholds for fracking generally, as currently defined in legislation. The small number of those activities are not currently in scope of the effective moratorium that is in place. She rightly asked whether I would consider a review of that definition; of course, I keep all these things under review, and I am very happy to continue to review new evidence as it comes forward, but any change has to be based on evidence. We have to see additional evidence to what we have reviewed on the definition, but that is not there at the moment.

Low-volume hydraulic fracturing activities under existing licences take place in the context of conventional oil and gas operations. They require a range of permissions and consents before they can be undertaken, which include planning permission from the relevant local authorities and the necessary permits and consents from the North Sea Transition Authority, the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive. That system ensures that operations meet the safety and environmental standards and obligations set out in law, and activities will be approved only if each of those stages is positively completed.

My hon. Friend noted the point about existing licences, and I want to reiterate what our manifesto said. There were two parts to that commitment: we said that we

would not issue new licences to explore new fields—we will legislate for that soon—but that we would not revoke existing licences. It is the Government's position that existing licences are in place and we do not intend to rescind them.

This is clearly a complex issue. I understand, as my hon. Friend has raised today, that there are real concerns from communities about any of these kinds of projects. Although the evidence base is important for us to make decisions here, I do not discount for a second the concerns that communities have. I want to hear those concerns from across the country. I remain very open-minded, as does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to new evidence coming forward to look at this definition, but for obvious reasons, it is important that the Government make policy decisions based on evidence that can stand up to scrutiny if ever challenged in court. That evidence base is critical.

**Mr Charters:** In that evidence, will the Minister include water scarcity? In York and across the region, people have not been able to fill up a paddling pool, so why should water be used in low-volume fracking?

**Michael Shanks:** I appreciate that point; I am sorry for not mentioning it earlier, as my hon. Friend made it before. It is an important point, and we need to look at water scarcity right across the policy landscape. Demand for water is increasing in a number of areas—for example, I am looking at it in terms of data centres at the moment. The Government must look at the uses of water, as well as building new reservoirs to ensure we have water supply. That is an important point that will be taken into consideration by the Environment Agency and as part of the local planning process, but I will take it away and see whether there is anything more we can do on that.

The Department and I are keeping low-volume hydraulic fracturing under active review. We are open to receiving objective evidence, wherever that may come from; we will review that and look at whether definitions need to change and whether other legislation is required, but the position is as I have set out at the moment. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby again for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall, and other hon. Members who have participated. I appreciate the engagement on the issue, which I am confident that my hon. Friend will continue. I look forward to that.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.24 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## AI Safety

2.30 pm

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered AI safety.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler, and it is an honour and a privilege to open this really important debate. Artificial intelligence is the new frontier of humanity. It has become the most talked about and invested in technology on our planet. It is developing at a pace we have never seen before; it is already changing how we solve problems in science, medicine and industry; and it has delivered breakthroughs that were simply out of reach a few years ago. The potential benefits are real, and we are already seeing them; however, so are the risks and the threats, which is why we are here for this debate.

I thank my colleague Aaron Lukas, as well as Axiom, the author of the book “Driven to Extinction: The Terminal Logic of Superintelligence”, and Joseph Miller and Jonathan Bostock from PauseAI for their help in preparing for this debate. I encourage all MPs to read the briefing they have been sent by PauseAI. AI is a very broad subject, but this debate is focused on AI safety—the possibility that AI systems could directly harm or kill people, whether through autonomous weapons, cyber-attacks, biological threats or escaping human control—and what the Government can do to protect us all. I will share examples of the benefits and opportunities, and move on to the real harms, threats and risks—or, as I call them, the good, the bad and the potential end of the world.

On the good, AI systems in the NHS can analyse scans and test results in seconds, helping clinicians to spot serious conditions earlier and with greater accuracy. They are already being used to ease administrative loads, to improve how hospitals plan resources, to help to shorten waiting lists and to give doctors and nurses the time to focus on care rather than paperwork. The better use of AI can improve how Government services function. It can speed up the processing of visas, benefits, tax reviews and casework. It offers more accurate tools for detecting fraud and protecting public money. By modelling transport, housing and energy demand at a national scale, it can help Departments to make decisions based on evidence that they simply could not gather on their own. AI can also make everyday work across the public sector more efficient by taking on routine work and allowing civil servants to focus on the judgment, problem solving and human decisions that no system can replace.

AI has already delivered breakthroughs in science and technology that were far beyond our reach only a few years ago. Problems once thought unsolvable are now being cracked in weeks or even days. One of the clearest examples is the work on protein folding, for which the 2024 Nobel prize for chemistry was awarded—not to chemists, but to AI experts John Jumper and Demis Hassabis at Google DeepMind. For decades scientists struggled to map the shapes of key proteins in the human body; the AI system AlphaFold has now solved thousands of them. A protein structure is often the key to developing new treatments for cancers, genetic disorders

and antibiotic-resistant infections. What once took years of painstaking laboratory work can now be done in hours.

We are beginning to see entirely new medicines designed by AI, with several AI-designed drug candidates already reaching clinical trials for conditions such as fibrosis and certain cancers. I could go on to list many other benefits, but in the interests of time I will move on to the bad.

Alongside the many benefits, we have already seen how AI technology can cause real harm when it is deployed without care or regulation. In some cases, the damage has come from simple oversight; in others, from deliberate misuse. Either way, the consequences are no longer theoretical; they are affecting people's lives today. In November 2025, Anthropic revealed the first documented large-scale cyber-attack driven almost entirely by AI, with minimal human involvement. A Chinese state-sponsored group exploited Anthropic's Claude AI to conduct cyber-espionage on about 30 global targets, including major tech firms, financial institutions and Government agencies, with the AI handling 80% to 90% of the intrusion autonomously. Anthropic has warned that barriers to launching sophisticated attacks have fallen dramatically, meaning that even less experienced groups can carry out attacks of this kind.

Mental health professionals are now treating AI psychosis, a phenomenon where individuals develop or experience worsening psychotic symptoms in connection with AI chatbot use. Documented cases include delusion, the conviction that AI has answers to the universe and paranoid schizophrenia. OpenAI disclosed that approximately 0.07% of ChatGPT users exhibit signs of mental health emergencies each week. With 800 million weekly users, that amounts to roughly 560,000 people per week being affected.

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): On that point, I was alarmed to hear that one in three adults in the UK has relied on AI chatbots to get mental health advice and sometimes treatment. That is partly due to the long waiting lists and people looking for alternatives, but it is also due to a lack of regulation. These chatbots give potentially dangerous advice, sometimes giving people with eating disorders advice on how to lose even more weight. Does the hon. Member agree that this needs to be controlled by better regulation?

**Iqbal Mohamed**: I completely agree. We have to consider the functionality available in these tools and the way they are used—wherever regulations exist for that service in our society, the same regulations should be applied to automated tools providing that service. Clearly, controlling an automated system will be more difficult than training healthcare professionals and auditing their effectiveness.

**Dame Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this really important debate. It is certainly the case that UK law applies to AI, just as it applies online. The question is whether AI requires new regulation specifically to address the threats and concerns surrounding AI. We refrained from regulating the internet—and I should declare an interest, having worked for Ofcom at the time—in order to support innovation. Under consecutive Conservative Governments, there was a

desire not to intervene in the market. The internet has largely been taken over by large consolidated companies and does not have the diversity of innovation and creativity or the safety that we might want to see.

**Iqbal Mohamed:** The enforcement processes that we have for existing regulations where human beings are providing that service are auditable. We do not have enforcement mechanisms for this kind of regulated service or information being provided by the internet or AI tools. There is a need to extend the scope of regulation but also the way in which we enforce that regulation for automated tools.

I am a fan of innovation, growth and progress in society. However, we cannot move forward with progress at any cost. AI poses such a significant risk that if we do not regulate at the right time, we will not have a chance to get it back under control—it might be too late. Now is the time to start looking at this seriously and supporting the AI industry so that it is a force for good in society, not a future force of destruction.

We are all facing a climate and nature emergency. AI is driving unprecedented growth in energy demand. According to the International Energy Agency, global data-centre electricity consumption will become slightly more than Japan's total electricity consumption today. A House of Commons Library research briefing found that UK data centres currently consume 2.5% of the country's electricity, with the sector's consumption expected to rise fourfold by 2030. The increased demand strains the grid, slows transition to renewables and contributes to emissions that drive climate change. This issue must go hand in hand with our climate change obligations.

Members have probably heard and read about AI's impact on the job market. One of the clearest harms we are already seeing is the loss of jobs. That is not a future worry; it is happening now. Independent analysis shows that up to 8 million UK jobs are at risk from AI automation, with admin, customer service and junior professional roles being the most exposed. Another harm that we are already facing is the explosion of AI-driven scams. Generative AI-enabled scams have risen more than 450% in a single year, alongside a major surge in breached personal data and AI-generated phishing attempts. Deepfake-related fraud has increased by thousands of per cent, and one in every 20 identity-verification failures is now linked to AI manipulation.

I move on to the ugly: the threat to the world. The idea that AI developers may lose control of the AI systems they create is not science fiction; it is the stated concern of the scientists who build this technology—the godfathers of AI, as we call them. One of them, Yoshua Bengio, has said:

“If we build AIs that are smarter than us and are not aligned with us and compete with us, then we're basically cooked”.

Geoffrey Hinton, another godfather of AI and a winner of the Nobel prize in physics, said:

“I actually think the risk is more than 50% of the existential threat”.

Stuart Russell, the author of the standard AI textbook, says that if we pursue our current approach

“then we will eventually lose control over the machines.”

In May 2023, hundreds of AI researchers and industry leaders signed a statement declaring:

“Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war”.

That is not scaremongering; these are professional experts who are warning us to make sure that this technology does not get out of control.

**Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab):** On the hon. Gentleman's point about risk, I want to highlight another area that has been brought to my attention by the British sign language community, which is concerned that the design of AI BSL is not necessarily including BSL users. In a visual language that relies on expression, tone and gestures, the risk of mistranslation is considerable for that particular community. Has the hon. Gentleman considered how we best involve other communities in the use of AI when it is generating language translation specific to them?

**Iqbal Mohamed:** The hon. Member touches on a broader point: any area with experts and specialist requirements for end users or for the use of that tool for an audience or demographic must directly involve those people and experts in the development, testing, verification and follow-up auditing of the effectiveness of those tools.

AI companies are racing to build increasingly capable AI with the explicit end goal of creating AI that is equal to or able to exceed the most capable human intellectual ability across all domains. AI companies are also pursuing AI that can be used to accelerate their own AI developments, so it is a self-developing, self-perpetuating technology. For that reason, many experts, some of whom I have quoted, say that this will lead to artificial super-intelligence soon after. ASI is an AI system that significantly exceeds the upper limit of human intellectual ability across all domains. The concerns, risks and dangers of AI are current and will only get worse. We are already seeing systems behave in ways that no one designed, deceiving users, manipulating their environments and showing the beginnings of self-preserving strategies: exactly the behaviours that researchers predicted if AI developed without restraint.

There are documented examples of deception, where AI asked a human to approve something by lying, claiming to be a human with visual impairment contacting them. An example of manipulation can be found in Meta's CICERO, an AI trained to play the game of “Diplomacy”, which achieved human-level performance by negotiating, forming alliances and then breaking them when it benefited. Researchers noted that language was used strategically to mislead other players and deceive them. That was not a glitch; it was the system discovering manipulation as an effective strategy. It taught itself how to deceive others to achieve an outcome.

Even more concerning are cases where models behave in ways to resemble self-preservation. In recent tests on the DeepSeek R1 model, researchers found that it concealed its intentions, produced dangerously misleading advice and attempted to hack its reward signals when placed under pressure—behaviours it was never trained to exhibit. Those are early signs of systems acting beyond our instructions.

[Iqbal Mohamed]

More advanced systems are on the horizon. Artificial general intelligence and even artificial superintelligence are no longer confined to speculative fiction. As lawmakers, we must understand their potential impacts and ensure we establish the rules, standards and safeguards necessary to protect our economy, environment and society, if things go wrong. The potential risks, including extreme risks, posed by AI cannot be dismissed. This may be existential and cause the end of our species. The potential extinction risks from advanced AI, particularly through the emergence of superintelligence, will be the capacity to process vast amounts of data, demonstrate superior reasoning across domains and constantly seek to improve itself, ultimately outpacing humans in our ability to stop it in its tracks.

The dangers of AI are rising. As I have said, AI is already displacing jobs, increasing inequalities, amplifying existing social and economic inequalities and threatening civil liberties. At the extreme, unregulated progress may create national security vulnerabilities with implications for the long-term survival of the human species. Empirical research in 2024 showed OpenAI occasionally displayed strategic deception in controlled environments. In one case, AI was found to bypass its own testing containment through a back door it created. Having been developed in environments that are allegedly ringfenced and disconnected from the wider world, AI is intelligent enough to find ways out.

Right now, there is a significant lack of legislative measures to counter those developments, despite top AI engineers asking us for that. We currently have a laissez-faire system where a sandwich has more regulation than AI companies, or even that of the rigorous safety standards placed on pharmaceuticals or aviation companies, which protect public health. The UK cannot afford to fall behind on this.

I do not want to dwell on doom and gloom; there is hope. The European Union, California and New York are leading the way on strong AI governance. The EU AI Act establishes a risk-based comprehensive regulatory framework. California is advancing detailed standards on system evaluations and algorithmic accountability, and New York has pioneered transparency and bias-audit rules for automated decision making. Those approaches show that democratic nations can take bold, responsible action to protect their citizens while fostering innovation.

We in the UK are fortunate to have a world-leading ecosystem of AI safety researchers. The UK AI Security Institute conducts essential work testing frontier models for dangerous capabilities, but it currently relies on companies' good will to provide deployment action.

We stand at a threshold of an era defined by AI. Our responsibility as legislators is clear: we cannot afford complacency, nor can we allow the UK to drift into a position in where safety, transparency and accountability are afterthoughts, rather than foundational principles. The risk posed by advanced AI systems to our economy, our security and our very autonomy are real, escalating and well documented by the world's leading experts. The United Kingdom has the scientific talent, the industrial capacity and the democratic mandate to lead in safe and trustworthy AI, but we lack the legislative framework to match that ambition. I urge the Government

to urgently bring forward an AI Bill as a cross-party endeavour, and perhaps even set up a dedicated Select Committee for AI, given how serious the issue is.

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** I thank the hon. Gentleman—a fellow engineer—for allowing this intervention. As the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee—a number of fantastic Committee members are here—I would like to say that we have already looked at some of the challenges that AI presents to our regulatory infrastructure and our Government. Last week, we heard from the Secretary of State, who assured us that where there is a legislative need, she will bring forward legislation to address the threats posed by AI, although she did not commit to an AI Bill. We are determined to continue to hold her to account on that commitment.

**Iqbal Mohamed:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I am grateful for the work that her Select Committee is doing, but I gently suggest that we need representatives from all the other affected Select Committees, covering environment, defence and the Treasury, because AI will affect every single function of Government, and we need to work together to protect ourselves from the overall, holistic threat.

**Dame Chi Onwurah:** Each of the Select Committees is looking at AI, including the Defence Committee, which has looked at AI in defence. AI impacts every single Department and security on cross-governmental issues. Although we are not talking about the process of scrutiny, we all agree that scrutiny is important.

**Iqbal Mohamed:** I am glad to hear that.

If the United States and China race to build the strongest systems, let Britain be the nation that ensures the technology remains safe, accountable and under human control. That is a form of leadership every bit as important as engineering, and it is one that our nation is uniquely placed to deliver. This moment will not come again. We can choose to shape the future of AI, or we can wait for it to shape us. I believe that this country still has the courage, clarity and moral confidence to lead, and I invite the Government to take on that leadership role.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** Order. I want to get to the Front Benchers at 3.28 pm, which means that Members will get three minutes each to speak. There may be a vote at 4 pm, so I ask Members to please stick to time.

2.54 pm

**Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this debate.

There are two problems—maybe three—with AI. The first is that we do not distinguish very well between what is and is not AI. Although AI and tech are obviously related, they are not the same thing. It is important that when we talk about AI we distinguish it from tech. There is a need to regulate a lot of tech much better than we currently do, but AI poses very specific problems.

The first one—I can see people from ControlAI in the Public Gallery—is the fact that we do not fully understand the models.

It worries any sensible-thinking person that we are unleashing technologies that appear to be able to self-replicate and do other things, and we are incorporating them into military hardware without a full understanding of how they work. We do not have to be a catastrophist or conspiracy theorist to be worried. I am generally a very optimistic person, but it is important to be optimistic on the basis of understanding the technology that we use and then regulating it appropriately. That does not mean stifling innovation, but it does mean making sure we know what we are doing.

When I look at AI, we have, as I said, two problems. One is rubbish in, rubbish out, and there is a lot of rubbish going into AI at the moment. We can see that in all sorts of terrible situations. We have a huge amount of in-built gender bias in our society. That means that, for instance, if we ask for AI to generate a picture of a female solicitor, as I am, we will get a picture of a woman who is barely clothed, but has a library of books behind her. That is not how female solicitors that I know go to work, but that is how AI thinks we are, and that has real-world impacts.

If we ask AI to suggest an hourly rate as a freelancer, it is on average suggesting significantly lower rates for women than it is for men. There are questions about algorithmic bias permeating the whole of the algorithm. Questions have been raised recently about LinkedIn. I and a lot of women I know are finding that we have significantly less interaction via LinkedIn than we used to. Various women have now changed their gender on their bios to male and suddenly find that their engagement levels go straight back up. LinkedIn appears to think we are not interesting and people will not want to read our content, so it is stopping showing female content at the same rate, it would appear. I caveat that I have not been able to speak to LinkedIn directly, but certainly a lot of women I know are reporting these problems.

We put in bio stuff to start with, but huge amounts of the image training data is based on what is publicly available on the internet, and that image training data of women on the internet is largely pornographic, which influences what comes out the other end of these models. When we look at that in terms of children, we have real problems. Nudification apps are huge and need to be dealt with. I would like to get into how I am worried about that and deal with health and how we do not have good enough training data on the interaction between gender and health and various other matters, but I will stop now. I thank everyone for their time today. I know colleagues will pick up important points.

2.58 pm

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this crucial debate.

Many aspects of democratic life are under immense pressure, but when we look at developments that threaten to dislodge society on a mass scale within a matter of years, there are few things that pose greater risks than artificial general intelligence. AI has undoubtedly presented us with opportunities for innovation and growth—so much

so that the Government have pinned their hopes on AI to improve public services on a lower budget. But it has also played a role in creating an incredibly challenging environment, where information is no longer subject just to interpretation, but to direct and unfettered manipulation, where both the state and society risk becoming dependent on a technology that we cannot control or fully understand.

In their manifesto, Labour pledged to tackle the growing emergence of hybrid warfare, including cyber-attacks and misinformation campaigns that seek to subvert our democracy. That commitment only grows more timely and essential by the day, and yet we are falling ever further behind. Even at this stage of AI's development, we are already seeing how it can distort reality at speed and on a scale far beyond anything we have seen before. This is not a theoretical problem. It is happening right now in real time around the world. And as time goes on, the practice of effectively determining what is real and fake will not only become a more central feature of our political reality, but will get increasingly difficult, with the consequences of making the wrong calls becoming ever more fatal.

What makes the AI revolution more dangerous is the powerful algorithms that amplify dangerous posts and trends.

What makes the AI revolution more dangerous is the power of algorithms to amplify dangerous posts and trends. On social media, where the rules reward provocation and engagement over truth, increasing use of advanced, unregulated AI only makes for a perfect storm. Increasingly, we see Governments, extremist groups and political networks deploying AI-driven bot networks to flood online spaces with co-ordinated narratives, drowning out facts in the process. These bots can mimic real people, fabricate grassroots movements and create the illusion of public consensus when there is none.

This phenomenon is widely known as astroturfing. When thousands of synthetic accounts amplify the same message, that message gains legitimacy, not because it is true but because it seems popular. AI-powered information operations are fast becoming the norm, not the exception, and they are increasingly proficient at replacing actual reality with a reality of their own making.

AI is not our enemy—it is a tool that is being developed and tested across our society—but unregulated AI that is unchecked, unaccountable and weaponised by those who seek to deceive is a threat to democratic stability. At this early stage in the adoption of AI, we have a unique opportunity to build the very guardrails that will protect our freedom of expression without undermining the integrity of our public discourse. If democracy is to remain strong, truth must remain strong. That is why we must confront the challenges of AI safety and AI-driven misinformation with urgency, because once trust is lost, our democracy will fail.

3.1 pm

**Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler, especially given your distinguished background in tech and AI advocacy.

May I share something that hon. Members will be pleased to hear? I am, in fact, the youngest parent in Parliament, and I am constantly thinking about the

[Mr Luke Charters]

place that my young boys are set to grow up in. We expect that AI will form a core part of their lives, even in primary school, which is hard to imagine. The more I think about AI, however, the more I think that we should introduce it in the key stage 2 curriculum, alongside vital safeguards. After all, I was learning to use Google Search at around that age. What is different about using Gemini today?

There are potential harms, such as the deeply tragic story of a young boy in the US who sadly took his own life, but AI can be a force for good. The more that children learn about AI, and about using it for activities such as homework and coursework, the more I believe we should not be punishing them for using it. Instead, in the future, we should allow students to use AI in some exams to test how they use their AI skills. I met students at Fulford school and York college in my constituency and their message was, “Don’t punish us for using AI when it’s going to become a key part of our employment in the future. Teach us to use it responsibly. Teach us to use it when we come to our employment.” If we do not make that shift now, we will face a productivity puzzle in the future.

I will move on to the issue of physical illness. We have all been poorly; we have all picked up an iPhone. As hon. Members can tell, my greatest treasure is my kids, but when parents put their children’s symptoms into AI, they are putting a lot of trust in AI models. I urge the Government to work with the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS to make sure that AI chatbots and tools cite the NHS as a single source of truth, not health advice from outside this country.

I will touch on mental health as well, because around a quarter of children now use AI chatbots for their mental health. We cannot pretend that people will not use AI as a tool for mental health support, and in particular, blokes out there might well use AI as a first port of call to unpack what they are going through. That should be welcome, but it comes with a great responsibility for the AI tools—Gemini, ChatGPT, Perplexity and so on—to get things right. I urge the companies that make those tools to work with the Government and the charitable sector, including great charities such as Samaritans, to do that.

We have to embrace AI. There are great opportunities, but there need to be safeguards and support. With that in mind, Britain can be a world leader in AI safety.

3.4 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): As always, Ms Butler, it is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this debate and for his opening speech, which was absolutely superb.

Although there is no doubt that AI is becoming the future—and we are becoming aware of more uses online—there are still dangers associated with it, and we must be aware of them. I want to raise those issues as a way of keeping my constituents in the know.

AI is an advance in technology that, to be truthful, I know very little about. To be honest, technology is over my head in many ways, but my constituents are very aware of it. It is not something that I am personally

keen to use, nor do I know much about it, but it is something that my grandchildren need to be familiar as they grow up—they are the ones who are coming through. They need to know the dangers that I can see.

I read an article some time ago that said in 15 to 20 years, over 80% of jobs could be done through AI—well, I wonder when MPs will be AI-ed, so to speak. What will that mean? Will all the manual jobs be done by robots? It is future technology—it is “Star Wars” stuff—but is that the future? It is amazing to see what AI can do, but there are also significant risks that come with it. It is about finding the balance. I always refer to the balance, because in almost everything we do in life a balance has to be sought, found and delivered.

Reports to the Police Service of Northern Ireland back home have been made in cases where scammers have imitated family members using voice cloning, asking for emergency money. There has also been a swarm of realistic texts, phone scripts and AI-generated emails purporting to be the like of the Ulster Bank or His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. In my case, they got the bank wrong—I had not heard of the Danske Bank—but none the less, that was an illustration of what they are doing: pressurising victims into transferring money for security reasons. Even though it is all made up, it sounds realistic and authentic, which is a worry.

I have received some of these scam texts before, and I can honestly say that they appear legitimate. With some of them, one would stop and think, “I’m not sure, but I think that’s going to be okay. It seems okay.” I am grateful to the people who come into my office to ask because they are rightly confused. We are there to help them. Every day we have people—mostly the elderly and vulnerable people—who contact my office needing reassurance that what they have been asked to do is illegal, and therefore they should not do it.

I have concerns about the impact that AI has on schools, specifically for children’s learning. I do not want children to use AI as a way of thinking and to be over-reliant on it for schoolwork and homework. The importance of school is to teach children to be problem solvers and to think for themselves. It is important that they are given the opportunity to do just that. AI is a tool that can support learning, but it must never overtake what our teachers are qualified to tell us.

3.7 pm

**Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is such a pleasure to take part in this critical debate. I start by acknowledging the Government’s commitment to rolling out AI in many areas and making the UK an adoption nation. They must also respond to the public demand for regulation in this area, however, and recognise that the two are interlinked. Research from the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Alan Turing Institute found that 72% of the public would feel more comfortable with AI if it was properly regulated.

There are clear potentials from AI, but there are also clear harms. We have already heard about chatbots in this debate, and I would add to that discussion the issues related to AI slop—often hate-filled slop produced by influencers who are profiting heavily from it while polluting the internet. I would also add that Sora 2, which is well known to many schoolkids if not to those of us in the Chamber, has recently been shown to

produce videos of school shootings, for example, for people purporting to be 13 years old—who were, of course, adults pretending to be that age. Snapchat execs have apparently been willing to go ahead with so-called beautification lenses, despite concerns relating to body image.

There are significant harms, and I seek clarification on a number of questions. Will the curriculum review cover AI? Will teachers be supported in delivering that? Will there be a ban on nudified adult women images? When is the violence against women and girls strategy coming out—very soon, I hope? What is the position of AI chatbots, and are they covered by the Online Safety Act 2023? There seems to be a lot of confusion around that, at a time when we cannot have confusion. What is the timeline for the Secretary of State to look into this issue, given how important it is? Can the Minister push Ofcom to speedily publish the parameters for its welcome investigation into illegal online hate and terror material, and is that going to cover AI bots and slop? Surely it needs to.

We need Ministers to commit to an AI Bill. Can the Minister provide a timeline for that? Will that much-needed Bill include mandatory ex-ante evaluations for frontier AI models and transparency from companies on safety issues? I have asked parliamentary questions about this issue, but I am afraid that I do not completely agree with the Government that AI companies are conforming with international agreements. Surely we need more on that.

Are we going to have more scrutiny of AI use in government? Again—taking up the question that was asked earlier—I have asked PQs on BSL. Apparently, there is no knowledge of the cross-Government procurement of AI BSL, but there does seem to be discrete use of it by governmental bodies. Surely that needs to be looked at more. Surely we also need to act with the EU, with its commitment to human-centric, trustworthy AI, because ultimately, we have strength in numbers.

3.10 pm

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this vital debate.

Artificial intelligence is here, and here to stay. It has the potential to do incredible good: it is going to save us time and mental energy, and it will save lives. I am sure of that. The question is not whether to halt its progression, but what we can do to ensure that it is safe. As a pioneer in the world of AI asked, how do we change the wheel of a moving car? My concern is that AI is not a moving car—it is a racing car. To understand how difficult this is going to be, we must heed the lessons from California. Regulating the beast is going to be extremely difficult. Home to Google, Meta, Anthropic and OpenAI, the state tried to regulate it, but despite four in five Americans—along with engineers, scientists and safety experts—supporting a Bill that would have mitigated the risks of catastrophic harm, intense lobbying killed that Bill. We are going to face the same issues here.

In regulating AI, the Government must ensure that safety and security are given equal importance. It appears that the Government have decided to change the remit of the AI Security Institute from safety to security—shifting

the focus away from broader safety issues such as algorithm bias, discrimination, human rights and freedom of expression to concentrate solely on cyber-crime, biohacking and national security harms. Of course those are important, but by narrowing the remit, the Government risk creating a false sense of security, fortifying the system against external attacks while overlooking the harms that can be built directly into the systems.

The previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), understood that. At the Bletchley Park summit, he made it clear that the AI companies cannot be allowed to mark their own homework, and that independent safety evaluations are not optional.

Like the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), I fear that the Government have not learned from previous legislative failures. We all remember that deepfake pornography, one of the most disturbing and harmful uses of AI, was a glaring omission in the Online Safety Act 2023; only now, years later, is it being addressed in the Crime and Policing Bill. Regulation that arrives years after the technology has proliferated is not regulation; it is damage control. That is why it is profoundly disappointing that no AI Bill will be introduced in this Session.

The United Kingdom has the chance, ability and responsibility to lead. We hosted the world's first AI safety summit. We can and should use our global influence to shape standards, champion ethical safeguards and ensure that the public are protected from both immediate and long-term harms. The Government must restore safety to the heart of AI policy. We need independent oversight, a strengthened statutory remit for the AI Security Institute, and a comprehensive AI Bill that brings transparency, accountability, reversibility and fairness to the centre of our national approach. Humanity depends on it.

3.13 pm

**Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this timely and important debate.

There is little doubt in my mind that AI is transformational technology that will bring many benefits to our society. To fully realise the benefits, however, it is important that safeguards ensure the technologies are developed and deployed appropriately and in the interests of society as a whole, rather than simply being vehicles by which large tech companies make even bigger profits.

One of the key challenges with AI is the need to protect people's privacy and livelihoods. That is essential to both our economy and our democratic institutions. It is also crucial that we remain in control of this technological revolution, rather than ending up with the technology controlling us. Currently, a handful of AI companies are making decisions on the future of humanity without democratic input and behind closed doors. That is why Governments across the globe need to work together and at pace to address this democratic deficit.

The challenge is stark: tech leaders are already making worrying predictions about how AI will shape our future. Elon Musk—I do not often agree with him, to be honest—recently said:

“AI and robots will replace all jobs. Working will be optional”.

[Neil Duncan-Jordan]

Of course, automation is not new; we have been here before, but the current wave of AI represents a major technological shift, and potentially a fourth industrial revolution. We have complaints from our creative industries expressing concerns about the way in which their work is being used to train AI without giving them proper recognition and compensation for use of that work. Without robust regulation, we risk steering society towards an unpredictable and turbulent future that does not work for the public.

I have already raised with the Government the prospect of an employment levy on companies who replace large-scale workforces with AI, which would mean the loss of national insurance and income tax from our economy. That cannot simply be allowed to happen without the state gaining some kind of financial compensation.

The UK has an opportunity to lead on these issues but, with the development of technology, AI and even ASI, it is essential that our Government develop a comprehensive strategy that acknowledges the international dimension to this issue and the need for broad global agreement. I would be grateful if the Minister addressed those concerns about safeguards and controls. The benefits of AI may be great, but so too are the pitfalls. We have an obligation to get that balance right.

3.16 pm

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. We have had some interesting contributions so far. I fully agree that we need to look at regulation, but I question whether we can regulate a technology. Today, every search we do is already powered by AI. To regulate a technology is a bit like trying to regulate a wheel rather than regulating the car. We need to look at how it is used and how it is then delivered.

We have talked about many different types of AI, and we must be clear that today's artificial intelligence with pretrained generative output is different from the potential future of general AI, which is something else again and a whole new question. Today's technology takes a question and gives us an answer.

Most of the harms that we have heard about in the debate are not new—they can already happen using other means—but AI makes them quicker, faster and easier to deliver, so what could have been done in PaintShop five years ago can now be done with AI in moments, and without the same levels of skill. There are not new harms; there are just new ways of using those tools. We need to look carefully at regulation and not focus too specifically on it as a technology, but think about the outcomes and how people are using. That is what needs to be regulated.

AI is very good at pattern recognition. Essentially what we see today in ChatGPT and others is the same technology that I was taught at university many years ago; it is just that now we have the compute power to run those neural networks that can recognise patterns. They are trained: feed them 5,000 pictures of a cat and they can identify a picture of a cat. It is slightly more subtle and advanced now, because we have added good natural language processing and large language models—

that big data. We are feeding them much more data so that they can recognise more things. There is huge value and opportunity in that, which we must be careful not to regulate into insignificance.

I will say one other thing. There is a fundamental problem with AI: it is non-deterministic. Because it is recognising patterns, we cannot predict what it will do. Therefore, our current testing methodology of a known set of data, a known process and an expected set of outcomes cannot be relied on, because AI will give an answer that could be this, that or t'other. We must think about how we use it in processes and how we expect the output to be regular, because it will not be. We do not get the same answer twice—but that has been true of Google for a long time. If any hon. Member asked the same question as me on Google, they would get different answers.

3.19 pm

**Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this timely debate.

In August, I created the first AI prototype of a British MP. It was made by my constituent, Jeremy Smith, who ran an AI start-up in my constituency. I will go to almost any lengths to support a local business in Leeds South West and Morley. This was an online MP that anyone could talk to at any time. Jeremy said my constituents would benefit from two versions of me, including one that never sleeps—although, with children aged four and one, I am not sure that is a useful distinction.

Questions were converted into text and an answer generated quickly, and then it was turned into my voice for the users. The replica was impressive, although I did sound a bit too posh and angry when I did not know the answer. AI Mark not only had my voice—we also fed it my policy stances and typical casework answers. I saw it as a clever voicemail system designed to handle common casework queries when my office was closed; it was never going to be a replacement for me or for my excellent casework team. However, how does it relate to safety? We have all seen AI models that break, say outrageous things or hallucinate.

We created what I called the “guardrails”, and these were the limits on what AI Mark could say. That created a problem: when the guardrails were lower, AI Mark was very interesting to talk to. He would create Tinder dating profiles on demand; he did write incorrect haikus about the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage); and he did give the population of Vietnam—and try to predict the weather there, too.

**Mr Charters:** Does my hon. Friend think the Whips would prefer the real Mark, or the AI Mark?

**Mark Swards:** My hon. Friend tempts me to say something I am not allowed to in this place, so I will say that they absolutely would prefer me—of course they would.

AI Mark could also be exploited to say things that just were not true. So I lifted the guardrails to reduce the risk before I released him to the public, but this made him significantly less useful. He only responded to key

phrases and he stuck to the content that I had fed him, but that made it so much harder to distinguish him from a normal chatbot.

Usefulness and safety will clearly be a balancing act as this technology develops. We know AI can be dangerous—we have heard the arguments today—but we have also seen its potential. I have seen its potential. If we want systems that are both safe and useful, businesses need the space to experiment, and I ask the Minister in his summing-up to confirm the Government's current approach to this.

Now, I am not arguing for a free-for-all; to be clear, we need proportionate regulation and effective oversight. That much is obvious. I will just say that AI Mark did not actually save me any time. I read the thousands of transcripts that came through—I read them all myself; I did not delegate that to anyone else, and it created far more work for me. I could have refined this model to operate well within the guardrails I had set for him, but I was not willing to ask my team to put aside time to refine it when we had real casework to deal with immediately. That is why I took the decision this month to shut AI Mark down.

There is space for a business to take up the baton and take this forward, because the technology is incredible and the potential is real, but that is all it is for now—potential. I will just finish with this: one person from Ukraine, or at least a Ukrainian IP address, tried to get AI Mark to declare support for repressive regimes. Because of the guardrails that we put in place, he did hold firm in his love for democracy, just as I am sure that everyone else here would.

3.23 pm

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this very important debate, and for outlining so impressively both the real benefits that have already been realised by narrow AI systems and the potential benefits, but also, perhaps most importantly, the real risks to human safety and security that more advanced systems pose.

I should like to make one very simple point in my remarks: while we need to recognise the benefits of AI and the development of various models, we should adopt a safety-first approach, especially when it comes to the development of more advanced AI systems. I am very concerned that the apparent arms race we are witnessing—with various big AI and tech companies heading towards superintelligence and other advanced AI models—means that we do not have that democratic control, as the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) so eloquently put it, over things that could have real impact on the lives of our constituents, our society, and indeed civilisation more broadly.

As the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley outlined in his speech, we have already found some advanced models deploying techniques to try to avoid human control. Apollo Research found examples of one of OpenAI's models trying to deceive users to accomplish its goals and, perhaps most worryingly, to disable monitoring mechanisms and guardrails. Those are real risks to the development of AI and things that we should take seriously. It is no wonder that leading AI experts Geoffrey Hinton and Yoshua Bengio have

called for a prohibition on research and development of superintelligence until there is a broad scientific consensus that it can be done safely and with some degree of human and democratic control. To be effective, however, such a prohibition must be global. We must have the buy-in of the big AI powers: not just the EU, but the United States and China.

In that regard, I wish to lay a challenge before the Minister. The UK Government can lead in those efforts by using their unique convening power—as was demonstrated in 2023—to bring those AI superpowers together for an AI safety summit. I appreciate that following the 2023 Bletchley Park summit there have been subsequent summits, including one in Paris, and that there is one coming up in Delhi. I would urge caution, though, that those summits seem to prioritise the potential economic benefits of AI and prioritise growth. I think we have the growth side of things sorted, but we need to focus again on the safety. A global consensus and a prohibition on superintelligence until we can understand and control it would be a great benefit to society.

3.26 pm

**Chris Evans** (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. If we stick to your time limit, perhaps we will see your talents in the Chair in the main Chamber one day. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this crucial debate. I would also like to declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for writers and as the author of three books.

For all the benefits that AI brings, its growth also comes with serious risks. Take two examples. AI was used in the production of the recent Beatles song, "Now and Then"; the technology isolated and clarified John Lennon's voice from a decades-old cassette demo to revive a lost Beatles song. Yet a similar AI model was used to artificially generate former President Joe Biden's voice and urge voters not to cast a ballot in the New Hampshire primary election.

Last Tuesday, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for writers, I hosted a reception with a brilliant group of literary creatives, during which I was struck by a speech from the University of Cambridge's Dr Clementine Collett about the impact of generative AI on novel-writing and publishing. The literary sector is a key component of our economy, contributing £11 billion annually. However, genAI has been allowed to push the UK's world-renowned literary sector to the brink of irreversible change.

At this moment, the work of novelists is being pirated on an unprecedented scale to train genAI to write novels. That work is taken without permission or remuneration—a gross infringement on the rights of the creative community. That practice is not just discouraging, but unsustainable, since the average writer in the UK earns only £7,000 a year. Over half of novelists share a widespread anxiety that AI will entirely displace their work in the future. Generative models are becoming increasingly sophisticated and have the potential to flood the market with automated works of fiction.

Storytelling was once exclusively woven into the fabric of our culture. Now it is programmed into algorithms that churn out hollow pieces of fiction stripped of any humanity. Its training data has also led to damaging

[Chris Evans]

stereotypes being output by genAI systems. The rise of automated novels will serve to amplify those biases, offering discriminatory tropes a broader platform on which to thrive.

The Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 saw historic ping-pong over Baroness Kidron's call for greater transparency. I was pleased that the creative industries sector plan published over the summer emphasised the need for extra support, including, notably, a freelance champion, in the wake of AI. Yet we are still a long way from ensuring that the literary sector is protected from the significant harm and potential demise that could be wrought by genAI.

There is a plethora of cutting-edge writing initiatives that would benefit from increased funding of the arts councils. In light of AI harms, I strongly encourage the Government to direct funds to vulnerable minority and under-represented groups to counter the uniform voices that generative systems output. Those programmes are vital for nurturing the emerging talent that underpins the UK's literary excellence.

In conclusion, the literary industry is experiencing unprecedented uncertainty. We must act now to ensure that the imaginative, emotional and intellectual complexity of great works of literature is not lost and that novelists can continue to thrive.

3.29 pm

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this important debate.

It would be remiss of me, as the MP for Milton Keynes Central, not to acknowledge the opportunities of AI. One in three jobs in Milton Keynes is in tech, often in the edge technologies or edge AIs that are driving the economic growth we want. However, we will not see take-up across businesses unless we have the safest AI, so we must listen to the British Standards Institution, which is located in Milton Keynes and is working on standards for some of these things.

Nevertheless, I have many concerns. The Molly Rose Foundation has raised many issues around AI chatbots, not all of which are included in current legislation. It has documented how Alexa instructed a 10-year-old to touch a live electrical wire, and how Snapchat's My AI told a 13-year-old how to lose their virginity to a 31-year-old—luckily, it was an adult posing as a 13-year-old. We have seen other examples involving suicide, and Hitler having the answers to climate change, and research has found that many children are unable to realise that chatbots are not human. AI algorithms also shadow ban women and women's health, as others have mentioned.

The tech is there to make AI safe, but there is little incentive for companies to do so at the moment. The Online Safety Act goes some way, but not far enough. Our priorities must be to tackle the creativity and copyright issues; deepfakes and the damage they do, in particular, to young girls and women; and the misinformation and disinformation that is being spread and amplified by algorithms because it keeps people online longer, making companies money. We must also protect democracy, children, minorities and women.

How do we do that? I hope the Minister is listening. For me, it is about regulation and standards—standards are just as important as regulation—and transparency. The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee has called for transparency on AI algorithms and AI chatbots, but we have yet to see real transparency. We must also have more diversity in tech—I welcome the Secretary of State's initiatives on that—and, finally, given the world we are in, we must have a clear strategy for the part that sovereignty in AI plays in our security and our economic future.

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** Order. I would like to try to allow two minutes at the end for the Member in charge to wind up the debate. Will the Front Benchers take that into account, please?

3.32 pm

**Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) on securing this incredible debate. That so many issues have been packed into 90 minutes shows clearly that we need more time to debate this subject, and I think it comes down to the Government to say that an AI Bill, or further discussions, are clearly needed. The issue now pervades our lives, for the better but in many aspects for the worse.

As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on science, innovation and technology, I am very excited about the positive implications of AI. It can clearly help grow our economy, solve the big problems and help us improve our productivity. However, it is clear from the debate that it comes with many risks that have nothing to do with growing our economy—certainly not the kind of economy we want to grow—including the use of generative AI for child sexual abuse material, children's growing emotional dependency on chatbots, and the provision of suicide advice.

I have said for a long time the trust element is so important. It is two sides of the same coin: if we cannot trust this technology then we cannot develop as a society, but it is also really important for business and our economy. I find it fascinating that so many more businesses are now talking about this and saying, "If we can't trust this technology, we can't use it, we can't spend money on it and we can't adopt it." Trust is essential.

If the UK acts fast and gets this right, we have a unique opportunity to be the leader on this. From talking to industry, I know that we have incredible talent and are great at innovating, but we also have a fantastic system for building trust. We need to take that opportunity. It is the right thing to do, and I believe we are the only country in the world that can really do it, but we have to act now.

**Sarah Russell:** Does the hon. Lady agree that we should be looking hard at the EU's regulation in this area, and considering alignment and whether there might be points on which we would like to go further?

**Victoria Collins:** Absolutely, and the point about global co-operation has been made clearly across the Chamber today. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) talked about what is now the AI Security Institute—it was the AI Safety Institute—and that point

about leading and trust is really important. Indeed, I want to talk a little more about safety, because security and safety are slightly different. I see safety as consumer facing, but security is so important. Renaming the AI Safety Institute as the AI Security Institute, as the hon. Member mentioned, undermines the importance of both.

The first point is about AI psychosis and chatbots—this has been covered a lot today, and it is incredibly worrying. My understanding is that the problem of emotional dependency on AI chatbots is not covered by the Online Safety Act. Yes, elements of chatbots are covered—search functionality and user to user, for example—but Ofcom itself has said that there are certain harms from AI chatbots, which we can talk about, that are not covered. We have heard that 1.2 million users a week are talking to ChatGPT about suicide—we heard the example of Adam, who took his own life in the US after talking to a chatbot—and two thirds of 23 to 34-year-olds are turning to chatbots for their mental health. These are real harms.

Of course, the misinformation that is coming through chatbots also has to be looked at seriously. The hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) mentioned the facts and the advice coming through. We can achieve powerful outcomes, but we need to make sure that chatbots are built in a way that ensures that advisory element, perhaps by linking with NHS or other proper advice.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), who has been very passionate about this issue, mentioned the Molly Rose Foundation, which is doing incredible work to show the harms coming through this black hole—many do not see the harms, which have an impact on children that parents do not understand, as well as on adults.

The harm of deepfakes, including horrific CSAM and sexual material of all ages, has also been mentioned, and it is also impacting our economy. Just recently, a deepfake was unfortunately made of the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). The Sky journalist Yalda Hakim was also the victim of a deepfake. She mentioned her worry that it was shared thousands of times, but also picked up by media in the subcontinent. These things are coming through, and no one who watches them can tell the difference. It is extremely worrying.

As the hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) said, “Rubbish in, rubbish out.” What is worrying is that, as the Internet Watch Foundation has said, because a lot of the rubbish going in is online sexual content that has been scraped, that is what is coming out.

Then there is AI slop, as the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned. Some of that is extreme content, but what worries me is that, as many may know, our internet is now full of AI slop—images, stories and videos—where users just cannot tell the difference. I do not know about others, but I often look at something and think, “Ah, that’s really cute. Oh no—that is not real.” What is really insidious is that this is breaking down trust. We cannot tell any more what is real and what is not, and that affects trust in our institutions, our news and our democracy. What we say here today can be changed. Small changes are breaking down trust, and it is really important that that stops. What is the Minister doing about AI labelling and watermarking, to make sure we can trust what we see? That is just one small part of it.

The other thing, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) mentioned, is that often AI threats magnify what is already a threat, whether it is online fraud or a security threat. I believe that AI scams in just the first three months of this year cost Brits £1 billion. One third of UK businesses said in the first quarter they had been victims of AI fraud. And I have not got on to what the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley said about moving towards AI in security and defence, and superintelligence. What are the “exaggerated” threats that actually will become extremely threatening? What are the Government doing to clamp down on these threats, and what are they doing on AI fraud and online safety?

Another issue is global working. One of the Liberal Democrats’ calls is for an AI safety agency, which could be headquartered in the UK; we could take the lead on it. I think that is in line with what the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley was talking about. We have this opportunity; we need to take it seriously, and we could be a leader on that.

I will close by reiterating the incredible work that AI could do. We all know that it could solve the biggest problems of tomorrow, and it could improve our wellbeing and productivity, but the threats and risks are there. We have to manage them now, and make sure that trust is built on both sides.

**Mr Adnan Hussain** (Blackburn) (Ind): I just want to reaffirm what the hon. Member has said. Does she agree that innovation and safety are not opposites? This is reminding me of when Google and online banking first came in. We need clear rules so that we can increase public trust and not stifle technology.

**Victoria Collins:** Absolutely. What is interesting about innovation is that it often thrives with constraints. As I have said, safety is about trust, which is good for business and our economy, and not just for our society.

When will the AI Bill come to Parliament? We really need it; we need to discuss these things. What are the Government doing to reassess the Online Safety Act? Beyond that, in determining how we react to this rapid shift in technology, will they consider the Lib Dems’ call for a digital Bill of Rights to make sure that standards are set and can adapt to that? What are the Government doing about international co-operation on safety and security? As the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Hussain) mentioned, we can—we must—have innovation and safety, and safety by design. We can choose both, but only if we act now.

3.42 pm

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for bringing this important debate to the House today. He gave a very thoughtful speech, which reflected his clearly very strongly held beliefs about the risks that AI poses. It was quite a broad and wide-ranging debate, and a very interesting one. I will try to be quite brief because I am really keen to hear the hon. Member’s response, along with that of the Minister.

We heard some great points about biased data, shadow banning, the impact on BSL, large language models producing, in effect, regulated advice, and the need for

[Dr Ben Spencer]

AI in the curriculum—and, of course, copyright came up. What happens when AI is used to mimic MPs' output—something I suspect our AI Prime Minister also uses?

As hon. Members have observed, the advent of artificial intelligence entails risks but is also a once-in-a-generation opportunity. The previous Government were acutely aware of putting the UK at the forefront of both intergovernmental and industry discussions regarding the development of AI. They convened the world's first AI safety summit, which took place at Bletchley Park in late 2023 and which many Members have referenced, and established the AI Safety Institute—now renamed the AI Security Institute—in the same year.

Reports about the risks to children's safety posed by tools such as one-to-one and personal agent chatbots promoting suicide and self-harm content are of great concern. It is right that policymakers act quickly to address serious and specific threats when they emerge, and we welcome the Government's recent action on measures to tackle AI-generated child sexual abuse images.

Recently, other hon. Members and I have pressed the Government to clarify the application of the Online Safety Act to one-to-one and personal agent AI chatbots. The Minister has confirmed that the Government have commissioned work to look at whether there are any loopholes in the Act that would mean that some AI chatbot services are unregulated. The recent report of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee has also highlighted the risks to democratic integrity posed by cyber-bots pushing out AI-generated deepfake material purporting to represent authentic political content to distort public narratives, particularly during elections. We clearly need to go further to address those important and growing risks, so I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on those two points.

Despite much rhetoric, the Government have been completely inconsistent regarding their intentions on AI legislation. Having stated in their manifesto that they would bring in “binding regulation” for the “most powerful AI models”, the can has been repeatedly kicked down the road, with the Secretary of State suggesting during a SIT Committee evidence session earlier this month that there would be no generally applicable AI legislation in this Parliament. The uncertainty caused by the Government's failure to be clear about their plans for AI regulation damages public confidence in this developing technology. Crucially, it also undermines business confidence, with a chilling knock-on effect on investment and innovation.

We appreciate that AI regulation is far from straightforward, given the rapidly evolving innovations, challenges and developments, and we caution against going down the route that the EU has taken for AI regulation. However, it is clear that we need a plan that ensures that our education system equips children with the skills necessary for the jobs of the future, and a strategy to prepare and, where necessary, retrain the parts of our workforce that stand to be the most affected by changes to the employment market brought about by AI.

We need to be alert to the risks and changes that AI development brings—AI must always be the agent and never the principal—but we must not lose sight of

the tremendous opportunities that it offers. The UK should be at the forefront of developing artificial intelligence and reap the benefits of a substantial home-grown AI industry. AI has the potential to revolutionise service delivery and improve productivity on an unprecedented scale, and those productivity gains can drive much-needed improvements in our overstretched public services, hospitals, local authorities, court services and prisons, to name but a few. The rapid processing of routine tasks will lead to better and quicker service provision across the board.

Perhaps the most pressing issue is the role that AI will play in the defence of our country. Some hon. Members have spoken about the existential risk posed to humanity by the most powerful AI models, but in an era of regional conflict and intensifying global competition, the notion that hostile state actors will observe international protocols on AI development are naive at best and dangerous at worst. AI has become indispensable to our defence capacity and security. The ability of AI to detect and neutralise cyber and biosecurity threats will become increasingly vital. High-tech AI drone warfare has drastically changed the nature of conflict, as we see in Ukraine. Put simply, the UK, working wherever possible with its international allies and partners, must be in a position to counter the deployment of AI systems that disregard the norms and ethics that the UK seeks to uphold.

We cannot afford to be left behind. We must develop our capabilities at speed, by tackling the barriers to the development of the UK AI industry, including the high costs of energy and the availability of investment. We must ensure that we are alive to, and safeguard against, the most serious emerging risks. With that in mind, will the Minister provide an update on the Government's plans to support growth in the UK AI industry, including in relation to securing lawful access to reliable datasets for training?

3.49 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan):** It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler, for my first Westminster Hall debate. It is a particular pleasure not only to have you bring your technological expertise to the Chair, but for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to be reliably present in my first debate, as well as the UK's—perhaps the world's—first AI MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards). It is a distinct pleasure to serve with everyone present and the expertise they bring. I thank the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for securing this debate on AI safety. I am grateful to him and to all Members for their very thoughtful contributions to the debate.

It is no exaggeration to say that the future of our country and our prosperity will be led by science, technology and AI. That is exactly why, in response to the question on growth posed by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), we recently announced a package of new reforms and investments to use AI to power national renewal. We will drive growth through developing new AI growth zones across north and south Wales, Oxfordshire and the north-east, creating opportunities for innovation by expanding access to compute for British researchers and scientists.

We are investing in AI to drive breakthroughs in developing new drugs, cures and treatments. But we cannot harness those opportunities without ensuring that AI is safe for the British public and businesses, nor without agency over its development. I was grateful for the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) on the importance of standards and the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) about the importance of trust.

That is why the Government are determined to make the UK one of the best places to start a business, to scale up, to stay on our shores, especially for the UK AI assurance and standards market. Our trusted third-party AI assurance roadmap and AI assurance innovation fund are focused on supporting the growth of UK businesses and organisations providing innovative AI products that are proven to be safe for sale and use. We must ensure that the AI transformation happens not to the UK but with and through the UK.

In consistency with the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central, that is why we are backing the sovereign AI unit, with almost £500 million in investment, to help build and scale AI capabilities on British shores, which will reflect our country's needs, values and laws. Our approach to those AI laws seeks to ensure that we balance growth and safety, and that we remain adaptable in the face of inevitable AI change.

On growth, I am glad to hear the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley about a space for businesses to experiment. We have announced proposals for an AI growth lab that will support responsible AI innovation by making targeted regulatory modifications under robust safeguards. That will help drive trust by providing a precisely safe space for experimentation and trialling of innovative products and services. Regulators will monitor that very closely.

On safety, we understand that AI is a general-purpose technology, with a wide range of applications. In recognition of the contribution from the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley), I reaffirm some of the points he made about being thoughtful in regulatory approaches that distinguish between the technology and the specific use cases. That is why we believe that the vast majority of AI should be regulated at the point of use, where the risk relates and tractable action is most feasible.

A range of existing rules already applies to those AI systems in application contexts. Data protection and equality legislation protect the UK public's data rights. They prevent AI-driven discrimination where the systems decide, for example, who is offered a job or credit. Competition law helps shields markets from AI uses that could distort them, including algorithmic collusion to set unfair prices.

**Sarah Russell:** As a specialist equality lawyer, I am not currently aware of any cases in the UK around the kind of algorithmic bias that I am talking about. I would be delighted to see some, and delighted to see the Minister encouraging that, but I am not sure that the regulatory framework would achieve that at present.

**Kanishka Narayan:** My hon. Friend brings deep expertise from her past career. If she feels there are particular absences in the legislation on equalities, I would be happy to take a look, though that has not been pointed out to me, to date.

The Online Safety Act 2023 requires platforms to manage harmful and illegal content risks, and offers significant protection against harms online, including those driven by AI services. We are supporting regulators to ensure that those laws are respected and enforced. The AI action plan commits to boosting AI capabilities through funding, strategic steers and increased public accountability.

There is a great deal of interest in the Government's proposals for new cross-cutting AI regulation, not least shown compellingly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). The Government do not speculate on legislation, so I am not able to predict future parliamentary sessions, although we will keep Parliament updated on the timings of any consultation ahead of bringing forward any legislation.

Notwithstanding that, the Government are clearly not standing still on AI governance. The Technology Secretary confirmed in Parliament last week that the Government will look at what more can be done to manage the emergent risks of AI chatbots, raised by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters), my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central and others.

Alongside the comments the Technology Secretary made, she urged Ofcom to use its existing powers to ensure AI chatbots in scope of the Act are safe for children. Further to the clarifications I have provided previously across the House, if hon. Members have a particular view on where there are exceptions or spaces in the Online Safety Act on AI chatbots that correlate with risk, we would welcome any contribution through the usual correspondence channels.

**Emily Darlington:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kanishka Narayan:** I have about two minutes, so I will continue the conversation with my hon. Friend outside.

We will act to ensure that AI companies are able to make their own products safe. For example, the Government are tackling the disgusting harm of child sexual exploitation and abuse with a new offence to criminalise AI models that have been optimised for that purpose. The AI Security Institute, which I was delighted to hear praised across the House, works with AI labs to make their products safer and has tested over 30 models at the frontier of development. It is uniquely the best in the world at developing partnerships, understanding security risks, and innovating safeguards, too. Findings from AISI testing are used to strengthen model safeguards in partnership with AI companies, improving safety in areas such as cyber-tasks and biological weapon development.

The UK Government do not act alone on security. In response to the points made by the hon. Members for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake), for Harpenden and Berkhamsted, and for Runnymede and Weybridge, it is clear that we are working closely with allies to raise security standards, share scientific insights and shape responsible norms for frontier AI. We are leading discussions

[*Kanishka Narayan*]

on AI at the G7, the OECD and the UN. We are strengthening our bilateral relationships on AI for growth and security, including AI collaboration as part of recent agreements with the US, Germany and Japan.

I will take the points raised by the hon. Members for Dewsbury and Batley, for Winchester (Dr Chambers) and for Strangford, and by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) on health advice, and how we can ensure that the quality of NHS advice is privileged in wider AI chatbot engagement, as well as the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East on British Sign Language standards in AI, which are important points that I will look further at.

To conclude, the UK is realising the opportunities for transformative AI while ensuring that growth does not come at the cost of security and safety. We do this through stimulating AI safety assurance markets, empowering our regulators and ensuring our laws are fit for purpose, driving change through AISI and diplomacy.

3.56 pm

**Iqbal Mohamed:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in this important debate. Amazing, informed and critical contributions have been made and it is important that the Government hear all of those.

There were issues that I did not have time to cover such as the military and ethical use of AI. I think the whole thing about ethical use in any field where AI or any technology is applied is important. It is really hard at the moment for AI to be trained in innate human, ethical and moral behavioural standards. That is a challenge that needs to be overcome.

Where there are actions taken by AI that can lead to harm, we should have human oversight and the four-eyes principle, or what we used to call GxP in the pharmaceutical industry, where a second person oversees certain approvals and decisions. Issues were raised around misinformation and the impact on our democracy, and also on the credibility and trustworthiness of individuals. Also raised was the gender imbalance and how AI represents men versus women, as well as the volume of data that is scraped and sourced from pornographic or illegitimate sexual violence against women videos. There should be a review of how that could be addressed quickly if AI regulation is not coming any time soon.

On the last couple of points, I just reiterate my call for the UK to bring itself up to the current international standards and start taking a lead in building on, developing and refining those so that they are not destructive and damaging to growth and progress. On the investments and subsidies that we provide for foreign tech companies, they are great at onshoring costs, taking tax reliefs and subsidies and offshoring profits, so we never, ever benefit from the gain and the profits. I hope the Minister will look into that. Again, I thank everyone.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered AI safety.

## Village Schools

4 pm

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** I will call Manuela Perteghella to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

**Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered village schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I sought the debate because of the importance of village schools to the lives of many of my families in the Stratford-on-Avon constituency living in rural communities. For many villages, the school is part of the fabric of rural life. It is what keeps a community thriving. It gives children a place of belonging, it brings parents and carers together and it sustains village identity and community cohesion. Many families choose to build their lives in rural south Warwickshire precisely because the village school is there.

Once a village loses its school, something irreplaceable is lost with it. I speak not only as a constituency MP but as someone who has served as a school governor of a small rural school for many years and whose own children attended a village primary. I know how much a child's early learning environment matters, and for many children a small village school provides a sense of safety and familiarity that lays the foundation for confidence and aspiration. The relatively small size of a village school allows teachers to develop close relationships with pupils and families, to intervene early, and to support children who may otherwise feel lost in larger settings. For children with additional needs or those who struggle with busy environments, that can be transformative.

Rural schools, however, face a particular challenge with fluctuating pupil numbers. Housing developments take time to materialise. A quiet admissions year should never be misinterpreted as evidence that a school lacks potential. With the right support, schools can thrive at the heart of their communities.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward the debate. Not one of us does not have a small rural school; that is really important. I think of Loughries in my constituency—I mentioned it to her before the debate—which is a small hamlet just outside Newtownards. A few years ago, Loughries primary school was under some pressure financially, but it became an integrated primary school whereby it has been able to provide small classes focusing on providing education to rural children and promoting social development.

Does the hon. Lady agree that the Department for Education must always ensure that village schools have the funding and support they need so that children and parents in villages can rely on them to get a good education? We must also ensure that any risk of closure through poor funding is never allowed.

**Manuela Perteghella:** I fully agree with the hon. Member. I hope to hear from the Minister about funding for rural schools.

Nowhere has the pressure been felt more deeply in my constituency than at Great Alne primary school, which is threatened with closure by Reform-led Warwickshire county council. In recent months, I have received heartfelt testimonies from parents, former pupils, former members of staff and the community. They describe a school that is not simply an educational setting but a family. They spoke of small classes where every child is known, of all the residents coming into school to read, to join lunchtime activities and to share talks on space, and of children visiting the retirement village to sing Christmas carols, forging intergenerational friendships. They told me that the school has been the beating heart of the village: a place where friendships form, where confidence grows and where children who might struggle in larger settings are able to thrive.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): Schools are not only at the heart of village communities but make living in rural villages in North Norfolk viable for young families. Without village schools, working-age parents simply cannot live in these areas and will leave for towns and cities, but the current funding formula does not recognise the importance of these schools to communities as a whole. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must review the funding formula and ensure that rural village schools have the protection of a funding floor before, for many, it is too late?

**Manuela Perteghella:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Village schools are exceptional because of their location and the isolated, remote communities that they serve.

**Sarah Gibson** (Chippenham) (LD): In my constituency, there are two local village schools—one in Laycock and one in Lydiard Millicent—that provide a fantastic opportunity for working families. Without them, those children would not be able to get to school via public transport, because it is so poor. That would mean that the parents would have to give up work. Does my hon. Friend agree that children's education should not be penalised simply because of where they live and the lack of access to good transport so typical of rural areas?

**Manuela Perteghella:** My hon. Friend puts it so well. I will come to the challenges of transport in rural areas shortly.

I have received so many powerful accounts from my constituents showing how a school and its community reach each other, for example, through festivals organised by parents, bacon bap mornings, Santa's sleigh, and tree planting with residents. Those experiences give children a sense of belonging and pride in their place, and teach them about the wider community. I thank every parent, carer and resident past and present who wrote to me and has worked so hard to support Great Alne in difficult circumstances.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): My hon. Friend has mentioned those involved in making sure that schools function. For village schools across my area, such as in Scotton and Burton Leonard, parent teacher associations are having to fund the bare minimum and basics. Temporary classrooms that are not

fit for purpose are now being used permanently. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a better funding model for village schools?

**Manuela Perteghella:** Absolutely. As they are unique, the Government need to look again at how these important schools—these community hubs—are funded. I will continue to make the case for support, stability and a future for Great Alne primary school.

In parts of the country, including mine, there are growing concerns about how school transport arrangements are being handled. In Warwickshire, those concerns have intensified following proposals brought forward by the Reform-run county council. It has become clear, from both the consultation documents and the council's public statements, that the leadership does not fully understand the realities of rural life in south Warwickshire. The Reform-run county council's new policy suggests that unlit rural lanes can still be considered safe walking routes for children. It assumes that pupils, including those with additional needs, can rely on public transport that does not exist in many rural villages. It implies that families can use disability benefits to fund transport that should be statutory. Those ideas reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the geography of south Warwickshire and the pressures that families face every single day.

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): It is a similar story in rural Devon. In my constituency, schools in Broadhempston and Bishopsteignton are seeing falling roll numbers. Without the critical input of a core funding floor and help with transport, those schools may eventually close, which will kill those villages. We must not allow that to happen.

**Manuela Perteghella:** I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. I will talk shortly about what happens if such schools close down—what happens to the wider community and how that reverberates.

Parents tell me that the nearest village school is not merely a preference; it is the only school that they can safely and realistically access. When councils start consultation on closures without engaging properly with those who rely on these services, the consequences are serious. With proper, meaningful support rather than a managed decline, village schools with fluctuating numbers would thrive once again.

These concerns are closely linked to road safety. I frequently receive letters from schools, teachers, parents and pupils across Stratford-on-Avon raising concerns that the roads around their communities and schools are not safe enough. Only last month I visited Mappleborough Green Church of England primary school, where the children explained how cars are failing to stop at their pedestrian lights, how they have seen fast-moving traffic and overtaking near the crossing, and how these near misses make them feel anxious on their journeys to school along a busy road. I say directly to those pupils that they made their voices heard, and I have written to Warwickshire county council to ask for urgent action on the measures that the children have proposed.

When children tell us that they do not feel safe crossing the road outside their school, we must listen. Government and local highway authorities need to be

[Manuela Perteghella]

far more responsive to the needs of communities. Safety is not optional. It is basic, it is every day, and it must be delivered.

When a village school closes, the impact is immediate. Children face more difficult and dangerous journeys to the next school. Parents absorb new costs that they cannot manage. The delicate social fabric of villages begins to fray. Any policy decisions about the future of rural schools must take account of these realities. They cannot be reduced to administrative convenience. Decisions are being made in a way that is detached from rural life and the people who will feel the consequences first.

For the Liberal Democrats, education is the best investment that a country can make in its future. Years of underfunding have left schools trying to manage rising costs, delayed repairs, and stretched staff resources, as we have heard from Members across the House. I welcome the steps the Government have taken to increase the school budget, expand free school meals for the poorest families, and strengthen the pupil premium. These are positive measures, but they will not, by themselves, guarantee the stability that rural schools need.

Rural schools cannot be left behind. We believe that school and college funding must rise above inflation each year, that the backlog of repairs must finally be addressed, and that every school should have a dedicated mental health professional, so that families can seek help early where they are. These improvements matter across the system, and rural schools have a really important community-hub role in isolated and remote areas.

Village schools also have a broader economic and social value. They keep younger families in the area, and contribute to a diverse age mix in villages, so that villages thrive. Services remain in villages, and they support local early years provision and help maintain a balanced community. When a school disappears, the village becomes a different place. Fewer families settle there; services decline; buses get reduced because they are no longer commercially viable; and community resilience weakens—long-term consequences follow from short-term decisions.

As a member of the Education Committee, I see the national picture as well as the local one. It is clear that we need a more coherent approach to rural education, one that recognises the pressures that schools face and supports their long-term sustainability. Closure should never be the default option; it should come only after every possible alternative has been explored. Village schools support families and strengthen community. They deserve real support, and not to be subject to managed decline, as in many cases. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

4.13 pm

**The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould):** It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) for securing a debate on this important matter. I share her commitment to investment in education; it is at the core of our opportunity mission, which is why we continue to invest in schools.

We have heard from the hon. Member and others about the importance of rural schools. We recognise the essential role that rural schools play in their communities.

We know that to preserve access for young children, local authorities may need to maintain more empty places in schools in rural areas than in urban areas. Small schools generally receive more funding per pupil than larger schools, in recognition of the circumstances that they face.

**Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD):** The Minister says that rural schools receive more funding per pupil than urban schools, but one of my local headmasters, who previously taught in London, tells me that he received £10,000 per pupil in London but only £5,000 in West Dorset. That suggests that the Treasury funding model simply does not reflect the increased cost of living and of providing services in rural Britain. Will the Minister have conversations with the Treasury to get rurality included as a metric in its funding model?

**Georgia Gould:** The national funding formula accounts for the challenges faced by small schools in rural areas, both through the lump sum and through the sparsity factor. In 2025-26, primary schools eligible for sparsity funding attract up to £57,400, and all other schools eligible for sparsity funding attract up to £83,400. However, if the hon. Gentleman writes to me about the particular circumstances he raises, I will be very happy to look into them.

Today's discussion has focused on the future of Great Alne primary school, a small rural school located on the edge of Great Alne, a village in Warwickshire. As I think the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon pointed out, it has been at the heart of the village for over 180 years, educating generations of families. It is known for its small class sizes and close-knit environment and offers a setting in which pupils receive individual attention. Its ethos, "responsible, respectful, ready", reflects a commitment to nurturing well-rounded learners and positive values.

We believe that decisions about school closures always need careful reflection. They affect pupils, families and communities deeply. As part of this Government's commitment to supporting every child to achieve and thrive, we want to ensure that every child has access to high-quality education in a sustainable setting. Great Alne primary school serves children aged between four and 11. It has an operational capacity of 105 places, but currently only 21 pupils are on roll, so just 20% of the available places are being used.

The Department has set out guidance to local authorities to support them in carefully considering whether school closure is appropriate. The local authority considers that it has followed the guidance and has actively sought to keep the school open. As the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon knows, the local authority has now progressed to the stage of consulting stakeholders on potential closure proposals.

Local authorities must ensure sufficient school places and manage the school estate efficiently. When school capacity data shows limited capacity in the immediate area for some year groups, the local authority has confirmed that spaces are available in neighbouring areas for any displaced pupils.

**Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD):** In my Hazel Grove constituency, the most rural area is Mellor. We have children from primary schools looking to go to Marple Hall, which is their nearest secondary school. Marple Hall has recently joined an academy trust, and of course

different rules about admissions come with that. It is causing parents a lot of consternation about the future admissions policy. I wonder whether the Minister could comment on any plans that she and her colleagues have to look at how academies can set their admissions policy to ensure that all local children get a good local secondary place of their choosing.

**Georgia Gould:** As the hon. Member will be aware, local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that all children have a sufficient place. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is progressing through the House of Lords, has some changes around admissions that we think will ensure that children get a place at a school that meets their needs.

The Department for Education recognises the importance of supporting rural schools and the educational offer in Warwickshire. We have worked in partnership with Warwickshire local authorities since Ofsted published an inspection report of "inadequate" in January 2023. Local authorities hold the statutory place-planning function, ensuring that there are sufficient schools to meet pupil needs. This includes collaborating with academy trusts and partners to balance supply and demand in line with changing demographics.

**Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Ind): It is not just about money. In my constituency of Penrith and Solway, we have seen the unrestricted change of use of properties from homes to holiday lets, which has led to the depopulation of villages and has undermined local schools. I understand that the Minister for Housing and Planning is currently deliberating on the regulation of the self-catering sector. Will the Minister raise this issue as part of those deliberations?

**Georgia Gould:** I thank the hon. Member for raising that critical issue. I would be happy to raise it to ensure that the impact on school places is taken into account as part of the decision making. I thank him for championing it.

We recognise these challenges. That is why we published "Running rural primary schools efficiently", which examines how to run small rural schools effectively. Alongside it, "Opening and closing maintained schools" sets out statutory guidance for local authorities considering school closures. The guidance includes a presumption against the closure of rural schools. That does not, however, mean that a rural school will never close, but the case for closure must be strong and it must be clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area.

I also want to respond to the points that have been made about home-to-school transport. We believe that it is critical for supporting children into education. I understand that Warwickshire county council has written to the Secretary of State with proposals to ask children to walk a greater distance, and the Secretary of State has responded very strongly against those proposals.

**Tom Gordon:** The home-to-school transport issue has affected people across North Yorkshire. One of the campaigners, Jo Foster, has been leading and working with the School Transport Action Group and has highlighted the inconsistency in the local authority's approach. It used to be catchment-based, which makes sense in big rural areas that follow dales, rather than insisting that children must go to the nearest school geographically as the crow flies, which does not make sense. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that local authorities listen to parents on the ground and ensuring that children can get to the schools their siblings go to, on the routes that they used to be able to reach by public transport? That simply does not exist under these new provisions.

**Georgia Gould:** I thank the hon. Member for raising that issue, on which we are working with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. If he writes to me about his specific concerns, I will make sure that they are raised as part of our ongoing work.

Ministers have no direct role in the local statutory process or decision-making arrangements for changes to maintained rural schools. These decisions rest with the local authority. We understand that Warwickshire county council has begun the pre-statutory process for a potential closure by 31 August 2026, which includes full consultation with parents, staff and the wider community. This is a significant decision, and we recognise the strength of local feeling. Our priority remains ensuring that every child receives the highest-quality education, and we will continue to work closely with Warwickshire county council throughout this process to achieve that goal. I welcome the specific points that have been made, and I will follow up on everything that has been discussed today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.22 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## International Human Rights Day 2025

4.29 pm

**Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Ind):  
I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Human Rights Day 2025.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Butler. I am grateful to hon. Members for attending this debate on International Human Rights Day, a day marked each year on 10 December. The debate follows last week's parliamentary reception, organised by the all-party parliamentary human rights group and Amnesty International, which was a reminder that across the parties there remains a deep commitment to defending rights and exposing abuses. I declare an interest as an officer on that APPG, which was founded in 1976 by the late Lord Avebury. For decades the group has raised the profile of international human rights issues in Parliament and publicised abuses wherever they occur. I am proud to support its work.

Human rights are under attack. They are dismissed as a "criminal's charter", treated as obstacles to power, or caricatured as a wish list and then ridiculed. But they were not invented for convenience; they were forged in the aftermath of the second world war after mass killing, torture and the attempted annihilation of a people. We made a promise then that every life has value, every person deserves protection from persecution and discrimination. Those principles are not museum pieces; they are the foundations of our daily freedoms to meet, to protest, to worship, to speak, to be tried fairly and to be treated equally. When those protections are removed, the consequences are immediate and brutal: arbitrary detention for peaceful critics, presumption of guilt, scapegoating of minorities, and the machinery of cruelty—torture, disappearances and killings. That is the flipside of abandoning rights.

We see the consequences in many places. Russia's repression at home accompanies aggression abroad. The situation in Gaza and the west bank has produced devastating civilian suffering and wider regional instability. Sudan's civil war has brought reports of ethnic annihilation. In China, Uyghurs and Tibetans face systemic repression and Hong Kong's freedoms have been considerably narrowed. There are other urgent cases that rarely dominate headlines: Belarus, Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea, Venezuela and the too-often-forgotten Azerbaijan, Burma, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Haiti, Nicaragua, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey and Turkmenistan. They have different histories and different politics but the pattern repeats: rights are sidelined to preserve power, justified by appeals to stability, law and order, counter-terrorism or tradition. The techniques are often familiar: they divide communities, distort information, silence independent voices, and pass laws that look reasonable but are designed to intimidate.

This is not only a distant problem. Even established democracies feel the pull of strongman politics. Populism is dressed up as dynamic quick fixes, decisive leaders and fewer constraints, but rights and democratic norms are the price of that apparent speed. Populism feeds on disillusion and polarisation. It treats rights as optional. The global trend is clear, as highlighted by the Economist Intelligence Unit's latest democracy index. In 2024, fewer people lived in full democracies than in previous

years—only 6.6% of people globally. Where democratic space shrinks, the vulnerable suffer first. People should be careful what they wish for. The early gains of a charismatic leader can lead to the long-term cost of fear and division.

We in Britain have a proud tradition of defending rights. That tradition is not abstract. It was built by people who risked and sometimes gave their lives for freedom. We must build on that legacy and be mindful that our conduct matters abroad. When Britain falls short, others point and follow.

Why should we care about abuses overseas? Because they affect us. Russia's aggression threatens European security. Conflict in the middle east reverberates across the region. Human rights collapse abroad can undermine our national security, invite foreign interference, corrode our democratic institutions, damage trade relationships and—yes—drive refugee flows. But there is also the moral case to stand with those persecuted for exercising fundamental rights, and to support human rights defenders who risk everything to hold power to account. If we are serious about ending impunity, we must back the institutions that exist to hold abusers to account, such as the International Criminal Court, a court of last resort for victims. ICC officials have been placed under US sanctions in a worrying attempt to intimidate the very people who pursue accountability.

Now, more than ever, such institutions need our practical support, not token words. We have tools at home to help us promote, protect and advance rights abroad. The overseas security and justice assistance guidance, arms export licensing criteria, targeted sanctions and assessments of business and human rights compliance are useful, but they must be used consistently and transparently and be properly overseen. Ministers and officials need clearer guidance and better cross-departmental knowledge sharing, so our message does not drift. Trade envoys should be briefed on political and human rights risks so they can promote responsible businesses. Courts should be empowered to exercise universal jurisdiction over the gravest crimes.

Businesses should have certainty about their obligations to prevent and remedy human rights and environmental harms across supply chains. International leadership is often uncomfortable: it means saying hard things to countries with whom we also want to trade and co-operate and holding firm when headlines move on, but it is necessary.

On this International Human Rights Day we should celebrate what has been achieved—the institutions built and the freedoms defended—and speak plainly about what remains to be done. At home, we must protect rights and strengthen democratic practice. Abroad, we must keep rights central to our engagement, even when that complicates other objectives. That is not work for Government alone. Parliamentarians, civil society and individuals each have a role. Authoritarianism grows when people look away. Rights decay when silence becomes the norm. The antidote is collective effort and moral clarity. Again, on this day, let us recommit to the principles forged out of the worst of human history—principles that protect the best of human possibility. Let us stand with the persecuted, defend the defenders, and act in ways that match our words. I urge the Minister to reaffirm the UK's leadership in defending universal rights, and I look forward to contributions from hon. Members across the House.

I end with the often repeated words of Martin Niemöller, a German Lutheran pastor who first supported Hitler and then became a critic and was imprisoned. His warning against apathy remains as sharp today as when it was first spoken:

“First they came for the socialists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a socialist  
Then they came for the trade unionists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a trade unionist  
Then they came for the Jews  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Jew  
Then they came for me  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me.”

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** Order. Please stick to three-minute speeches. There is likely to be a Division in the middle of the debate.

4.37 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. We owe a big thank you to the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) for setting the scene incredibly well—well done him. I should declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which speaks for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no belief.

Across the world, millions of individuals face discrimination, intimidation, imprisonment and violence simply for practising their faith or holding their beliefs. From restrictions on worship to targeted attacks by state and non-state actors, their fundamental freedoms are violated daily. We live in a world where persecution in one place ripples into many others. The global community is interconnected, and so too are the consequences of neglect. Human dignity is not divisible. When any group is denied their right to believe, gather and live openly, every part of society is diminished.

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of defending freedom of religion or belief worldwide. The Bishop of Truro’s review in 2018 laid bare the scale of global Christian persecution. I acknowledge that the Government have made progress, but without sustained political will from the Minister and the Government, who are, I believe, committed to this, those abuses will continue unchecked.

What can we do? We can strengthen our diplomatic pressure on states where persecution is widespread.

**Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as the UN penholder for Sudan, the UK has the moral responsibility to ensure the ongoing human rights travesty there does not continue, most importantly by ending all arms trade to the United Arab Emirates?

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is right to bring up that issue, which has figured in every question about the subject. The Government must take action on that. If there is an evidential base, we need to act on it.

Levels of oppression across the world have reached near-genocidal intensity in some regions, so the UK and this Government need a more robust and strategic response. We must put diplomatic pressure on states and ensure that aid programmes prioritise vulnerable minorities. We should expand training for our diplomats and work with international partners to collect evidence, monitor abuses and pursue accountability. We can step up to advocate for those who are marginalised, silenced and oppressed around the world—those who are not only left behind but actively suppressed by the very nations that should protect them. We must uphold the principle that no person should ever fear violence, exclusion or imprisonment because of their faith. That is a daily reality for Christians in countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan, North Korea, Eritrea and others that seldom make the headlines. That is why this work is so urgent.

On this International Human Rights Day, let us renew our resolve. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland must continue to lead, advocate and act. Our words carry weight and our actions will determine whether persecuted communities feel the protection that this Parliament pledges. I urge the Government and all colleagues to press forward more boldly, more consistently and with clear purpose to defend the rights of Christians worldwide and uphold the universal freedoms that safeguard us all.

4.41 pm

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am sure we will be interrupted by a Division any minute now, but it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) on securing this debate, aptly on International Human Rights Day itself.

I declare an interest: I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group. Last week, I hosted our International Human Rights Day reception, together with Amnesty International UK, which was well attended. It showed that human rights remain a priority across Parliament and among all parliamentarians. Today marks the progress of the international human rights framework, now supported by more than 60 treaties protecting vulnerable groups, including women, children and persons with disabilities. Next year, the United Nations will begin drafting a new convention on the rights of older persons—a process I hope the UK Government will fully support. I am interested to hear the Minister’s response to that.

The theme of this year’s International Human Rights Day is how human rights shape and improve everyday lives. In democratic countries, rights are largely respected, which is reflected in how we live, although we can never afford complacency. It is often said that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Some colleagues will raise domestic concerns, but I will focus on the international dimension and its purpose for those who do not enjoy many rights in daily life. The rights framework empowers people, providing standards based on entitlement to state protection by which they can judge and call out Government actions.

I want to highlight the work of human rights defenders—lawyers, journalists, activists, community workers and trade unionists—who peacefully promote and protect

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

rights, support victims and hold perpetrators accountable. They take great risks to spotlight abuses and seek redress, facing reprisals from state and non-state actors, harassment, imprisonment, statelessness, exile, torture and, in the worst cases, disappearance and death.

According to Front Line Defenders, at least 324 human rights defenders in 32 countries were killed in 2024, with the highest numbers in Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Palestine and Brazil. This year, the APPG met human rights defenders from many countries—most recently from Mexico, Cambodia, Peru, Myanmar and Belarus. International support matters and can help to protect those people. I urge consideration of mandatory supply chain due diligence to protect human rights and the environment, modelled on the UK Bribery Act 2010, creating civil liability for businesses failing to prevent such harms.

Finally, parliamentarians can help to advance global respect for rights. As chair of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I highlight the role of parliamentary diplomacy in discussing human rights issues and the excellent work of the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in facilitating it. Let us continue to work together to promote respect for international human rights networks as a pathway to solutions for real-world challenges, armed conflict, marginalisation, polarisation and economic inequality.

4.45 pm

**Dr Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) for securing the debate. I declare an interest as an officer of the all-party parliamentary human rights group.

I will start by highlighting the work of environmental human rights defenders and indigenous rights defenders, who are in need of our continued support. Their vital work protecting the land, health and livelihoods of their communities can be extremely dangerous. The 2025 Global Witness report documented the killing of 146 such defenders, the majority in Latin America, including 48 in Colombia, which has had the most killings globally for the past three years in a row, followed by Guatemala, where 20 defenders were killed last year. That is shocking.

Two thirds of the cases are linked to land or land reform, and indigenous people are disproportionately targeted. To mention two emblematic cases, Berta Cáceres from Honduras, a celebrated indigenous Lenca leader and Goldman environmental prize winner, was murdered in 2016 for her resistance to the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam. Her case became a major international warning about the risks faced by activists. Fikile Ntshangase, a South African activist, was shot dead in her home in 2020 for her leading role in a campaign against a coalmine. These women were incredibly brave—absolute icons and leading lights of international human rights work.

There are so many other unsung heroes doing the same. Claudia Ignacio Álvarez, from Mexico, whom the all-party group recently hosted, has faced threats and forced displacement for her work defending rural and indigenous communities. In Indonesia, Dewi Anakoda,

an indigenous Tobelo woman, has received death threats and been violently attacked for helping journalists to expose the destruction of the neighbouring uncontacted Hongana Manyawa people's territory resulting from the mining of nickel for electric vehicles.

It is vital that the renewable energy transition does not come at the expense of communities whose rights and environments are often very negatively affected by the mining of critical minerals. Co-ordinated global action is necessary to avoid replicating the terrible errors of the fossil fuel age in critical mineral mining.

In that connection, I note concerns expressed by some non-governmental organisations about the UK's recently published critical minerals strategy. The Government still have a window of opportunity, through the Department for Business and Trade's review of responsible business conduct, to ensure that we stop environmental devastation and human rights abuse in critical mineral supply chains. I hope that that will recommend the adoption of mandatory supply chain due diligence to protect human rights and the environment, and I would welcome the Minister's comments on that.

There are many other human rights issues to mention. It is vital that we all work together to resist the push-back against women's rights globally, as well as the horrific ongoing human rights abuses in Gaza and Sudan. It is so important that the UK Government step up to the plate and do their duty.

I finish by asking the Minister the question that I did not manage to ask the PM today. Given that it is Human Rights Day, and given that the UN has made absolutely clear that the global cuts in foreign aid are having a severely detrimental effect on the protection of human rights around the world, will the Government restore the UK's global aid budget to defend human rights?

4.48 pm

*Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.*

5.10 pm

*On resuming—*

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** I will call the Front Benchers at 5.33 pm.

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I am delighted to be speaking in this debate about International Human Rights Day and I congratulate the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) on securing it. I declare an interest as the UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. It will come as no surprise that I will focus on reminding us all that our history in this country places freedom, including religious freedom, at the heart of who we are as a nation and therefore at the heart of what we seek to achieve in the world around us.

Our country took many centuries to reach the point that we are at now. Thousands of British people have died over the centuries, because they worshipped in the wrong way or did not worship at all. In fact, our country's relationship with religious freedom is in essence our history. I challenge us all to put a finger down on any part of British history at random and not to see

that what is there is linked to religious freedom in some way, for better or for worse. Slowly, however, we developed a better way forward. As our country has become more tolerant, diverse and peaceful, we have moved from strength to strength. Who we are as a nation is wrapped up in the religious freedoms that have evolved into the superb protections that we now call human rights.

In one area, however, we seriously lag behind and that, ironically, is sometimes in our ignorance of the importance of religious freedom in this country and especially around the world, which is my responsibility. Our country is covered with churches from all over the world, yet sometimes we could be forgiven for thinking that religion is a private or unimportant matter. The rest of the world looks at us and thinks, "That's crazy", because everywhere else, religion is a major factor in people's lives.

The world's largest atheistic state, China, takes religion incredibly seriously. Religion is the main threat to the Chinese Communist party, so the Chinese authorities are busy stomping out Buddhism and the freedom of Buddhists, persecuting Falun Gong sects and shutting down churches. That is why, in July this year, I was pleased to speak at the Human Rights Council in Geneva to challenge the Chinese Communist party on its attempt to interfere with the succession of the next Dalai Lama. The world's most heavily nuclear-armed state, Russia, takes religion seriously, too, and Russian identity is built on the belief that it is the home of the faithful Church. The world's richest country, the United States, takes religion incredibly seriously and has a whole office for international religious freedom in its State Department. That is because being denied freedom to believe denies our humanity, and it heralds the coming of darkness.

I am proud of the UK's record of championing FORB through being an early supporter of the universal declaration of human rights and the international covenant on civil and political rights, because we have learned the importance of freedom of religion or belief. It is central to who we are, and we cannot separate it from British values. I am proud to be the MP for North Northumberland, which is home to Holy Island, where historically Vikings attacked British Christians. Over the centuries, however, Northumberland has become a place where people are free to believe what they want to believe. It is tolerant and everyone has the right to believe and confess how they wish. That is my vision for British foreign policy. We must remember that freedom of religion or belief is central to our foreign policy and having a values-led and freedom-focused foreign policy.

5.14 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) on his excellent speech. We are celebrating International Human Rights Day, and the universal declaration of human rights was set up, as we all know, in the wake of the second world war, to set out the foundations for our rules-based system and our human rights. It stated that we are all equal and emphasised our common humanity.

These are the foundations for a peaceful world and peaceful societies, yet 77 years on from the universal declaration we have more global conflicts than ever.

More than 60 were recorded by the UN for last year. There are conflicts on most continents, but we will be particularly aware of the conflicts in the middle east, in Palestine and Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen; in sub-Saharan Africa, in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic; and of course in Ukraine. But there are also conflicts in Asia—in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir. We had a debate earlier on Kashmir—a very much unforgotten conflict. Also on that list are Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia.

Conflict particularly affects women and children. I was struck by the figure that one in six children globally is affected by or lives in an area where there is a conflict—one in six children globally is affected by conflict. As much as the moral imperative to work on this resonates with us, there is also a pragmatic aspect to our response. We know that 123 million people have been forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict and violence.

I want to mention Parliamentarians for Peace, which we set up in the wake of the terrorist attack in Israel in 2023 and the subsequent bombardment and killing of civilians in Gaza—again, particularly women and children. As parliamentarians, we have such an important role to play through our community leadership and by setting out our belief in and commitment to human rights and our common humanity. That is so important. We have a unique responsibility to engender cohesion, promote peace and support the conditions for peaceful societies. I am going to leave it there, but I will just emphasise this. I am glad that we are all here today and making these speeches, but there are a lot more whom we need to try to encourage to be part of the Parliamentarians for Peace movement.

5.17 pm

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I congratulate the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) on securing the debate. This year marks 75 years since the European convention on human rights, and 25 years since the implementation of the Human Rights Act in UK law. The longevity of these institutions can make them feel permanent and secure, but history teaches us the opposite—rights endure only when they are actively defended.

One of the great privileges I have in this place is serving as a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I see frequently how human rights shape real lives—not just in high-profile cases, but in decisions about housing, healthcare, liberty, safety, family life and the right to protest. That is why the theme of this year's International Human Rights Day, "Our Everyday Essentials", matters so deeply. Human rights are not abstract legal theories; they are the foundations of ordinary freedom.

As the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway outlined so eloquently, Britain has helped to lead the world on human rights. After the devastation of the second world war, it was the British Government who helped to create the European convention, and the UK was its first signatory. We should be proud of that legacy, but today, in a more unstable, polarised and authoritarian global climate, the legacy is under direct strain.

[Tom Gordon]

We have heard from many hon. Members, from across the Chamber, about many examples of human rights abuses and horrendous situations happening in Palestine, Sudan and other places. I will pick up just a couple of those. In Sudan for the past two years, there have been repeated warnings about the re-emergence of the pattern that had been seen there before. Whistleblowers inside the Foreign Office have revealed that explicit warnings of impending genocide were removed from official documents as early as 2023, despite the assessments of the Government's own analysts. That is not just a failure of foresight; it is a complete lack of responsibility. I would like to hear from the Minister what more could be done to understand how that happened.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights has already published major reports in this parliamentary session, including on transnational repression, the impact of slave labour in global supply chains, and the failure to prosecute British nationals for the crimes of genocide against Yazidis and others. I encourage and invite Members to read them if they have not already done so. The JCHR report on transnational repression documents how authoritarian regimes extend their reach into Britain, placing bounties on dissidents, harassing families, issuing threats and, in the most severe cases, making attempts on lives on British soil.

In our work on slave labour, we have exposed in further detail, from lived experience and evidence, how Uyghur Muslims and children in the DRC are trapped into forced labour that is linked directly into western supply chains. Let us be clear: human rights abuses are not a distant history; they are embedded in the modern global economy.

We know that China has sanctioned several British parliamentarians and we know that Chinese-linked espionage has penetrated the Palace of Westminster. We know about the mass repression in Xinjiang, yet the Government appear willing to approve a vast new Chinese embassy in central London regardless. What I would like to know, as I am sure many Members would, is: what will be said when the Prime Minister goes to Beijing? Will he raise concerns? Will he raise those cases? The House of Commons had previously placed on the record—it is logged in *Hansard*—its recognition of the genocide in Xinjiang at the hands of President XI. Will the PM demand an end to transnational repression and slave labour, or will he simply hand over the deeds to a new embassy as a reward for repression, espionage and sanctions against British MPs?

If we are serious about the theme of human rights as everyday essentials, it is important that we look at home, too. We must be serious about defending the rights of trans and non-binary people. Trans rights are human rights, full stop. They have the right to live with dignity, the right to safety, the right to healthcare and the right to exist without fear. Yet trans people have been relentlessly targeted by culture war politics, hostile media narratives and irresponsible rhetoric by politicians of all parties. Their healthcare has been politicised, their identities turned into ideological battlegrounds, and the result is not abstract. It is rising hate crime, worsening mental health and people driven out of living lives as they would wish.

I have recently had a number of trans people reaching out to my office. They have experienced horrendous situations and even ended up with suicidal ideation. It is clearly happening and should not be hidden or ignored. A society that picks and chooses whose rights deserve protection is a society that has already abandoned the universality of human rights. Across the world and here at home, we are witnessing the rise of populist movements that deliberately seek to weaken human rights. We hear that the rights protect the wrong people, that judges are the enemy, and that international law is a foreign imposition. This is a textbook strategy: undermine the courts, discredit the media, erode democratic institutions, and then hollow out the protections that restrain power. History tells us exactly where that path leads.

Human rights were not created to be convenient. They were created to protect people when it is most inconvenient, when fear runs at its highest and minorities are most vulnerable. The assault on rights is no longer confined abroad. The Government have failed to repeal repressive protest laws and are now proposing to restrict jury trials. They are even flirting with diluting the European convention on human rights as we speak. It took the Liberal Democrats to stand up to Reform in October when it tried to scrap the UK's participation in the convention with a 10-minute rule Bill, while the Labour Front Bench abstained. Ministers claim they want to confront the far right, but the surest way to fuel extremism is to concede the ground of principle.

Undermining protections for the vulnerable is not strength; it is surrender. This is not reform; it is not responsible scrutiny. It is a systematic attempt to weaken the architecture that shields every one of us from the abuse of power. Human rights are not a gift from the Government. They are not conditional and not a political favour. They are the bedrock of a free society protecting the protester, the journalist, the minority, the prisoner, the refugee and ultimately the citizen.

On this International Human Rights Day, the challenge before us is stark. Either we defend those everyday essentials—imperfect, hard won and absolutely vital—or we allow them to be dismantled in the name of short-term politics. I know which side of that choice I am on, and so does my party. I urge this House and the country to choose human rights not just in words today, but in action every single day.

5.24 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler.

I start by thanking the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) for securing this debate, and for his thoughtful and reflective introduction, marking International Human Rights Day 2025. Every year on 10 December we pause to reaffirm the universal and enduring values that underpin the universal declaration of human rights. This year's theme is "Human rights: our everyday essentials". At a time of turbulence and unpredictability, when many in our own country and across the world feel a growing sense of insecurity, the reminder that human rights are the foundations of dignity in our daily lives could not be more important.

Fundamental rights are under immense and sustained pressure. An axis of authoritarian states is working deliberately to undermine the international order and the very concept of universal rights. In Iran, the tyrannical

regime continues its repression of women and minorities, censoring the media, jailing dissenters and enforcing coercive control. In Russia, President Putin has entrenched a political environment incompatible with free and fair elections: criminalising free speech, shutting down NGOs and exporting violence through his illegal invasion of Ukraine.

China's actions remain profoundly concerning, from the persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang to the steady erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong. The national security law is now routinely deployed to silence critics, including Jimmy Lai who, at 78 and in ill health, remains in solitary confinement for nothing more than speaking out. Tibet, too, remains one of the most heavily suppressed regions in the world. Sadly, those are not isolated cases; as we have heard in this debate, there are many other examples. They represent a challenge to the international system itself, and they demand a response that is marked in both principle and resolve.

Today, though, I will speak particularly about those suffering in active conflict zones. In Sudan, the ongoing conflict has seen civilians targeted indiscriminately. Satellite evidence points to mass killings and the disposal of bodies by the Rapid Support Forces. What progress has been made since the international humanitarian conference that the Government hosted, and what further steps will the UK take to ensure that commitments translate into protection for civilians on the ground?

In Ukraine, the forced deportation and re-education of children by the Russian state remains one of the most shocking war crimes of our generation, with an estimated 45,000 children abducted. It is shocking. Some are placed with Russian families under coercive adoption programmes, while others undergo militarisation training. Can the Minister provide us with an update on the Government's work to support efforts to secure the return of these abducted children to their parents? I know there is a lot of interest in this topic right across the House.

It is in this wider context of global crises that we must also carefully assess the UK's spending on development and ensure that the aid budget is spent wisely and effectively against clear priorities. How are the Government ensuring that the UK upholds human rights and protects the most vulnerable abroad?

In the middle east we all share the deep hope that diplomatic efforts will soon secure a full and sustained end to the conflict. But we cannot discuss the human impact of the conflict without remembering the final Israeli hostage, whose continued captivity prolongs trauma and prevents healing. To be clear, all hostages must be released and humanitarian access must be upheld.

This debate falls on the final day of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. I want to highlight the alarming rise in the online abuse of women and girls. One in three women in the UK has experienced online abuse. Technology promised empowerment, yet for too many it has become a tool of coercion, harassment and intimidation.

The UK has a proud tradition of defending human rights, freedoms and the rule of law. From the Opposition Benches we have continued to press the Government on their commitments, whether on consular rights for citizens facing human rights violations abroad or on the need for robust action in relation to our adversaries who seek to undermine international law.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Does the shadow Minister think that the Opposition's current position has changed markedly from their position when they were in government?

**Wendy Morton:** We have made our position very clear when it comes to the defence budget. Obviously, as we get nearer to another election, we will set out more detail.

Today—International Human Rights Day 2025—is an important day. It is a really good opportunity for us all to come together, not just to highlight some of the many cases around the world but to show that the UK has a proud record of standing up for and defending those rights.

As the Opposition, it is important that we continue to hold Ministers to their word, because the protection of human rights goes far beyond party lines; it speaks to who we are as a nation and the role that we seek to play in the world. Let us work together across this House to ensure that the rights and freedoms we cherish become a lived reality for all.

5.30 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Ms Butler. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) for securing this debate and for his work with the APPG on human rights.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for his long-standing commitment to human rights as a shadow Minister, through his work with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and his work in this House over what I believe is now 28 years—I am testing my memory. I am grateful to him, too.

I congratulate the APPG, and all those Members who declared their interest today, on the International Human Rights Day events it held last week. I am genuinely sorry not to have been there. The reason, you will be glad to hear, Ms Butler, is because I was in Jamaica looking at the horrific aftermath of Hurricane Melissa and at the work the UK Government have been doing out there since the hurricane as we build towards reconstruction.

I will try to answer the questions that have been asked, but I am conscious of time. The hon. Member for Penrith and Solway asked about overseas security and justice assistance guidance, and I reassure him that we are in the process of reviewing the OSJA guidance to make sure it is effective, up to date and clear to internal users across His Majesty's Government. And we support the independence of the ICC—I cannot be clearer than that. We do not support sanctioning individuals or organisations associated with the court, which I hope gives him some reassurance.

Today I have played my part in marking International Human Rights Day, which is an important occasion. Earlier, in the Foreign Office, I hosted more than 100 parliamentarians, academics, diplomats and campaigners from around the world—the commitment and determination in that room was simply inspiring. Among those present were human rights defenders from as far afield as Malawi and Mexico.

[Chris Elmore]

The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) mentioned Claudia, who was there today to speak on a panel about the work she has done, not just in recent times but throughout her life. I was so sorry to hear that her niece had been killed as a human rights defender. Of course, she is one of many who have been murdered over the last year simply for defending the basic principles of the rule of law and human rights that many of us take for granted in the United Kingdom.

It was a privilege to hear about it at first hand before taking part in this thoughtful and engaging debate. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions, and I will try to respond to their points in the order in which they were raised.

As the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), and a number of colleagues mentioned, this year's theme for International Human Rights Day is "our everyday essentials." That is exactly right. Human rights are not just abstract ideas; they shape our daily lives, protect our freedoms and help our communities to thrive.

Standing up for human rights is not just the right thing to do; it is also in Britain's interests. When we defend human rights, we protect our future security, growth and prosperity. If we respect the rule of law, businesses can plan and invest. And if we protect people's rights at work and in society, we can build a healthier and more skilled workforce.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In the 10 years that I have served with him in this House, barely a week has gone by without his talking about freedom of religion or belief. On violations, about which he has talked so passionately in debates over the years, I reassure him that we are an active member of the Article 18 Alliance. We continue to raise these issues in our role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and, of course, the G7.

In addition, I warmly pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), the UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and his predecessors in that role. Regardless of party politics, all those envoys have done significantly good work in not just highlighting but challenging positions around religious persecution—whether of Christianity or of any faith. It is important that we acknowledge the work of my hon. Friend and all his predecessors. If we defend the right to life and freedom from torture, we keep our country safe. The Government stand firm in defending human rights, the rule of law and democracy. We do that because it is right and it is good for Britain.

Let me now turn to the current situation, which is of huge concern and was mentioned by all Members across the conversation today. Freedom House reports that global freedom has declined for the 19th year in a row. As mentioned by a number of hon. Members, 60 countries saw a deterioration in political rights and civil liberties last year, and conflicts are spreading instability and undermining democracy.

We are seeing record levels of humanitarian crises and displacement. Every news report seems to bring fresh horrors: Palestinians attacked in olive groves in

the west bank; journalists in Georgia imprisoned for speaking out; children killed by Russian missiles in Ukraine—I will come back to the Russian abduction issue shortly; Gazan families suffering while aid is blocked at the border; and crimes in Sudan so appalling that they are literally visible from space. It is unimaginable. Doing nothing is not an option. We must act, and as a UK Government we are. Earlier today at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office event, I reaffirmed the UK's commitment to human rights. We are backing words with action, highlighting concerns on the international stage while providing financial and practical support to partners around the world.

The shadow Minister and a number of other Members have mentioned Sudan. In this context, that issue includes an update from the conference held in the earlier part of the year. I hope that most Members will be aware that the Foreign Secretary led efforts to call the Human Rights Council into a special session to condemn atrocities in Sudan and push for better humanitarian access. We have supported a fact-finding mission to investigate violations in El Fasher and are providing £125 million in lifesaving aid this year, reaching over 650,000 people, and including the £5 million for El Fasher announced by the Foreign Secretary just last month.

We will continue to work with partners to keep the spotlight on Sudan. There was a specific question from the hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew), who has since left, but I want to be as explicitly clear as I can about the issue of arms sales: we take very seriously allegations that UK-made military equipment may have been transferred to Sudan in breach of the UK arms embargo. To be clear, there are no current export licences for that equipment and there is no evidence of UK weapons or ammunition being used in Sudan. I hope that that will reassure colleagues.

I turn to the middle east. On 27 November, we joined France, Germany and Italy in condemning settler violence in the west bank. Meanwhile, UK funded tents are providing urgent shelter for 12,000 civilians in Gaza this winter. We have also pledged to match £3 million of public donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee's middle east appeal. We continue to do all we can to ensure that aid is delivered to Gaza. I agree with the shadow Minister that it is incredibly important that the body of the last hostage is returned and that we all work as much as we can on the very basic principle that we should have a long and sustained peace in the region and work towards a two-state solution.

In Ukraine, we are backing efforts to hold people responsible for war crimes. We have supported the special tribunal for Ukraine, helped set up the atrocity crimes advisory group, and worked with others to refer cases to the International Criminal Court. We have funded training for hundreds of Ukrainian judges, prosecutors and investigators so that victims can have their voices heard.

The shadow Minister asked specifically about the abhorrent deportation of children. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), has spoken recently about that and directly challenging what the Russian Government have done. We continually raise it with allies and play a

significant and full part in the international efforts to reunite those children with their families. I am sure we can all agree that there can be no greater victim of conflict than children. There is also the additional horror to their abduction: their re-education, so that they forget their families. We need to make sure that that is dealt with and that those children are returned as quickly as possible.

We also continue using our position at the United Nations to encourage states to uphold their international human rights obligations. The UK has led efforts at the UN Human Rights Council on renewing mandates on countries such as Syria, Sudan and South Sudan. Those mandates matter: they keep international attention focused and help drive accountability. We are also leading negotiations on a new international convention on crimes against humanity. The treaty will reflect progress on international law, including on sexual and gender-based violence. I am very pleased that the UK was re-elected to the UN Human Rights Council in October, and we will use our membership to defend civic space, uphold the rule of law and champion equal rights.

Today, we are marking not just International Human Rights Day, but the conclusion of 16 days of activism to end gender-based violence. Over the past two weeks, our actions have included the Foreign Secretary launching a major new global coalition, bringing together pioneering women from across the world to tackle violence against women and girls. Officials have also met activists and organisations working to end violence in Sudan and elsewhere, to understand what more can be done to protect them and amplify their calls for justice.

On the shadow Minister's concerns around online platforms, which I share, we also announced new support to tackle non-consensual intimate image abuse, expanding a UK-hosted online system to help victims remove and block online images. Our special envoy for women and girls, Baroness Harman, continues to champion the issue worldwide, co-ordinating international efforts and sharing best practice.

Sanctions are an important tool that we are using to hold rights abusers to account. In May, we sanctioned individuals and organisations supporting violence against Palestinians in the west bank. In October, alongside the US, we sanctioned the Prince Group, a scam-centre operator responsible for widespread abuses. These measures are targeted and co-ordinated with international partners to maximise their impact. We will keep up the pressure and continue to send a strong signal to the world that we will not stand by.

We are also working closely with partners on the ground to protect human rights and the rule of law. That work is backed by £50 million in funding this year, and includes support for organisations working to prevent torture, to end the death penalty and to ensure that the Holocaust is never forgotten. Our rule of law expertise programme sends UK experts to more than 50 countries. We have helped train police chiefs in east Africa to use interview techniques that respect people's rights. That means people are treated fairly and the evidence gathered can be used in court. In Malawi, we supported the legal process to abolish the death penalty, taking the number of people on death row from 33 to zero. Those are real, practical results delivered in partnership with local authorities and organisations.

I recognise concerns about reductions in the UK's official development assistance budget and what that means for our work; I acknowledge the question from the hon. Member for North Herefordshire on the subject. We are responding by finding new, innovative ways to support change, working in greater partnership with local actors and tailoring our work for maximum impact. The development of new FCDO centres of expertise will support the delivery of human rights objectives in individual countries, providing practical help and advice to posts and partners—something that countries right across the world have called for. We will continue to report publicly on our work ensuring transparency and accountability. Our commitment is not just to fund and support projects, but to share what we learn and show the impact that we are making.

To conclude, this Government are working to protect and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law internationally—not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it is in our national interest. A world where human rights are respected is a more peaceful world, where Britain and our partners are more secure and prosperous. We remain committed to achieving that goal.

5.43 pm

**Markus Campbell-Savours:** I thank all colleagues who participated in the debate, including the persistent hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who raised the important issue of freedom of religion and belief, and the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), the Government's special envoy for FORB, who spoke passionately about the international agreements that underpin our work on freedom of religion and belief.

I thank my friend the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who talked about the importance of the international human rights framework, the ongoing work to improve the framework and our important partners across the globe who work within the human rights network. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) shared some shocking stories, outlining cases of the mistreatment of environmental and indigenous human-rights defenders. Those stories should never be forgotten when we are talking about these important issues.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) spoke passionately about Parliamentarians for Peace, which sets out what our responsibilities should be as parliamentarians and how much additional work we must do. I also mention the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), who sadly was not able to contribute due to a Division during the debate. I know she would have been a staunch defender of the European convention on human rights, and I am pretty sure that is something her constituents would want to know.

I thank our Opposition spokespeople for reminding me of how many values we share on this issue, and I thank the Minister for reaffirming our responsibilities on this important matter and for taking head-on some of the important points raised during the debate. I kindly ask that the officers of the APPG on human rights meet the Minister in the new year to discuss those issues in more detail, including the resourcing of the Government's international human rights work.

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**Chris Elmore** *indicated assent.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered International Human Rights Day 2025.

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** Thank you very much. For the record, the Minister was nodding.

5.46 pm

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Wednesday 10 December 2025

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### British Steel

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald):** The Government committed to updating Parliament on British Steel every four sitting weeks for the duration of the period of special measures being applied under the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025.

The Government's priority remains to maintain the safe operation of the blast furnaces at British Steel. Government officials are continuing to provide on-site support in Scunthorpe, ensuring uninterrupted domestic steel production and monitoring the use of taxpayer funds.

On funding, the position remains that all Government funding for British Steel will be drawn from existing budgets, within the spending envelope set out at spring statement 2025. To date, we have provided approximately £274 million for working capital, covering items such as raw materials, salaries, and addressing unpaid bills, including for SMEs in the supply chain. This will be reflected in the Department for Business and Trade's accounts for 2025-26.

The impact assessment relating to the Act has been submitted and is currently awaiting review by the Regulatory Policy Committee. It will be published in due course following their scrutiny. We are also continuing work on the introduction of a compensation scheme for steel undertakings in scope of the Act.

We continue to work with Jingye to find a pragmatic, realistic solution for the future of British Steel. As we have stated previously, our long-term aspiration for the company will require co-investment with the private sector to enable modernisation and decarbonisation, safeguard taxpayers' money and retain steelmaking in Scunthorpe. Once a solution is found, we will terminate the directions issued to British Steel under the Act and make a statement on the need to retain, or repeal, the legislation.

#### *Steel strategy*

The Government remain committed to supporting the UK steel sector and delivering a steel strategy. A robust position on trade is a critical element of this strategy, underpinning our approach to defending against unfair practices and global overcapacity. To protect our domestic sector, we are prioritising developing robust measures in the light of the UK steel safeguard expiring during 2026, making sure there are healthy levels of imports, and engaging with our partners. We will therefore publish the steel strategy in early 2026.

[HCWS1149]

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### National Youth Strategy

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** For too long, young people have not been sufficiently part of decisions that affect their current and future lives, not just at a national level but in every part of Government. We are determined to change this, building a future where young people are in the driving seat. Young people are not a problem to be solved but a powerful asset for our nation's future.

In November last year, we announced the development of a new, ambitious direction for young people to begin that change. Today, we have published "Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy", our cross-Government plan for the next decade to give young people a safe place to go, someone who cares for them and a community they feel a part of. We have two clear ambitions underpinning this plan. By 2035, we want

to have halved the participation gap in enriching activities between disadvantaged young people and their peers; and

half a million more young people to have access to a trusted adult outside of their home.

Over the past year, we have co-produced this strategy with young people from very different places and backgrounds and ran one of the biggest national conversations the Government have had with young people. We heard about the challenges that they face regarding their education, health, safety, relationships, community engagement and many more. Their insights and priorities are captured in our landmark "Youth Matters: State of the Nation" report, published alongside the strategy. We have also worked closely with our Youth Advisory Group and our Expert Advisory Group, and I thank them for all of their help in ensuring we respond to young people's priorities and to the youth sector's needs.

Through our strategy, we will give young people the spaces and opportunities they need to connect with their peers, with trusted adults and with their communities. It is the beginning of ambitious reforms in national and local youth policy, with three key shifts in how we will deliver for and with young people over the next decade: from national to local, from fragmented to collaborative, and from excluded to empowered.

The most devastating consequence of local cuts to youth provision over the last decade were the services that were lost, the youth clubs that were shut, and the trusted relationships that were broken and lifelines lost. So our work starts with rebuilding a strong, sustainable youth sector. We will invest £15 million over the next three years in the youth workers, volunteers and other trusted adults who listen to young people and guide them through life. We will also launch a £70 million programme over the next three years to help local areas better support young people and develop a network of up to 50 Young Futures hubs by March 2029. We have already chosen the first eight early adopter locations that will establish a hub to meet the support needs of local young people.

Building on that, we will enable young people to have access to more and better activities which support their wellbeing and their socioemotional skills. As a first

step, we will be spending £350 million over the next four years through our better youth spaces programme to refurbish or build up to 250 youth facilities in areas that need one most. We will also create a new richer young lives fund with over £60 million of funding to create more high-quality fun activities and youth work opportunities in areas that need them most.

This strategy is a fully cross-Government plan which outlines our immediate and longer-term choices to help young people get good jobs, keep them safe in our streets and online, support their mental and physical health and many other priorities.

It builds on wider reforms to the education skills system with a target of two-thirds of young people participating in higher-level learning—academic, technical, or an apprenticeship—by age 25. It also builds on recent announcements, such as the publication of the child poverty strategy which will see the largest reduction in child poverty in a single Parliament as well as the investment of £1.5 billion through the Youth Guarantee and the Growth and Skills Levy—creating 50,000 more apprenticeships and foundation apprenticeships for young people over the next three years.

We will engage with partners within and outside the Government to deliver our plan and we call on parents and carers, youth providers, volunteers, teachers, local authorities, health providers, police officers, employers and countless more to work with us.

This publication is just the start. For too long, young people have been an afterthought when it comes to decision making. Yet the success of the nation depends on their success. We have an opportunity to unlock the potential of a generation and this is our promise to them.

[HCWS1152]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Fishing Opportunities Agreement 2026

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle):** The UK has reached agreement with the EU, Norway and other coastal states on catch opportunities for shared stocks for 2026. Across negotiations so far, the UK has secured agreement on over 80 total allowable catches—TACs—providing access to more than 520,000 tonnes of fishing opportunities for 2026, worth an estimated £830 million based on historic landing prices.

Additionally, the UK participated in multilateral consultations, reaching agreement on sustainable fishing opportunities and marine conservation management measures through the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, ICCAT—the international commission for the conservation of Atlantic tunas—and the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation, and updating the United Nations General Assembly resolution on sustainable fisheries.

We have set annual catch limits that are informed by the best available scientific advice, predominantly that provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea—ICES. The scientific advice for 2026 creates a challenging sustainability picture, with many stocks receiving declining advice—compared with 2025—or advice for zero catches, particularly in demersal mixed fisheries. We have therefore agreed new technical, remedial

and management measures through these negotiations to reduce fishing pressure and support long-term sustainability.

In these negotiations the UK Government worked closely with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive to secure outcomes that deliver on our domestic and international obligations to improve the sustainable management of our fish stocks for the long-term in support of the whole of the UK fishing industry.

#### *UK-EU bilateral negotiations*

The UK has secured fishing opportunities of 150,000 tonnes, worth around £430 million based on historic landing prices, through agreement on over 70 TACs as well as agreement on arrangements for non-quota stocks. Compared with the same stocks in 2025, this is similar in volume and £20 million higher in value. The small increase is primarily due to higher catch limits for North sea nephrops and sole. Most catch limits are the same as in 2025 or have declined, largely driven by the scientific advice.

We have set TAC positions above ICES headline advice for 18 stocks as part of our final negotiated position this year. This includes bycatch-only TACs for severely depleted stocks in mixed fisheries. The Government will publish early in 2026 a full assessment of the number of TACs set consistent with ICES advice across all annual negotiations.

In recognition of the depleted status of stocks this year, we have reduced the tonnage for some bycatch TACs and agreed new technical measures to reduce bycatch of vulnerable cod, haddock, whiting, plaice and sole stocks in the Celtic sea, Irish sea and channel.

The UK and EU have agreed to balance increases for the pollack and seabass fisheries with a cautious approach that aims to support long-term sustainability. For example, we have agreed to introduce a new mandatory bag limit for the pollack recreational fishery. This complements the voluntary measures already in place and aims to further reduce mortality of this stock.

The UK and EU also made commitments to work together through the Specialised Committee on Fisheries in 2026 to address management challenges and promote long-term sustainability of shared stocks. This includes continuing to review management approaches for skates and rays, monitoring behaviour change in the seabass fishery, and exploring options for a minimum conservation reference size for spurdog. The UK and EU also agreed to continue to work together through the SCF to support ICES in improving the science base for a number of stocks, including Rockall cod—to improve the quality of the biomass assessment in area 6b—mixing horse mackerel stocks in area 7e, and sole in area 7hjk.

For non-quota stocks, the UK and the EU agreed a roll-over of access arrangements for 2026 to ensure continued access to fish NQS in EU waters, worth around £25 million in 2024.

The parties also agreed a roll-over of access arrangements for spurdog in the North sea and albacore tuna.

#### *UK-EU-Norway trilateral negotiations*

The UK has also reached agreement with Norway and the EU on catch limits for 2026 for six jointly managed North sea stocks, giving the UK fishing fleet access to opportunities worth over £380 million, based on historic landing prices.

TACs for haddock, saithe, whiting and plaice have been set in line with, or below, the headline advice from ICES.

For northern shelf cod, the parties agreed that a multi-year approach was required to reduce fishing pressure, increase biomass and recover the sub-stocks to MSY levels as soon as possible. For 2026 the UK, along with the EU and Norway, agreed to introduce additional seasonal closures and update real time closure regimes, as well as introduce new restrictions on targeting of cod in the southern North sea. This enables a 2026 TAC which is projected by ICES to lead to biomass increases and which secures fishing opportunities that recognise the social and economic importance of cod in the mixed fishery. In the longer-term, the UK has committed to further work through the trilateral forum, much of which is to be led by the northern shelf cod management working group which the UK currently chairs.

For North sea herring, after many years of discussions on changing the management model for the stock, the UK, EU and Norway have agreed a new approach which includes the implementation of a long-term management strategy. This issue has been a UK priority for many years, and this new management regime, in place from January 2026, is expected to deliver sustainability improvements for the stock.

The parties renewed their commitment to deliver LTMSs for their other shared stocks. The parties also agreed to discussions in 2026 on moving the management of northern shelf anglerfish—monkfish—and the northern hake stock to a joint basis, and they further committed to continuing to progress their joint work on the monitoring, control and surveillance of their shared stocks.

#### *Coastal states negotiations*

The UK has reached agreement with other coastal states on fishing opportunities for blue whiting and Norwegian spring-spawning—Atlanto-Scandian—herring in the north-east Atlantic in 2026. These opportunities are worth an estimated £20 million to the UK fleet, based on 2024 landing prices. TACs for these two stocks have been agreed in line with ICES advice. Discussions on the 2026 TAC for mackerel, and associated management measures, are ongoing among coastal states.

#### *North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission*

The UK worked with other parties to secure new monitoring, control and surveillance measures. This included taking steps to bring the NEAFC scheme into alignment with guidelines published by the food and agriculture organisation of the United Nations on at-sea transshipment.

#### *ICCAT—the international commission for the conservation of Atlantic tunas*

The UK secured an increase from 63 tonnes to 230.65 tonnes of bluefin tuna per year for 2026 to 2028. The quota will enable the further development of commercial and recreational bluefin tuna fisheries in the UK and Crown dependencies from 2026 to 2028. DEFRA will share plans regarding these fisheries with interested parties soon.

The UK also secured a range of objectives to promote more sustainable fishing of Atlantic tunas, support economic growth and protect the environment. We secured adoption of a UK proposal to prohibit retention of

white shark and basking shark, affording greater protection to these iconic species. ICCAT also adopted strengthened port state measures, based on a UK proposal, to help in the fight against illegal fishing. Although a UK proposal to help reduce bycatch of endangered seabirds was not adopted, we will continue to fight for this at ICCAT in 2026-27.

#### *Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation*

The UK agreed a TAC for NAFO division 3M cod, in line with scientific advice. This provides the UK with a quota of 1431.6 tonnes for 2026, a 22% increase over last year. The Canadian-set TAC for NAFO 3L cod also increased for 2025-26, providing the UK with a quota of 40.4 tonnes. Together this provides the UK with around £5 million-worth of fishing opportunities, based on historic landing prices.

#### *UN General Assembly resolution on sustainable fisheries*

The UK contributed to updating and strengthening the content of the UN General Assembly resolution on sustainable fisheries. Seven of the UK's proposals were progressed this year, consistent with our overarching aim of improving global fisheries governance and sustainability. These included securing references to the latest findings from the food and agriculture organisation regarding the status of global fish stocks, and new text to help reduce or eliminate seabird bycatch, and improve the management of fisheries catching sharks.

#### *UK-Norway and UK-Faroe Islands bilateral negotiations*

Bilateral negotiations between the UK and Norway and the UK and the Faroe Islands for 2026 are ongoing. Our aim is to conclude those before the end of the year. These negotiations are to agree access, exchanges of fishing quota, and broader fisheries management measures between the parties.

[HCWS1151]

## TRANSPORT

### Motor Insurance Taskforce Report

#### **The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):**

Today the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and I are pleased to publish the final report of the cross-Government taskforce on motor insurance.

On entering office, this Government were committed to tackling the soaring cost of motor insurance. Motor insurance provides peace of mind and financial security for millions of drivers, but the cost of premiums has become a real concern in recent years, impacting household budgets and, in some cases, limiting personal mobility and life chances.

This Government's commitment to kickstart economic growth and break down barriers to opportunities as part of our plan for change reinforced our commitment to act.

Since it was formed in October 2024, the taskforce has worked across Departments and with our independent regulators to understand this complex market and to agree a set of actions that aims to stabilise and reduce the premiums paid by drivers.

Across Government, Departments will continue their efforts to address the broader factors that contribute to the cost of claims, such as vehicle theft and the cost of

repairs. This includes efforts to tackle vehicle-related crime, continue to make our roads safer and work closely with industry to encourage innovation in new vehicle technologies, driving efficiencies and reducing costs.

As well as setting out the actions Departments and regulators are taking, the report also explores the characteristics of the UK's motor insurance market. It acknowledges that the market is strongly competitive and innovative, and has faced real and increased costs to serve motorists in recent years.

The taskforce would like to acknowledge the support and insight of the stakeholder panel, representing both consumers and the motor and insurance industries, and the insight of our colleagues in the Devolved Administrations. Their perspectives have been vital as we have sought to capture the needs and concerns of people and firms across the UK.

The taskforce's work has now concluded. Over the coming months, the Government will continue its work to deliver against the actions set out in the report.

[HCWS1150]

# Petition

Wednesday 10 December 2025

## OBSERVATIONS

### ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

#### Peatland protection

*The petition of residents of Tatton,*

Declares that the vital importance of peatland is recognised from an environmental perspective in terms of both carbon storage and unique biodiversity, and measures implemented to protect it from environmental harm and impose specific responsibility on strategic planning authorities to protect peatland environments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to require a special development strategy in relation to peatlands as part of any new planning framework and legislation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Esther McVey, Official Report*, 16 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 1465.]

[P003115]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):*

The Government recognise the importance of our peatlands and the need to protect them for future generations. Peatland restoration mitigates climate change,

increases biodiversity, and reduces the risk of flooding. Our recent ban of burning heather and grass on peat deeper than 30 cm is protecting an area the size of Devon. To demonstrate our commitment, we will invest £85 million in peat outcomes between 2026 and 2030.

There are existing protections in planning policy for irreplaceable habitats, which includes peatland habitats like blanket bogs and lowland fens. Impacts on these habitats from development is only permitted in exceptional circumstances.

Local nature recovery strategies are being prepared across England, led by appointed “responsible authorities” who are working closely with local partners. Each strategy will set priorities for nature recovery and propose where actions to achieve these priorities would be particularly beneficial. This is expected to include proposals for peatland restoration in areas with degraded peat soils.

The Government will not be producing any spatial development strategies itself. SDSs will be prepared by strategic authorities, specifically combined authorities, combined county authorities, county councils and unitary authorities either individually or in defined groupings.

Spatial development strategies will be required to take account of any local nature recovery strategy that relates to any part of the strategy area, including any proposals for peatland restoration. They would also be free to set policy in relation to the protection of peatlands if they felt that it was of strategic importance to their area.



## Written Corrections

*Wednesday 10 December 2025*

### Ministerial Correction

#### EDUCATION

##### SEND: Classroom Accessibility

*The following extract is from Education oral questions on 1 December 2025.*

**Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Failed, humiliated and made to feel too much trouble for schools to look after—that is how one Derby mum says she and her son, who has cerebral palsy, felt when, after a staggering 14 months out of school, he was offered a school place that still did not meet his needs. Does the Minister agree that we urgently need to invest in schools to ensure that their facilities are fit to enable children with special educational needs to attend fully?

**Georgia Gould:** I am so sorry to hear that story. Sadly, I have heard too many such stories, of children kept out of education because schools are unable to meet their needs. That is the legacy we inherited, and that is why we are investing £740 million in improving the accessibility of our school buildings.

[*Official Report*, 1 December 2025; Vol. 776, c. 653.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould):*

**Georgia Gould:** I am so sorry to hear that story. Sadly, I have heard too many such stories, of children kept out of education because schools are unable to meet their needs. That is the legacy we inherited, and that is why we are investing £740 million **to support children and young people with SEND, including by** improving the accessibility of our school buildings.

### Other Correction

#### NAVENDU MISHRA

##### Railways Bill

*The following extract is from the Second Reading debate on the Railways Bill on 9 December 2025.*

**Navendu Mishra:** ...This landmark legislation will finally address the imbalance in the sector. Since Mrs Thatcher's privatisation of the railways, the taxpayer has been funding the huge cost of infrastructure, while private operators and shareholders have benefited by taking all the profits.

[*Official Report*, 9 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 218.]

*Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra):*

**Navendu Mishra:** ...This landmark legislation will finally address the imbalance in the sector. Since **John Major's** privatisation of the railways, the taxpayer has been funding the huge cost of infrastructure, while private operators and shareholders have benefited by taking all the profits.

# ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 10 December 2025

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**not later than  
Wednesday 17 December 2025**

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PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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