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5 January 2026

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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 5 January 2026

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.

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 778

TWENTY SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2026

House of Commons

Monday 5 January 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I want to say a few words before we start our proceedings about our former colleague, Sir Patrick Duffy, who died aged 105 during the Christmas recess. Not only did Patrick have the claim to fame of being the oldest living former Member of Parliament, but he was also the last to have served in the second world war, having survived a terrible crash during a training exercise. Patrick was a northerner who was born in Wigan—a Lancastrian by birth—and his death is a blow to the many people who enjoyed his company and his tales from the past. A Labour MP for Sheffield Attercliffe from 1970 to 1992, and previously for Colne Valley, Patrick was a well-respected parliamentarian, an effective Navy Minister under the Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan and president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. He was a man of deep faith, which Pope John Paul II recognised when he bestowed upon him a papal knighthood. Our thoughts are with Patrick's family, his friends and his allies across all political parties.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Care Companies: Exploitation of Migrant Workers

1. **Mrs Elsie Blundell** (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help prevent the exploitation of migrant care workers by private care companies.

[907037]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): Exploitation of workers is unacceptable, and overseas recruitment for social care visas closed in July 2025 following significant concerns about exploitation. We have revoked record numbers of sponsor licences to prevent exploitative employers from sponsoring migrant workers. The Government are establishing the fair work agency to provide a more cohesive and streamlined response to exploitation across all sectors.

Mrs Blundell: In recent weeks, I have heard from several social care workers in my constituency who have each outlined to me the profound uncertainty that they face regarding their employer-sponsored visas, despite the critical role that these workers play in supporting the most vulnerable in our communities. What consideration has been given to the idea that these employer-sponsored visas could be replaced with sector-wide schemes to prevent continued poor practice from some employers?

Mike Tapp: This Government acknowledge and are grateful for the significant contribution that health and social care workers put in, day in and day out, across the country. However, it was right that we ended the overseas recruitment of care workers due to the high levels of abuse that many workers were experiencing at the hands of dodgy employers. There are no current plans to replace the current sponsorship arrangement for care workers.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I am disappointed to hear that the Minister is not looking at a common certificate of sponsorship. Has he made a decision, with his colleagues, on whether care workers will be considered in the same group as NHS workers in relation to the faster route? Otherwise, we are going to end up with a massive hole in our services, with social care yet again being the Cinderella service to the NHS.

Mike Tapp: We must remember that hundreds of thousands came into the country to fill just tens of thousands of jobs, so this is the right approach here. There are no plans at this time, but the mechanism of delivery is currently at consultation, and that closes on 12 February.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): My constituent, a migrant care worker, was asked to pay £3,600 to her employer, a private care company, for a sponsorship application that never happened. The company is now keeping the money, with no legal reason, and refusing to engage with my constituent. This is not the only case I am aware of. Will the Minister take stronger action, including suspending licences and prosecuting companies that exploit vulnerable workers?

Mike Tapp: It is important that we hold dodgy employers to account. Penalties are in place for those employing illegal workers, as is a potential prison sentence for illegal working. In the care sector, we saw hundreds of thousands come into the country to fill a very small number of jobs, so it is right to stop this social care visa at this point.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Health and social care workers fear not only exploitation, but that promises may be retroactively broken by the Government. Will the Minister confirm that the promise of indefinite leave to remain after five years for health and social care workers at Musgrove Park hospital in my constituency will be honoured?

Mike Tapp: When visas end, people should leave the country, and that is what this Government will ensure. There is no route for these people unless they switch, and that is of course open to them at this point. If the visa ends, they must leave the country.

Asylum Hotels

4. **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): What progress her Department has made on closing asylum hotels. [907040]

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): This Government will close every asylum hotel. We are making progress with spend in this area reduced by a third. We are restoring order and control to the system, speeding up case working, maximising the use of our estate, including ex-military sites, and continuing to increase returns.

Lewis Cocking: This is my ninth question about the asylum hotel in my constituency, and I am still waiting for a clear answer. The Prime Minister said yesterday that we would see “evidence” of hotels being closed soon, but plans to move asylum seekers into new council housing would solve nothing and be an insult to millions on the waiting list. My constituents want the asylum hotel in my constituency of Broxbourne closed immediately. Will the Minister meet me to explain how and when this asylum hotel will close?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman knows—I am sure he remembers with a degree of pain from the general election—the commitment we made to close the hotels. Of course, the vast majority of them were opened by Opposition colleagues. We will close those hotels within this Parliament. Colleagues will always want specific dates, but it is right that we bring these things forward when we are ready and able to do so. I am of course happy to meet him.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Bliadhna mhath ùr—happy new year to you, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister update the House on Cameron barracks in Inverness and plans to move some asylum seekers to that town?

Alex Norris: As has been said from this Dispatch Box by myself and the Home Secretary, we are looking at ex-military sites, of which my hon. Friend names one. We are doing all the feasibility assessments there and at Crowborough training camp. When we have made that final decision, we will announce that in the right way, but this approach has to be the right one. Moving people away from very public accommodation often on high streets, which has a significant impact on cohesion and the local economy, and pivoting to larger military sites is clearly a better option.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Those protesting at hotels are usually there because they have been served misinformation and far-right political rhetoric by those with sinister political agendas. One way we found to tackle that is to give proper information—tell the stories of what drove people to this country and the real conditions in their homelands. Will the Minister consider doing a similar type of initiative to dampen down some of the misinformation and terrible political rhetoric that we get at these asylum hotels?

Alex Norris: I have absolutely no truck with those who seek to exploit the vulnerabilities of others for their own ends. I know my country; I know my city of Nottingham—when the system is ordered and controlled, our communities step up to meet the moment and provide shelter for people who need it. But that simply cannot be done while the system is disordered, lacks that control and has public manifestations of failure, such as hotels being used for that purpose.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): The Cresta Court hotel in my constituency has been used to house asylum seekers for just over a year. That is bad for the taxpayer, bad for my community and bad for those going through the system. As I have said to the Minister on many occasions, the Cresta—like all hotels housing asylum seekers—must be returned to normal use as soon as possible. As we seek to build a fair, safe and just immigration and asylum system out of the wreckage left to us by those on the Opposition Benches, could he provide an update on the Government’s work to make that happen?

Alex Norris: I know my hon. Friend’s constituency well and of where he speaks. We are clear that that hotel and all hotels being used for this purpose must shut. I know colleagues will want information as soon as possible. They may not have to wait too much longer, but it is right that we do this in an orderly and controlled way to ensure that the system works.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. I am not surprised that the Home Office thought that Wealden, a Green and Lib Dem-run council, would be a soft target to move asylum seekers to, considering that the co-leaders previously seemed more concerned with Calais than they did about Crowborough, but moving asylum seekers into Crowborough training camp in Madam Deputy Speaker’s

neighbouring constituency will displace the cadets who are making good use of that facility and, as I understand it, will not save any money. Given that it will not save any money, what is the benefit of moving asylum seekers there?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman knows that this is not purely a financial arrangement. We know that hotels have a profound social and economic impact on communities in this country. We believe that big military sites are better places to house asylum seekers. I appreciate that that is a point of difference, but the hon. Gentleman needs to know that when he advocates against our proposals to use larger military sites, he is saying yes to the use of hotels across the community. To say otherwise simply does not stand up—that is the choice. His view is very clear, as is ours.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I recently visited an asylum hotel in my constituency and have spoken separately with people living there and in the community surrounding the hotel. It is clear that ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers is in the best interests of not only asylum seekers, but the neighbouring community and the taxpayer. The Minister and I have had many conversations about this. Can he confirm when the Government will begin ending the use of asylum hotels in Bournemouth?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I can assure his constituents and hon. and right hon. colleagues that he persists with me on this issue on virtually a daily basis, including over the Christmas period, which was very welcome indeed. I could not be clearer: we do not want to see hotels in Bournemouth used for this purpose. As my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) said, that is part of the wreckage that was left by the previous Government. We want that to change. I know that colleagues want information as soon as possible. I am asking them to be a little bit patient. It may not be too much longer before they start to hear news in this space.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker. It is all well and good closing these asylum hotels, but they have to go somewhere else. The latest madcap idea that we hear from the Labour Benches is to build council houses for illegal migrants crossing the channel. Does the Minister think that will help to smash the gangs?

Alex Norris: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman should spend less time reading newspapers and more time listening to what is said in this Chamber. He will have heard from me and from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary through our asylum policy statement about the most significant change to our asylum system in a generation—certainly in my lifetime. It is not just about managing those who need support in the here and now; it is about reducing numbers. The number of people seeking sanctuary in this country is up significantly at a time when it is down significantly across the European Union—we are seen as the golden ticket.

Lee Anderson: Answer the question.

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman shouts at me from long range—having been near him at the football, I know he has a pair of pipes on him when he wants to use them. There is a reason he does not want to hear me answer

the question: he knows he will get not a three-word answer, but a serious one that says that we are going to reduce the numbers of people who need support in this country. That is how we will close the hotels.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): A happy new year to you and your team, Mr Speaker. I welcome the Minister's commitment to closing the Tory asylum hotel in Gloucester by the end of this Parliament. I have raised with him in the past the plight of families who live next door to that hotel, who are having to deal with an increase in antisocial behaviour, constant protests at their front door, and YouTubers turning up and trying to get a vox-pop reaction at 11 o'clock at night. What support can we give to those families, who are having to deal with a hotel on their doorstep that they did not plan for when they moved in?

Alex Norris: We are very mindful that, whatever the nature of the supported accommodation, it should tread as lightly as possible on the community and on its neighbours. I would say to my hon. Friend that we are standing up capacity within the Home Office to make sure that local police are sharing information, and that we are sharing information with local police, about possible vulnerabilities, particularly in some of the cases he is talking about. If he is able to share that information with us, we can make sure that local authorities and local police, alongside the national Government, are supporting the community to the fullest degree possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. The Minister keeps saying that he intends to end the use of asylum hotels, but the most recent figures show that there are now more illegal immigrants in asylum hotels under this Government than there were at the time of the election. The numbers are going up: 41,000 illegal immigrants crossed the channel last year, a 40% increase on 2023. Does the Minister agree with the Prime Minister's admission in an astonishing letter to President Macron that this Government have no deterrent to stop these crossings? Is it not the truth that this Government have no control of illegal immigration and the only way to stop the crossings is to leave the European convention on human rights and deport anyone arriving here illegally within a week?

Alex Norris: The right hon. Gentleman was, I remember, sat right there in that seat—well, the Leader of the Opposition had moved him down one—to hear my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary talk about building this country's deterrent factor. He was there because he was opposing our Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025, which passed only in the last few days of the previous year. It is part of our deterrent—he knows that, because he opposed it. The idea that we should instead leave international agreements, which would mean all our returns agreements would need to be entered into again, is, I am afraid, for the birds. We are getting on with serious action; the Conservatives are just getting on with their press releases.

Rural Crime

5. Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): What recent steps her Department has taken to help tackle rural crime.

[907041]

18. **Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): What recent steps her Department has taken to help tackle rural crime. [907055]

23. **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): What recent steps her Department has taken to help tackle rural crime. [907060]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): Rural crime is a scourge on our communities, and this Government are taking action to tackle it. We are improving the safety of rural communities through tougher measures on equipment theft and a crackdown on antisocial behaviour, farm theft and fly-tipping, backed by over £800,000 of funding for the specialist national rural and wildlife crime policing units.

Paul Davies: The most common and impactful rural crimes in West Yorkshire include the theft of farm machinery, fuel and livestock, incidents of livestock worrying, and wildlife and environmental offences. Increased funding for specialist units, such as the national rural crime and the national wildlife crime units, is welcome. They will help to co-ordinate and support police forces across England and Wales to target rural crime. What other actions can the Government take to help tackle such crime?

Sarah Jones: I am delighted to say that, since the last Home Office questions, the National Police Chiefs' Council launched its rural and wildlife crime strategy, which we absolutely support. The Government are going further: new provisions in the Crime and Policing Bill will introduce powers for the police to enter and search premises for items that have been electronically tracked and are reasonably believed to have been stolen, and we will implement the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, which will strengthen measures to tackle the theft and resale of high-value equipment, particularly that used in agricultural settings.

Terry Jermy: Waste crime—an increasing concern in rural areas—often has links to serious and organised crime. Just last week, the *Eastern Daily Press* revealed that although there were nearly 1,300 reports of waste crime in Norfolk in a five-year period, just two people have been convicted for such offences in that time. In one case in my South West Norfolk constituency, 250 bales of DIY waste were dumped on a farm, with an estimated removal cost of £250,000. Will the Minister tell the House what more the Department can do to tackle waste crime in rural areas?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend speaks about a very serious crime, and we must go further. Last year, the Government announced a huge crackdown on cowboy waste operators in order to tackle fly-tipping. To support local authorities, our Crime and Policing Bill will introduce a power to issue statutory guidance on fly-tipping enforcement, and there will be a new five-year prison term for waste cowboys. We need to crack down on that crime.

Ben Goldsborough: Heritage crime is a huge issue in rural communities like mine. My constituency boast some of the jewels in England's crown—Roman town Venta Icenorum, Wymondham Abbey and the wooden

henge in Arminghall—which puts us more at risk of heritage crime. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can train scrap metal dealers to be more aware of the damage that it does, and how might we record the statistics more appropriately so that we can give police the resources they need?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is lucky to have such wonderful places in his constituency. Of course I will meet him—this is a very important matter. We are supporting the work of Historic England on a number of issues to tackle heritage crime, but I am sure that we can go further, and I look forward to talking to him about it.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): In my constituency, car thefts and related burglaries continue to rise. Nationally, almost four in five car thefts go unsolved. This is not low-level rural crime; it is organised, highly profitable, and deeply disruptive and upsetting for families and businesses reliant on vehicles. Will the Minister set out what steps the Government are taking to tackle organised vehicle crime, and will they back the Liberal Democrat proposals for a specialist national unit to work with police forces, such as Warwickshire police, to crack down on car crime?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady points to a very significant crime. Through our neighbourhood policing guarantee, we will be making sure that there are more neighbourhood police in our communities. We will obviously continue to work with car manufacturers to make sure we design crime out as much as we can. I would be very happy to talk to the hon. Lady about any other proposals she has, but this Government are investing more in policing and cracking down on crime.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

One crime that most concerns farmers in Hampshire and around the country is that of illegal meat imports. Last year, I visited the Port of Dover, where I was shown some of the illegal meat that had been seized. This is not only a public health issue; it puts the UK livestock industry at risk of a notifiable disease outbreak, such as foot and mouth disease. If I were caught driving illegal meat into the UK in a lorry, the authorities would not have the powers to arrest me and would not be allowed to seize the lorry, but they would have to clean my lorry and disinfect it at the taxpayer's expense before sending me on my way. Does the Minister agree that this is absolutely crazy and will she look at how we can equip the hard-working teams at the ports with the powers needed to provide a proper deterrent to stop this meat coming in?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman points to an issue that is of course very important. We need to make sure that we do not have illegal meat coming into the country. My colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and my colleagues on the Front Bench today will of course take these issues seriously. I am very happy to take this matter further and come back to the hon. Gentleman.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Only one in 200 police officers in England and Wales is allocated to rural crime teams. In Cumbria, the situation is even worse: only five officers in 2024 were allocated to our rural crime team. Given what Members have said already today, is it not clear that people who live in very rural communities are subject not only to crime, but to an even more concentrated sense of the fear of crime, because they know that they could be 20 or 30 miles away from the nearest officer? Is it not time for the Government to think again about rural crime and make sure that every community, particularly rural counties like Cumbria, has a dedicated rural crime team that is bigger than five officers?

Sarah Jones: Our neighbourhood policing guarantee applies to rural as well as urban areas, and the increase of 3,000 in police numbers that we will see by next March will go across the whole country. The hon. Gentleman points to a very specific challenge. Just a few weeks ago, I was with Thames Valley police, who have a rural crime taskforce; the work they are doing and the expertise they are bringing to particular challenges faced by rural communities was very impressive, and I would like to see other forces following their lead.

Migrants: Safe and Legal Routes

6. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to introduce new safe and legal routes for migrants. [907042]

12. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to introduce new safe and legal routes for migrants. [907048]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): Alongside restoring order and control of our borders, we will open new safe and legal routes for refugees and displaced people who are fleeing danger. We are currently developing routes for refugee students and workers alongside a community sponsorship route. A cap will be set each year in Parliament, and further details on the design of these routes will be set out in due course.

Tom Rutland: I am proud of our country's history of offering refuge to those fleeing persecution and want this to continue, as do many of my constituents in East Worthing and Shoreham. Can the Home Secretary set out how she will establish safe and legal routes for people while taking action to secure our borders from the criminal gangs profiting from dangerous small boat crossings?

Shabana Mahmood: The first point to acknowledge is that this country will always offer sanctuary to those fleeing danger, but the public rightly expect a system that is fair and that restores control. That is why we are reducing the incentives that draw people here illegally, making it easier to remove those who have no right to be here and toughening controls at our borders, alongside developing safe and legal routes, which will provide the proper option for those fleeing danger to seek sanctuary in our country.

Perran Moon: Meur ras, ha blethen noweth da—happy new year, Mr Speaker—and may I take this moment to thank the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for

Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), for, in his previous role, getting the Cornish language through part III status from that excellent organisation, the Council of Europe?

Before Christmas, I met care workers from my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency who came to the UK through legal routes. They shared with me their anxieties about the changes to immigration policies affecting the care sector and other key worker sectors. Specifically for migrants who are already part-way through the five-year leave to remain qualification process, working and paying their taxes in the UK now, can the Secretary of State confirm when the new fast-track leave to remain process will be established following the end of the 12 February consultation?

Shabana Mahmood: Safe and legal routes relate to those who we would accept as refugees before they enter this country, in order to drive down the number of people who seek to enter the country illegally. My hon. Friend refers to routes for people who come to this country to work. It is right that we acknowledge, as we have done in our planned reforms to settlement, that settlement in this country is a privilege that has to be earned, not a right. It is perfectly proper for this country to be able to set the rules for how settlement is earned. Previous considerations about how many people might arrive through particular routes in order to work have shown that more people have arrived than anticipated, and therefore it is right that we change our approach; the discussion about care workers is particularly pertinent to that point. We are consulting on how those changes are delivered—as he rightly points out, that consultation ends on 12 February—and we will then set out our proposals for delivering our reforms.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Of course we are all proud of our historic record in welcoming genuine political refugees who apply in the proper way, but I am sure that the Home Secretary would agree that this humane policy is being entirely negated by illegal boat crossings, which are driving people mad and putting people at risk. Will she do the humane thing and seek an urgent derogation from the refugee convention and the convention on human rights so that we can arrest, detain and deport these people? By the way, if she announced that now, Labour would shoot up five points in the polls and the Prime Minister's position would be safe. Does she support all that?

Shabana Mahmood: It is important that the changes that are made are about genuinely securing our borders and not about the political fortune of individual parties. Certainly under my watch, this Government and the Home Office will always put the securing of our borders first, regardless of what that might mean for individuals and polling positions. I believe that package of reforms that we set out in the asylum policy statement in November—I know that the right hon. Gentleman took part in that discussion—are the right reforms. I think we can make reforms to our legal system, as well as policy changes, that will secure our borders without requiring a derogation from international law.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): While the Home Secretary thinks about the safe and legal routes, my constituents are concerned about the unsafe and illegal routes. Will the Home Secretary update the House on how many gangs have been smashed in the first 18 months of this Government?

Shabana Mahmood: Hundreds of individuals involved in organised crime groups have already been pursued through law enforcement. There have been 4,000 disruptions of organised crime group operations and 22,000 illegal crossings have been prevented.

Rural Crime

8. Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): If she will make an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a specific offence of aggravated theft from commercial vehicles. [907044]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): We take theft from commercial vehicles extremely seriously. These crimes are often committed by organised criminals who seek to profit from tool theft, and we are supporting law enforcement officials as they seek to disrupt these networks. Courts already have tough sentencing powers in this area, with a maximum prison sentence of seven years for theft and up to life for violent robbery.

Dave Doogan: Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker—but unfortunately for the haulage industry, 2026 promises to be a year of increasing freight crime from haulage operators up and down these islands. Whether it is Alan Davie of Forfar, Taylor's of Forfar or McLaughlan's of Perth, who operate up and down from Scotland to England, when drivers park up at night, they are at risk of having their loads stolen. This is a growing problem that would benefit from there being an offence for aggravated theft from commercial vehicles. I have petitioned the Scottish Government on the very same issue and I urge the Minister to look at the matter.

Sarah Jones: While I am always happy to keep things under review, we currently do not think that such an offence is the answer, although that is not to say that there is not a problem—there absolutely is. I will shortly be hosting industry representatives to discuss what more is required to tackle this growing and significant problem, which the hon. Gentleman is right to identify.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): In my constituency, we have both rural and urban areas. I have had numerous people from rural areas contact me about theft from commercial vehicles, including in Quarndon. As we move forward with our police recruitment plans to get 13,000 more police officers by the end of this Parliament, may I ask that we ensure there are enough officers in rural areas to address this issue? It is particularly pertinent in those places.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. As I said earlier, our neighbourhood policing guarantee applies to all parts of the country. It is very important that we understand the particular challenges that rural communities face and that we robustly support our police, who are getting increased funding this year and will continue to be supported by us to ensure that we tackle these very significant crimes.

Ukrainian Refugees

9. Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking through the visa and immigration system to support refugees from Ukraine. [907045]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): This Government remain committed to supporting Ukraine following Russia's illegal invasion. More than 300,000 Ukrainians have been offered temporary sanctuary through the dedicated Ukraine schemes, and Ukrainians can still apply to the Homes for Ukraine scheme with a UK sponsor.

Catherine Fookes: Blwyddyn newydd dda, Mr Speaker.

Monmouthshire hosts more than 400 refugees from Ukraine. Most of the adults work locally, and some have started businesses; their children are settled in schools, and they contribute hugely to our community. However, Ukrainians in Abergavenny—a proud town of sanctuary—as well as in our towns of Chepstow and Caldicot say that their temporary status can create practical hurdles, such as in housing or university grant applications, because they may suddenly be uprooted. What is the Minister doing through the visa system to ensure that refugees from Ukraine have the necessary support and stability to thrive here in the UK in the long term?

Mike Tapp: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important concern. Ukrainians in Monmouthshire and across the UK have full access to work, healthcare and education, and this Government acted swiftly to introduce a further extension of three and a half years to provide certainty. Ukrainian visa applications are processed swiftly, and e-visas can be easily accessed online to prove status. The Department for Education is working closely with higher education providers to ensure that they support Ukrainians in maintaining stable access to their studies. We have to be clear that this bespoke route offers temporary sanctuary; it balances the immediate needs of Ukrainians with the future needs of Ukraine as it rebuilds.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Bath Welcomes Refugees has supported more than 800 refugees to integrate and access vital services such as housing—indeed, Bath is another place where Ukrainian refugees have received a very warm welcome. The Public and Commercial Services Union report “Welcoming Growth” highlights the importance of employment support and English language provision in enabling refugees to contribute to society. What consideration has the Department given to these recommendations to support Ukrainian refugees in Bath?

Mike Tapp: As I said earlier, those here on these bespoke routes have access to full work, healthcare and education, but I will take the hon. Lady's point away to my team after this session.

Police Efficiency

10. Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help improve police efficiency. [907046]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): There is far too much duplication and waste in policing. I want to see police on the beat, not stuck behind a desk doing paperwork. We must embrace the potential of technology to transform policing. The Government have already established a police efficiency programme, which will save £354 million and free up millions of officer hours by 2029. In the coming weeks, I will set out further reforms in a White Paper on policing.

Rachel Hopkins: Bedfordshire police have been using both modern technology and AI to ensure that they make the best use of resources over the medium term. However, Bedfordshire faces a disproportionate level of demand due to complex, serious and organised crime, and it relies on special grant support to tackle these challenges. Can the Secretary of State confirm that she will ensure these special grants are protected for Bedfordshire police? When might we expect an announcement on that?

Shabana Mahmood: First, let me say that I recognise the challenges posed by serious and organised crime, and I thank Bedfordshire police for their tireless work to tackle the issue. Applications for special grants in 2026-27 will be considered shortly, and details will be confirmed with police and crime commissioners in due course.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker.

In addition to police officers, our police staff play a vital role in fighting crime. However, a freeze in recruitment of those staff has led to police officers being taken off the beat to fill support staff roles, meaning fewer officers on our streets. Can the Secretary of State shed some light on the situation and commit to relaxing the rules on recruiting more support staff?

Shabana Mahmood: That is why we have our neighbourhood policing guarantee: to get those police officers back on the beat and in neighbourhoods, providing reassurance and dealing with the types of crimes that we know are going up, which have a huge and deleterious effect on our communities. Of course, total funding for territorial police forces and counter-terrorism policing will be up to £19.5 billion, which is an increase on 2025-26.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): The Association of Police and Crime Commissioners has today said that this Government's funding settlement leaves our police forces with a shortfall of almost half a billion pounds. We have already seen the number of police officers fall under this Government, and that shortfall could make the situation worse. With crime on the rise and prisoners being released early, will the Government commit to getting police numbers back up to the level they were at before they came into office?

Shabana Mahmood: It would be a bit easier to take the hon. Gentleman more seriously if it were not true that 94% of the reduction in police officers he refers to occurred when his Government were in office. From March 2024 to June 2024—before the general election—

there was a reduction of 1,232 officers, so I will not take any lessons from him. The details of the police funding settlement will be clarified by the end of this month.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Happy new year to you from the Liberal Democrats, Mr Speaker.

The Tories left us without enough police to tackle burglaries, car thefts and shoplifting. People voted for change, but between March 2024 and March 2025, that legacy and the new Government's actions meant that we lost more than 4,000 frontline police officers. Will the Home Secretary reassure us and the country that the next set of police numbers in March 2026 will show a net increase in frontline police compared with when this Government took office?

Shabana Mahmood: I had hoped that the hon. Gentleman would have welcomed the neighbourhood policing guarantee, which is designed to deal with exactly the problem he has recognised—a decrease in officers visible in our communities. That is what this Government are setting right, with our pledge to have 13,000 by the end of this Parliament and 3,000 by the end of March this year. We are on track to deliver that. As I said earlier, the final details of the police funding settlement will be clear at the end of the month, and I will set out my proposals on wider policing reform in a White Paper in a few weeks' time.

Community Policing

11. **Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD):** What steps she is taking to support effective community policing. [907047]

21. **Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab):** What recent steps her Department has taken to help increase levels of community policing. [907058]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): As part of the neighbourhood policing guarantee, every neighbourhood now has a named and contactable officer dedicated to tackling local issues, with forces increasing patrols in town centres and other hotspots based on local demand. We have also made £200 million available to police forces this financial year to kick-start the journey towards delivering 13,000 additional neighbourhood policing personnel by the end of this Parliament, including 3,000 by March 2026.

Monica Harding: Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker.

I pay tribute to the work of the police in my constituency of Esher and Walton, who have got the rate of solved burglaries up by 84%. However, while the local police are doing a great job catching burglars, they tell me that the perception that they are unable to bring those burglars to justice is making it more difficult to tackle persistent offenders and is impacting on the confidence of local residents. My constituents were incredulous recently when the borough commander told them that two individuals charged with burglary in December last year had been given a date to appear for trial in September 2027. What conversations is the Minister having with her counterparts in the Ministry of Justice to increase the number of Crown court sitting days so that my constituents can have confidence?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady highlights a problem that we inherited from the previous Government, which is very considerable—we do not deny that. We in the Home Office are talking to our colleagues in the Ministry of Justice every day about how we manage the situation and increase the speed with which people are brought to justice. This Government want to see everyone who commits a crime do the time.

Luke Murphy: Happy new year to you and your team, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the Government's neighbourhood policing guarantee, which puts named, contactable officers in every community, and indeed the increased presence of patrols in the Top of the Town in Basingstoke. However, as the Minister knows—we have corresponded on this issue—one of the issues that we in Basingstoke face is the retention of officers, with locally trained officers moving to higher-paid forces such as those in London. What more can the Department do, and what more can I do, to ensure we improve the retention of officers in Basingstoke, including to support community policing?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It was not just public confidence in policing that fell under the last Government but how the police felt they were treated, which affects retention. One aspect of the White Paper process and police reform is looking at how we train police, how we treat them and how we give them the support they need to do the job they want to do, rather than the bureaucracy that blights a lot of their time. My hon. Friend makes a good point, and we are working closely with the police bodies to ensure that we get this right.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is becoming increasingly apparent that West Midlands police retrospectively created a rationale and, according to remarkable investigative work by *The Sunday Times*, false evidence to justify their predetermined decision to ban fans from the world's only Jewish state from going to a football match in Britain's second city. Does the Minister think that the chief constable of such a force can possibly be overseeing effective community policing? How can he continue in his role?

Sarah Jones: The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the whole Government have been clear that we believe the wrong decision was made. We have asked the inspector to look at what happened in two parts: first, what happened around the match itself; and secondly, a wider look at the police role in relation to safety advisory groups and how decisions are made. We had been expecting that information before the end of the year, but it will be slightly delayed to take into account the recall of the West Midlands chief constable to appear before the Home Affairs Committee tomorrow. We need to wait and see what the inspector says, and that is what we will do. That is the right thing to do, because these things will be considered in the round.

Hate Crime

14. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps she is taking to tackle hate crime. [907050]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): This Government are determined to tackle all forms of hate crime. We have a robust legislative framework in place to respond to hate crimes that target race, religion, sexual orientation, disability and transgender identity. The Home Secretary has also commissioned an independent review of public order and hate crime legislation to ensure that it remains effective, proportionate and fit for purpose.

Christine Jardine: I welcome the Minister's comments, as I welcome the Government's violence against women and girls strategy, including the confirmation that the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023 will commence in April. We know, however, that misogyny runs deeper, and attitudes and actions throughout society and on social media are damaging to women. As well as focusing on prevention and strategy in all these areas and tackling harassment, will the Minister outline the position on misogyny becoming a hate crime?

Sarah Jones: A review is being undertaken by Lord Ken Macdonald KC, who is looking at hate crime legislation in the round. I hope that the hon. Lady will understand that we want to wait for that, so that we can understand what those recommendations are before the Home Secretary makes decisions.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to tackling misogyny, but I am sure that Ministers will be as disgusted as I am by reports over recent weeks of users of the social media platform X being able to create sexualised images of women, including children, through its AI tool, Grok. What conversations are Ministers having across Government to ensure that we clamp down on that vile practice, which should simply not be tolerated on social media sites?

Sarah Jones: The Home Secretary launched the violence against women and girls strategy. She, like my hon. Friend, takes this issue seriously. We are working across Government, in particular with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, on this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister. Welcome back.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and happy new year.

Women are overwhelmingly the victims of hate crimes online, but that is no surprise when companies are promising that the purchase of a self-swab rape kit will deter rapists. That is plainly offensive and shifts the onus on to women and off the cowards who rape them. The kits are also inadmissible in court. We have already had a sexual assault of a child case collapse because of the use of a self-swab kit. For almost a year, rape charities have begged the Government to take action and ban these dangerous kits and their dangerous narratives. Will the Government work with me, support my campaign and commit to protecting women from self-swab rape kits?

Sarah Jones: The Home Office shares the concerns expressed by law enforcement and healthcare professionals about the use of self-swabbing rape kits, and are considering this matter very carefully. We always recommend attendance

at a sexual assault referral centre to collect samples, regardless of whether a person decides to report an incident to the police.

Topical Questions

T1. [907092] **David Burton-Sampson** (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): Today the powers in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025 come into force—no thanks, I might add, to Opposition Members, who voted against them at every opportunity. The Act has given vital new tools to law enforcement agencies, with approaches that have been tried and tested in the countering of terrorism and will now be brought to bear on people-smuggling gangs. From today, we will be seizing mobile phones at Manston in order to gather vital intelligence to disrupt people smugglers. Those who plan small boat crossings face up to five years behind bars, while those who supply equipment to smugglers could be locked up for 16 years.

Our work is beginning to take effect. Last year we disrupted 22,000 small boat crossings and disruptions were up by 33%, and since we have been in power the number of removals has been more than a fifth higher than it was under the last Government. However, I know that we must do more. The challenge that we face is great, but we will do whatever it takes to restore order and control to our borders.

David Burton-Sampson: In my constituency I have launched the We Love Westcliff campaign, which, as well as promoting greater civic pride, aims to drive down antisocial behaviour such as fly-tipping and drug dealing. What support will the new neighbourhood policing teams provide to help us to achieve that goal?

Shabana Mahmood: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign. Essex police have been allocated £4.5 million, which will fund 74 more neighbourhood police officers in 2025-26. They will provide a visible and engaging police presence, build strong relationships with local communities, and tackle the issues that my hon. Friend has raised.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): We now know that Alaa Abd el-Fattah expressed racist, anti-white, antisemitic and violent views. Members of the present and the last Government say that they did not know about that beforehand, and of course I accept those assurances, but now that we do know about those disgusting comments, will the Home Secretary use her powers under section 40(2) of the British Nationality Act 1981 to revoke his citizenship and deport him on the basis that he meets the statutory test in subsection (2), namely that he is not

“conducive to the public good”?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me say first that those tweets and those comments are absolutely abhorrent, and that I share the horror and revulsion felt across the country by all who have now seen and read them. The shadow

Home Secretary used to be the Immigration Minister, and he will know that the power to deprive an individual of citizenship—which, of course, was granted by the last Government in this case—is used in a very specific way to deal with the most harmful offenders, particularly serious and organised criminals and those who pose a threat to national security. I do not propose to change the basis on which those deprivation powers are used.

Chris Philp: The statutory test is “conducive to the public good”,

and the Home Secretary could use that. Will she now confirm that she will use every legal mechanism to prevent the return to the United Kingdom of Shamima Begum, who chose to support the Daesh regime that murdered civilians, raped thousands of women and girls, and killed people for being gay? More broadly, does she agree that anyone who espouses extremist, racist or antisemitic views or supports terrorism, and who is not a British citizen, should be deported from this country immediately? She has those powers; will she use them?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me be very clear. The case in relation to Shamima Begum was litigated by the last Government all the way to the UK Supreme Court, which did not hear the last appeal because all legal questions have now been dealt with. We as a Government have accepted that position, and our position on this case will not change. We will robustly defend it in the European Court of Human Rights. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, I cannot give more detail on the case as it progresses, because it is now subject to that litigation, but this is the approach that the Government are taking, and we will defend the position that has already been set by all our courts, right up to the UK Supreme Court.

T2. [907093] **Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I recently met a group of care workers from Northwich who are here through the health and social care visa, and who are undertaking vital work with great commitment and some personal sacrifice. They spoke passionately about the unfairness of applying the proposed changes to requirements for settled status retrospectively. What assessment has the Home Secretary made of the policy’s compliance with the judgment in the case of *R (HSMP Forum Ltd) v. Secretary of State for the Home Department* in 2008, in respect of ensuring that changes made to immigration rules should not disadvantage those who had already made life-changing decisions based on the existing framework?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): In addition to what I laid out earlier in the House, the changes announced by the Home Secretary are subject to consultation, which is live and will end on 12 February. Any decision to implement these proposals will take full account of relevant legal precedent.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Home Secretary is turning heads by focusing on people arriving in this country, but the latest migration statistics show a worrying

trend in the opposite direction. The number of working-age UK nationals leaving the country is concerning from an economic and a demographic perspective. Why does the Home Secretary think that they are leaving? Is it the disastrous Brexit legacy of the Tories, the terrifying prospect of a future Reform Government or her own Government's low-octane approach to boosting young people's life chances?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member will know that the methodology has changed. In fact, the numbers have stayed relatively flat. He will also know that it is a freedom of all our citizens that if they are able to work somewhere else, they may choose to do so. This Government are not going to interfere with that.

T4. [907095] **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. My visit to France with the Select Committee on Home Affairs exposed the reality on the beaches: French officers facing pitched battles against violent smuggling gangs to stop hazardous boats launching. Many of the crossings are successfully thwarted. Does the Minister agree that the populist myth that our French partners are simply waving migrants through is not only offensive to those brave officers risking their lives but undermines the critical intelligence sharing that is needed to address this sinister trade, and that the support provided by the Sandhurst funding is money well spent?

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work in this area and to the Select Committee for its work and its recent visit. My experience of working with France is that it wants to solve the shared challenge. There is no silver bullet, but my hon. Friend has mentioned ways in which it can be solved. That is why we have the "one in, one out" pilot, as well as our ordinary day-to-day intelligence co-operation. We want to do more with our neighbours and solve this problem together.

T7. [907098] **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), does the Home Secretary not appreciate how worrying it is to hear about the numbers of young people leaving this country? These people are literally the future of this country. What measures is her Department taking to disincentivise young people from emigrating? Does she agree that a youth mobility scheme with the European Union that allowed young people to work in Europe without needing to take the drastic step of leaving altogether would help?

Shabana Mahmood: I repeat that the numbers have stayed relatively flat. I think that the hon. Member is imputing a motive to those individuals that has not yet been stood up by any of the data or the evidence. He will know that we are pursuing discussions in relation to a youth mobility scheme with our partners in Europe.

T5. [907096] **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Because of antisocial behaviour, including drug dealing and public injecting, Upper Charminster community action group has activated a community safety trigger, and this month we will have a case review. I thank the group and Queen's Park councillor Sharon Carr-Brown

for their focus on antisocial behaviour. Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing to tackle antisocial behaviour in Bournemouth and beyond?

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): Antisocial behaviour is a scourge that has gone untackled for too long. We are funding hotspot policing in our town centres and other areas in which antisocial behaviour is rife; that is having an impact. Our neighbourhood policing guarantee, which will mean 3,000 more police on our streets by next March, will have an impact. We are introducing respect orders, which will be a really useful tool to tackle prolific antisocial behaviour offenders. The message has to be loud and clear: we will not accept this behaviour, and the police are responding.

T10. [907101] **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Before Christmas, we had a cross-party retail crime summit in Bexhill, with the police and local council in attendance, to help shopkeepers to have their voice heard. At the same time, Katy Bourne, the Sussex police and crime commissioner, is using criminal behaviour orders in a pilot to tag prolific offenders. These are really positive initiatives. Will the Minister agree to meet us to discuss how we can further roll them out?

Sarah Jones: Yes. I was really pleased that charges for shop theft increased by 25% in the year to June 2025, because the police are taking these issues seriously: they are really getting in there, working with our retailers, getting the prolific offenders and tackling the issue. I am always very pleased to meet.

T6. [907097] **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. Many fantastic businesses in my constituency are facing daily struggles with crime. Many shop workers and police have to face issues with aggressive behaviour and shoplifting. Many of the people doing it are repeat offenders who have already been arrested and released for similar crimes. The police are doing all they can, but the system is allowing offenders to return to exactly the same place, ensuring that the cycle of violence and harassment can continue. When the system is flawed, the community is let down and the police are already overstretched, does the Minister agree that offenders should not be allowed to return to the area and the businesses in which they have committed their offences? Will she meet me, local businesses, local shop workers and local police to find a solution?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is right: 20% of offenders are responsible for 80% of crime. We need to ensure that repeat offenders are targeted, and that is what the police are doing. There is a raft of tools that we can use, but partnerships between the police and the retail sector are key. The number of shop theft charges has increased, but we need to look at other measures, such as treatment when people have drug addiction and other such issues. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Sussex police is one of the most underfunded forces in England, with the number of officers per resident 27% below the national average. Following the national decrease in police officers during the first year of this Government, will the Home Secretary commit to ensuring that police officer numbers go up in 2026?

Sarah Jones: I will just repeat the statistic: 94% of the fall in officer headcount in 2024-25 came during the last four months of the previous Government. Total funding for 2026-27 is £18.3 billion, which is a £746 million increase on the previous year.

T8. [907099] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Cambridge University Press & Assessment has long experience of conducting in-country English tests for those seeking to come to the UK, but it is concerned that the Home Office is moving too quickly to a new digital system whereby applicants do not have to attend in person to be tested. It fears that the scope for impersonation remains too high, so will the Minister review that change?

Mike Tapp: The Home Office English language testing procurement has formally launched. Given that there is a live process, I will not comment on that specifically. However, I can assure my hon. Friend that the delivery model must meet appropriate integrity requirements.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Nearly 17,000 companies licensed to sponsor worker visas have five or fewer employees, and over 3,000 of these have just one employee. Ministers have been unable to tell me how many inspections have been made of companies since the general election. How sure is the Home Secretary that these are not bogus companies offering a back door to Britain?

Mike Tapp: Any UK business can apply for a sponsor licence, provided that it complies with the relevant requirements. I will take that point away, look at it and come back to the hon. Member with more detail.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): In the light of the appalling antisemitic terror attack at Bondi Beach, the faith communities in Aylesbury are scared. I welcome the Government's funding to protect places of worship, but it does not extend to my local Jewish community, who do not have their own synagogue. What further measures will the Minister consider to ensure that all faith communities, even those without their own premises, are well protected?

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): As the Home Secretary has said, we were all appalled by the antisemitic terror attack at Bondi Beach. As my hon. Friend will know, all faith communities should be able to worship in peace and without fear. That is why the Government are investing £70.9 million in 2025-26 to strengthen security at places of worship. I listened carefully to the point she raised and would be very happy to discuss it with her further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): As a fellow west midlands MP, the Home Secretary will be aware that policing in her constituency is incredibly different from policing in Staffordshire Moorlands. Can she confirm that, when we get the police reform White Paper in a few weeks' time, we will not see any moves to

abolish Staffordshire police, which knows how to police Staffordshire Moorlands, and merge it into West Midlands police?

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Member is attempting to tempt me into commenting in a way that I know she knows I will not do. She will have to wait, as will everyone else, for the details of our proposals in the policing White Paper. However, let me assure her that the thread running right through the White Paper, and the approach that this Government and I personally will take, is to ensure that policing is fit for purpose and has the outcomes on the ground that the public rightly expect.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): For my constituents back home in Newcastle-under-Lyme, a crime is a crime wherever it takes place. Can the Minister set out what steps she will take to ensure that rural crime in my constituency and across Staffordshire is always treated with the same urgency as crime that takes place in our town and city centres?

Sarah Jones: We are supporting and working with the National Police Chiefs' Council on its new rural crime strategy, and we are working very closely with local police forces such as Thames Valley police, which has a rural crime team tackling these issues. Our neighbourhood policing guarantee applies everywhere, and all areas—rural or urban—must have the right number of people in their local community tackling crime.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): It is widely reported that the Home Secretary is a strong supporter of robust reform of the European Court of Human Rights. A large number of countries on the European continent share our concerns over that. Has she discussed them with any of her opposite numbers? In particular, where does she see the common interest in reforming the Court?

Shabana Mahmood: These are live discussions taking place not just between myself and my counterparts, but with other members of the Government. The right hon. Gentleman will have noted the political declaration achieved at the last meeting at the Council of Europe. That work was led by the Justice Secretary but was a cross-Government effort. We will continue in that vein, because reform of the European convention on human rights, and article 3 in particular, is a key part of our agenda. We will have legislation on domestic reform of article 8 in due course.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, I wish you and your team a very happy new year. I welcome the Minister's work on the defending democracy taskforce. How can MPs like me, and political parties more generally, get involved in supporting the taskforce, because I am passionate about representing Harlow and not Moscow?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. I intend for this work to be a shared endeavour right across the House. Members and their teams should remain vigilant about the threats to our democracy, particularly in the run-up to the elections in May. I again encourage take-up of the personal and online security guidance available to all Members and staff.

Any malicious activity should be reported through the appropriate channels, including the Parliamentary Security Department.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Does the Home Secretary agree that British citizens should be prioritised over asylum seekers in the allocation of publicly funded housing under the £100 million pilot scheme?

Alex Norris: The hon. Member may have heard me say earlier that we have started the process of hotel exit, which means we have reduced the amount of money we are spending on that. We want all British citizens to be adequately housed, which is why we released the homelessness strategy at the end of last year. Beyond that, we want order and control in our asylum system, so that the British people's proud record of providing shelter can continue, and so that people can have confidence in that order and control.

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): I thank the Government for maintaining the five-year pathway to settlement for Hong Kong British national overseas visa holders. In my constituency I have over 2,500 BNO visa holders. Will the Minister explain how the Department will continue to support our Hong Kong residents, now and in the future? Will he agree to meet me and my Hong Kong visa holders in Broxtowe to hear about the challenges that they continue to face?

Mike Tapp: We have continued the settlement after five years for residents, providing certainty. The new mandatory requirements on income and language we see as sensible. However, they are out for consultation and no firm decision has been made. It would be a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend and her constituents.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): On 7 October the police told a private meeting that they planned to ban Israeli fans from Villa Park. That was, to quote the minutes, "in the absence of intelligence".

On 9 October they accepted that they needed to find a more clear rationale for the decision already made. On 16 October they said they suddenly found significant intelligence for a ban. That supposedly came from a conversation with the Dutch police on 1 October, before the first meeting held in the "absence of intelligence". Does the Home Secretary believe West Midlands police—yes or no?

Sarah Jones: As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, we have asked His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to look at that and we are waiting to see what it has to say. That is absolutely the right thing to do. Did we disagree with the decision? Yes, we did. Do we want to get to the bottom of what happened? Absolutely, we do.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): In relation to the changes, announced at the end of last year, to indefinite leave to remain, my constituent Dr Matthew Hewitt advises on an issue relevant to his family and many other families across the country: that the information being put out by the Government is ambiguous as to

whether or not the shorter five-year route will remain for those currently on partner visas, or whether the baseline changes to 10 years will apply to those currently on those partner visas. I would be grateful for some clarity on that, please.

Alex Norris: The consultation document released under the settlement proposals is very clear about what deductions apply in what context and what other hurdles people may have to clear. Maybe my hon. Friend and I should have a conversation to get to the bottom of the particular example he mentions.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Rural life, particularly for those in farming communities, is more typically based on traditional roles, which can often see women marginalised in their role within the family and, sadly, more likely to be victims of abuse. Can the Minister assure me that with any new strategy on tackling violence against women and girls, women who live rurally will be able to access the support they need?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

The violence against women and girls strategy is absolutely for every woman and girl in our country. There are specific problems faced by people in rural communities, and I will gladly work with the hon. Lady and others from rural communities to get that right.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Does the Minister agree that far too much resource is being spent on exceedingly heavy-handed policing of peaceful protests, which is likely to increase with plans to restrict protests based on their supposed cumulative impact, as planned in the Crime and Policing Bill?

Sarah Jones: No, I disagree with my hon. Friend on that. Policing protests is always a balance that we have to get right: we have to respect the right to protest, but we also have to ensure the police have the powers they need to tackle issues and ensure that protests can happen peacefully, as they have done for so many years in this country.

Mr Speaker: With congratulations on his engagement, I call Ben Obese-Jecty.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

On 9 February 2020, the Home Secretary co-signed a letter to the then Prime Minister urging him to suspend a deportation flight to Jamaica for foreign national offenders. Fabian Henry, who had been convicted of grooming and raping two young girls, was removed from that flight and is believed still to be living in the UK. Having previously campaigned to keep them in the country—even demanding in this Chamber that the flight be halted—has the right hon. Lady now taken any action as Home Secretary to deport this dangerous child rapist, whom she helped to remain in the country?

Shabana Mahmood: I signed that letter because one of the individuals was a constituent of mine who had served in the British armed forces—serving this country

on two tours of Afghanistan—and was British in every meaningful way, and his case should have been looked at more by the Home Office before he was placed on that deportation flight. I will look at the details of the specific case the hon. Gentleman mentions and write to him on that.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): We continue to await a Home Office decision on the future of the Gaza student scholarship scheme. While thinking about that, will the Government commit to honouring the visas of the small number of students and their families who already have funded places to come here but have not yet been permitted to leave Gaza?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that question. As my hon. Friend says, this Government have supported Chevening scholars and those with fully funded scholarships in Gaza to come to this country to study during the 2025-26 academic year. I have heard from my hon. Friend on multiple occasions that there is demand for more support, and we are aware of that; it is, as she knows, a fluid situation on the ground, and we are looking at it closely and seeing what may be done in the future.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Iqbal Mohamed.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and a happy new year to all.

I have a constituent who was in care as a child and who was arrested at age 11, more than four decades ago, for stealing. Even though it is a minor petty crime, this juvenile crime has not been removed from their Disclosure and Barring Service certificate, and my constituent believes that this has impacted their ability to be employed in the social care sector as it appears on their DBS certificate and is not eligible for removal. Will the Home Secretary consider changes to the DBS filtering framework for petty minor offences committed by children to determine whether such offences should continue to appear on DBS certificates and later impact employment?

Jess Phillips: There is an independent system that oversees whether access to files from the DBS has been granted appropriately. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me on this specific case, I am more than happy to ensure that it is followed through.

Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief

3.44 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if she will make a statement on the changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for asking this question. I wish a happy new year to her and to all Members of the House.

The reforms announced in December go further to protect more farms and businesses while maintaining the core principle that more valuable agricultural and business assets should not receive unlimited relief.

The allowance for the 100% rate of relief for agricultural property relief and business property relief will be increased from £1 million to £2.5 million when it is introduced in April. That means that a couple will now be able to pass on up to £5 million of agricultural or business assets tax-free between them, on top of the existing allowances such as the nil rate band. Taken together with the reform announced at the recent Budget, widows and widowers will benefit from up to £2.5 million of their spouse's allowance, even if their spouse passed away many years ago.

Our changes further reduce the number of estates forecast to pay more inheritance tax, and they further reduce the liability for many of the remaining estates. Compared with Budget 2025, the number of estates claiming APR—including those also claiming BPR—affected by the reforms in the coming tax year is expected to halve, from what would have been 375 estates to just 185 estates. That means that around 85% of estates claiming agricultural property relief in 2026-27 are forecast to pay no more inheritance tax on their estates under the changes.

The Government have announced these changes after listening carefully to feedback from the farming community and family businesses, and I am pleased that the National Farmers' Union and others have welcomed the changes. Even after the reforms, the Government expect to raise around £300 million in 2029-30 from our changes to these tax reliefs. We are making fair and responsible choices to support the farming community, with a record £11.8 billion investment in sustainable farming and food production over this Parliament, and to modernise our tax system for the future.

Victoria Atkins: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this first urgent question of 2026—and what a way to open the new year, with yet another Government U-turn. But where is the Chancellor of the Exchequer? This is her tax and her U-turn, and she should explain why she did not announce this at the Budget. Over the past 14 months, farmers, rural communities and the Conservatives have campaigned relentlessly in and out of Westminster against these vindictive taxes. This U-turn acknowledges what farmers have been telling the Government from day one: Ministers have got their maths badly wrong, and many more farms and family businesses will be broken up as a result of Labour's higher taxes. Does the Minister accept that?

Why have the Government U-turned? Does it have anything to do with the recent Labour Back-Bench rebellion? Can the Minister tell the House how many family farms and non-farming family businesses will still have to pay this death tax? Are tenant farmers included, given that the now Chief Secretary to the Treasury admitted at the time that 14,000 tenant farmers were missed out of the Government's original calculations? Can the Minister also confirm whether he signed the tax information and impact note for this U-turn before the Budget?

This partial U-turn does not save every family farm and family business. Indeed, for many the U-turn simply comes too late; we have seen record farm closures under this Government, and it has taken a great personal toll on many families. Given the pain, anguish, distress and, in some cases, sorrow that this cruel tax has caused families up and down the country, will the Minister now have the good grace to apologise on behalf of the Government to farmers and family business owners?

Dan Tomlinson: The Government announced the change in December because we had continued to listen to the representatives of family businesses and the farming community. I note that the National Farmers' Union and others have welcomed the change, which will increase the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million.

I think it is the right change to make, and it ensures that we get the balance right. We are still raising £300 million from the very largest estates. If the Conservatives would prefer not to raise that money and give a £1 million tax cut to an estate worth £10 million, that is their choice. It is not our choice. We think we have got to the right place on this policy and are striking the right balance—both raising revenue from those with the very largest estates, and making sure that we have a higher threshold. Because of the changes we announced at the Budget, someone in a couple will now be able to pass on up to £5 million.

I can confirm to the House that I did not sign the tax information note for the change that was announced on 23 December before the Budget. On the numbers, as I said, the number of estates affected who claim agricultural property relief—including those also claiming BPR—is expected to halve, from 375 to 185.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his answer. I was pleased to meet NFU representatives for Dartford and for Kent in late 2024 and January 2025. Following those meetings, I passed on the view to Treasury Ministers that it was right for the Government to close the inheritance tax loophole and stop the price of farmland from being inflated by people purchasing that land to avoid inheritance tax, but that the threshold should be set at a significantly higher level to reduce the risk of smaller family businesses being affected by the changes. Does the Minister agree that the reliefs are now fairer to family farms but will still achieve their purpose of reducing tax sheltering and raising vital revenue for public services?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, I do believe that we have got the balance right. It is worth noting that the top 4% of claims accounted for over half the Exchequer cost of business property relief and the top 7% of claims accounted for 40% of the Exchequer cost of agricultural property relief. That is hundreds of millions of pounds in tax

that was forgone but will now be raised under these changes from the very largest estates. I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement on this issue over recent weeks and months.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to House staff and all Members in the Chamber. This policy was a disaster from the get-go. It came with no warning, no consultation and no clue. The Liberal Democrats were the first party to point out the damage it would do to family farms. We have repeatedly and clearly highlighted that it would fail to tackle the loopholes exploited by private equity companies but hammer the family farm, damaging our food security in the process. The changes are welcome, but they do not touch the sides, and they are a clear admission by the Government that they have got it badly wrong.

There is now only one sensible course of action left: to scrap the policy in its entirety. Will the Government now do that? If not, the Liberal Democrats will table amendments to the Finance Bill to bring this measure down. Will the Government allow a free vote so that those on their own Benches who want to vote against the measure are free to do so?

Dan Tomlinson: I am always interested in reading Liberal Democrat amendments, even though none of them will ever get passed in this House—not least on this measure, where we have got to the right position. The changes that will be in the Finance Bill will raise about £300 million. It is a legitimate position for the Liberal Democrats to say they do not wish to raise that revenue and that instead they would borrow more money or cut public spending on services like our NHS. That is not our position. We think that this is a fair and proportionate reform.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this sensible compromise and point out that the £800 million put into the environmental land management scheme in 2023-24 will become £2 billion by 2028-29, along with the sustainable farming incentive being reintroduced in April, the land use framework and the farming road map. Does the Minister agree that the Labour Government are now well on track to raise food security and help our family farmers?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her work on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on this and many other important issues that affect rural communities up and down the country, as well as in her constituency—a fantastic part of the world that I am sure I will be able to visit soon. She is right that the Government are taking steps—for example, through our £11.8 billion fund to support sustainable farming and food production—and I look forward to working with Ministers in other Departments and across Government to ensure that we continue to support our rural and farming communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome this announcement and I pay the warmest possible tribute to the farming unions and others whose tireless campaigning since the Budget of 2024 has made this happen. These changes make the policy better, but that is not the same as saying that they make it good. It is surely bizarre that in 2025, two farms could both be valued at £5 million but one of them would pass free of inheritance tax while the other had an inheritance tax bill of £500,000. Surely the Government now have to publish the impact assessment that they have presumably done so that we can all see the reasons for this change and have some confidence that they have got the figures right this time.

Dan Tomlinson: The figures that the Government have published on this change and at previous Budgets are drawn from actual claims and from engagement with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs on both APR and BPR. That analysis shows that before this change, up to 275 estates a year would have been affected, and that that number is now forecast to halve to around 185. That means that around 85% of all estates claiming APR, some with BPR, will now not pay any additional tax. I stand by those figures. We published them when we made the decision and they are included in the letter that I and the Secretary of State have sent to all Members.

On the right hon. Member's point about £2.5 million or £5 million, I think he was referring to the fact that a couple can pass on up to £5 million and for a single person it is £2.5 million. That is a long-standing position. It means that the inheritance tax nil rate band and the residence nil rate band are transferable only between spouses and civil partners. Making any unused allowance transferable in the same way is consistent with that long-standing approach.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): My constituents very much welcome the changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief, which, as the Minister knows, I have raised repeatedly. The changes to the reliefs mean that family farms will be protected while large landowners who bought agricultural land simply to avoid paying tax will no longer have that loophole. Does the Minister agree that these changes show that the Labour Government are listening to rural areas and to rural Labour MPs, and that, unlike the Opposition, they are serious about proper policy development and not just headline chasing?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is right to say that we on this side of the House are the true and better representatives of the rural community. There are over 150 MPs on this side of the House who represent rural or semi-rural constituencies—I believe that there are as many Labour MPs representing rural constituencies as there are MPs on the blue Opposition Benches.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and a happy new year to you and your staff. Farmers in my constituency will welcome this change to the thresholds for APR and BPR. However, it took 14 months to achieve it and rural communities really do feel discriminated against by some of the measures

[*Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

that this Government are taking against them. I ask the Minister to convey to his colleague, the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, who is sitting on the Treasury Bench, that the Government should not enact any changes to shooting or trail hunting, because to do so would really damage and annoy rural communities?

Dan Tomlinson: We will be going ahead with the changes that were set out in our manifesto and that have been announced recently. I think that that is the right thing for us to do.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Happy new year to you and the team, Mr Speaker.

I start by thanking the Minister and his Department for working actively with rural colleagues and myself for the last 14 months. In the many conversations that we have had, both face to face and in wider correspondence, we have set out the huge number of issues that are well known to this House, but at the heart of this, and the reason that so many of us are concerned, is the lack of profitability in farming. Baroness Batters' report will go a huge way towards addressing some of the systemic issues in farming, but does the Minister agree that we also need to tackle supermarkets and unfair practices and to address lots of the long-standing issues, and that the Treasury as a whole needs to continue to engage with rural MPs to make sure that we introduce further reforms to support farming profitability?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, too, for her work on the Select Committee, and for representing rural communities, including hers. My understanding is that Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Government are looking at what more we can do to ensure that farmers receive a fair price for their products. Of course, we support having a competitive supermarket and retail system in this country, so that we can have low prices for consumers, but we have to ensure that those prices are fair for farmers, and for the communities up and down the country that we rely on to produce good British produce.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): This policy has caused huge stress for rural communities across North Yorkshire. What discussions is the Minister having inside government about other policies, such as the policy on rates for public houses in rural areas, to ensure that this error is not made again?

Dan Tomlinson: Of course, as the tax Minister—that is why I am at the Dispatch Box today, to address a point made earlier—I look continually at what improvements we can make to our tax system to ensure that we continue to support both rural and urban constituencies and communities up and down the country. If there are changes that the right hon. Member would like to see, he is of course welcome to write to me, on that or any other matter.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I have worked extensively with the National Farmers Union and its Welsh branch, and with the Ulster Farmers' Union in Northern Ireland. These changes are very much welcome, but I say to the Minister—and to the Minister for Food

Security and Rural Affairs, who is sitting next to him—that it is important that we have these conversations with Labour MPs and Members from across the House at every opportunity, because this has damaged our farming communities. I also have no truck with what the Opposition say, because I have been in opposition and I know what it is like. Conservative Members let our farmers down. We are getting to the heart of this, fixing the situation, and supporting our rural communities properly, and I welcome the changes, especially for my constituents in Gower.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution, for the experience and expertise that she brings to the House as Chair of the Select Committee, and for the important work that she has done on this and other issues. The changes that we have made to this policy mean that it is now fair and balanced, and protects more farms. As I have said, the number of estates expected to pay more tax will halve. We Labour Members and the Government can hopefully continue to focus on what we can do to support our farming and rural communities—for example, on the £11.8 billion of investment that we are putting in over the course of this Parliament.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Our farming and rural communities in Cumbria and right across Britain should be utterly proud of themselves, because this U-turn is their victory, and I pay tribute to them. However, the appalling emotional and economic damage done to farmers over the last 14 months has been cruel and will have a lasting impact. Will the Minister apologise to the farming community for the last 14 months, and recognise that many hill farms in Cumbria will still be hit by this tax, because they are worth more than £2.5 million, although their average income is less than the minimum wage? Does this tax not remain an attack on British farming and on food security?

Dan Tomlinson: If the Government had not made these changes in December, Opposition Members would have been standing here asking us to make those changes. We are coming forward with a revised position—we are increasing the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million—and Members are criticising us for that change. We think it is the right thing to do, and we are doing it in good time—before the Finance (No.2) Bill, in which these changes will be made, is voted into law later this year.

Yes, some estates—the very largest—will continue to pay more after these changes, but it is worth bearing in mind that, relative to the position of a few months ago, estates worth £2.5 million will now pay significantly less; there is a £300,000 reduction in their tax liability. For an estate worth £5 million, it is a £600,000 reduction. These are significant reductions in the amount of tax that the very largest estates will have to pay, but we do think that it is right and fair to continue with a reform that strikes the right balance between the need to raise more revenue and the need to protect smaller family farms.

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): I wish you, my constituents in North Somerset, House staff and hon. Members a happy new year, Mr Speaker. I welcome the Government's decision to amend the thresholds for

APR and BPR, as do rural communities in my constituency, and extend my thanks to the organisations that campaigned for this outcome, such as the NFU. However, this is only one part of a larger problem. For 50 years, our country has witnessed the gradual erosion of our rural community sustainability, national food security and farm profitability. I look forward to 2026 being the year that the farming sector gets the wider change that it needs in order for the new year to be happy and profitable.

Dan Tomlinson: I wish my hon. Friend's constituents a happy new year. The Batters review, which was published just a few weeks ago, set out ideas that the Government can take forward to ensure that farming can be profitable and sustainable. I know that Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and across Government will continue to work on those important objectives.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Although I welcome this announcement, which directly contradicts what the Secretary of State told me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) on the day that the House rose for Christmas, is the Minister aware that a significant number of my constituents who farm in the Dengie peninsula and elsewhere will still face a significant inheritance tax bill that may prevent them from passing on their farm, as they inherited it, to their children? If the Minister is anxious about the scheme being used for tax avoidance, will he reconsider the NFU's suggestion that there be a clawback mechanism, which would allow the Government to take back the exemption if a farm was sold within a certain period after inheritance?

Dan Tomlinson: No, we will not be considering the clawback proposals put forward. Instead, the Government have come forward with the change that was announced in December, which increases the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million. It is worth remembering that the tax rate paid above the higher threshold is half the rate that anyone else who has sufficient assets would pay if they were liable for inheritance tax, and that any tax liability can be paid interest-free over 10 years. On balance, while these changes will affect some of the very largest estates—the Government have published the numbers, which are based on the actual claims data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs; it estimates that fewer than 200 estates will pay additional tax—almost all the estates paying additional tax will pay significantly less than they would otherwise have done, because we have listened to family businesses and farming communities.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Although this issue is clearly of importance to the farming industry, it is also of importance to small firms in the steel and engineering sector in my constituency. The owner of Special Quality Alloys, Benn Beardshaw, wrote to tell me that the firm had been in the family for many years, and had been passed on from one generation to another. He was really concerned that the measure as initially proposed could lead to a break-up of that important firm, which has won the Queen's award for enterprise, or to it being sold off. Will the Minister confirm that this measure will equally help those sorts of small businesses, which are vital to the overall wellbeing of the steel and engineering sector in Sheffield?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which has given me a chance to return to a question that the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), asked, but that I did not quite get to—he will have to forgive me. I will put on record for the House that the number of estates claiming only business property relief is set to fall from 325 to 220 a year as a result of our increasing the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million.

I have met representatives of Family Business UK. I know that, as well as having private conversations about APR, Labour Members have been discussing the BPR proposals with the Government. The uplift in the threshold will mean that family businesses that people wish to pass on will now be subject to a lower tax rate, or will not have to pay the tax at all in many cases.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I find it interesting that the Minister says that this is the right policy. That is what the Government said on 23 December, but not what they said at oral questions on 18 December—the day before we rose for recess. I have spoken to farmers who will now not be affected by the tax, but who have spent cashflow and hard-earned savings on financial advice to ameliorate their position. Things are not getting easier for farmers; just this morning, one of my local farmers got in touch to say that he was informed on new year's day that his milk supply faces a 3p per litre cut. What is the Government's assessment, alongside what is in the Batters report, of the ongoing financial impact on farmers, be it of poor Government policy or of poor supply chain practices?

Dan Tomlinson: Earlier in the year, Members asked us about making these changes, and we have come forward with a revised proposal that includes a higher threshold. That is the right thing to do; it shows that we have listened to representations from the farming and business communities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) mentioned. The Batters report, which was published on 18 December, made a number of recommendations. We will take forward many of those proposals to ensure that we support increased profitability for farmers and continue to work on important sustainability initiatives.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): I was grateful for the opportunity to meet the Chancellor recently to highlight the impact that the changes to APR and BPR would have had on farmers in Derbyshire Dales. I therefore sincerely thank the Minister and the Chancellor for listening to me and other members of the Labour rural research group, and raising the tax-free allowance. Since the change was announced, more than 100 farmers have written to me to say how pleased they are about it. One farmer said:

"This has been hanging over me all year, making me ill, and I can't believe the relief I'm feeling right now."

Will the Minister or the Chancellor take the opportunity to visit a farm in Derbyshire Dales to see for themselves the positive difference that this change has made?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his invitation. I will pass it on to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and will carefully consider it myself.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Minister referred to the importance of manifesto commitments. Where in the Labour manifesto did it say that there would be any tax restrictions on inheritance for farmers? In fact, when they were in opposition, did Ministers not go around promising not to impose such a tax? They then did precisely the opposite. When he talks about manifesto commitments, will he have a slightly less selective memory and avoid misconstruing the position of the NFU, which is still in favour of the abolition of the tax altogether? Tom Bradshaw is my constituent. I hope that the Minister will send him his best wishes and congratulate him on exposing the Government's hypocrisy.

Dan Tomlinson: I had the pleasure of meeting Mr Bradshaw last year. The NFU published statements—both at the time of the announcement and around the turn of the year—welcoming the changes that the Government have proposed. The hon. Gentleman asks about manifesto commitments. We were very clear in our manifesto that we would return economic stability to this country, putting behind us the chaos of Liz Truss and the chaos that the Conservatives left us with. Part of that is about ensuring that we do not continue to borrow at excessive levels, as they did, but bring borrowing down—[*Interruption.*] Borrowing is coming down in every single year of the next five years. We are ensuring that we can raise, in a fair and sustainable way, the revenue to fund our public services.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I hugely welcome these changes, which have been met with real relief by the farmers in my constituency, and I am grateful to the farmers who fed in their perspectives to me over the last year and allowed me to pass them on to the Treasury. Can the Minister reassure me and my local farmers that he will continue to listen and engage with our farming communities in this way, recognising the inherent value of farming, but also the great contribution it makes to the economy and our food security?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for the conversations that I know she has had with Ministers on this and other issues in recent weeks and months. Yes, we will continue to do all we can to support farmers and the farming industry in this country. That is part of why we are working hard on trade deals, to make sure we can improve access to markets for farmers here in the UK so they can export more of their produce overseas.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I pay tribute to the Minister: he is back out again doing a sterling job of being a totally discredited Chancellor's human shield. He will remember the Finance Bill that we debated just before Christmas, which took three hours in this place, and two hours of that was taken up with agricultural property relief, as I pointed out to him at the time. He wants us to believe that he has moved this policy into an acceptable position, but it is no such thing: this is a policy that Labour expressly said they would not enact, and then they did it, and now they have made it slightly less bad. I and the NFU Scotland are firmly opposed to this in its entirety, so will he take a win for a hard-up Government and pause this policy pending a proper analysis?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, we did discuss this at Treasury questions and on Second Reading of the Finance Bill, and we will have time to discuss it in the Committee of the whole House next week too—and I can see from the number of Members wishing to speak now that there are many more questions coming so we may have many more hours today, Mr Speaker, to discuss it as well. In the end, the position that the Government have now reached is that we are going to amend the Finance Bill to make this change and increase the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million. That will, we expect—and it will be confirmed by the Office for Budget Responsibility in the usual way at fiscal events—raise £300 million, money that we can put into our public services, rather than continue the chaos of previous years with additional borrowing. It is right to look in the round at fair and necessary tax changes that we can make on those with the broadest shoulders, so that we can fund our public services adequately.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to Carlisle NFU and my constituents who have raised this issue with me over the last 14 months, and I thank the Minister and his colleagues for engaging constructively and listening to those representations. North Cumbrian farmers face land price increases as a result of forestry firms snapping up large parcels of land and large landowners seeking to abuse the IHT system by hiding their wealth, and this is an important step in balancing the need to tackle that abuse and rising land prices and the need to raise the revenue required for our village schools, local health services and to tackle crime. Does the Minister agree that this now achieves that balance?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her strong representation of rural constituents and rural communities. She makes a very important point. It is worth noting that this is a tax relief, and the tax relief as it stood before the changes that the Government have come forward with since the 2024 Budget meant that the top 7% of claims for agricultural property relief accounted for 40% of the Exchequer cost of the relief. That meant £219 million in foregone tax revenue—revenue that, by and large, this Government will now be raising from the very largest estates to help fund our public services in a sustainable way. The Opposition were never able to do that because of their chaotic management of the economy and the public finances.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The Government have heard from these Benches time and again about the impact the family farm tax has had on food security and the risk to countryside stewardship and our environment and the economic viability of farms, but also, crucially, about the impact on farmers' mental health. My question to the Minister is simple: on behalf of farmers across Chester South and Eddisbury, why did this decision take so long?

Dan Tomlinson: The Government wanted to ensure that the changes that we are legislating for in the Finance Bill in the coming weeks came forward before that Bill was passed. We have continued to listen to farming communities and family businesses. The changes with which we have come forward, including increasing the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million, coupled with

the changes announced in last year's Budget, will mean that a couple can pass on up to £5 million of agricultural or business assets tax free, which we think is a fair and proportionate way to raise revenue from some of the largest estates in the country.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): South Norfolk is home to 400 farms, and I put on record my thanks to Will, Nick, David and Deborah, who are some of the farmers have supported me hand in glove over the past 14 months in making representations to the Minister. I welcome these changes, but the biggest threat to family farming in South Norfolk right now is biosecurity risk. I urge the Treasury to pay special attention to avian influenza and African swine fever, so that we can protect those family farms going forward.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for the strong representation that he has provided for his constituents since he was elected in 2024, and for raising an important issue. I am sure that DEFRA Ministers are alive to that issue and will continue to have conversations with hon. Members.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): I refuse to call this property relief on what is an absolutely new tax, but will the Minister tell us if the agricultural property tax threshold will rise in line with agricultural land prices?

Dan Tomlinson: The Government have set the thresholds for tax policies over the period of the OBR's forecast, and it would not be right for me to comment on the changes that may or may not happen after that. May I say to the right hon. Gentleman that throughout the time that Margaret Thatcher was in power, we did not have a system like the current system, so he is not quite right to say that this relief has always been there? It was not there when the political hero of many Conservative Members was in power.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to all your team. I welcome the Minister's comments. I thank DEFRA and Treasury Ministers for engaging with farmers and National Farmers Union members in my constituency, and for listening to their views. Farming has had a terrible decade—much longer than 14 months—with rural services cut, farming budgets unspent, failed Brexit plans and trade deals that sold out British farmers. Does the Minister agree with me that with the changes that we have made to APR, the findings of the Batters review and the funding that this Government are putting in place, we can now turn a corner on that terrible decade for British farming?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend's powerful contribution. He made important points about how the trade deals negotiated by the previous Government undermined British farming and that there was no consistency of investment and support for farmers up and down the country. What do rural communities think about that? At the last general election, they turfed out hundreds of Conservative rural MPs and elected over 150 Labour MPs to represent rural and semi-rural constituencies. Labour Members are now the mainstream voice of rural communities up and down the country.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The psychological impact of the past 14 months has been profound in rural places like North Shropshire. At every primary school visit that I have made in the past 14 months, I have been asked by children as young as seven or eight to confirm that I oppose the family farm tax, because it is having a devastating impact on their families at home. The uncertainty has also had a devastating impact on related businesses, such as agricultural machinery suppliers. It will continue to have an impact by making business owners deliberately keep their businesses small so that they do not have to pay inheritance tax, because they cannot sell off part of their farms as they will no longer be viable. Why are the Government continuing with this daft policy of restricting growth in rural areas?

Dan Tomlinson: The Government want to support growth and investment in rural communities. That is why we are putting in £11.8 billion of support over the course of this Parliament and ensuring that we improve our economy and our economic fortunes across the board as a country after the chaos of the last 14 years. We have had six interest rate cuts in a row, borrowing costs are coming down, and inflation is falling faster than people forecast—it is now forecast to continue to fall. All those long-term changes to improve our economic outlook will support businesses in rural communities and communities across the country.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): May I put on record my thanks to farmers such as Nick, Mac, Debbie, James and Graham in the Northumberland branch of the NFU in my constituency? I was in contact with them regularly, and they welcomed the Minister to my constituency to hear at first hand about the potential impact of the policy had it not been changed. I urge him to impress on colleagues the importance of buying British wherever possible. The best way to improve farming profitability is to ensure that much of the public sector food procurement is done with British farms and to ensure that farmland is not lost. To replace potential food-producing land, more food-producing land does not need to be cut out of forests elsewhere in the world.

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for inviting me to his constituency last year; I believe it was shortly after I was made a Minister on 1 September. It was a very productive and useful visit, and I thank the farmers and members of the community I met when I went to a lovely café and had some lovely tea and cake with my hon. Friend and those farmers. It was a really helpful conversation for me, and I am thankful to him for his representations on behalf of his constituents over many months. I want to work with him on procurement and ensuring that we can continue to support farmers and farming communities; I know that Ministers across Government, particularly in DEFRA, will continue to do that in the months and years ahead so that we can turn the page on the chaos we had under the previous Government.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I cannot adequately put into words the fear, concern and stress that farmers in my constituency and right across the country have felt as a result of the policy announced at the Government's first Budget.

[Sir Gavin Williamson]

That same fear is now being felt in rural pubs up and down the country due to the changes to business rates. Will the Minister apologise to those farmers for the fear, stress and cost that he has put them all through? Will he indicate to many publicans across Staffordshire that the Government are going to U-turn on business rates so that they do not close rural pubs?

Dan Tomlinson: The Government have been listening to rural communities, farming representatives and the representatives of family businesses. That is why, after listening, we have come forward with these changes, which we think strike the right balance between the necessary impulse to ensure a fair and sustainable tax system and continuing to protect smaller businesses and farms. I am sure that we will have many more chances in this place to continue to discuss business rates.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): This is very welcome news, and many farmers in my constituency will be delighted. May I acknowledge the Minister's engagement on this subject and the many conversations he has had with myself and other Labour party representatives from rural communities? I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for her role as the chair of the Labour Rural Research Group and her advocacy for hundreds of farmers across the country. It is fair to say that the changes to APR are part of a long list of concerns for farmers in this country—concerns that were increased over 14 years of Conservative Government, when we saw a huge decline in farming. May I invite the Minister to join me in a new year's resolution to work with Treasury colleagues to do more and to do all that we can possibly do to support farming in this country?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his reminder that the previous Government and previous Conservative Prime Ministers were roundly rejected by the country at the last general election. People in rural communities and communities up and down the country voted for change for the better with this Labour Government and for a Government who will continue to represent and support farming communities up and down the country. Let me praise my hon. Friend on his recent appointment to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, to which I know he will provide an invaluable contribution in his continued representation of rural communities.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I wish you and the staff of the House a happy new year, Mr Speaker.

Regardless of the reason for the change in policy—whether it is simply fear of the electoral consequences of breaking election and manifesto promises to farmers, or a belated recognition of the importance of the farming industry to feeding the nation in an increasingly unstable world—I welcome these changes. However, I would point out to the Minister that despite his assurances, 25% of farmers in Northern Ireland will still fall over the threshold he has announced, which will have an impact on family farms because of the cost of land and so on. Having seen the disaster of the policy, does he accept that the only answer is to abolish it altogether?

Dan Tomlinson: No, I do not accept that. That is not the answer.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his considered engagement with rural Labour MPs such as myself on this issue from the get-go. I also thank farmers—at least in my part of Cornwall—for their dignified engagement at what I know has been a difficult time. Does the Minister agree that where we have landed now strikes a much better balance, one that in relative terms favours small family farms compared with industrial concerns, institutional investors and those looking to use agricultural property as a means of avoiding tax?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued engagement on this and a whole range of issues that affect rural communities in Cornwall—he is a strong advocate for his constituents. As he says, we have now come forward with a change in the APR and BPR thresholds to make sure we can protect those smaller family farms.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I urge colleagues to keep their questions short, and for the answers to be on point.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): This U-turn comes too late for too many. It is extraordinary to hear Labour MPs saying that their farmers are delighted; mine are sick with relief after 14 months. At the Liaison Committee, the Prime Minister accepted that he knew that some farmers had planned to take their lives or had already done so, yet it still took him well over a week to decide that rural lives matter. What was it that suddenly changed after 14 months for him to decide that our farmers should be stood by, and should not be questioning whether or not they were going to be here for next Christmas?

Dan Tomlinson: Over the course of recent months—since I have been in the Government, from September onwards—Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and from the Treasury have continued to engage with farming communities and with business communities. As has been raised by some Members today, it is worth remembering that this change affects business property relief, not just agricultural property relief. As a result of that listening and engagement, we have come forward with this change in time for it to be included in the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): This month marks 12 months since I first called on the Government to raise the APR threshold. I strongly welcome their decision to do so, and thank NFU Cymru and the Farmers' Union of Wales for their tireless campaigning. Can the Minister assure me that the Government will continue to listen to rural communities like mine?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will continue to listen to, and engage with, the over 150 Labour MPs who represent rural and semi-rural constituencies.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It really should not have taken over a year for the pleas of thousands of farmers to be heard, and for the Government to finally concede their mistake and change the disastrous

family farm tax. However, it is clear that they still simply do not understand the industry. Many farms in Glastonbury and Somerton are run by multi-generational family partnerships, rather than married couples. Those businesses will not benefit from the combined spousal allowance of up to £5 million, so will the Chancellor finally give up and completely leave farmers alone to get on with what they do best: producing food for the nation?

Dan Tomlinson: We think that continuing to raise around £300 million from this policy is the right thing to do, so that—alongside the other changes that the Government are making—we can raise revenue in a fair and sustainable way to fund our public services.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the Minister for his engagement on this issue over recent months—it has made a real difference. Given his engagement on this matter and rural issues, does he agree that this country needs a rural strategy, which this Government should be delivering?

Dan Tomlinson: This Government have our farming road map. We have also published the Batters review, and we will be taking forward many of the proposals and the recommendations in it, so that we can continue to support profitability and sustainability for farmers and our farming communities.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): A guid new year to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the staff of the House.

The past 14 months have been hell for the farmers of Dumfries and Galloway, and the Minister has made it clear that he will not apologise for that. Will he stop fantasising, like the wealthfinder general, about the money he can take out of agriculture and instead concentrate on helping British farmers to put British food on British tables?

Dan Tomlinson: We need to continue to do all we can to support British farming so that we can have more British produce on our shelves and so that countries overseas can have more British produce, too. That is why we have been working hard on our trade deals to secure more access for British farmers to markets overseas.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thoroughly welcome the increase in the threshold, and I remind the Minister that in terms of farming profitability, my Conservative predecessor—a former DEFRA Secretary—described their Australia deal as

“not actually a very good deal for the UK”.—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

The Conservatives sold out and undercut our farmers with trade deals to New Zealand, whereby we could not export to New Zealand, but it could export to us. These deals were cheered on by Reform. Will the Minister confirm that this Labour Government will never sign such incompetent and damaging deals, and that we will not take lectures on farming profitability from the Conservatives or Reform?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend gives me the chance to quote Michael Gove, who admitted that the previous Government had let down British farmers. He said:

“I can confirm I think we negotiated poorly with Australia, and New Zealand, but particularly with Australia in defence of our farmers”.

He admits that the last Government made mistakes, failing farmers on trade; I wonder whether the Opposition will do so too.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): This partial U-turn on the dreadful family farm tax is partially welcomed by farmers in Boston and Skegness, but where is the Chancellor to come and admit the error of her ways? Jobs have been lost, investment has been slashed and, tragically, lives have been lost by this grief tax. Will the Minister, at the third time of asking, apologise to the farming community?

Dan Tomlinson: As the Minister with responsibility for tax, I am here answering questions about tax, and I am happy to continue to do so. The change that the Government came forward with last month—we will be legislating for it in the Finance Bill—will increase the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million. We are doing that because we have listened to farmers and their representatives and to family businesses, too. We think that is the right thing to do, and we think it strikes the right balance.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends in DEFRA and the Treasury for listening to farming colleagues, including NFU Cymru and the Farmers Union of Wales, in making this welcome change to the proposals for agricultural property relief. It will mean that many more Welsh farms will not pay any additional inheritance tax. The Minister will know that the previous Conservative Government signed very detrimental trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand, which within 10 years will lead to limitless meat imports. Will he look carefully at what can be done now to help those Welsh family farms to maintain their farming tradition? At the moment, they will be open to severe competition, and we need to look at everything that can be done to help them.

Dan Tomlinson: The previous Government negotiated poorly when it came to trade deals. When the Conservatives negotiate, Britain loses. Labour has negotiated four new significant trade deals that will help to ensure that British businesses—farming businesses and businesses of all sorts—can access more markets, more easily. That is the right thing to do for long-term growth and productivity.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the partial U-turn. When I met a number of farmers on Boxing day, all 400 of them were very concerned that the next phase of this Government's relationship with rural Britain would be a consultation on banning trail hunting. On the basis of this experience, I think that the Minister could go back to the Treasury and ask his officials to put together a team to work very closely with their counterparts in DEFRA to absolutely ensure that the farmers' obligation, and indeed their true intent—to produce food and be good stewards of the environment—

[John Glen]

can be combined, and to ensure that never again in the course of this Parliament will such measures be undertaken as they were last year.

Dan Tomlinson: The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned the issue of trail hunting. That was in our manifesto, and it is part of our animal welfare strategy to continue with some important changes there. I think it right for governing parties to make progress on the commitments that they made when they stood before the country.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I welcome the Government's changes in their plans in relation to inheritance tax on farmers and family businesses. The current system does not work. We need a tax regime that protects genuine family farms but does not let the super-rich dodge tax by buying up land, and many farmers in my constituency have the same concerns about that, but they have also made it very clear to me that the £1 million threshold was too low and would have a significant and detrimental impact on farming in my constituency. Along with many other Labour Members in rural seats, I have made that case to Ministers directly, and I am very pleased that the Govt are raising the threshold to £2.5 million, because that will make a huge difference for farmers in my constituency. I am very interested to hear, though, what steps the Government will be taking—and what steps the Minister can take, with colleagues—to ensure that profitability is at the forefront of our work with farmers, particularly on things like—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

Dave Robertson: I will leave it there.

Dan Tomlinson: The Batters review focused closely on this, and we will be looking at its proposals and recommendations, and ensuring that we can do all that we can as a Government, within the constraints that we have, to continue to focus on improving farming profitability.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Here is a new year tip: look at your question, cross most of it out, and then continue.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): In my constituency, we have not just a lot of farmers but a huge number of other businesses and livelihoods that rely on those farmers, and the whole of that rural economy has been negatively impacted over the last 14 months. Will the Minister undertake not just to apologise to communities like mine, but to ensure that the Government will genuinely start listening to rural communities? At the moment, they do not feel listened to, understood by or even cared for by this Government.

Dan Tomlinson: We will continue to listen to rural communities, and to farming communities, to make sure that we can support them as they seek to grow and invest in their businesses in order to improve and support the communities that they are part of. It is because we have been listening to the representatives of farming communities and family businesses that we have come forward with the changes that we think strike the right balance.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome this sensible compromise, and thank the members of the NFU in Devon for their work and for talking to me, both here and in Exeter. The Government's support for nature-friendly farming through environmental land management schemes is to increase from £800 million a year to £2 billion a year over the coming years. Can the Minister confirm that they are taking the necessary steps to ensure that we can, in a sustainable and environmentally-friendly way, produce the food that we need in this country?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for the engagement that we have had on this and other issues that affect his constituency, which I know contains some rural elements. He has raised an important point. We need to continue to work in partnership with farmers, and with their representatives and trade bodies, to make sure that we can support sustainable food production in the UK, and we are investing £11.8 billion of support over this Parliament.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I thank all the South Shropshire farmers and businesses for their tireless campaign. They were continually told by the Government that they were wrong, but they have now been proved right. They are still telling me that this tax is wrong. The family farm tax is not right. Will the Minister apologise for the heartache, pain and suffering that he has caused South Shropshire farmers and businesses, and scrap the tax completely?

Dan Tomlinson: We will not be scrapping this tax completely. We have tabled an amendment that the House will have the chance to debate next week in Committee of the whole House on the Finance Bill. We think that the proposals that we plan to implement will raise £300 million in a fair way and protect smaller family farms.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Last month, I visited Portnellan farm in my West Dunbartonshire constituency. I received a very warm and courteous welcome from husband and wife farmers David and Freda and their son Chris. The Scott-Parks run their family farm and were keen for me to hear and see at first hand the challenges that they face in ensuring that the next generation can continue to farm at Portnellan. I listened to their request that we review the original proposals. Does the Minister agree that 85% of all farming estates will now be protected from inheritance tax but, importantly, that we will maintain the original principle that tax avoiders should not use land to avoid tax at the expense of hard-working family farmers such as the Scott-Parks?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If someone has agricultural or business assets worth £2.5 million, for example, they will now pay £300,000 less in inheritance tax than they would otherwise have paid; if they are worth £5 million, they will pay £600,000 less than they would have paid before the changes that we announced last month. The challenge of the proposals from the Opposition parties is that they would provide a £1 million tax cut to an estate worth £10 million. Their priority is clearly giving the very largest estates in this country tax cuts worth millions or even tens of millions, rather than using revenue in a fair way to fund our public services.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Farmers in North Herefordshire welcome this change, as do I, but there are still huge problems with the policy: it does not even fix the tax loophole for people who buy up land to avoid tax, and it has created huge economic damage and heartache in farming communities. First, why did it take more than a year to listen to farmers' voices? Secondly, will the Treasury please engage brain before announcing policy in future, and listen to and work with farming communities?

Dan Tomlinson: We will, of course, continue to engage with, listen to and work with farming communities on the policies that we are putting forward. It is interesting to see and hear that there is at least one wealth tax that the Green party does not support.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I thank farmers in my constituency of Banbury and Chipping Norton for engaging constructively with me on the issue—well, the vast majority of them, anyway. I know that they will welcome these changes, as they will welcome the record £1.8 billion investment in sustainable farming and food production provided by this Government. However, they are concerned about trade deals, having been left high and dry by the previous Government, so will the Minister confirm that this Government will protect farmers, not sell them down the river as happened previously?

Dan Tomlinson: Having grown up in rural west Oxfordshire, I know the importance of farming and rural communities in the fantastic county of Oxfordshire, which thankfully now does not have a single Conservative MP—long may that continue. It is a very good thing that we have strong Labour representatives in north Oxfordshire who are continuing to fight the good fight for their communities.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): This partial U-turn on the family farm tax is undoubtedly welcome, but does the Minister understand the hell that he has put farmers through during the past 14 months, not just in my constituency but across the United Kingdom? He should do the right thing and scrap this dreadful, dreadful tax.

Dan Tomlinson: We will not be going ahead with the hon. Member's proposal of scrapping this change entirely.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I put on the record my thanks to the farmers in my constituency of Harlow who have engaged really productively on the issue. In particular, I pay tribute to Richard and Jack Scantlebury of Great Canfield. Can the Minister talk further about how the record investment of £11.8 billion in sustainable farming can help to benefit farmers such as Jack and Richard in my constituency?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is right that we are putting that amount in over the course of this Parliament to support innovation, agritech and all the things that farming businesses can and should do to invest and grow and to support their communities. That is the right thing to do, and it is turning the page on the chaos and the underfunding of previous years.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Minister said that this reversal of plans to introduce inheritance tax on many farming families has happened "after listening carefully to feedback from the farming community". This news just before Christmas was indeed a massive relief, but given that the farming community did not say anything in December that it had not been saying for the previous 13 months, will the Government listen properly in future?

Dan Tomlinson: Yes, the Government will make sure that we do continue to listen.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for listening and acting on the concerns that I and many other Labour MPs raised alongside our farming constituents. Now that a happier compromise has been found on inheritance tax, the issue remains one of securing a profitable future for nature-friendly farming in our country. Can the Minister provide an update on what actions the Treasury is taking to support the swift roll-out of our manifesto commitment for 50% of the food bought by the public sector to be locally produced?

Dan Tomlinson: I cannot update my hon. Friend at this moment, but I would be happy to write to him on that point.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Government say they have been listening carefully, but they had 14 months and four votes to listen to the Opposition and the farming community. One question is: what changed the Government's mind? The second question is: who made the decision—the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary, the Prime Minister or the Chancellor—and how long did they take to persuade the others to make that right decision?

Dan Tomlinson: Government decisions are made collectively. Yes, the Government have listened to farming communities and farming businesses, and to representatives of family businesses that would also have been affected by the £1 million BPR threshold, which was the same as the APR threshold.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): It was very welcome news that the Government had revisited the issues of business property relief, which will help family businesses in my constituency, and agricultural property relief, which means that up to £5 million can be passed on by a qualifying couple. It was also right that the Government considered this area as a whole, because too many people, including famous folk off the telly, had bought such properties with a view to insulating themselves against tax. Can the Minister assure me that we will take steps to support our farming community by not selling them down the river with dodgy trade deals, as we saw with Australia and New Zealand under the previous Government, and that we will work closely with our European export partners? Will he also ensure that the SFI and other subsidies get to where they need and are spent in a timely way, because they went unspent under the previous Government?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is right to mention the disastrous trade deals that happened under the previous Government, and I thank him for giving me the chance

[Dan Tomlinson]

to mention the trade deals that we have implemented, which seek to support businesses across the country to access more markets. I hope that, with our continued engagement with the European Union, we can continue to do that closer to home, too.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Does the Treasury subscribe to the general commitment that the Government have made to ensure that all policymaking considers the impact of decisions on rural areas? If it does subscribe to that rural-proofing commitment, will the Minister elaborate on how he will ensure that it is abided by in future so that rural communities, such as those in Ceredigion Preseli, are not subjected to yet another ordeal such as we have just endured?

Dan Tomlinson: I can reassure the hon. Member that I and Ministers will continue to think through the impacts on rural communities—and all communities—when we come forward with changes to tax or other policies. It is because we have done that that we came forward with the change we announced just before Christmas, and we will be making that change in the Finance Bill in the coming weeks.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): Family farms and family businesses across the Weald of Kent have been through appalling emotional turmoil in trying to work out how to avoid leaving their children unaffordable, crippling tax bills when they die. They are operating on razor-thin margins and small profits, and many of them have been forced to shell out thousands of pounds on professional services advice on this issue, which is now worthless. What does the Minister have to say to them?

Dan Tomlinson: To those families—people with farms and businesses that would have been affected by the lower threshold, but will now be affected less or not at all by the higher threshold—I would say that we have listened. Over recent months, we have heard the concerns that were raised, and that is why we have raised the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million. That means a couple can pass on up to £5 million of agricultural and business assets tax-free on inheritance. I briefly remind the House that, above that threshold, the tax rate is half the rate that everyone else pays—20% rather than 40%—and that those who pay it will, if they so need, have 10 years to pay it interest-free.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Farmers are among the most robust members of society, yet since autumn 2024 several have spoken candidly with me about the mental health impact of the family farm tax, in an industry that suffers a rate of suicide four times the national average. The changes to the Government's family farm tax are welcome, but will the Government take this opportunity to apologise to Gloucestershire farmers for 14 months of torment?

Dan Tomlinson: We have listened. We have made sure, after the engagement we have had with farmers across the country, their representatives and the representatives of family businesses, that we have come forward with a policy proposal that we, on the Government Benches, now think is balanced. It raises £300 million from the very largest estates and does so in a fair way that means we can continue to fund our public services sustainably.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Fourteen months is a long time for farmers to have the sword of Damocles over their heads. Many still do, because this is only a partial U-turn in the policy. The Minister has said many, many times today that he is and has been listening to farmers, but will it take another 14 months before he hears them and scraps this policy altogether?

Dan Tomlinson: We heard what farmers were saying and that is why we have come forward with the changes we announced last month.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Ulster Farmers' Union and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster made many representations here with regard to the damage that this policy would do to Northern Ireland farms, but there is one specific point I want to ask the Minister about. He has mentioned a number of times the allowance being passed between couples and civil partnerships. Example 2, in his own Government paper, states:

"Two people (such as siblings) who jointly own a farm will be able to pass on a farm up to £5.65 million"

under the allowance. If there is a father and daughter, uncle, aunt, niece and nephew in that partnership, can they pass on that allowance, too—seeing as he is the tax Minister?

Dan Tomlinson: They can each pass it on up to £2.5 million to whomever they choose to pass it on to. In the inheritance tax system more broadly, it is the case that the various bands and allowances are only fully transferable between spouses, and this is consistent with that policy. But it would be the case that if a farm was owned, say, by a brother and a sister, the brother could pass up to £2.5 million to whomever he wished and the sister could pass up to £2.5 million to whomever she wished. That is what example 2, which the hon. Gentleman is referring to, gets at.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Worcestershire's farmers have had to endure 14 months of sleepless nights over this policy before this partial U-turn. The Minister has hinted, at the Dispatch Box today, that he appreciates he will also have to U-turn on business property rates, because of the transitional relief coming off too quickly. Can he commit to the House that he will do that U-turn in less than 14 months?

Dan Tomlinson: We are having a discussion today about agricultural property relief and business property relief. I am sure we will have many occasions in the coming weeks and months to continue to discuss the changes that the Government have made on business rates to support businesses through the transition, because of course there has been a significant increase in their rateable values, coming out of the pandemic. I would just say to Opposition Members that the changes to the rateable values and the valuation methodology were signed off by Conservative Ministers. We have made sure that we are providing support, for example business rates will be capped at 15% for many pubs this year.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is wholly unacceptable that farming families in places such as Mellor and High Lane have had over a year of uncertainty and anguish

since the Government first announced these tax hikes. The Government got it wrong and the changes we are talking about today are welcome, but will the Minister commit to consulting farming communities before making any future changes to taxes affecting farming communities? That was the step in the process that was missed and it could have saved them 14 months of anguish, had they got it right last time.

Dan Tomlinson: Because I sign them off, I can tell the hon. Lady that there are many consultations on tax changes that we publish alongside fiscal events. If she wished to engage with the consultation on electric vehicle taxation, she could do so; if she wished to engage with the consultation on the high-value council tax surcharge that will be published shortly, she could do so too. The Government have published many consultations on tax changes, and on those where formal consultations are not published—it is not universal—we continue to engage in detail with those who are affected, as we have done with this change.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Despite many opportunities to do so, the Minister simply refuses to apologise. Despite warnings from so many organisations that this tax would do real harm, farmers, including those in my constituency, have been forced to live with fear and uncertainty for more than 14 months. Can the Minister explain what support his Department will give to the families who have shelled out money for advice and whose businesses have suffered irrevocable damage as a result of this Government?

Dan Tomlinson: I have been asked that question already by an Opposition Member, but I am happy to give the right hon. Lady a similar answer. I can say to those families that we listened carefully to the representations that were made about the level of the threshold as it was originally set at the Budget in 2024, and we have now come forward with a change to increase the threshold from £1 million to £2.5 million, which, coupled with the changes announced at the Budget in 2025, will now be transferable between spouses, allowing those families to pass on up to £5 million tax free.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker. For 14 months, I have stood here alongside my colleagues and asked various Ministers to reconsider this policy. For 14 months, farming organisations up and down the country have campaigned relentlessly against the policy. Why did it take the Government so long to listen to them? Would it not be nice if someone was able to stand at the Dispatch Box and simply say, “We’re sorry—we got this wrong. We commit now to consult with farming and rural communities on any further changes to tax reliefs affecting them”?

Dan Tomlinson: We have come forward with a change to this policy after listening to farmers and farming communities and to the representations that have been made. We think that this is the right change. We will have the chance to debate it again when we consider the Finance (No. 2) Bill in Committee of the whole House next week, when the amendment that has been tabled will be voted on. In the end, Opposition Members who wish for the Government not to go ahead with this change at all should come forward with ideas for how

they would raise £300 million from those who have the very largest estates in this country. We think it is right to raise revenue from those with the very broadest shoulders, and that is what this change will allow us to do.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): After months of sleepless nights, fear and uncertainty, this partial U-turn is a victory for farmers—I pay tribute to farmers across the country, but particularly those in my constituency of Bromsgrove and the villages. Despite the U-turn, this policy should still be scrapped. What can the Minister say to farmers regarding incentives? Where is the incentive for a farm to invest in very expensive capital equipment if it may tip them over the threshold of liability for the family farm tax?

Dan Tomlinson: Just to be clear, this policy applies only to the farming or business estates worth more than £2.5 million, or £5 million if owned by a couple. There are still significant incentives to grow and invest in people’s businesses. This tax rate is half the rate for everyone else paying inheritance tax, if they have sufficient assets to get over the threshold. I think that is worth noting. Only around the very largest 10% of estates in the country pay any inheritance tax at all.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): On behalf of the family farmers of Melksham and Devizes, can I point out that farm prices differ across the UK and that raising the level of APR to a flat £6 million, say, whether a farm belongs to a couple or to an individual farmer, would be a great help in assuring the farmers about the future, freeing them from worry and ensuring their future growing our food?

Dan Tomlinson: We think it is right to have the same level across the country. It is the same in other parts of our tax system, and it would not be right to have different tax thresholds for different small parts of the country.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I certainly welcome the increase in the threshold as far as it goes, and I commend the campaigning farmers who secured it. In explaining it today, the Minister said that the Government have “got the balance right”, but of course those are the very words that he used at the Dispatch Box and in Westminster Hall when defending the £1 million threshold, and each time he caused torment and anxiety to farming families. Is he sorry for the anxiety caused needlessly to those farmers?

Dan Tomlinson: The number of estates that will be affected by this change will fall by half as a result of the changes that the Government announced late last year after listening to representations from various business and farming communities. That means that rather than 375 estates being affected per year, it will now be closer to 185 estates affected per year. Around 85% of estates will not pay any additional inheritance tax, and the vast majority of those that do will pay significantly less than they would have done before the change we announced late last year.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I welcome the revised threshold change; it is a first step in the right direction. I thank the local farming community

[*Manuela Perteghella*]

in South Warwickshire and the National Farmer's Union in Warwickshire for their tireless campaigning. However, farmers across my constituency tell me that the changes to agricultural property relief have created many months of uncertainty, freezing investment and growth and affecting succession planning. Why did the Chancellor and her team announce changes to the agricultural property relief last year without meaningful consultation with family farmers first?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for welcoming the changes that the Government have brought forward. We did continue to engage with representatives from the farming community. I believe that the Prime Minister mentioned being in conversation with Mr Bradshaw from the NFU, and Ministers across Government have of course listened to and engaged with the farming community. I myself went up to Hexham. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) has left—for other important business, I am sure—but I met farmers in his constituency. All those different forms of engagement have proved very valuable indeed.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Farmers in Waveney Valley are relieved at this change, but they are also frustrated that the Government have not been listening about the underlying causes of why it is so difficult for farmers to make even a living wage to put food on our table. It has been obvious from the outset that the Government needed to review the threshold, so it is baffling that it took 14 months for them to do so. Does the Minister recognise the emotional and financial cost of this 14-month delay?

Dan Tomlinson: I recognise that many estates that would have been affected by the lower threshold, rather than having to pay additional inheritance tax, will now not be paying any inheritance tax at all. We have moved hundreds of estates out of having to pay additional inheritance tax. We have also reduced the tax liabilities for those larger estates too, because we have listened.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Many of my rural constituents are relieved that the Government have partly seen sense on this issue. Given the track record of U-turns from this Government, when I meet with a group of local farmers next week, what reassurance can I give them that the Government will not change course on this policy again in the near future?

Dan Tomlinson: The Finance (No. 2) Bill will be making its way through the House in the coming weeks, and once the Bill is law that change will come forward. If the hon. Gentleman meets his farmers on 7 April this year, the change will already be in place.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the farmers of West Dorset who have never stopped campaigning against the family farm tax, and especially those hardy ones who have repeatedly driven their tractors up to London to let their views be known. This is just the latest in numerous assaults by the Government against our farming communities. So will the Minister take this opportunity

to put on the record that the Government will not agree to President Trump's demands that we accept more food imports at lower food standards as part of a US trade deal?

Dan Tomlinson: We will always fight for the interests of British businesses and British farmers in the deals we strike with countries across the world.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the last 14 months, constituents in Newbury, which I am proud to represent, have really felt the burden of the unfair family farm tax. I have hosted farmers here in Parliament and invited all parliamentarians to come and meet them, and I am proud that Members—predominantly from the Opposition Benches—have made that effort, and the Government have started to listen. But I have family farms in my constituency that will still have to pay £600,000, and they will have to sell off their farms to pay those tax bills. When the Government table their amendment, will they publish an assessment of those remaining farms and whether it is likely that they will need to be sold off to fit Labour's tax bills?

Dan Tomlinson: The amendment, which has already been laid before the House, sets out the changes that the Government are making. In the letter that all hon. Members will have received, we set out our estimate that the number of estates we think will be affected will halve, and that about 85% of farming estates claiming APR—sometimes with BPR—will not pay any additional inheritance tax at all as a result of these changes.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Looking at farm sizes and land values locally, I fear that family farms will still be paying the family farm tax. What evidence is there that £2.5 million realistically reflects the value of a typical family farm in a constituency with higher land values, such as Thornbury and Yate?

Dan Tomlinson: May I thank all hon. Members on both sides of the House for their engagement on this important issue today? We have set the threshold at £2.5 million for a single person and £5 million for a couple as a result of the changes announced at the Budget 2025. We think that threshold is right and fair. It means that the number of farming estates that will be affected will fall by half, and the vast majority will pay no additional inheritance tax at all.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier the Minister said that agricultural property relief was not available under Margaret Thatcher. In fact, it was Margaret Thatcher's Government who brought it in under the Inheritance Tax Act 1984, and it was subsequently increased to 100% under John Major. How might I go about getting the Minister to correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Lady, due to her experience, will know that the Chair is not responsible for the content of Members' contributions, or those of Ministers—if only we were. She has no doubt got her point on the record, and we do not wish to continue the debate.

HMP Leyhill: Offender Abscondments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before we come to the urgent question on absconded prisoners, I should inform the House that one of the prisoners has been charged with escaping from lawful custody and the matter is now sub judice. Members should therefore avoid references to the specific circumstances of the individual case. Questions on the broader issue of public safety, which is the focus of the urgent question, are permissible, as are more general questions on security protocols in prison.

5.14 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the implications for public safety following the admission that two dangerous offenders, including a convicted murderer, absconded from HMP Leyhill on new year's day.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): A happy new year to you and to all in the House, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On 1 January 2026, three prisoners absconded from HMP Leyhill, an open prison: Mr Thomas, Mr Washbourne and Mr Armstrong. This was discovered during routine roll checks, and their absence was followed up immediately. On 3 January, the police issued a public appeal to assist with their recapture. As you have stated, Madam Deputy Speaker, one of the prisoners, Aaron Thomas, has since been arrested and is scheduled to appear before magistrates today. He will then be returned to closed conditions. The other individuals remain unlawfully at large, and police are actively pursuing them. The Government take every abscond seriously. In line with the prevention of abscond policy framework, the prison group director for HMP Leyhill has commissioned a review, which will be completed within 20 days.

These individuals had been moved to open conditions at different points in 2025 after recommendations made by the independent Parole Board. There was no recent intelligence regarding a potential abscond by these prisoners. When it comes to an offender serving a life sentence or an indeterminate sentence for public protection, as these prisoners are, a transfer to open conditions will be approved only following a recommendation by the Parole Board, other than in exceptional circumstances. Before making a recommendation, the Parole Board conducts a thorough assessment of the offender's risk of harm and risk of absconding. At the time these risk assessments were completed, the prisoners were deemed suitable for open conditions. We are continuing to work and engage with the victims and the victims' families, either through the victim contact scheme or via the police where relevant. Currently, we have made contact with two victims through the victim contact scheme.

Robert Jenrick: So a murderer is on the loose—a murderer and a violent offender. Once again, the Justice Secretary's strongest ever checks have been a resounding failure, and once again there is a manhunt under way. Precious police resources are being wasted to fix Calamity's latest cock-up. And where is the Justice Secretary? The Ministry of Justice seems to lose its Secretary of State

as much as it does its prisoners. Has his aunt taken him to the January sales to find him a new suit, just in case he gets let loose on Prime Minister's questions again?

Let me ask the Minister instead: why was someone who robbed and brutally killed a man by bashing him on the head with a brick—a man who led a prison riot and attacked prison officers repeatedly—deemed safe for open prison? Why, as we have just learned, did it take 48 hours for the police to raise the alarm? How many other murderers are there in open prisons? How many more mistaken releases have there been since the Justice Secretary last came clean? Once again, the safety of the public is being compromised by the breathtaking incompetence of his Department.

What a Christmas it has been for the Justice Secretary. On Boxing day, he said he was delighted to welcome into Britain an extremist who hates our country. The following day, it was revealed that he had invited a disgraced ex-Labour politician convicted of spreading homophobic smears to his official swearing-in as Lord Chancellor. Days later, he paid an Islamist double murderer thousands in compensation, alongside hundreds of thousands in legal fees, much of it to the Justice Secretary's own colleague's spouse. Then the Prime Minister's mentor, a leading KC who clapped him into Downing Street, slammed his shameful plan to slash jury trials. To top it all off, on new year's day we learned that these prisoners had been let loose. Well, happy new year from the Justice Secretary. It is little wonder that in his first interview of 2026, he said that he was seeking divine retribution—sorry, he meant to say divine intervention. Well, with more of this, God help us all.

Alex Davies-Jones: I am afraid that it is a new year but the same sad, old Jenrick. The right hon. Gentleman clearly has not done his homework. He does not seem to know the difference between releases in error and absconds. This is a Member who wants to be the Lord Chancellor and the next Leader of the Opposition, and he is deliberately muddying the waters here to suit his own agenda.

We are seeing the deep-rooted issues caused by years of chronic underfunding and mismanagement by the right hon. Gentleman's Government play out. The crisis that our prisons face today was built up over 14 years and the Tories are the chief architects. This did not happen overnight, and it was not inevitable. It was the choice of the Conservatives, made again and again for 14 years. They abandoned their posts and put public safety at risk by allowing our prisons to reach bursting point. He talks about public safety, but they left our prisons at breaking point with not enough room to lock up any dangerous criminals. If it were not for the decisive action that this Government took, the police would have been unable to make any arrests, courts would have ceased to function, and there would have been a breakdown of law and order unlike anything we have seen in modern times.

Those who abscond face serious consequences. We take our responsibilities very seriously, and that is one of the reasons why there has been a dramatic fall in the number of absconds over the last 20 years. It is one of the success stories that the Tories actually had in government, and the right hon. Gentleman should celebrate that because elsewhere their record is much less rosy.

[Alex Davies-Jones]

As the Tories were packing their bags to leave office, temporary release failures hit a 13-year high on their watch. The prison system was in chaos, and they presided over 17 releases in error a month in their last six months in office. They said that they were the Government of security and safety, yet they oversaw violent crime and crumbling courts and prisons. To cover up for their failures, they covertly let out 10,000 prisoners early as part of their chaotic early release scheme. The Tories claim to be the party of law and order; instead, their legacy was lawless disorder. Now they have the barefaced audacity to come to this House and make demands as if they had never been in government, as if they had never ever overseen a crisis in our criminal justice system.

What is the right hon. Gentleman's solution to this crisis? To do nothing—to ignore the evidence that places people in open conditions to help them prepare for life outside and reduce their risk of reoffending, and to turf people out of prison with no support and just hope that everything turns out okay. The Tories are not serious people. They are not serious or ready for Government. They have no solutions to the problems that they created.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): In the light of these escapes from a class D prison, will the Government look again at the policy and process for moving prisoners to open prisons earlier in their sentence as a consequence of prison overcrowding? Does the legacy of the previous Government mean that prisoners may be located in prisons because of the space available, rather than their suitability for the type of offender?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his probing. He will be aware that to deal with the crisis in prison capacity that the Tories left us, this is what we had to do. The policy of moving prisoners to open prisons began under the Conservatives. Typically, they tried to keep quiet about it when they were in government. We have been open and transparent. We have looked at exactly how we have done this as part of our strategy to deal with overcrowding and, thankfully, through our Sentencing Bill—which the Tories are trying to wreck, by the way—we will ensure that our prisons never ever reach breaking point again. However, open prisons are part of the course to rehabilitation and part of ensuring that we make better citizens rather than better criminals, and they have worked and operated effectively under successive Governments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The news that offenders absconded from HMP Leyhill on new year's day is yet another example of the glaring incompetence of the MOJ when it comes to maintaining control of the prison population. This situation has yet again placed the public at risk and lets down victims. It also raises serious questions about why some of these prisoners were placed in a category D prison. Matthew Armstrong, a convicted murderer, has a history of violent incidents

in custody, including leading a riot and attacking prison guards. Given that record, why did the MOJ feel able to approve his transfer to an open prison? What steps are the Government taking to review the criteria for violent offenders being assessed for transfer to category D prisons when they could pose a risk to the public again? What additional resources are being provided to the victims of these individuals, including the prison officer assaulted by Armstrong who is no longer serving? I hope that lessons are being learned from the case of Lenny Scott.

Does the Minister believe that poor transfer decisions are being made based on a lack of capacity in our closed prisons, or is she satisfied that the processes of the Parole Board and the Department are strong enough? Can she reassure the House now that we will not be coming back to have this same conversation again in 2027?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome the questions from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson. To reassure the House, offenders who are serving a life sentence or an IPP sentence for public protection will be approved for a transfer to open conditions only in response to a recommendation by the Parole Board. Before making that recommendation, the Parole Board conducts a thorough risk assessment of the offender's risk of harm and risk of absconding, taking into account all those assessments provided by qualified HM Prison and Probation Service staff and other agencies. The Secretary of State does have the ability to reject a recommendation from the Parole Board, but to do so they would need evidence to dispute the board's assessment of risk. Officials, on behalf of the Secretary of State, concluded that there were no grounds under the published policy to reject the board's recommendations for any of these three individuals.

On absconding more generally, it is important that I state categorically to the House that there were 57 absconds in the year ending March 2025, which is a 2% decrease from 58 the previous year. The number of absconds is falling year on year, and has fallen from 143 in the 12 months to March 2020. It is coming down substantially due to a sustained focus on this area. Open prisons work; they are a key part of the programme of rehabilitation and of reintegrating offenders into society. However, sometimes prisoners abscond and it is important that all steps are taken to bring them back into custody when that occurs.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I must have a bit of amnesia in the new year, because I cannot seem to recall any circumstances in which the shadow Secretary of State raised in the House the 143 abscondments that happened on his Government's watch—perhaps it is only when a leadership bid is in the offing that he cares about this issue. Will the Minister set out what steps she has taken to ensure that these prisoners are returned to custody and what measures are in place to deter prisoners from absconding in future?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. He is right: amnesia seems to be going around the Opposition a lot faster these days. In July last year, as well as refreshing internal security frameworks, the Government published a new policy framework that sets out definitions, reporting expectations and response requirements. We are working with all relevant agencies,

including the police, and the public, following the public appeal that went out on 3 January to get everyone behind bringing these prisoners back into custody and putting them into closed conditions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Justice Committee member, Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Since October of last year, five people have absconded from Leyhill, which suggests that there are systemic issues around both security and licensing arrangements. I suspect that those are not bespoke to Leyhill, but are used across the wider open prison estate. With that in mind, what has the Minister's Department done to tighten those arrangements to ensure that this does not happen again, not just at Leyhill, but at any other open prison?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. As he will be aware from my previous answers, absconds have actually decreased across our open prison estate: they have come down by 2% on the previous year. However, whenever an abscond happens, a rapid review will take place. A rapid review is taking place into the absconds at HMP Leyhill. It will be done within 20 days and I will ensure that it is brought forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Justice Committee member, Warinder Juss.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Any prisoner absconding is, of course, bad news and something that should not happen, but does the Minister agree that it is a symptom of the broken-down prison system that we inherited from the previous Government and something that we are now trying to sort out? Can she confirm that the rate of prisoners absconding is lower under this Government than it was under the previous Government?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is right: the levels are decreasing. That is due to the strong and robust frameworks on absconding prisoners that we are putting in place. We inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse and took immediate action days after coming into office to stabilise our prisons. We are bearing down on releases in error, which have caused huge upset and concern to victims and can put the public at risk. I state again at the Dispatch Box that that is wholly unacceptable. We have introduced mandatory stronger release checks to catch those errors before they happen, as that is the most effective way of protecting the public, and Dame Lynne Owens is examining the causes of releases in error.

Abscondment numbers are coming down. I am proud of the work that has been done. Any abscondment is one too many and we are working to bring that number down even further.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): The police have said that the prisoners who absconded from the open prison HMP Leyhill are dangerous and should not be approached by the public. How can any prisoner described in that way be in an open prison? It defies logic, Minister.

Alex Davies-Jones: The right hon. Lady will be aware that the decision regarding Parole Board recommendations to move prisoners to open prisons has been made by successive Governments. This is a policy decision. The Parole Board makes independent decisions. At the time of those risk assessments, no concerns were raised about the risk of harm to the public or absconding in relation to any of the prisoners who have absconded.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): When we see offenders abscond from prison, it is understandable that many people feel unsafe. Our thoughts are particularly with the victims and their friends and families. Does the Minister agree that absconding is not only a serious criminal offence, but a symptom of years of austerity and chronic underfunding that saw our prison system pushed to breaking point?

Alex Davies-Jones: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. This is just another symptom of the crisis we inherited in our criminal justice system. Whether prisons, courts or probation, every single aspect of the system was at breaking point following 14 years of underfunding and mismanagement by the Conservative party. We are working as quickly as we can to bring back to justice the two prisoners who absconded. My thoughts are with the victims. We have made contact with two of the victims and their families via the victim contact scheme. I encourage the public to get behind the police's public appeal to bring those prisoners to justice.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): What steps are being taken to ensure that prisons are adequately staffed with properly trained and equipped guards, and that IT systems receive long-overdue updates, to ensure that there are no further escapes across the whole prison network?

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Lady is correct. We are investing in the IT systems in our prisons, which are needed to reduce releases in error, and in the brilliant and brave men and women who serve on the frontline as prison officers, day in, day out in very difficult conditions. They have been chronically underfunded for the past 14 years. They are brilliant servicepeople and they deserve our praise—I pay tribute to them. They are working in difficult conditions, but we are investing in them and in the technology that will help them in their everyday job.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Some Opposition spokespeople clearly think that it is still pantomime season; they should take this issue with the seriousness that it deserves.

What is the consequence for absconding from an open prison? Being in an open prison is a privilege, as part of rehabilitation; it is not the right of any prisoner to be there.

Alex Davies-Jones: That is a good point. The prisoners who have absconded were at the end of their sentences. They were working through rehabilitation in order to reintegrate into society. They have let themselves, their families and the victims down. They have basically come to the end of the marathon—the final mile—and let themselves down. They will now be returned to closed conditions, and could, if the courts determine it appropriate, have more time added to their sentences, but we must be careful in discussing ongoing cases.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): With two dangerous offenders on the run, many of our constituents will rightly be very concerned and worried. Will the Minister explain what resources are being deployed to capture those offenders as soon as possible?

Alex Davies-Jones: When a prisoner absconds from open conditions, the prison must notify the police immediately, so that officers can locate the individual and return them to custody. Local governors have good working relationships with their local police forces and maintain constant communication about efforts to locate prisoners who are at large, including on whether to launch a public appeal. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the police launched a public appeal on 3 January to assist them in locating the prisoners. I encourage any member of the public who spots the prisoners not to approach them but to alert the local police so that we can bring them back into custody.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Once again, the Opposition have clearly absconded from reality. Will the Minister remind the House what the previous Government—of which the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), was part—actually did to clamp down on absconds?

Alex Davies-Jones: Nothing—absolutely nothing. Absconds decreased under the previous Labour Government, and that trend carried on under the Tories until they failed—they have the poorest ever record. The number is down 2% on last year. The Conservatives' failure to get to grips with this, fund our prisons and probation system effectively, and deal with the crumbling infrastructure of our prisons system has resulted in this crisis in our prisons. The Labour party is getting on with the job of cleaning up their mess.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister is keen to take credit for the reduced rate of absconsions. What specific steps have the Government taken to reduce that rate? Will she reassure the public that every single one of the 57 prisoners who absconded—less the two currently at large—have been re-apprehended?

Alex Davies-Jones: I congratulate the hon. Member on his happy news over the Christmas break. It is lovely for us to have some positive news to celebrate in this place.

In April 2025, the Government introduced changes to the eligibility for open conditions from three years to five. We also strengthened mandatory checks in offender assessment system reviews and victim liaison officer notifications, and introduced mandatory seven-day transfer

reviews and mandatory security inputting. We upped the assessments necessary for a prisoner to be moved into open prison. We are reducing the number of absconsions—there has been a 2% decrease on last year, as I said—and we hope to go further. Open conditions work; they are about rehabilitation. Tagging also works, which is why we are investing £700 million in probation to increase tagging and probation.

As for the 57 prisoners, I do not have those figures to hand, but I will happily write to the hon. Gentleman with them.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): As a former maths teacher, I would be very interested to see the trends with regard to absconsions and the moving average over a period of time. However, ultimately one absconsion by a dangerous criminal is one too many. More specifically, what is the Minister doing to support and train prison staff to ensure they understand the system and the increased checks that she mentioned?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome that positive question. My hon. Friend is right that this this is going to take all of us working together across the prison system—everyone in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. I again pay tribute to our brilliant staff who are working on the frontline in very difficult, challenging conditions every single day in an underfunded, chronically in chaos prison system that we are having to rebuild literally brick by brick. Our staff are our biggest asset in this, and we are working with them and the trade unions to make sure they have all the equipment, tools and training necessary to ensure that the number of absconsions comes down.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): My constituents are concerned that high-risk violent prisoners are increasingly being placed in Leyhill open prison, putting local residents at risk when they abscond. Will the Minister review the process for assessing prisoners prior to a move? With new rapid deployment cells expected to be online at Leyhill by the summer, will she also meet me to discuss what steps the Government are taking to ensure that those cells will not be used for high-risk prisoners, and to increase security to prevent escapes?

Alex Davies-Jones: The hon. Lady will be aware that the policy regarding recommendations for moving to an open prison is handled by the independent Parole Board. That is a policy that has been carried out by successive Governments. I will ensure that she receives a meeting with the appropriate Minister to discuss her concerns further, and a review into the absconsions at HMP Leyhill will be done within 20 days.

Northern Ireland Troubles Bill: Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention

5.36 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the impact of the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill on armed forces recruitment and retention.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): This Labour Government are committed to renewing the contract with those who serve, and our commitment is reflected in our actions. That is why we have given our armed forces the largest pay rise in 20 years, committed to invest £9 billion to fix forces homes, scrapped 100 out-of-date medical policies for entry standards, and created novel ways of entry including our new gap year scheme and a cyber direct entry pathway with its first cohort graduating in November. It is also why, at Christmas, this Government funded travel for up to 35,000 service personnel to be with their families over the festive period.

The Government's actions are having an effect. On recruitment, inflow continues to improve and is up 13% this year compared with September 2024. Applications to join the armed forces and intakes to basic training both continue to remain high. On retention, under the Conservatives morale had been falling year on year, with more people leaving than joining; we have started to reverse that decline with an 8% reduction in outflow this year compared with September 2024.

The question refers to the impact of the troubles Bill. The Government have brought forward the troubles Bill to effectively and legally deal with the legacy of the troubles in Northern Ireland. The complexity of dealing with this issue is not lost on me. The reality is that the previous Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 did not have unfaltering support, and we are focused on navigating a workable route through this incredibly emotive and difficult topic in a fair and proportionate manner.

The military cohorts most impacted by legacy processes are those at the very tip of the spear. There is no evidence to suggest that this Bill has had an impact on their recruitment or indeed retention. The House will understand that we do not comment on matters of special forces, but let me echo what the Defence Secretary has said directly to the community: we have your back. I am assured in my interactions with those in the command of, or serving in, our special forces that they continue to deliver at the very front edge of the nation's effort to counter the threats that we and the UK face. I say to them: you have my support and this Government's unequivocal support.

The Government owe all those who served in defence of peace during the troubles an immense debt of gratitude. We understand the immense psychological toll that legacy proceedings can have and the concerns of the veterans community. We are working closely with representatives of veterans and the armed forces community to understand their concerns and ensure that this Bill meets their need. But to link recruitment and retention with the Northern Ireland legacy Bill is incorrect.

James Cartledge: Our legacy Act ensured that those who served bravely in Northern Ireland could sleep soundly in their beds at night, knowing that they would not be hauled before the courts for protecting all of us from terrorism decades ago. But when our Act was challenged in the courts, instead of appealing, Labour immediately caved and is now scrapping those protections. This will reopen cases, such as Loughgall, from 1987, when IRA members were shot while mounting a bomb attack on a police station, having fired first on the Army.

Loughgall involved 24 SAS soldiers, so it is no wonder that on 30 December, seven senior former SAS officers wrote an extraordinary letter stating:

"Commanders now hesitate, fearing years of litigation. Troops feel abandoned...This self-sabotage needs no foreign hand...In this Troubles Bill, the Government is complicit in this war on our Armed Forces."

The Minister knows the operational importance of special forces as much as anyone. Does he recognise the huge hit to morale if cases like Loughgall are restarted because of the troubles Bill?

Of course, the Government will say that we need the troubles Bill to pursue unsolved IRA crimes, but as the Prime Minister's own appointed Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner David Johnstone warned last week, soldiers may be dragged before the courts, but IRA terrorists walk free because the weapons they used were decommissioned without forensic testing. Was the commissioner not right to say that veterans are treated "worse than terrorists"? Furthermore, last October the Government said that the troubles Bill would contain protections specifically for veterans. Will the Minister confirm that all the protections in the Bill also apply to terrorists?

In November, eight retired four-star generals and an air chief marshal described the troubles Bill as a "direct threat to national security".

The letter from seven former SAS officers said that they "are not asking for immunity; they simply want fair procedures and decisive political leadership".

With the threats that we face and the need to maximise recruitment and retention, can the Minister show decisive political leadership of his own and scrap the troubles Bill?

Al Carns: As the shadow Defence Secretary has raised a question about recruitment and retention, it is important that we look at the record of his own Government. Military morale fell to record lows under his Government, with just four in 10 personnel in the UK armed forces satisfied with service life; satisfaction fell from 60% to 40% in 2024. Is that surprising when there were real-terms pay cuts in nine out of the 14 years that the Conservatives were in power and over 13,000 housing complaints in a single year? I will not be lectured by the hon. Gentleman on this issue.

I would suggest that to mention that I have an insight into the operational imperative of our forces, as the tip of the spear, is a slight underestimation. I would argue that there are several people in this House who would understand that, including one who is stood here and another on the Opposition Benches. We have been left with a mess and our Northern Ireland veterans were in a legal wild west because of what the Conservatives did with the last legacy Act. No party in Northern Ireland agreed with that Act or supported it, so we had to sort that out—this Government will not allow that situation to continue.

[*Al Carns*]

Let me be very clear: we are listening. We have spoken to the Royal British Legion and other associations. I speak to military cohorts on a weekly, if not daily, basis and I speak to the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner almost every day. We are working collaboratively and collectively to ensure that the Bill is fit for purpose, that it protects the individuals, that the process does not become the punishment for those individuals, and that we do not allow any terrorist organisation to rewrite history through the courts.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is clear that the previous solution, the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, was opposed by all the political parties in Northern Ireland. It was found to be unlawful by our courts, and therefore it needed to be replaced. It is also clear that the solution to this complex issue must provide justice, be legal, and ensure that our veterans feel that they have been protected and their service has been celebrated. Can the Minister confirm that nobody who perpetrated terrorist atrocities during the troubles will be given immunity? How exactly will the Government protect veterans from repeated investigations?

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. The reality is that the last Act was opposed by every part of the Northern Ireland system, groups across the military and civilians in Northern Ireland. It left our veterans in a legal wild west. The honest answer is that our military will always adhere to the law, and to the highest levels of the law. The new Bill allows us to protect this cohort, so that the legal process does not become a punishment, and importantly ensures that individuals cannot rewrite history. For the first time, we will have protections in place to support our veterans, and we will protect them from repeated investigations. There will be a legal duty to consider our veterans' welfare, and we will ensure that no veteran has to attend proceedings or go to Northern Ireland; they can give evidence from home. These protections for our veterans have been designed by veterans, through discussions with me and various people across the Ministry of Defence.

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

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The Liberal Democrats are clear that the Conservatives' Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 failed victims, survivors and veterans alike by removing legal avenues to justice and eroding public trust. Elements of the Government's new Bill are welcome, particularly the desire to move towards reconciliation and information recovery, but those aims cannot come at the expense of justice and fairness, or the rights of those who served. Our concern is not to shield wrongdoing; it is to ensure fairness for those who acted within the law as it stood at the time. Veterans must not be left exposed to uncertainty or retrospective judgment, and without clear legal protection.

Recruitment and retention is already an acknowledged challenge for our armed forces. Given the flaws in the Bill, an impact in this area could only further the case

against it. What steps is the Minister taking to protect personnel who served during the troubles who followed the laws of the day? Given the extreme concern across the armed forces community about the impact that this legislation could have, will he consider halting the Bill, and replacing it with one that puts veterans at its heart?

Al Carns: I have been really clear: I have been working with veterans across the whole UK, with Northern Ireland and with the commissioners to ensure that the protections that we put in place are written into legislation and are well thought-through, so that the process does not become the punishment. People have said in Northern Ireland that the prospects of prosecution are vanishingly small. We must also ensure that other groups, such as families who lost loved ones in the troubles, get truth, reconciliation and justice, but in doing so, we must absolutely protect our veterans. We will put six protections in place; we will get five of them straight into the Bill, and written into law. We are working through the sixth one, a protocol to ensure no cold calling. It will ensure that anybody who is required to give evidence remotely, rather than by going to Northern Ireland, is engaged with by either the MOD or a regimental association. The main aim of involving our veterans was for them to help me articulate how we can stop this process from being wielded as a punishment against those who served our country so valiantly and honourably in Northern Ireland.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): The Minister has been too modest; he mentioned the September figures for the increase in recruitment, but the December figures were released just a couple of days ago, and they show a 20% increase in recruitment to the armed forces over the last year. Some 2,170 additional personnel were recruited in the year before. Despite the accusations from the Conservatives, might that be because of the two above-inflation pay rises that this Government have granted our personnel? Might it be because of the £9 billion increase for armed forces housing, after it was left in a decrepit state by the last Government? Might it be because of the 2.6% of GDP that we are investing in the military? That figure was never reached in the 14 years of the last Conservative Government.

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for his list. This Government have come into power and put in place a very clear, concise programme to increase recruitment and retention. There is a list: there is the armed forces discovery scheme, zig-zag careers, and the cyber direct entry scheme; the first cohort graduated in November '25. We are scrapping a huge amount of red tape left by the last Government. If somebody had athlete's foot as a child, they could not join the military, and people needed multiple sets of medical records. That was ridiculous. We also have financial retention incentives. [*Interruption.*] Individuals on the Conservative Benches can say that they know, but they did nothing about it; I lived it. We have done a single living accommodation review, and we have a Christmas travel payment. [*Interruption.*] There are great comments coming from the Opposition, but they did nothing about it. We have done it, and as a result we see a 13% increase in recruitment, and a reduction in outflow by 8% for the first time in 14 years.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): As the shadow Defence Secretary was reading out the letter from the squadron leaders and warrant officers that was published

over the Christmas break, I looked across the Chamber, and was very surprised to see the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and two Defence Ministers shaking their head. We have had feedback from numerous generals, squadron commanders and warrant officers, so can I just understand where the Minister is coming from? Why does he think he is right and they are wrong?

Al Carns: I fully respect the hon. and gallant Member; he has experience from Northern Ireland during the troubles. I served in Northern Ireland in 2003, after the troubles. We absolutely respect those individuals' views; we also respect the statistics on those who are currently serving, which we have looked through in the Ministry of Defence. I would welcome a discussion with many of the individuals who the hon. and gallant Member mentioned. Since some of the articles came out in the press, I have had discussions, multiple times, with several of them. We need to work together to make sure they are comfortable with the Bill, and we are doing so. On top of that, we have spoken to the Royal British Legion and other veterans, but when we come down to the common denominator, the statistics show that there is not a recruitment and retention issue caused by the Northern Ireland legacy Bill. As Members well know, the moral, physical and conceptual components are critical to fighting power, but in some cases, the conceptual and moral components are one. We must ensure that the Bill protects veterans going forward, which is what I will do. We will protect the moral component.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Will my hon. and gallant Friend take this opportunity to welcome the 156 new recruits who started last week at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in my constituency? Those new recruits put the academy well on track to meet its recruitment targets for this year.

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. In this role and in my last role, I have visited Sandhurst several times; it is the best leadership academy in the country, and its "Serve to lead" motto is absolutely essential. I am sure that the 156 cadets who have just started will progress and graduate with flying colours. I look forward to them serving in the military, and enjoying their service throughout a full and wholesome career.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): The Minister has said that veterans will have Government support. I am sure that is what he intends, but the hard reality is that the Bill that he is defending will lead to coroner's court inquiries into decisions taken in a fraction of a second, 40 years ago. The best way to look at that issue is to look at what has already happened, as described by the senior judge who oversaw the judicial review of the Coagh inquiry:

"In this challenge, this Court is being asked to slow the passage of time down, to analyse events in freeze-frame and to address the issue of absolute necessity in slow-motion...It is ludicrous to suggest that this court should analyse the events of the day in question in that manner",

but that is what will happen with Loughgall and all the other issues that will come before the courts, and our brave and honourable soldiers will be humiliated through that process. That is why the process is the punishment.

Al Carns: I thank the right hon. Member for his comments. The reality is that 90% of all casualties in Northern Ireland were caused by terrorists, and it is not lost on me that that context is often lost in today's society. That is why it is essential that we ensure that the individuals holding the inquests, and indeed the legacy commission, have the best operational context and advice as inquests progress. As the Clonoe inquest showed, if we do not agree with the findings, we will judicially review them—that is what I did in the case of Clonoe, and we will do it again if we need to. We must prevent the process from becoming a punishment, and looking back retrospectively on Clonoe, I think that advice from an individual who understood the operational context, the tactical detail and the strategic outputs that were to have been delivered would have led to a different conclusion being reached.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): This Government have a very strong story to tell when it comes to recruitment and retention in defence, whether that is about investing in homes for our forces people, providing free travel over Christmas, or delivering a 6% pay rise last year and a 4.5% pay rise this year. I know that those efforts are working, because one of my staff, Archie Butler-Gallie, will be leaving shortly to go to Sandhurst—I am sure that colleagues from across the House will want to congratulate him on that. What further steps can the Minister take to ensure that our armed forces are an attractive career for young people, as well as those changing jobs?

I also welcome what the Minister has said about the Northern Ireland element of this issue. I urge him—as I know he is doing—to leave no stone unturned in ensuring that inequitable or vexatious prosecutions are not brought against our forces personnel.

Al Carns: First of all, there are no vexatious prosecutions. I would also say that if you want to see the world, work with some of the best people in the world, have an adventure and get trained in leadership, by all means join any one of our officer academies, or go to one of our recruitment centres. It is the best career anyone could possibly ask for, and I do not regret any day—maybe one—of my 24 years in Her Majesty's armed forces.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Have there not already been numerous investigations and inquiries, and while old wounds are being reopened, is it not the case that little new evidence is emerging? The Minister, who is my parliamentary neighbour, is a most distinguished soldier. Surely he must be concerned that the circumstantial evidence about the impact on the health and wellbeing of veterans is clearly impacting morale, retention and recruitment elsewhere.

Al Carns: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. Of the 300,000 veterans who served in Northern Ireland, among whom I include myself, this will affect a small number, but we must not allow that to be an excuse not to put in place the most well-thought-through and legislatively sound protections. One of those protections is a legal duty to consider veterans' welfare, so that individuals who are suffering from physical or mental issues because of their service in Northern Ireland do not get dragged back through the system. That is linked to the measures on giving evidence from home, which

[*Al Carns*]

will ensure that no one needs to return to an area where they may have had distressing or psychologically impactful moments.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): This Christmas, the Government funded travel for up to 35,000 service personnel—including over 2,000 from the east midlands—so that they could be with their family over the festive period. My husband served in Afghanistan, so I know how much it means to have those moments with loved ones. Does the Minister agree that that kind of support demonstrates that our Labour Government are on the side of our armed forces?

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for her point, and I thank her husband for his service—we do not say that enough in this country, and I think we should say it more. The previous Government focused on ships, bombs, bullets, guns and rifles, but they did not focus enough on the key asset of our armed forces, which is our people. We are doing that now, including through a comprehensive messaging campaign around the policies that have been put in place to increase recruitment and retention, and we are seeing a statistical change in recruitment and retention because of that—there has been a 30% increase, and an 8% reduction in outflow. That is a fantastic change. We have much more to do, but this Government are heading in the right direction, and we are going to do much more over the years to come.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): On a serious note, on this work towards retention and recruitment, I have not found one person in my entire military network—those I served with during the troubles and after—who supports the Bill. I welcome the rise in recruitment—one of those recruits is my son, which is great to see—but can the Minister confirm whether anyone serving in the senior chain of command has said that the Bill is a potential obstacle to operational capability or future retention and recruitment?

Al Carns: I thank the hon. and gallant Member for his comments, and also for his service. Nobody in the senior command has raised the Bill with me in relation to recruitment and retention.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Minister for his service—we should thank people for their service more often. I had the pleasure of being part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, through which we got to visit a training academy and see the cadets. It was a fantastic experience, but when we talked to the people on the estate, they said that two things were limiting the number of young people who could be part of the programme. The first was the number of people who were able to act as trainers, and the second was the facilities. What is the Minister doing to address those two concerns, at a time when so many people are responding to the Spotify adverts and signing up to be part of our armed forces?

Al Carns: We have a huge amount of people wanting to join the armed forces. The problem is that the processes we inherited with the old recruitment scheme are out of

date and need to be renewed. That is being put in place now. We have reduced more than 100 outdated medical requirements and we are refining the processes. We have created a digital ability to get hold of GP records, which is reducing the time of flight from an individual putting in their application to the point where they join. As a result, we are seeing an increase. We are focusing on people, we are raising morale and we are moving the system forward.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner has said that this legislation will mean that those who serve in the armed forces are treated worse than terrorists. Former commanders have said that it will affect recruitment and retention and leave soldiers in fear of legal action. Does the Minister not recognise that by giving in to the IRA's demand for the ability to rewrite the history of the troubles, it is leading to the situation where soldiers will be dragged through the courts in their old age? Should his message to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland not be, "Your job is to stand up for those who served in Northern Ireland and not to kowtow to the IRA, Sinn Féin and the Irish Government"?

Al Carns: This is not giving into the IRA's demands in any way, shape or form; this is about truth, justice and reconciliation. It is about taking those three different groups of people—veterans; the families of those who have lost loved ones, who could be civilians or members of the PSNI or the RUC; and, families who have lost loved ones because of military action—and ensuring that we navigate the process to get to truth, justice and reconciliation. The right hon. Member knows better than me the difficulties of Northern Ireland politics. My job, as the ex-Veterans Minister and now the Armed Forces Minister, is to ensure that veterans are protected 100% as we move through that process, and that is what I am determined to set out to do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Colleagues will struggle to get in unless they keep their questions short, and the Minister should make sure that his answers are just as short.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker. The French Government have recognised the legal jeopardy that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) has described, and they have legislated to protect their servicemen and women and veterans accordingly. That is contained within their recently published manual on military operational law—all 353 pages of it—which I recommend to the Minister. Why can the French do that for their people, while this Government are doing completely the reverse?

Al Carns: I fundamentally disagree. We hold our British forces, whether it be the Army, the Navy or the Air Force, to the highest legal standard. We always will, and it is what separates us from terrorists or dictatorships. I would be interested to read the French document so that we could have a discussion offline and see whether there is any applicability to how we run things.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I am supportive of the Government's desire to move beyond the Tories' failed legacy Act, provided that the legitimate concerns of our veterans are met. However, I am not convinced that the Northern Ireland Office is even listening to, let alone acting upon, those concerns. Can the Minister tell the House what discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Office to address veteran concerns? What would he say to veterans dissatisfied with the safeguards in the Bill?

Al Carns: For almost a year and a half now, I have been in constant discussion with various veterans groups, whether that is co-ordinated by the Royal British Legion or whether that is individuals from our intelligence community, our special forces community or the Parachute Regiment, all the way through to line infantry members in the Navy and the Air Force. I have been listening. We have designed these protections around what they have said. We are reinforcing that into legislation, and my office is in daily contact with the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that we shore up those protections collaboratively and come out with the best possible way to get to truth, reconciliation and justice across all three different groups within Northern Ireland.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): America's Delta Force has been involved in an incredible feat of arms in Caracas over the weekend. Of course, Delta Force is based on the 22 SAS regiment. Its formation came after Charles Beckwith served with the SAS. When the SAS speaks, it is usually listened to. The Minister has told us today that he has spoken to individuals from the SAS who signed the letter saying that this Bill is not fit for purpose. Have they changed their position?

Al Carns: I have spoken to several of the generals who have raised these concerns. I have spoken to the associations connected to a variety of organisations across the group, and I have spoken to active members of those organisations to ensure that statistics are communicated effectively and people are representing what is and what is not happening. It is not lost on me that Delta Force was shaped off the SAS. It is not lost on me that forces at the tip of the spear are essential to all the security that we enjoy. We have got to protect them. We have got to ensure that we give them the correct capability and protections as we move forward, and that is what I will do.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Special forces operations inescapably involve split-second decisions and walk a very fine line. If those operatives perceive that the Government do not have their back, is the Minister seriously saying that will not have an adverse effect on morale or recruitment?

Al Carns: It is clear that the Government have our armed forces' back. I have just spelled out a whole list of recruitment and retention initiatives. Indeed, we have individuals with the most military experience sat within the Department in the political space. They understand the line that they walk—they have walked it several times across various different operational theatres—and understand it wholeheartedly.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Given the concerns that have been expressed about this Bill and protections for our veterans, what assessment has the Minister made of the forthcoming Haddon-Cave inquiry and the impact that could have on the retention of personnel, given the cohort of people affected are likely either still serving or are of the same era as veterans in this Chamber?

Al Carns: The Haddon-Cave inquiry is an independent inquiry established by the last Government, and we must allow that to continue. We are focused today on ensuring that the correct protections are in place and written into law to ensure that no veteran who served so valiantly in Northern Ireland has any concerns about the Northern Ireland legacy Bill as it progresses in terms of their involvement in that operational context.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I thank the Minister for his engagement with the various associations, which I know is appreciated. I also welcome the improvement in recruitment. However, how are veterans meant to feel that there is anything other than persecution when incidents such as Loughgall—an exemplary SAS counter-terrorism operation—are granted a public inquiry, and incidents such as the 1987 IRA bombing of Enniskillen, which left 12 people dead and at least 60 people injured, are not?

Al Carns: The reality is that the last Government's legacy Act made promises that could not be kept, and explaining why to our veterans community is exceptionally difficult, and I will not lie on that. On the same hand, we have been clear that inquests that were started by the last Government, but stopped—such as Loughgall in 2014—must continue and come to their rightful conclusion. We must ensure that throughout that process, all our veterans are protected as we progress.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The Minister has more experience than most with the global threats facing this country. In those circumstances, we need to be recruiting the brightest and best to our armed forces and retaining them. He has set out current retention levels with certain detail, but that is before the Bill passes through Parliament and, as the Government hope, becomes enacted as law. Does he not recognise that the inequality of arms under the legal system for our veterans is likely to have a significant impact upon retention?

Al Carns: This Government have an exceptional record on supporting our veterans. We put more money into veterans than any other Government in the past 10 years. We put £50 million into Valour. We have enhanced the Op Restore programme. Op Courage on mental health has now got £21 million and has rolled out. Our career transition partnership is second-to-none. On housing, we have got Op Fortitude. We have had 4,100 referrals and more than 1,000 veterans supported. We are doing a fantastic job for veterans. We must ensure that they are protected as we go forward.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): With the risk of future prosecutions for simply following orders, would the Minister join the British Army today if he was a young man again making a career choice?

Al Carns: No, I would join the Royal Marines.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Government's troubles Bill contains no provisions to prevent former members of the IRA or other paramilitary groups from sitting on their proposed legacy commission. Northern Ireland veterans and victims are rightly outraged, so will the Minister use this opportunity to assure the House that the Government will table amendments ensuring that terrorists will not sit on that commission alongside the families of victims?

Al Carns: I have worked very closely with those in the Northern Ireland Office on this issue, and I will allow them to come up with the answer, but from our perspective the legacy commission as a whole has the most powers to review the evidence that has gone through. It will get to truth, reconciliation and justice better than any other organisation, which is why we are promoting pushing as much as we can through it to ensure that those three different groups of people in Northern Ireland get to that truth and reconciliation in the first place.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I carried out court martial duty while serving, and it gave me greater confidence in justice for accused serving personnel. Last week we learned that, as Prime Minister, Tony Blair supported the trial of British soldiers by court martial rather than by a civil court. When it was suggested that the case should go to a civil court, he annotated the proposal with the words, "It must not!" Can the Minister reassure civilians who are thinking about joining the armed forces that justice from a jury of a service person's peers is worthy of their confidence?

Al Carns: In my last role, I had considerable dealings with the service justice system. I have been to visit the Defence Serious Crime Command and had a look at the victim support units that it has established, and I can say that since 2021 there has been a huge amount of revamping and rebuilding of the service justice system. It is fully fit for purpose, and it has my utter confidence.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Seven former SAS officers say that troops feel abandoned by this Government's legacy Bill. Given those comments, does the Minister believe that the Bill will incentivise the next generation to apply to serve in the armed forces, or, rather, that it will prevent the next generation from taking that career path, in the knowledge that they could be abandoned by a future Government, just like the troops who feel abandoned by this Government now?

Al Carns: There has been no impact on our special forces recruitment. The SAS is the tip of the spear, one of the best regiments in the world. It will continue to be so, and I have no doubt that it will continue to attract the very best of our armed forces to join and serve in its ranks.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): In response to the question from my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), the Minister said that he respected the views of the officers who had shared their concerns—so why does he think they are wrong?

Al Carns: I have 100% respect for the views of anyone who has served in our armed forces, and I am willing to sit down and talk through, in detail, any of the statistics that we have in the Ministry of Defence that would show that statistics do not necessarily justify some of the comments that were made. I am happy to discuss that with anyone, at any point.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I welcome the steps taken by Ministers in their support for our armed forces, but may I caution them that the Northern Ireland Office's troubles Bill has the potential to undo all that? The protections for veterans in the Bill are not specifically for veterans, no matter how they are packaged—and how weak it sounds to tell a Northern Ireland veteran who lives in Northern Ireland and served in Northern Ireland that he will not have to go to Northern Ireland to give evidence. The Minister has often cited the fact that no Northern Ireland party supported the last Government's legislation. Can he tell me what Northern Ireland party currently supports the Bill as it is drafted, and if he cannot do so, will he pause and reflect?

Al Carns: The hon. Member knows better than I the difficulties of Northern Ireland politics. My role in this is to ensure that veterans are protected. I speak to the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner on a weekly basis for hours on end to make sure that we are defining, refining and implementing the correct protections for our veterans. Whether they served in Northern Ireland or were deployed to Northern Ireland from here on the mainland, from my perspective they are one and the same.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): The relentless and malicious lawfare to which our brave Northern Ireland veterans have been subjected has exposed the fact that, in Britain, human rights laws can be used to attack those who have risked their lives for this country, not to protect them. The conditions in which soldiers and veterans are forced to live, even if they are accused with no evidence and no credibility, are inhumane. What will the Minister do about the situation, and if it cannot be resolved through the European Court of Human Rights and the Human Rights Act, will he call for them to be, respectively, left and repealed?

Al Carns: I have made it very clear that anyone who served in Northern Ireland, and indeed any veteran, will receive the full legal and welfare support of the Ministry of Defence. We saw that in the Soldier F case, and we will see it in any case that goes through. The full weight of the Ministry of Defence will be provided to protect veterans, in any way, shape or form, from vexatious claims or the lawfare to which the hon. Member has referred.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his answers. I ask him, with great respect, whether it is any wonder that recruitment is down when a Sinn Féin First Minister tells my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and my party to "butt out" of recent recruitment issues—paired with this Government's support for our veterans in the context of Northern Ireland. Who in their right mind would sign up to be abandoned in the future for doing their job in order to give in to republicanism?

Does the Minister acknowledge that the cost of the sale of our veterans may well be the defence capability of this great nation? He is an honourable man, and is much liked in the Chamber and, indeed, outside it, so will he take this opportunity to stop the rewriting of history and stand by our troops, past and present?

Al Carns: I thank the hon. Member for his—as always—well-thought-through contribution. We have made our perspective clear: we must protect our veterans from the process being wielded as a punishment, and we must also ensure that none of the terrorists who caused 90% of the casualties in Northern Ireland can rewrite history to suit their own narrative. We must not allow that to happen. Importantly, what underlines all this is that we must protect those who have protected us if this nation is to remain as great as it always has been.

Venezuela

6.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): I want to begin by expressing my condolences to all those affected by the terrible tragedy in Crans-Montana, and my support for the Swiss authorities. The British embassy has been supporting the family of Charlotte Niddam, who was educated in Hertfordshire and in north-west London. I can confirm that yesterday Charlotte's family were given the devastating news that her remains had been identified. Charlotte was just 15. The whole House will be thinking of her and her friends and family now.

Let me turn to Venezuela. Over the weekend, the United States conducted air strikes on a series of Venezuelan targets, and confirmed that it had captured Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. They have been indicted on narcoterrorism, drug smuggling and weapons charges. I can confirm to the House that the United Kingdom was not involved in these operations.

UK policy on Venezuela has long been to press for a peaceful transition from authoritarian rule to a democracy that reflects the will of the Venezuelan people, maintains security in the region and is in line with international law. That remains our position and our determined view about what must happen in Venezuela now. Over the weekend I discussed this with the US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, and the UK Government are in close contact with our international partners on the issue.

The first duty of government is the safety and security of our citizens, and my Department is working tirelessly to ensure the safety of British nationals. Over the weekend I also spoke to the UK chargé d'affaires in Caracas. All our embassy staff are safe and accounted for, and working to support the approximately 500 British nationals in Venezuela. Our travel guidance currently advises against all travel to Venezuela, and British nationals in Venezuela should closely follow that travel advice, which will be kept up to date.

We should be under no illusion as to the nature of the Maduro regime. A once functioning democracy has become a hub for very dangerous organised criminal gangs—corrupt links have involved Iran, with Hezbollah increasingly present in recent years, as well as malign support from Russia—and a regime that has facilitated illicit finance, sanctions evasion and organised criminal activity, including narcotics trafficking and illegal gold trading. That undermines the security of the whole region, including UK overseas territories, as well as the United States and other regional partners. The country has been driven into economic ruin, with an 80% drop in its GDP in a decade. More than 8 million people have left, which has caused instability elsewhere in the region.

We have seen Maduro's regime systematically dismantle democratic institutions, silencing dissent and weaponising state resources to maintain power through fear and corruption. The International Criminal Court has opened an investigation into possible crimes against humanity, following reports of hundreds of extrajudicial killings, including at the hands of Venezuela's security services and paramilitary groups under the regime's command. UN investigators have repeatedly reported a pattern of arbitrary detentions, tortures and killings.

[Yvette Cooper]

In the July 2024 presidential election, millions of Venezuelans voted, but the official results have never been published. The opposition leader, María Corina Machado, was banned from standing by Maduro. International observers cited basic failures of election integrity. Independent tallies covering 80% of polling stations showed a clear victory for Edmundo González, yet Maduro claimed victory.

Most recently, in October, the UN independent fact-finding mission reported on state security forces using firearms against protesters after the elections 18 months ago, where 25 people died. González has been forced to leave the country and claim political asylum in Spain. Machado was forced into hiding for her own safety and had to be spirited out of the country to receive her Nobel peace prize in Norway last month.

These are the hallmarks of a regime that clings to power through fear, coercion and violence, not through democratic consent. That is why, as the Prime Minister said on Saturday, we can shed no tears for the end of Maduro's rule.

Let me turn to UK policy. The UK has long been an advocate for a democratic Venezuela and a vocal critic of the Maduro regime. Since 2019, successive UK Governments have refused to recognise the regime. Through the G7 and the UN, with partners and directly, we have continued to call out the Maduro regime and its appalling human rights violations.

We have also, in some areas, taken a different policy approach from some of our allies. Our other Five Eyes partners have closed their embassies, but we have maintained our diplomatic mission in Caracas at a much more senior level than many of our partners and are seeking dialogue, sustaining direct contact with the opposition, supporting Venezuelan civil society and advocating for British interests.

A year ago, around Maduro's inauguration, the UK acted alongside partners and announced a wave of new sanctions. We targeted 15 individuals, including judges and senior-ranking officials in Maduro's regime responsible for undermining democracy and the rule of law, and for human rights violations. We have imposed sanctions on individuals, but not on sectors of the economy, and we have not supported or been involved in blockades or strikes against drug boats. We have continued to directly promote the interests of the British overseas territories, which need to see stability in the region.

Of course, throughout we have promoted and maintained support for international law. The commitment to international law, as the Prime Minister set out on Saturday, is immensely important to this Government. Those principles guide the decisions that we make and the actions that we take as part of Britain's foreign policy. That commitment to international law is part of our values; it is also strongly in the UK's national interest. Our manifesto talked about a foreign policy that is progressive and is also realistic, engaging with the world as we find it, in the interests of UK security, prosperity and our values. That means upholding international law and defending democracy, and it means confronting the complex, evolving and hybrid threats that we and our allies face in the world today.

Those principles and values also guide the conversations that we have with our allies across a range of issues where we agree and disagree. In my discussions with

Secretary Rubio, I raised the importance of complying with international law, and we will continue to urge all partners to do so at every stage. It is, of course, for the US to set out the legal basis for its actions. The UN Security Council is discussing Venezuela this afternoon. These issues will continue to be matters for international discussion.

I discussed with Secretary Rubio what should happen next and our continued commitment to a transition to a peaceful and stable democracy. Our collective immediate focus must be on avoiding any deterioration in Venezuela into further instability, criminality, repression or violence. That would be deeply damaging for the people of Venezuela, our own overseas territories, our allies in the US and other regional partners.

The UK has long been clear that the leadership of Venezuela must reflect the will of the Venezuelan people, so the international community must come together to help achieve a peaceful transition to a democratic Government who respect the rights and will of their people. That must mean action on the economic crisis, the release of political prisoners, the return of opposition politicians, an end to political repression, respect for human rights, and plans for the holding of free and fair elections. I urge the acting President, Delcy Rodríguez, to take these steps forward, because the people of Venezuela have a right to decide their own future.

The US Secretary of State and I discussed the particular role that the UK can play to support a peaceful democratic transition and stability. Drawing on our embassy in Caracas and on the work that we have done over many years to build up relationships and dialogue with Venezuelan opposition parties and with the current authorities and regime, and of course our relationship with the US, to that end I have also spoken today with Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado. Her unwavering fight for democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Venezuela, and against oppression, is inspirational. We will keep in touch over the days and weeks ahead.

Finally, let me turn briefly to another matter. The House will have seen recent comments from the United States and from Denmark regarding Greenland. Let me be very clear on the UK's position: Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Our close European partners, our long-standing NATO allies and all our countries work closely together on security issues and will always do so. The future of Greenland is a matter for the Greenlanders and Danes, and no one else. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Leader of the Opposition.

6.26 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I would like to start by associating myself with the condolences expressed by the Foreign Secretary about the awful tragedy in Crans-Montana. I also thank her for her statement on Venezuela, although I am disappointed that it was not the Prime Minister who delivered the statement, because many of us in this House and beyond want to know how he is going to respond to the situation.

Nicolás Maduro was a tyrant who criminally abused the Venezuelan people and destabilised the region. It is no surprise that there is jubilation in the streets, because Venezuelans remember what their country was like before

it was ravaged by years of socialist dictatorship. For years, the Conservative Government refused to recognise the legitimacy of Maduro's horrific regime of brutality and repression, and we were pleased to see the Labour Government follow suit. However, we are in a fundamentally different world. The truth is that while the likes of China have been strategic and aggressive in strengthening their influence across the world, including in South America, the west has been slow.

Foreign policy should serve our national interest. It should be about keeping Britain safe. We should be clear-eyed. The United States is our closest security partner. We must work with it seriously, not snipe from the sidelines. The Opposition understand why the US has taken this action. As the Foreign Secretary said, UK policy has long been to press for a peaceful transition from authoritarian rule to a democracy. That never happened. Instead, Venezuelans have been living under Maduro's brutal regime for many years.

The US has made it clear that it is acting in its national interest against drug smuggling and other criminal activity, including potential terrorism. We understand that. However, we have concerns about what precedent this sets, especially when there are comments made about the future of Greenland. It is important that the United Kingdom supports its NATO ally Denmark, which has made it categorically clear that Greenland is not for sale, so I welcome the Foreign Secretary's remarks in that regard.

What is critical now is the stability of the region and the wider world. It is important that we listen to those who have been risking their lives for freedom and democracy in Venezuela. Opposition leader María Corina Machado, when asked about US action, said that Venezuela had already been invaded: by Iran, by Russia, by drug cartels, and by Hamas and Hezbollah. It is clear that Venezuela had become a gangster state.

I am pleased to hear that the Foreign Secretary has spoken to María Corina Machado, but can she also update the House on whether the Prime Minister has spoken to President Trump? I ask that because the Government talk up their relationship with the US, but we keep finding that we are not in the room when big decisions are made.

We should be under no illusions, because a democratic transition in Venezuela will be far from straightforward, so when the Foreign Secretary speaks of democratic transition, what does that actually mean to the Government in practice? Can she also set out what will now happen to the UK's Venezuela sanctions regime.

In a world changing as it is, we must be serious and responsible about our security and standing. We know what the strategy of the President of the United States is, because his Government set out their national security strategy last year. The US is acting in its national interests, and we need to do the same. We should be working to protect the rules-based order, and we should be standing up to hostile actors that want to undermine us, but what are our Government doing instead? They are giving away the Chagos islands, and paying £35 billion for the privilege, with no strong legal basis to justify doing so.

Last year, the Defence Committee warned that the UK was not adequately prepared to defend herself from attack. The Government are still stalling on defence

spending. The Conservatives want to see defence spending increase to 3% of GDP by the end of this Parliament, given the changing world. Why have the Government not matched that commitment?

It has never been more important for the UK to have a coherent foreign policy strategy. Right now, Labour does not have one. If it does, we would like the Foreign Secretary to tell us what it is, because I did not hear anything that sounded remotely like one in her statement. Let us be honest: old strategies will not work. We are living in an increasingly dangerous world, and the axis of authoritarian states seeking to undermine us respects just one thing: strength. Britain must be ready and willing to defend our own interests, to protect ourselves from those who would undermine us, to protect the unity of the western alliance, and to support democracy and freedom around the world.

Yvette Cooper: I must just say to the Leader of the Opposition that, while I obviously welcome her support on Switzerland, Greenland and Denmark and so on, it felt like the tone of her response was very poorly judged. It was really all over the place. Many times when we were in opposition, we set out our agreement with the Government in the national interest and recognised that there are some cross-party issues. I suspect that had the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), responded to our statement, she probably would have done that.

In fact, on the different issues the Leader of the Opposition talked about, she seemed to agree with us. On Venezuela, she said that the Maduro regime has been deeply damaging, corrupt and deeply destructive, and therefore that no one should shed any tears for its going. She also—I think this was implicit when she talked about the rules-based order—recognised the importance of precedents, the importance of international law and the complexity of the world we face. She also said that she thought we should show support for Denmark and Greenland. In fact, I could not see in her response a single detailed thing that she disagreed with, except for the fact that she seemed to want to express opposition for opposition's sake.

On the overall approach, I think everyone recognises the leadership this Prime Minister has shown on the international stage: chairing the coalition of the willing, and leading the European and international support for Ukraine against Russia; and agreeing three trade deals with India, Europe and the US, after her Government ripped up the trade and co-operation deal and trashed the UK's reputation across the world. We have the biggest increase in defence investment since the cold war, properly supporting UK security, and we have had the most successful state visit of the US President, leading to major tech investment in the UK. The Prime Minister talks frequently to the US, and we have deep partnerships on security, intelligence and the military. There is now our close working on Gaza and the peace process, on the crisis in Sudan and, of course, fundamentally on Ukraine.

Many times in the past we took a cross-party approach, and I would expect the Leader of the Opposition to do the same on what really matters for the future of this country. This Government will continue to stand up for Britain's interests, our prosperity and our values.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): If a large and powerful country abducts the leader of another, however abhorrent that leader is, and tries to intimidate the smaller country to, as it says itself, gain access to its resources, does the Foreign Secretary not agree that this should be called out not just by Britain, but by our western allies? We should be calling it out for what it is—a breach of international law. It is not for the country breaking the law to say whether or not it has broken the law; it is surely for the west to stand up and call it as it is. Does she not therefore share my concern that there may be a profound risk of international norms changing? If we do not call it out, this may become okay, and we risk living in a world where might is right, which is surely not in Britain's interests.

Yvette Cooper: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question, and I recognise that she has been consistent in her opposition to the Maduro regime, even when she was under pressure not to be through many years. She and I would probably agree that a man who is currently being investigated for crimes against humanity and has such a history of political repression, as well as economic destruction and corruption, should not be leading a country.

My right hon. Friend rightly referred to the issues of international law. I have set out our commitment to international law, and she will know that my predecessor as Foreign Secretary talked about progressive realism. We have set out the progressive principles we follow—including how important international law is, because the framework it sets does not just reflect our values, but is in our interests—but also that we have to engage with the world the way it is. I can assure her that, as part of that, I have raised the issue of international law with Secretary of State Rubio and made it clear that we will continue to urge all countries to follow it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the Foreign Secretary's comments about the tragedy in Crans-Montana.

When President Reagan invaded Grenada, Margaret Thatcher said that

“we in...the Western democracies...use our force to defend our way of life, we do not use it to walk into other people's countries... We try to extend our beliefs not by force but by persuasion.”

I am disappointed that we have heard nothing as clear and courageous from either the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary, or from today's Conservative party.

Maduro is a brutal, illegitimate dictator, but that does not give President Trump a free pass for illegal action. This was not about liberating the Venezuelan people. Trump's refusal to back Nobel prize winner María Machado, Maduro's brave liberal opponent, shows that Trump has no interest in Venezuelan democracy. This is about Trump believing he can grab anything he wants—this time, oil—and get away with it. We know what happens when an American President launches an

illegal war under the pretext of an imminent threat. It is why we opposed the Iraq war, and why we condemn Trump today.

National sovereignty matters and international law matters. Without them, the world is far more dangerous and we are all less safe. Anyone who thinks Trump's actions will make China or Russia think twice is either hopelessly desperate or desperately naive. Putin and Xi will be using this precedent to strengthen their hands in Ukraine and Taiwan. Anyone who thinks Trump will stop with Venezuela has not read his new national security strategy. He is already threatening Colombia, Cuba and Greenland, and even democracies across Europe. Does the Foreign Secretary not realise how ridiculous it looks to refuse to call this what it is: a clear breach of international law? Will she at least publish all the advice the Government have received on the legality of Trump's actions?

Yvette Cooper: Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that we do, I hope, agree on the brutality of the Maduro dictatorship and that it is better for Venezuela not to be led by somebody like Maduro. Therefore, the most important thing now for Venezuela is for it to have a transition to democracy. I have spoken directly to the US Secretary of State about that and also about the potential role the UK can play. Unusually, we have a very senior and experienced chargé d'affaires in Venezuela, who has long-standing relationships with the Venezuelan opposition and the regime, and also, of course, we have a close relationship with the US. That puts us in a particular position and gives us a particular responsibility to ensure progress keeps being made towards that democratic transition. Stability will not be maintained unless there is a transition that has the will of the people.

We have made very clear our commitment to international law and the way that it must guide our decisions and UK foreign policy. We will continue to raise it with our partners, both in public and in private. It is important that we do so. As for Government legal advice, the right hon. Gentleman will know that the ministerial code is very clear about the Government not publishing or commenting on different legal advice.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): Nobody in this Chamber wants to defend the regime of Maduro, but what some of us want to do is to stand up for the importance of a rules-based international order. I might add that because my parents were born overseas, I take the question of national sovereignty extremely seriously. We cannot have a situation where a country, because it is bigger and stronger, walks into a smaller country, snatches its political leadership—whatever people think of that political leadership—helicopters it out and puts it on a show trial in an outside country. That cannot be something that this Government are prepared to support.

Let me add, I know that the Opposition are blithe about what Trump is doing—

Hon. Members: Lies?

Ms Abbott: Blithe.

I know that the Opposition are blithe about what Trump is doing, but let me say this: there will be countries that will look at Trump's attitude and carelessness towards issues of sovereignty and think, “What happens if we

have that threat? Who will be willing to stand up for us? Who will be willing to stand up for our national sovereignty?" As far as I have heard thus far, it will not necessarily be our Ministers. And there will be individuals—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The right hon. Lady must get to a question shortly, please.

Ms Abbott: My question is: what would the Foreign Secretary say to British voters—ordinary British voters; not left-wing British voters in particular—who do not understand why a British Prime Minister is not willing to stand up for an international rules-based order and is not willing to defend national sovereignty?

Yvette Cooper: What I would say to my right hon. Friend is that support for a rules-based international order and for international law is a central part of our foreign policy and the decisions the UK Government make and the actions we take. There is an approach that says, "Look, this is a new world of great power politics and spheres of influence," and rejects the role of international law. That is not our view not only because we believe it is right and part of our progressive values, but because it is in the UK's interests. It is why we believe not just in the UN charter but, more broadly, in international law and a rules-based framework. It is why we believe in rules-based alliances and the maintenance of those alliances. Contrary to the great power strategic hemispheres approach, we believe in the transatlantic alliance and the NATO alliance. That is why we are taking such a strong position on Greenland and Denmark, but also why we work with close allies and talk to them on many issues privately as well as publicly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): At the end of the Foreign Secretary's statement, I am no wiser on whether the Government approve this action, or on whether they believe that it breaks international law. The Prime Minister is such a devotee of international law that he is not prepared to defend our borders from the small boats, and to take the necessary action there. Why is there one law for the American President, when he is doing what is right for his country and defending it, but a different law for us? My simple question is this: do the Government believe that this breaks international law, and do they approve this action?

Yvette Cooper: As I said in my statement, and as the Prime Minister said on Saturday, there can be no tears shed for the Maduro regime, given the damage that it has done over many years. It is for the US to set out the legal position following its actions. We were not involved in those actions. We continue to be guided by international law in our approach, and we continue to work on the most important issue: getting a transition to peaceful democracy in Venezuela.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It was the Prime Minister who decided to disregard the United Nations charter when it came to Trump's bombing and killing, and his kidnapping the Head of State. It speaks volumes that the Prime Minister has chosen not to come to this House to explain his decision. The reality is that if it were Putin doing this, the Prime Minister would not be saying,

"It's up to the Russians to decide whether or not this is legal," but that is exactly what the Prime Minister has said in relation to Trump's disgusting attack on Venezuela. Is not the reality that the Prime Minister is willing to ditch international law and side-step the United Nations charter in order to appease Donald Trump, and does not that cowardly, craven approach drag this country's reputation through the dirt?

Yvette Cooper: I find it hard not to remember my hon. Friend's support and welcome for the Maduro regime, a regime that is currently being investigated for crimes against humanity.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Most people's thoughts on Maduro's capture will be, "Good riddance", and I would have liked the Government to have been more categorical in supporting US action to remove an illegitimate and evil dictator, but if the new US approach extends to the annexation of Greenland, the sovereign territory of a NATO member, it could mean the end of the alliance, with disastrous consequences. How much planning is going on at the Foreign Office to make sure that such a disaster does not happen? We understand that discussions between allies have to be private, but from the outside, it looks like Europe is weak and divided. Can the Foreign Secretary reassure the House that the right conversations are happening, and that we are not just hoping for the best?

Yvette Cooper: Let me reiterate our strong support for the Greenlanders and for Denmark. Greenland is part of the kingdom of Denmark, and its future is for them to decide, not anybody else, notwithstanding any of the things that we have heard the US and others say. We are very clear about that. I have raised this issue internationally, and we will continue to do so. We are very firm in our view on this point.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): My constituents do not mourn the removal of Nicolás Maduro, who oversaw the violent repression of his people, a fraudulent presidential election and horrific human rights abuses for many years, but they are alarmed about the unilateral regime change sought by the Trump Administration in order to access Venezuelan oil resources. Two wrongs do not make a right. What measures is the Foreign Secretary taking to support Opposition leaders, including 2025 Nobel prize winner, María Corina Machado?

Yvette Cooper: Our country has particularly strong relationships with the Venezuelan Opposition as a result of the work of our chargé d'affaires and our embassy in Venezuela, which we have maintained when other countries have not maintained theirs. As I have said, that puts us in a particularly significant position, in terms of being able to support a transition to democracy, which is what we have always argued for. That is exactly why I have spoken to María Corina today. We will keep in close touch, so that we can recognise, as a first step, their call for an end to political repression in Venezuela, which must happen.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I will not mourn the passing of the Maduro regime, but I will mourn the passing of the rules-based international order. If we accept the premise that a big-power country can do what it wants without any ramifications, anywhere in

[Edward Morello]

the world, then we accept the behaviour of Putin over the past two decades, and the behaviour of Xi Jinping in the future. We cannot allow that to stand. It is clear that our future security lies in closer co-operation with our European allies, so what is the Foreign Secretary doing to ensure that the UK is in lockstep with those who do share our values?

Yvette Cooper: We have strengthened our relationships with our European partners—indeed, I have been in touch with the Danish Foreign Minister today on the issues around Greenland—and we will continue to support the rules-based international order, the UN charter and international law. I would warn Members against making equivalence here with what Putin has done in Ukraine; Russia invaded a country led by a democratically elected President Zelensky, and thousands of children have been kidnapped. We should be careful about what we say and its implications.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement on an incredibly complex international situation. Maduro stole elections and murdered opponents, and 9 million Venezuelans were forced to flee their country. Venezuelans will be both fearful and hopeful for the future. This episode shows the US shifting to the western hemisphere, leaving European security more exposed, and the willingness of the US to interfere in foreign states, with serious implications for our NATO ally Denmark. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that what the UK can now usefully do is use any influence we have to pursue Venezuela's transition to democracy, learn from this event, and accelerate the meeting of our defence and national security commitments?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right about the fear and hope felt by many people in Venezuela; we have had that reflected back to us over the weekend. That is why we are doing everything we can—we are in an unusual position, given our experience and relationships—to promote and support a transition to democracy. I also agree about the importance of increasing our defence investment; that is why we now have the biggest increase in defence investment since the end of the cold war.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Maduro and Chávez regime was characterised by widespread human rights abuse, criminality and economic destitution, and many Venezuelans are rightly and understandably celebrating its end. However, I have to say to the Foreign Secretary that after more than half an hour, it is still not clear whether the UK Government actually agree with what has been done. She referred to the discussion taking place at the UN Security Council at the moment—can she say what the UK's position will be at that meeting?

Yvette Cooper: I set out our position at the beginning of the statement: we have long supported a peaceful transition from an authoritarian regime to a democracy. We shed no tears for the removal of Maduro, but we want a peaceful transition to the establishment of a democracy, which we do not yet have in Venezuela. That is what we will work towards. We will always argue for the upholding of international law.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Members will be aware that very many of you wish to contribute to this statement. There is another statement to come, and an important debate later. I encourage you to make your questions short.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Whether it is Venezuela, Greenland, Ukraine, Palestine or Taiwan, the UK Government are right to champion international law, but we must face facts. The global rules-based order is crumbling before our eyes, as nations increasingly disregard those rules and national interest trumps long-standing alliances. In this new era of strongman politics, whether we like it or not, military strength is the ultimate guarantor of our security and sovereignty, so I ask the Secretary of State what steps the Government are taking to accelerate investment in defence, and to send a clear signal, so that we are respected by both friend and foe globally.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to say that the global rules-based order is under pressure from different directions, as I said in a speech just before Christmas; however, we believe that it remains important, and is in the interests and nature of our country and history, as well as forming a fundamental part of our values. We believe that international law and the rules-based order are fundamentally a foundation for peace and security across the world. We have to engage with the world as we find it, and not as we would like it to be, which means continuing to advocate for international law with people right across the world, including directly with our allies, and increasing our investment in defence. Fundamentally, protecting our national security has to be the most important priority for the Government.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): Surely the real story coming out today and over the past few days is the revelation—one we should all have known—that this country has opted out of protecting the international rules-based system. We have not significantly invested in defence, and even the commitment the Foreign Secretary speaks of does not keep pace with defence inflation. As the Prime Minister revealed on Sunday, he has not even spoken to the American President. Does this not reveal the simple truth that the Americans did this without us because they do not give a damn what this House thinks?

Yvette Cooper: I guess I would just have to ask who it was who did not significantly invest in defence over the past 14 years. This Government are substantially increasing investment in defence, chairing the coalition of the willing, and showing leadership on the international stage. What has struck me since becoming Foreign Secretary, and having had discussions with Governments from across the world over the past few months, is how often those Governments say how welcome it is that Britain is back.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Maduro was an illegitimate president. In *The New York Times* today, Colette Capriles, writing from Caracas, describes a “struggle for survival”, a “primitive capitalism”, a

“web of bosses, private loyalties, corrupt practices and institutional ruins that have replaced public life”

in Venezuela. I ask the Foreign Secretary: what can the UK do to support the development of strong civic institutions there that can help to build a new Venezuela?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. There is a real risk of instability in Venezuela now, and it will be crucial to build civil society and give people in Venezuela hope, rather than fear. We should ensure stability, building up capacity and work with Opposition parties and other organisations. That is something we are advocating strongly for. I have discussed this with the US Secretary of State, and said that we will continue to make that a priority, based on the work that our excellent chargé d'affaires has been doing over many years; now we need to do that extensively, including in discussion with Opposition parties.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It would be hard to find an occasion on which a British Prime Minister has looked as irrelevant and spineless on an era-defining international issue as this one does on this occasion. We are witnessing an existential threat to the international rules-based order, and the Prime Minister cannot rouse himself to give it even the meekest of defences. France, Spain, Brazil, Mexico and the UN Secretary-General have all been clear that the Trump Administration have violated international law. When will the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary find their voices and join that chorus of condemnation?

Yvette Cooper: The Prime Minister's response has been very much in line with the leaders of countries across not just Europe but the world. We continue to stand up for and highlight the importance of international law and focus on the realities in Venezuela, where huge damage has been done over a long time, including by the interference of Iran and Russia. We are focusing on what should be the priority of all of us now: getting a democratic transition for Venezuela.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. We speak today from the heart of our democracy, where power transfers peacefully according to the will of the people. Does she agree that democracy is the right of all people, no matter where they live? Does she further agree that it is for Venezuelans to decide what their future holds?

Yvette Cooper: I completely agree. The people of Venezuela have been denied that democratic right for far too long. Election results have not been respected, and Venezuelans have faced some of the most horrendous political repression, including on an industrial scale. The July 2024 elections were clearly not respected, and the official results were never published. That is why we are continuing to talk to the opposition parties and others in Venezuela about the importance of getting a democratic transition in place.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Of course quite a lot depends on what now happens, but Mr Maduro stole the elections in Venezuela in plain sight, is a narco-terrorist and has destroyed the lives of tens of thousands of American citizens and of those more widely and made huge amounts of money out of it. Is not the world a better place with him before the courts in New York, and in this case do not the ends justify the means?

Yvette Cooper: Venezuela is in a stronger position without Maduro leading it, especially given the horrendous human rights abuses and the huge damage to its economy,

but as the right hon. Member implied at the beginning of his question, what happens next is really important. The UK is determined to do everything we can to ensure that there is a transition to democracy and stability, because Venezuela will not have stability without a proper democratic transition.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that the role of the Government has been to uphold international law. Part of upholding international law is to call out crimes when they are witnessed. Article 2.4 of the United Nations charter is explicit about the illegality of entering into a foreign state with armed force. That is why I found it shameful, I have to say, that the Prime Minister and Ministers in the news rounds have refused to condemn this action. I think that Trump will interpret our not condemning this action as the green light to go in wherever to steal the national assets of those countries. As a result, we are all in a more dangerous place.

Yvette Cooper: Promoting international law in the most effective way also means promoting the rules-based order and the rules-based alliances that we have. It means being able to raise issues around international law both publicly and privately in a way that has the greatest results to defend the rules-based order. That is what we will continue to do, and that, frankly, is what is in the UK's interest.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Venezuelans are relieved to be free of Maduro's tyranny. However, Venezuela risks remaining a failed state, rather than being a free state, unless the international community comes together. Oil companies are not state builders, nor are they capable of democratic capacity building or enabling political transitions. I was surprised that there was no mention in the Foreign Secretary's statement of plans to evacuate British nationals if possible or of how many British nationals are in country. What phone calls has the Foreign Secretary had since this action with the leader of Guyana, a Commonwealth country and nation with whom we have an important relationship? If she has not spoken to that leader, why has she not?

Yvette Cooper: As I think I set out in my statement, there are an estimated 500 British nationals in Venezuela. We did look at all possible crisis responses over the weekend. We stood up the crisis facility in the Foreign Office to ensure that we were ready to respond if necessary at any point. The response did not go beyond the changed travel advice, and over the weekend British nationals were advised to shelter in place while what might be happening next was assessed. We have had some consular contact, but it has been very limited. We have been available to any British nationals who want our support, as we would continue to be.

We are also in contact with Commonwealth countries and overseas territories. The Minister responsible for the overseas territories, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), is following up with overseas territories that are particularly affected by instability in the region.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for her remarks. She has talked about instability in the

[Rachel Blake]

region and the need for grassroots investment in order for there to be a peaceful transition. Will she share with us the assessment she has made about the impact of economic instability in the region and the role of businesses in the region and how that instability could feed into and damage the possibility of a peaceful transition?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The nature of the economic crisis in Venezuela over the last decade has pushed huge numbers of Venezuelans into extreme hardship. It is one of the reasons why so many Venezuelans have left the country; an estimated one in four Venezuelans have left the country over the last 10 years as a result. This should be a country with a very strong economy. It is very important to build that economy up, but crucially it has to be to the benefit of the people of Venezuela, not criminals or corrupt regimes.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): This is about being principled. What if we were to learn from the White House that Greenland had been the source of cocaine or fentanyl flowing to the United States? Even if we do not expect a fabricated pretext on Greenland or imminent US intervention there, will the Government please condemn the unilateral action in Venezuela by the Trump Administration before we see a complete breakdown of the rules-based order?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will have heard me setting out very strongly in my statement our position on Greenland and Denmark. We will continue to do so, because we are very clear that this is about the NATO alliance, the rules-based order and our close ally.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement that she will abide by international law. I would not expect her to publish the legal advice that she has received from the Law Officers and others, but I would expect her to set out the Government's own analysis of whether and how the acts of US forces towards Venezuela comply with the rule of law, so will she now do that?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will know the constraints in the ministerial code regarding legal advice. As I have said, it is for the US to set out publicly its legal basis for the actions that it has taken. We have raised the issue of international law—I have directly raised it with the US Secretary of State—and set out our views and concerns and the importance of urging all partners to abide by international law.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The essay question is not whether Mr Maduro was a good man, which is a clear no-brainer, but whether, as others have asked, the actions of the US President were legal. America cannot be expected to mark her own homework, so I have two questions for the Foreign Secretary. First, what body or bodies would she identify as being responsible to adjudicate on the legality of the American action? Secondly, as the vice-president of Venezuela, whose hands are as tainted with the previous regime as Maduro's, has this afternoon been sworn in as the new President, what read-across should this House have from that incident?

Yvette Cooper: The UN Security Council has been discussing Venezuela today, and I am sure that those international discussions will continue. On the vice-president being sworn in, we continue not to recognise the legitimacy of the Venezuelan regime. We want to see stability and a transition to democracy. We are urging the vice-president now to take the steps for that transition to a democracy that respects the will and human rights of the Venezuelan people.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I accept that Venezuela is a brutal, failed and highly dangerous state, but the implications of this action will be deeply destabilising across eastern Europe. In the Foreign Secretary's discussions with the US Secretary of State about international law, did she reference the message that this action sends to Putin about Russia's ambitions in Europe?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will know that we continually discuss the threat from Russia and the importance of the transatlantic alliance supporting Ukraine with the US. I have discussed that many times with the US Secretary of State and the Prime Minister has discussed that continually with the US President. We are clear about the importance of defending Ukraine. Tomorrow, the Prime Minister will be part of the coalition of the willing, which is exactly about supporting Ukraine. As we build those international alliances, we must ensure that we do so in the most effective way to support Ukraine. I assure my hon. Friend that I raise international law and the concerns we have with the US Secretary of State.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I think it is clear that the Foreign Secretary supports the end, if not the means. I think it is also clear that she accepts the outcome, though she cannot bring herself—nor can the Government—to condone the actions of President Trump. But today we learned that the Chinese have warned against touching Venezuela's oil resources and demanded the return of President Maduro. Does she see that as sabre rattling, or is she concerned?

Yvette Cooper: I know that there have been many concerns about engagement in the oil industry in Venezuela, particularly of Iran and Russia. The right hon. Member referred to issues around China and the position of the Chinese Government. The oil industry in Venezuela should be benefiting the people of Venezuela, not other countries or corrupt regimes.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The truth is, the warning signs that the rules-based order is at risk have been there for some time. In evidence to Congress during the impeachment inquiry into President Trump, the former White House adviser on Russia and Europe, Fiona Hill, claimed that an informal offer was made by Russia to withdraw its support for Venezuela in exchange for America withdrawing its support for Ukraine. In the light of these events, will the Foreign Secretary confirm that that specific allegation has been raised in her conversations with our American counterparts? What response has she had?

Yvette Cooper: We continue to have important discussions with the US about Ukraine and support for Ukraine. Many of those discussions have been about the security

guarantees that the US would provide as part of a peace agreement for Ukraine. Those security guarantees involve the US providing that support, working with other European countries. That will continue to be a central objective of our foreign policy.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): To those who still harbour illusions about an idealised world of international rules that will be abided by all, should we not just say, “Welcome to the real world, where might often proves to be right and we have to face the circumstances that we are in”? May I therefore give my support to the Government’s ambivalence, as supported by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, who also rightly criticised—it was all she disagreed with the Government about—the slow pace of rearmament? Will the Foreign Secretary avoid blowing up the bridges we have with the United States and use that influence? Does she not agree it really would be stupid to slag off President Trump now when we want to have influence over what he does next?

Yvette Cooper: Let me address some of the hon. Member’s bigger points about the international rules-based order and global power politics. He and I are old enough to have experience and reflections on the cold war, which was all about great power politics and difficulties. Alongside those big military global tensions, we had worked hard post the second world war to develop a rules-based order. This has been a part of global history for a long time: the tensions between how we maintain international law and an international rules-based order and how we engage with different competing interests, sometimes from some of the biggest countries in the world and sometimes from some of the smaller countries in the world who have particular power in particular areas.

In terms of the UK’s approach, we continue to believe in the importance of a rules-based order and of such an international framework. We also engage with the world as it is—the world as we face it. We need to be able to do so and to be agile in responding to that.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Regardless of what is said in this place, it is clear for all to see that Trump’s illegal actions in Venezuela are a blatant violation of international law, and now he has Greenland clearly in his sight. Frankly, the response from the international community and our own Government has been shameful. How can we pretend to defend international law when we refuse even to condemn the most blatant of violations and do not apply it equally?

The reality is that we are sending a green light to say that international rules no longer apply. Let us call this what it is. Trump’s actions are not about democracy; they are about oil and old-fashioned colonialism. I give the Foreign Secretary the opportunity again. If she truly believes and wants to stand up for international law, she should stand at that Dispatch Box and condemn these illegal actions. If she does not—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I think we have got the gist. We really need to have shorter questions, or not everyone will get in.

Yvette Cooper: I remind my hon. Friend that the Maduro regime was deeply authoritarian and corrupt, and it allowed countries such as Russia and Iran, as well as Hezbollah, to intervene and increase their influence

in that country. We should not shed a tear for the end of the Maduro regime; what we should do is work for democracy. That is in our values, and that is what we will continue to do. We will also continue to stand up for international law.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The last time I saw this degree of agreement between Government and Opposition Front Benchers in relation to foreign policy was in the run-up to the war in Iraq, and we all know how that ended. But I welcome what the Foreign Secretary has said about being clear that the leadership of Venezuela must reflect the will of the Venezuelan people. So when she spoke to Secretary Rubio, did she condemn President Trump’s assertion that he should run Venezuela for the foreseeable future?

Yvette Cooper: Obviously, in practice the US does not have boots on the ground in Venezuela, and the vice-president has been sworn in. We continue not to recognise the vice-president’s regime as legitimate in Venezuela and we are continuing to press for a democratic transition. I discussed with the US Secretary of State the importance of a democratic transition, the importance of working with the opposition, and the role that the UK could play in doing that. Ultimately, this has to be about ensuring that the will of the Venezuelan people is respected.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Article 2.4 of the United Nations charter states:

“All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”.

Does the Secretary of State agree that, even when a President lacks democratic legitimacy, any peaceful transition in Venezuela must be in the hands of its people and not dictated by foreign Governments, who must follow international law?

Yvette Cooper: A peaceful transition is essential, and it has to be a transition to democracy that reflects the will of the Venezuelan people. That is why I have spoken today to María Corina Machado, and that is what we and our embassy in Caracas will continue to press for.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Government use any influence that their silence on Venezuela is buying to impress on President Trump that, while it may be expedient for the UK to acquiesce in the removal of a hideous old tyrant, Nicolás Maduro, hemispheric proto-colonialism that threatens UK interests or the integrity of any Commonwealth country or European neighbour would destroy the special relationship that has existed between our countries since the second world war?

Yvette Cooper: I think the right hon. Member is referring to Greenland and Denmark. Let me be really clear: Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark. We have said so extremely strongly and we will continue to do so. The Prime Minister has said so today, and I have been in touch with the Danish Foreign Minister today. The right hon. Member will have seen the strong statements not just from the Danish Prime Minister but from other leaders, particularly across the Nordic states. This is immensely important to us. We are all NATO allies and we all need to work together. That is part of how we strengthen our security.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): There is a central question here, which can be simply put: if we do not condemn the American actions in Venezuela, what is to stop dictators around the world acting in a similar way against our allies and our interests? Does the Secretary of State agree that rules do matter?

Yvette Cooper: I think I have been clear not only that rules matter and that international law matters, but that we need to ensure that we look at the different circumstances of different situations and rightly approach each one in turn. That is why we have today set out our position on Greenland. I caution hon. Members against creating equivalence between different situations in different parts of the world and between very different circumstances in very different countries. We have to be realistic about the differences between them in the approach that we take.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Has the Foreign Secretary had an opportunity to study the United States national security statement that was made at the end of November, in which it appears to give itself the right to intervene in any country in the western hemisphere in order to exploit raw materials and minerals? Is she not concerned about the overt threats that are now being made against Colombia and Cuba, as well as about the illegal kidnapping of Maduro? Is she going to make any representations to the USA about that as well?

Yvette Cooper: On Colombia, for example, we have worked closely with the Government of Colombia. We continue to be the penholder on Colombia at the UN and continue to work closely with it. We have also made representations on aspects of the US national security strategy, where we take a very different view from the US. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has a long history in this area, but it has included support for the Maduro regime, which is now being investigated for crimes against humanity.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Compliance with international law is not an either/or, and I am extremely concerned that the action of the United States shows utter disdain for international law and leaves enormous uncertainty over the future of Venezuela. It removes a leader whose rule was corrupt and cruel, but rather than celebrating, many people there are now stocking up on food and medicines out of concern for what comes next. Trump's rationale around stopping drug trafficking rings hollow following his pardon for ex-Honduran President Hernández. What specific actions will the Government take to stabilise the situation so that the Venezuelan people can decide their own future, and also to ensure that President Trump does not act on his threats against Colombia, Cuba and Greenland?

Yvette Cooper: I have responded to questions on the other countries. The critical issue now is to ensure that Venezuela can be on a track towards a democracy that respects the will of the Venezuelan people and also their human rights. The first step has to be the ending of political repression and the release of political prisoners, and that is an issue that I have discussed with the leader of the Venezuelan opposition. I have also raised it with the US Secretary of State, and we will be pursuing that through our embassy, where we have particular weight and expertise.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Can the Foreign Secretary say a bit more about engagement with the Commonwealth? Not only are there two Commonwealth countries immediately adjacent to Venezuela, but there is an important Commonwealth network across the Caribbean. Surely there must be a danger at this moment that some of those countries might think that their interests would be better served by looking to the United States rather than to the Commonwealth and the UK.

Yvette Cooper: We continue to have a very strong engagement with the Commonwealth and are continuing to do so in the light of the weekend's events. There are Commonwealth countries and overseas territories that have been heavily affected by the instability in the region, including the instability driven by the Maduro regime, as well as by the scale of the narco-trafficking and the criminal gang operations and by the scale and pace of migration, which has been very destabilising. We are also engaging with the Commonwealth countries in order to work with them on ensuring that there can be stability in the region, because that is in everyone's interest.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): There can be no question but that it is for the people of Venezuela to choose its future and for the international community to support democracy and uphold international law. While there is no denying the illegitimacy and brutality of Maduro's regime, does the Foreign Secretary share my fears that such unilateral action sends the dangerous message to despots and tyrants throughout the world that might is right, and that it endangers peace and democracy throughout the world?

Yvette Cooper: We obviously have to keep in mind that this was an authoritarian dictator who is being investigated by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, which is why the Prime Minister said that we would shed no tears over the removal of Maduro, but we also believe in the international rules-based order and the importance of countries respecting that. We have raised that with the US.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Maduro was an enemy of the west, and while there is disagreement in this House about the means, I think there is much agreement that the Venezuelan people are better off without him. Can I ask the Foreign Secretary to comment more about the constructive influence that the UK and other western allies can have to ensure an early return to democracy for the Venezuelan people?

Yvette Cooper: The most important issue now is to ensure that Venezuela is on that track to democracy, and that means there has to be stability. Right now we need to prevent further instability and criminality, starting with the end to political repression and the release of political prisoners who are held across Venezuela. Those are some of the things that opposition parties are calling for as urgent first steps, and those are the things that the UK will press for, directly in Venezuela and in our relationship with the US as part of this process.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): There is clearly no question about the illegitimacy of Maduro's presidency, but there are questions about President Trump

driving a coach and horses through the global rules-based order. How should the UK now view the United States national security strategy in the light of this recent action?

Yvette Cooper: The US has set out its national security strategy and we have separately set out ours, and they are clearly different. I have raised with the US some particular issues around the US national security strategy. It is obviously for the US to set out its priorities as a democratically elected Government. This comes back to the fact that we believe in the importance not just of hemispheres of interest but of the transatlantic alliance. That has been a cornerstone of UK security. We have a unique security partnership with the US, and that remains important alongside the international rule of law.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I welcome the removal of Nicolás Maduro, who for too long oppressed the people of Venezuela, but history shows that the aftermath of intervention can be as consequential as the intervention itself. What specific steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure that there is no vacuum for instability or hostile actors to exploit both within Venezuela and across the wider region, particularly hostile state actors such as Russia, China and Iran?

Yvette Cooper: That is an extremely important issue, and I discussed exactly that with US Secretary of State Rubio yesterday in respect of how we ensure that there is stability in Venezuela and that stability is part of a pathway to democracy. I do not believe stability will be maintained if there is not that route to democracy—there must be a plan and a transition to democracy—but equally, it is hugely important to ensure that we do not have greater destabilisation by countries like Russia and Iran, but also by the criminal gangs that have been so deeply destructive and were allowed to become so powerful under the Maduro regime.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I welcome the confirmation that the Government support international law and now want to see a safe and peaceful transition to a legitimate Government that reflects the will of the people in Venezuela, but does the Foreign Secretary at least agree that if Donald Trump's unilateral action was in breach of international law and the UN charter, it has created a very dangerous precedent?

Yvette Cooper: The reason we stand up for the UN charter and international law is partly because it reflects our values and partly because it reflects our interests, and because that UN charter and international law framework underpin peace and security across the globe. Of course, throughout decades of history, international law and the UN charter have been tested and strained with the reality of different kinds of international affairs all over the world, and they will continue to be, but we still believe in the importance of advocating for international law and doing so with our closest allies.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The US attack on Venezuela is clearly a breach of international law. Of course Maduro's violent, repressive regime must be held accountable, but the Venezuelan people need and deserve international support that upholds international law, not the unilateral, unlawful US oil imperialism that

we have seen. Does the Foreign Secretary recognise that a key function of any Foreign Secretary is to defend and uphold international law? Does she recognise that a year of pandering to and pussyfooting around Donald Trump has had no restraining effect and has instead emboldened him? Will she condemn the illegal US action?

Yvette Cooper: Let me just say what is in the interests of the people of Venezuela, because that was where the hon. Member started her question. What I think is in the interests of the people of Venezuela is not the Maduro regime, but a transition to democracy. We have worked for many years for a peaceful transition to democracy in line with international law, and that continues to be our policy, but we will work with the reality on the ground. We will work with all those involved and will use the particular assets we have with our experienced embassy to promote the transition to democracy in as safe and stable a way as possible. That is exactly why we are in touch with the Venezuelan opposition.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary set three conditions for judging the transition: that it be peaceful, that it be compliant with international law and that it have the support of the Venezuelan people. All three of those conditions were broken by a lethal attack by a foreign power, planned not in Caracas but in Washington and in breach of the UN charter. Will the Foreign Secretary turn her mind for a second to the President's idea that he will seize Venezuelan oil and turn the Venezuelan state into a colony, and advise the House of her reaction? None of those things could be supported by any Labour Government.

Yvette Cooper: The Maduro regime did not have the support of the Venezuelan people. That was the consequence of the July 2024 election, for which they have continually refused to publish the results because of all the evidence that Maduro lost the election. We have been very clear that the oil in Venezuela should be used to the benefit of the Venezuelan people—that is what is most important now.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has repeated time after time today that she believes in the rules-based system. Therefore, will she argue for that vociferously at the United Nations so that the world knows what British values are? Will she also discuss with the American Administration a realistic plan to make Venezuela a democracy and make it clear, as she has just said, that the oil should benefit the Venezuelan people and no one else?

Yvette Cooper: Yes is the answer to the hon. Member's questions. We are continuing to raise and promote international law through the United Nations and the Security Council; we are continuing to raise the importance of international law with the US Administration on a range of issues; and we are continuing to argue for a democratic transition in which Venezuelan assets should be used for the Venezuelan people.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): If the Foreign Secretary believes that the rules-based order is important, why have she and the Prime Minister not condemned the actions of Trump? Does she agree that he is nothing more than a megalomaniac and that this is imperialism by another name?

Yvette Cooper: Again, the Maduro regime has been deeply damaging for the people of Venezuela. We do not shed a tear for the end of the Maduro regime. We do believe, however, that it is essential that we get a peaceful transition to democracy in line with the rule of law and international law. That is what we have argued for over many years and continue to argue for now, because that is what is in the interests of the Venezuelan people.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): With Donald Trump taking a leaf out of the Putin playbook and becoming an international gangster in the Americas, what assurance can the Secretary of State give the Chamber that the coalition of the willing to protect Ukraine will become the coalition of the capable to defend Ukraine?

Yvette Cooper: Again, I would advise Members against suggesting that there is somehow equivalence between what happened this weekend and Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine—the kidnapping of thousands of children in Ukraine, the targeting of democratically elected President Zelensky and the continued war in Ukraine. We will continue to work with the US in defence of Ukraine. That is why we are pursuing the issue of security guarantees as part of NATO, as part of our transatlantic alliance, which is immensely important to the security of the UK and the security of Ukraine.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): President Trump has behaved like a member of a criminal gang—bombing Venezuela, a sovereign country; kidnapping its Head of State and his family; and killing many in the process. Where next—Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Panama, Greenland, here? Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we do not stand up to deviants and bullies like Trump, they will only be emboldened to repeat their illegal acts elsewhere?

Yvette Cooper: I point out to my hon. Friend that Maduro was not recognised as a Head of State by the UK Government and by many Governments, not least because of the deep corruption, the refusal to respect the July 2024 election and the deep damage he had done, including now being investigated for crimes against humanity. My hon. Friend talked about the impact on neighbouring countries. Neighbouring countries have also suffered deep damage as a result of the Maduro regime allowing criminal gangs to operate so extensively from Venezuela, and as a result of the rapid migration of so many people from Venezuela due to the crisis.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I have listened to the Foreign Secretary for the last hour and a half and the Government's foreign policy position on Venezuela is still completely unclear to me, so I will ask a more direct question: does the Foreign Secretary agree with the United States' Donroe doctrine?

Yvette Cooper: The Monroe doctrine has been interpreted in many different ways over decades and through generations, and historians will dispute that. What I can set out is the UK's foreign policy approach, which is to stand up for Britain's security, prosperity and values. That is why we not only stand up for the international rule of law, but maintain crucial security alliances, such as NATO and our transatlantic partnership, which are based on laws and values.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has set out that it is possible to not shed a tear for Maduro's removal but be concerned about upholding international law. In that regard, this should not be seen as a green light for Greenland. With that in mind, will the Foreign Secretary confirm to the House that when she spoke to Secretary of State Rubio, she specifically registered the UK Government's position on Greenland?

Yvette Cooper: I have been in touch with the US Secretary of State about our position on Greenland, and the Prime Minister made it extremely clear today. We have made it clear to the House that we feel strongly that it is important that Greenland is part of Denmark and that the future of Greenland is for the people of Greenland and nobody else.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Like the Foreign Secretary, I shed no tears for the fall of the Maduro regime. However, I have fears about the precedent set by President Trump's actions over the weekend. What is the Foreign Secretary's assessment for global stability if dictators and despots across the world take a very simple lesson from the US's actions this weekend—that might is right?

Yvette Cooper: What we have seen in Maduro is a dictator who is no longer running his country, and the hon. Gentleman and I will, rightly, not shed any tears for that. It is important, however, that we uphold international law, the rules-based order and our values. Those values include recognising democracy and sovereignty for the Venezuelan people, which, frankly, have not been respected by the Maduro regime over many years.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): The whole world is now asking, "Who's next? Who's on this list? Is it Cuba, Mexico, Panama, Greenland, Canada or Colombia?" The attack on Venezuela sparked a wave of regional instability, including in Colombia. The Colombian peace agreement is under threat, exacerbated by the rhetoric from President Trump, who has outrageously smeared Petro as a drug dealer and threatened further military intervention targeting Colombia directly. Given the UK's role as UN Security Council penholder for the Colombian peace agreement, will the Secretary of State make immediate representations to her US counterparts to cease these reckless threats against a close UK partner?

Yvette Cooper: The instability in the region has been heavily exacerbated and driven by the Maduro regime, given the scale of migration and trafficking, the operations of criminal gangs and the escalating influence of Iran, Hezbollah and Russia in the region. As my hon. Friend rightly says, we are the penholder on Colombia. We support the peace process that was agreed and we have worked closely with the Colombian Government on sustaining that peace process. We believe that is extremely important. We will continue to do that through the UN and with all our allies.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Nordic countries, I am very grateful for the comments of the Foreign Secretary and the Leader of the Opposition on Denmark and Greenland. I am also grateful that the

Foreign Secretary confirmed just a few moments ago that she and the Prime Minister have been raising directly the issue of respect for the sovereignty of that key NATO ally. Why, then, did it take so long for the Prime Minister to publicly espouse his support, which was so delayed after Sweden, Finland and other countries did so?

Yvette Cooper: The Prime Minister did so this morning when he was asked about it.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): The UK's overriding interest should be to maintain international law, keep as many countries as possible in the global rules-based order and ensure that what has happened in Venezuela is not a gift to Russia or China. Is the Foreign Secretary sure that we can maintain our position at the Security Council and promote our values, our interests and the rules-based order?

Yvette Cooper: That is what we need to continue to do. The approach of progressive realism that my predecessor set out in our manifesto was about not only how we pursue our values, but recognising the world as it is—which is, sadly, often not the way we want it to be—how we continue to pursue those values in the most effective way, both publicly and privately, through our alliances, and how we make sure that our foreign policy and decisions are guided by international law.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Britain is historically America's best friend, and best friends tell each other when they are acting appallingly; they do not go into toadying mode. As my right hon. Friends the Members for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) have mentioned, in 2003 in this House, a Labour Government voted, with Conservative support, to illegally invade Iraq. The consequences were the undermining of international law, the emboldening of despots around the world, and the massive degradation of Britain's security, safety and significance. Have we learned nothing from that lesson of nearly 25 years ago? Have we not learned the one lesson above all of history—that those who appease bullies soon become their victims?

Yvette Cooper: Let me say again to the hon. Member that the continual false equivalence with other issues around the world does not help any of the arguments or the issues that we are dealing with. We have an important issue now: what happened in Venezuela. The UK was not a part of the operations that took place over the weekend. We have set out a different foreign policy approach to Venezuela, based on a peaceful transition, support for democracy and the promotion of international law, which we will continue with. It is right that we do that, given the world that we are in, and the alliances that we need to build in order to pursue our values, our interests and, in this case, democracy for Venezuela.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Democracy and human rights are sacrosanct. A new great game, in which might beats what is right, is replacing the international rules-based order. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that our allies in Ukraine, Taiwan and elsewhere are less secure now than they were a week ago?

Yvette Cooper: Throughout our history, there have been tensions. Since the second world war, there have been tensions around the issues of the rules-based order and the international law that we have championed throughout. During the cold war, there were big tensions between major countries, and there are tensions in some of the debates that take place now about global powers and spheres of interest in different hemispheres. As for how the UK should navigate through that, we continue to maintain and uphold the importance of international law, the rules-based order and the international framework of law because we believe that is in our interests, and is the right thing to do. However, as part of that, we have to maintain rules-based alliances, including the NATO alliance and the transatlantic alliance, which are built on, and underpinned by, our values and laws. That is important too, and it is crucial when it comes to Ukraine, which my hon. Friend has worked on for a long time.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Thirty per cent of the US naval fleet is positioned off the coast of Venezuela, those vessels having been redeployed from many locations. They include the fifth fleet from the joint UK-US deployment in Bahrain. We will be left exposed in certain areas—90% of data cables between Europe and Asia are in that region—if this goes on beyond the middle of January. What risk assessments have been undertaken to ensure that our troops are not more exposed than they need to be?

Yvette Cooper: The undersea cable issue is important, and we have considered it not just in terms of UK defence, but internationally. We have discussed it at NATO, and as part of our alliances. It is why we must continue to take much more seriously the operation of the Russian shadow fleet in our waters.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): There has been much discussion of international law, but what matters is that it is upheld at such a dangerous time in the world. Our country is less safe when it is not upheld. In the context of Venezuela and Greenland, will the Government reaffirm their commitment to the UN charter as a key instrument of international law, and will they vote accordingly at the UN Security Council?

Yvette Cooper: We continue to support the UN charter, which is the foundation of our peace and security. We will continue to support it and its principles in all our international debates.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's clarity on the UK's approach to Greenland, which is that it is up to Greenlanders and Danes to determine its future, and no one else. Could she be equally clear on whether use of any US bases in the UK will be permitted in any potential military action towards Greenland?

Yvette Cooper: We do not want to see any military action in Greenland, and it should not arise, because this is a fellow NATO country. We are NATO members and we should work on our security together.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Let me update Members. I will run this statement until 8.15 pm, so questions and answers will need to be very short if everyone is to get in. The second statement will probably last only about 45 minutes.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) has mentioned the threats to Colombia. The Foreign Secretary correctly said that we are the United Nations penholder for the peace accord achieved in 2016, after protracted negotiations between warring factions. The accord is heavily based on our agreements in Northern Ireland. Will she assure me that she has stressed to her American counterparts that the threat to peace in Colombia could unravel that accord?

Yvette Cooper: I can assure my hon. Friend that we continue to support and uphold the 2016 peace accord. We are the penholder, as he says, so we work closely with the Colombian Government on that, and on how to deal with a range of threats to their stability. I recognise that the Maduro regime contributed to instability in Colombia as a result of migration and criminal operations. We will continue to work with the Colombian Government.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In November, I asked the Government what our position would be if the US took military action in Venezuela, in the light of the new US national security strategy, which clearly outlines the US Administration's position on the western hemisphere and denial of influence to non-hemispheric competitors. The answer was not clear. Following her discussion with Secretary Rubio, what assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of the risk that Venezuela may be the first domino in a chain across central America, ending with Mexico? If we do not now recognise Delcy Rodríguez as the legitimate President of Venezuela, is it because she is one of the individuals we have already sanctioned?

Yvette Cooper: We want to see regional stability and calm across the region, and partnership working between nations—that is crucial. Delcy Rodríguez has clearly been part of the Maduro regime for a long time. We believe that there needs to be a transition to democracy that engages all the different Opposition parties and players in Venezuela. That is what we will work to do, and it is what I have discussed with Secretary Rubio.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement and her stamina. Over the past hour and 40 minutes, no one has regretted the downfall of Nicolás Maduro, but notwithstanding what the Foreign Secretary has said about the tension between practical, progressive realism and political principle, few of us can condone his kidnapping to stand trial in the domestic courts of another country. This has all the hallmarks of a treacherous deal between the remnants of the Maduro regime and the United States. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that it signals the end of the rules-based international order, and that the fraying of that order benefits not our friends in the west, but our foes in the east?

Yvette Cooper: I reiterate a point that I have already made: there have always been challenges and strains around frameworks of international law and the realities

of particular issues in different parts of the world. The UK has always argued for the maintenance of the rules-based order, and for the alliances that uphold it. For us, one of those alliances is the transatlantic one. We need both to maintain support for the rules-based order and to maintain the crucial partnerships that have upheld that rules-based order—we need to be able to do both.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Your Party): Two days ago, the United States carried out an illegal and unprovoked military attack on Venezuela, killing at least 40 people. During that attack, the Venezuelan President and his wife were abducted from their home and taken to the US on bogus drug-related charges. The Labour Government are now refusing to assess whether that is legal, so let me ask the Foreign Secretary this question. If a foreign power accused the British Prime Minister of breaking its domestic law, bombed targets in the UK, killed dozens of British citizens and abducted the Prime Minister and his wife in the middle of the night, would the Government be able to say that that was legal, or is international law something that applies only when Donald Trump says it can? If so, are the Prime Minister and this Labour Government anything more than Donald Trump's poodle?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member seems to be drawing an equivalence between the Maduro regime and the democratically elected UK Prime Minister. I think that this equivalence thing is just really inappropriate. We should recognise the huge damage that the Maduro regime has done, and the fact that it is under investigation by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. To give Members an update on my previous announcement, this statement will now run its course, because the Backbench Business debate has been postponed until a future date.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Maduro Government had no democratic legitimacy, but a return to gunboat diplomacy and strongman-led spheres of influence is not in our national interest. The rules-based international order is not teetering but collapsing, and that is disastrous. However, we cannot just bemoan it; we must respond to that threat by building up the coherence of our own bloc: Europe. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that these developments demonstrate that the absolute priority must be not noises off, but deepening connections, hard and soft, with our own continent?

Yvette Cooper: We should strengthen our European partnerships, which is what we have been doing, and strengthen our investment in defence—again, that is what we are doing. The transatlantic partnership remains important. It is what we will discuss this week with the Americans, when discussing security guarantees for Ukraine. The security guarantees we have been discussing, which involve the US, are also about the security of Europe, Ukraine and the UK, and, ultimately, about the upholding of international law.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that failing to publicly call out allies who violate international law—rather than just calling out one's enemies, which is easy—fundamentally weakens adherence to international law? Will she denounce the illegal actions of the US in Venezuela, including the snatching of its President, and will she confirm that, if it comes to a vote of the UN Security Council, the UK will stand up for international law and will not abstain?

Yvette Cooper: The UK continues to argue for international law and to ensure that it guides and frames the decisions that we take as part of our foreign policy, and I have directly raised the issues of international law, particularly around Venezuela, with the US Secretary of State and we continue to do so. Upholding international law also means upholding some of the alliances that sustain that international law, and that is what we will continue to do.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In order to hold up international law, it is important that there is robust accountability on two fronts. First, on how we use the intelligence that we have as a country ahead of actions being taken, can the Foreign Secretary say how she used the UK intelligence before this operation? Secondly, on the question of accountability after an event, how will we call the US President to account in the light of his being a sitting member of the UN Security Council?

Yvette Cooper: The UN Security Council has been discussing Venezuela today, as we would expect the UN Security Council to do on a significant issue. We have deep intelligence and security co-operation with Five Eyes countries. On this particular operation, we were not involved or informed in advance, and nor were other countries.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): The US has abducted the leader of Venezuela yet the Government cannot say whether that is legal or illegal. Let us try an easier one: if the US were to abduct the premier of Greenland, would that be legal or illegal?

Yvette Cooper: Again, I would say to the hon. Member that there is a continual searching for equivalence when it is really inappropriate to do so. I have made very clear our position on Greenland: the future of Greenland is for Greenlanders and for the Danes, not for other countries be that the US or any other country around the world.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Like the Foreign Secretary, we want an end to this brutal regime. I hope now that Venezuela can move to a democracy with full control of its oil and other resources following this breach of the UN charter. The Leader of the Opposition says that we live in

“a fundamentally different world and an increasingly dangerous world.”

After all, no UK Prime Minister previously has had to stand up so fulsomely for Greenland and Denmark's security. So when the facts change, should our stance not change too? Should we not be working more closely with the European Union and EU member states to deepen our security and our economic ties, but do we

not also need the European Union to be more flexible and pragmatic about what constitutes alignment with the UK?

Yvette Cooper: We are strengthening our security co-operation with European allies. We have increasing security partnerships and discussions both with groups of other European countries and the EU as a whole, as well as with the NATO members in Europe. That has been crucial; it is a central part of the coalition of the willing, and those partnerships need to continue to deepen.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The Secretary of State justifies in her statement a flagrant breach of international law by citing Venezuela's drop in GDP, narcotics trafficking and gold trading. These are issues that could affect countless countries around the world. But let me remind the Secretary of State of the words of the person who perpetrated this action, Donald J. Trump, who said that the US is

“going to have a presence in Venezuela as it pertains to oil. We're going to be taking a tremendous amount of wealth out of the ground”

and is going to “run” Venezuela. May I ask the Foreign Secretary to take a leaf out of Donald Trump's book and answer a question once: do the Government support US colonial expansionism or do the Government believe in the rules-based world order? Which is it? It cannot be both.

Yvette Cooper: The Government support democracy for Venezuela. The people of Venezuela have been denied that democracy for far too long. We should support that democracy, and we should support international law and the rules-based order, and ensure that a future Government of Venezuela reflect the will of the people and respect the human rights of the Venezuelan people.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Ind): Has the Secretary of State reflected on the well-documented difficulties that arise when the US assumes administrative control of occupied territory—difficulties we saw all too clearly during the Iraq conflict? Given these lessons, will the Government press our American allies to ensure we see an early, credible election, one that enfranchises the estimated 7 million Venezuelans who emigrated during Maduro's time in office? Would that not offer the most legitimate route back to democracy and spare the US the burden and risk inherent in attempting to administer another state? Does not this whole situation, to displace autocracy, demonstrate a need to establish a new consensus that updates the principles that govern intervention in failed states?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important, thoughtful point about the way in which frameworks need to work, but he is also right that there needs to be the transition to democracy at the earliest opportunity. The first stages of that are ensuring that there is stability, and then the release of the political prisoners and the return of political opposition members to Venezuela, because it is not possible to fight a free and fair election while there is still political repression in place.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I have to say that this is one of the most depressing days I have spent in this Chamber in the past few years, because

[Christine Jardine]

while I welcome the Foreign Secretary's commitment to democracy in Venezuela and her repeated commitment to the rules-based international system and our alliances, I cannot bring that together with this Government's abject failure to condemn the actions of Donald Trump in breaking international law and the concern it has created, reflected in statements by the leaders of Greenland, Denmark, Sweden and the Foreign Secretary herself at the Dispatch Box. How are the Government going to reconcile that blatant contradiction?

Yvette Cooper: I set out already our clear position on Greenland and the importance of international law, but also the importance of working through our different alliances and being prepared to raise issues around international law and other areas both privately and publicly. We need to ensure we can pursue the UK's interests and also our values. We do that through the discussions that will be taking place this week on Ukraine and through the pursuit of democracy and our values in Venezuela as well.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I read this morning that a former Under Secretary of Defence for Personnel and Readiness has said that he is not aware of any plans for how the next few days will be managed by the US. May I ask the Foreign Secretary what specific reassurances she has received from US counterparts that that is not the case and that instead there is a plan in place? Will she tell us about the work that we are doing with our international partners, particularly from NATO, to ensure that support is provided?

Yvette Cooper: One reason I spoke to US Secretary of State Rubio yesterday was to engage on what the plans now should be going forward. Given the level of criminal gang operations in Venezuela and the different factions that there have been in the country, preventing greater instability now and ensuring that we can get that stable basis and a plan for democracy is immensely important. There is a very strong civil society, with opposition groups and so on, but they need to be enabled and supported to ensure that we can get that peaceful, democratic transition. It will be crucially important.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Most Members of this House will agree with the Government that there are no tears to be shed over the removal of the brutal regime in Venezuela, but my question for the Foreign Secretary is this: how does such a desirable outcome impact on the Government's view of what is permissible within international law?

Yvette Cooper: There is always a debate to be had about how to respond to different kinds of hybrid threat and complex threat in different countries, and different interpretations can be made. That is also why we have said that it is for the US to set out its interpretation and its legal basis for any action that it takes, but we continue to promote the importance of international law as it is set out and the UN charter. The hon. and learned Gentleman will know that we have argued for, for example, reforms to the interpretation of the European convention on human rights and for other areas of

international law, for other reasons, to modernise, but we continue to stand up for the principles of the UN charter.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): From state-sponsored assassination attempts to illegal invasions, in recent years we have seen an alarming rise in the number of countries that are behaving like rogue states, including countries that are permanent members of the Security Council—I name Russia, given what happened on British soil, in Salisbury. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that international rules-based order and international law should be a fundamental principle and practice of the UK, and that we expect other countries to uphold that in all circumstances?

Yvette Cooper: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It could feel as if the rules-based order is under particular threat and challenge right now, as I raised in my Locarno speech before Christmas. It has probably been under challenge before and it has endured, partly because countries like the UK have continued to advocate for it, and we must continue to do so.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The people of Greenland are concerned today. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement earlier that UK bases that are used by the US air force will not be used for any attack on Greenland. Will she confirm that she will make that clear to Secretary of State Rubio next time that they speak?

Yvette Cooper: Let me be clear: the UK, Denmark and the US are all members of NATO. That is why it is so important that we continue to ensure the sovereignty of Greenland and of Denmark, and why we have made our views on that particularly clear to the US.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. I agree with her that Maduro was a corrupt dictator, who frankly cared nothing for the lives of his own people. I welcome her comments about the importance of upholding international law, so does she agree that if we believe in a world order with clear rules about sovereignty, we cannot pick and choose when those rules do and do not apply? Otherwise, what is to stop others with further bad intentions from taking advantage of that situation and following suit?

Yvette Cooper: We continue to support international law, to promote it, both publicly and privately, with our allies, and to pursue and sustain the alliances that are important as underpinning parts of the rules-based order, including our NATO alliance and our transatlantic alliance. We maintain those long-standing partnerships as part of upholding international law.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): The Biden Administration offered a \$25 million reward for the capture and detention of President Maduro, and this country has passively supported regime change in Venezuela since we froze the gold reserves held at the Bank of England in 2019. Now that President Trump has followed through on the implicit policy of both our countries and achieved the outcome that the whole world wanted, can the Foreign Secretary tell the House what conditions will need to be met for the money that is owned by the Venezuelan people to be returned by the Bank of England?

Yvette Cooper: As the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, successive Governments have not recognised the Venezuelan regime, which is the basis on which the independent Bank of England took its decision. We continue not to recognise the Venezuelan regime because it is important that we have the pressure in place to have a transition to a democracy, which is also about the will of the Venezuelan people. Obviously, there are independent decisions for the Bank of England to take, but our principles are about maintaining and pursuing stability and a transition to democracy, and that is what is guiding our approach to recognition.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. She has been getting lots of advice in response, but I do not think any of us really envy her position. I thank her for talking to the leader of the opposition, María Corina Machado, which is the right thing to do. The Foreign Secretary outlined how she had spoken to Secretary of State Rubio about a transition to democracy, but is there a timeline associated with that? Will the recognition of the Venezuelan Government only happen once a Government has been democratically elected?

Yvette Cooper: We do not currently have a timeline for that transition. The Venezuelan opposition have said that the first step has to be an end to political repression, the release of political prisoners and the safe return to Venezuela of opposition politicians, because without that there cannot be free and fair elections. So the first step that we are pressing for is an end to political repression, and that is what we are urging the acting President to do.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): There is an old warning from Benjamin Franklin: "If you do not hang together, you will hang separately." Given the events in Venezuela in recent days, and given the active threats against Cuba and Mexico, in the past against Canada, and today against Greenland, I ask the Foreign Secretary, where is the line? For the United Kingdom, what now is the Rubicon, the crossing of which would force us to recognise that our silence today will lead only to greater challenge tomorrow? Is it not time that we hang together with our values-based allies to stand up against Trump's colonial possession taking in central America, whether that is in the western hemisphere or elsewhere?

Yvette Cooper: Again, to draw equivalence between different countries is the wrong approach. It does not recognise the scale of damage done by the Maduro regime or the fact that, in order to promote international law, we must promote the partnerships that underpin it. We need to work closely with the coalition of the willing, which is meeting tomorrow to discuss Ukraine, and ensure that there are US security guarantees in place, which are an important part of our security alliance with the US. On Greenland, we and other European countries have made our position clear.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The unstoppable machine of American imperialist invasions has killed millions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. From aiding, arming and abetting a genocide in Palestine, to now the invasion and abduction of a leader in Venezuela, for oil, minerals and gold, and to protect

the petrodollar, this has nothing to do with democracy or narco-terrorism. With ongoing threats to Greenland, Cuba, Colombia and Mexico, the list of gangsterish aggression continues unopposed. Has the global rules-based order now collapsed, or did it ever even exist for western warmongering powers?

Yvette Cooper: I strongly disagree with the hon. Member's characterisation. We have a strong security partnership with the US and other countries, and not just through NATO but through a direct security partnership. The US is our strongest security ally and our alliance is based on values and principles. We continue to sustain that relationship as part of our support and continued respect for international law.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): What message does the Foreign Secretary think that this weekend's outbreak of unilateral acts of violence, kidnap and taking assets outside of international law sent to Vladimir Putin, particularly with reference to Russia's view of the need to seriously negotiate peace with Ukraine? Will the Foreign Secretary confer with her Ukrainian counterparts about giving our Ukrainian guests the option of a right to settle in the UK? Will the Minister meet me and Ukrainian guests to discuss options moving forward?

Yvette Cooper: It is fundamentally wrong to draw any kind of equivalence between what is happening in Venezuela and what is happening in Ukraine—they are fundamentally different. The US is playing a hugely important role in pursuing a peace process for Ukraine and in the discussions around security guarantees, which are immensely important. The hon. Member raises the issue of Ukrainians living in the UK. As he may know, we have a Ukrainian family continuing to live with us and I take this issue extremely seriously. He will also recognise that this is now a matter for the Home Secretary, and not for me, as the Foreign Secretary.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State is right that no one should shed any tears at the end of Maduro's rule. Does it surprise her that Sinn Féin, first of all, defended the fraudulent election as being electorally robust, and then attended the President's inauguration event in order to show what it said was "solidarity" with him? That highlights once again how it is still wedded to criminality and terrorism.

There is an opportunity, now that the Americans have done good for the Venezuelan people by removing the corrupt cancer that so damaged their country. Will the Foreign Secretary outline what steps our country can take to ensure that democracy is restored in Venezuela? From her discussions with the Americans, can she say how much they will co-operate with us in that venture?

Yvette Cooper: No one should be defending the Maduro regime. I have talked specifically to the US Secretary of State about the transition to democracy. The US has said that this is important, but we need to ensure that those conditions are in place, starting with the ending of political repression.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): President Maduro was illegitimate, but Donald Trump's illegal incursion into Venezuela puts him in the company of Vladimir Putin and will embolden President Xi in his ambitions for Taiwan. More pressing for the UK is the fact that an

[Cameron Thomas]

occupation of Greenland, which has been repeatedly threatened, would see Putin's ambition for NATO's disintegration come to pass. Given that there are numerous US assets in the UK, what discussions have the Government had with our European counterparts, including the Danes, to prepare European security against the threat now posed and explicitly stated by the President of the United States?

Yvette Cooper: Trying to make an equivalence between the US and Russia is just totally ridiculous and deeply inappropriate. We have seen the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the kidnapping of Ukrainian children. In contrast, we have our relationship with the US, in which it is discussing security guarantees for Ukraine. I think that is hugely important.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Absent international rules-based order leads to chaos. We all know that within chaos there is order; sadly, that order is one in which the strongest survive and the most vulnerable and weak die. That is neither just nor morally right. How can we be champions of and advocates for the international rules-based order yet wholly equivocal when it comes to calling out this flagrant breach of international law?

Yvette Cooper: We have set out our continued commitment to international law and the importance of maintaining some of the underpinning rules-based alliances that are so important for sustaining the rules-based order. That is why we will continue to argue for international law and to maintain things such as the NATO alliance and the partnership, and it is why we will continue to raise these issues publicly and privately with our allies.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): President Trump's actions are not about drugs; they are about oil. They are not about regional stability; they are about regional dominance. They are not about upholding the law; they are about breaking it. The Foreign Secretary has said that the Government have been clear, but she has not been clear on any of those three points. The world has changed this weekend, and it will change again very quickly. Can the Foreign Secretary say whether there is a single strategic decision or practical step that this Government have taken in the last 72 hours to shore up our national security or that of our allies, especially Denmark?

Yvette Cooper: We have discussions going on in the coalition of the willing. There are preparations for them as we speak, because the discussions are being taken tomorrow. Those are all about strengthening our national security as part of strengthening Ukraine's national security.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary has repeatedly emphasised the Government's commitment to international law. I remain confused—as, I am sure, do many colleagues across the House—as to her position in respect of President Trump's actions in Venezuela, whether they were in line with international law and whether she believes that breaching a nation's sovereignty is, indeed, a breach of international law and order. It could simply be a yes or a no.

Yvette Cooper: As I have said, we will not shed a tear for Maduro and his deeply damaging regime. It is for the US to set out the legal basis of its actions, which we were not involved in. We will promote the democratic transition, which we have continually argued for as part of the policies on Venezuela that we have set out over many years, and we will continue to stand up for international law.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Throughout this statement the Foreign Secretary appears to have taken comfort from the UK not having been involved in the US's illegal attack in Venezuela, but she cannot escape the reality that for as long as this Government fail to call out Trump for his actions, they are complicit in his demolition of the international rules-based order. When will the Government put their head above the parapet, in the spirit of the likes of Charles Kennedy back in 2003, and condemn the US President's attempt to turn our world into his wild west?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member should not make a false equivalence between different situations; it would be inappropriate to do so. We will continue to work with the US in the discussions this week on the defence of Ukraine, which is in itself about maintaining international law and the rules-based order, just as we will continue to raise issues around international law in our private discussions with it and in public debates.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Few of us regret the departure of Maduro, but many of us are alarmed by the breach of international law. However, I am most alarmed by Trump's concurrent threat to Greenland and his previous threat to Canada. The Foreign Secretary says that she likes to deal with the world as it is, so precisely how many NATO allies does Donald Trump have to threaten until the Government recognise that he is a clear threat to the survival of liberal democracy in the 21st century?

Yvette Cooper: We are working with the US Administration on support for Ukraine, which is about support for a democratic, sovereign state that has been threatened and invaded by an authoritarian Russian regime. It is the US that is pursuing peace and discussing security guarantees for Ukraine, so I really think the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the world we are in is just wrong.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): There has been widespread speculation in recent days and hours about a possible US operation to seize a tanker that previously operated in Venezuela, which the United States has been pursuing and is now off the Irish coast. Any such operation would very likely involve UK air bases. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that any deployments of US forces from UK bases, whether in relation to this tanker or other targets that it may define in Europe, are in full compliance with international law?

Yvette Cooper: We always ensure that any action the UK takes is in compliance with international law. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Ministry of Defence also takes issues of international law immensely seriously, and it is for it to comment on the way in which international law is applied.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): At the weekend, Donald Trump invoked the Monroe doctrine. From her statement, the Foreign Secretary seems to accept that in some cases, the UN charter is secondary to great powers' spheres of influence. What criteria does she use to decide when the charter is trumped by 19th-century thinking? She has talked a lot today about alliances; the great game of alliances in the 19th century ended very, very badly.

Yvette Cooper: That is why the alliances we stand up for today are ones that are based on our values and on long-standing rules and relationships. That is what the NATO alliance is—it is based on our values and is immensely important. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is saying that he disagrees with the NATO alliance, which has been the cornerstone of our security for a very long time.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): This Government have bent over backwards to not criticise President Trump directly, but that only makes him think he can get away with more and more. If President Trump really does invade Greenland, it is the end of NATO and the end of the special relationship, so will the Foreign Secretary accept that the best way for us to protect Greenland today is to explicitly say that President Trump is indeed acting outside international law?

Yvette Cooper: Again, I think the hon. Gentleman wants to draw equivalences between a whole series of different situations. We have been very clear about our view on Greenland.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jim Shannon to ask the final question on this statement.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I definitely have the strongest legs in this Chamber—I have been bobbing for over three hours.

I thank the Secretary of State very much for her statement and her strong commitment, but will she further outline what support we can offer our US allies to ensure that democracy is restored—or indeed created—in Venezuela? That nation has great potential to do so much good. Further, what support can our UK Government offer to secure the daily needs of so many young people who have been ignored for many years and left in poverty for far too long?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right about the future of Venezuela and the future for the Venezuelan people, including young people who have been pushed into hardship and poverty by the corruption and criminality of the regime. There is now an opportunity, but it is very fragile. We have to ensure that we support stability in Venezuela and the transition to democracy, which is crucial. Those are the points we will continue to make as part of our discussions with the US, and that is the work that our embassy will continue to do on the ground.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That concludes the statement on Venezuela. I thank the Foreign Secretary, who has taken over 90 questions and has been on her feet for two and a quarter hours.

Middle East and North Africa

8.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Madam Deputy Speaker, there have been a number of developments in the middle east that I would like to update the House on, including in Gaza, Iran, Yemen and Syria. I would also like to take the opportunity to provide an update on the case of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, which has been a subject of debate during the parliamentary recess.

To begin with Gaza, the humanitarian situation there remains desperate. Even with the ceasefire, half a million people are struggling to find enough food, and 100,000 people are in catastrophic conditions. The peace plan was clear: the Israeli Government agreed to let aid in, without interference, through the UN and other international organisations. At the same time, Hamas must disarm, their weapons must be decommissioned, and they must allow a path to lasting security for Palestinians. More trucks are entering Gaza, which is very welcome, but right now key crossings remain closed, convoys are being turned back, medical and shelter supplies are blocked, and non-governmental organisations are being banned. Over the recess, we joined nine other countries in stating that this is not acceptable. The peace plan cannot work if NGOs are shut out, and Israel's decision to ban 37 of them is unjustifiable.

Furthermore, many trucks entering Gaza carry commercial goods, which face fewer barriers than humanitarian aid. This means that, perversely, it is currently easier to get cigarettes and luxury goods into Gaza than the basic medicines and shelter that people so desperately need. Too much aid is still stuck at Gaza's borders—thousands of tents and shelter supplies, funded by the UK, are waiting to get in. Families are sheltering from winter floods and storms under rubble, and are suffering from hypothermia and sewage running in the streets. This is unforgivable.

We have not wavered in our commitment to help. This financial year, we are providing £116 million for humanitarian and other aid, including healthcare, food, clean water and sanitation. That includes treatment for 800,000 Palestinians through UK-Med. The UK formally recognised Palestine last autumn to protect the viability of a two-state solution and to create a path towards lasting peace for the Israeli and Palestinian people. We welcome the establishment of full diplomatic relations with the state of Palestine, and I can confirm the establishment of a Palestinian embassy in London today.

Let me turn to Iran, where we have seen protests enter a ninth day following the rapid depreciation of the currency. We are disturbed by reports of violence against those who are courageously exercising their right to peaceful protest. We are monitoring developments closely, and we urge Iran to protect fundamental freedoms, including access to information and communications. The UK was integral to delivery of the Iran human rights resolution adopted by the UN Third Committee in November. It called on Iran to halt its human rights violations, including in relation to women and girls and ethnic and religious minorities, and to stop the use of the death penalty. We will continue to work with partners to hold Iran to account for its rights record.

[Mr Hamish Falconer]

I know that many in the House will be thinking about Craig and Lindsay Foreman, who spent Christmas in detention in Iran. We are deeply concerned that they have been charged with espionage. We are focused on supporting them and their family and we remain in regular contact with the Iranian authorities. The Foreign Secretary raised their case with the Iranian Foreign Minister on 19 December.

I wish to provide the House with an update on another consular case that has been in the spotlight for many years: Alaa Abd el-Fattah. Supporting British nationals overseas is at the heart of the work of the Foreign Office, and the provision of that consular support is based on the circumstances of the case. Following Mr el-Fattah's registration as a British citizen in 2021, successive Governments gave him consular support and made it a priority to argue for his release. That is why it was welcomed by Ministers across the Government, and many others in this House, when he was released from detention in September and reunited with his family in the UK on Boxing day. However, we recognise and share the deep concern felt across the country following the subsequent emergence of extremely disturbing historical social media posts by Mr el-Fattah. Let me emphasise once again that the historical posts were abhorrent, and I join my colleagues in condemning them wholeheartedly. It is right that Mr el-Fattah has apologised.

I fully recognise the profound distress that the posts have caused, in particular to the Jewish community in this country, and especially in the context of rising antisemitism and recent horrific attacks against Jewish people in this country and around the world, and I very much regret that. The Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I were all unaware of those historical posts, as were the civil servants working on the case. The Foreign Secretary has therefore asked the permanent under-secretary to urgently review the Department's systems for conducting due diligence on high-profile consular and human rights cases to ensure that all necessary lessons are learned. The Foreign Secretary has undertaken to update the Foreign Affairs Committee on the changes that the Department will put in place.

I turn now to the dramatic developments in Yemen, which we are monitoring closely. I welcome calls by Yemen's President for dialogue in the south. I also welcome Saudi Arabia's offer to host a conference and the United Arab Emirates' calls for de-escalation. A swift diplomatic resolution will best serve the Yemeni people. The United Kingdom remains committed to supporting Yemen's unity, including the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council and the Government of Yemen, as we set out in the recent UK-led UN Security Council statement. I, the Foreign Secretary and the National Security Adviser have all been in regular contact with our partners in Yemen, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates about the situation, and we will continue to work closely with them.

We must not forget that Yemen already faces one of the world's worst humanitarian crises: 18.1 million people face acute food insecurity, as I saw for myself in November when I visited a clinic supported by the UK in Aden. Responding to this crisis is a priority for the UK. We are the largest donor to the Yemen humanitarian

needs and response plan, maintaining our commitment to provide £139 million in humanitarian aid in the current financial year.

In Syria, the past year has seen remarkable change. The Syrian Government have shown commitment to tackling security threats, joining the Global Coalition Against Daesh and committing themselves to dismantling Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles. In my engagements with the Syrian Government, I have heard directly a commitment to build a Syria for all Syrians. Despite that progress, the challenges remain immense. There have been outbreaks of sectarian violence in the last year, most recently in Latakia at the end of December. The recent attack on US soldiers in Palmyra is a reminder of the enduring Daesh threat.

A stable Syria is firmly in the UK's interest, as it reduces the risk of irregular migration, terrorism and other threats to our national security. That is why we have stepped up our engagement and our support for Syria over the last year. The UK remains an active partner in the Global Coalition Against Daesh, and on 3 January the Royal Air Force conducted a joint strike with France on an underground Daesh facility north of Palmyra. The UK will continue to do what is necessary to prevent a Daesh resurgence, support Syria's stability and protect UK national security.

I hope that that update on the developments that have taken place in the middle east over the recess has been helpful to the House. His Majesty's Government remain committed to playing their full role in the region.

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

8.41 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Britain's place in the world matters, and the Opposition are clear about the fact that our influence should be used to its fullest effect to support efforts to combat the complex and dangerous conflicts and tensions in the middle east about which we speak all too often in the House. From Israel to Gaza, Iran, Syria and Yemen, the UK can and should be able to make a difference.

The Opposition stand with the brave Iranians in their fight for freedom against their terrorist-supporting, despotic and oppressive Government. Their fight for freedom must prevail. What discussions are taking place with our partners in the region about the actions that can be taken to stop the regime's cruel and barbaric acts against those who are campaigning for freedom? Iran threatens our domestic security by continuing its nuclear weapons programme, supplying weapons and drones to Russia, and backing China and its repression in Hong Kong. Britain must send it a clear signal by imposing more sanctions on it, and take action to stop the sanctions-busting that is taking place through cryptocurrencies and other methods that facilitate and bankroll this tyrannical regime. Why have the Government, and the Minister in his statement today, been silent on those specific issues, and where is the plan to keep Britain safe from Iran?

What is being done to secure the immediate release from Iran's cruel captivity of Lindsay and Craig Foreman, the two British nationals who, tragically, are still in captivity? I appreciate that the Minister referred to the call that took place on 19 December, but what practical measures are being taken?

In Gaza, Hamas continue to breach the ceasefire. They have refused to release the body of the remaining Israeli hostage, Ran Gvili, which has been in terrorist captivity for more than 820 days. What pressure has been put on Hamas to adhere to the terms of the ceasefire, to disarm and to bring Ran back to his family?

The Minister mentioned aid. Will he confirm that 4,200 trucks are delivering aid to Gaza each week in accordance with the 20-point peace plan, and that that is being overseen by the Co-ordination of Government Activities in the Territories and the Civil-Military Co-ordination Centre? Is he meeting representatives of the CMCC and COGAT to observe the operational delivery of this aid and the role that the United States is playing in securing aid delivery?

As for the licensing of non-governmental organisations, can the Minister tell us how many agencies have undergone the licensing process and the contribution that they are making? We have heard a great deal in recent weeks and months about terrorists infiltrating aid agencies and diverting aid. What discussions has the Minister had with his Israeli counterparts about working with them to find practical solutions that will address the serious concerns that have been raised, so that more aid can get through and not be compromised by terrorists? On reforms to the Palestinian Authority, why are the Government still backing them with taxpayers' money while they continue with the pay-to-slay programme? When will this practice stop?

I agree with the Minister's comments about Yemen, the conflict there, and the humanitarian suffering. Every single successive Government have worked tirelessly to secure more aid and to support global efforts to address the suffering in Yemen, but what direct discussions has the Minister had with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which are both long-standing partners and players, particularly on the recent dispute and tensions? Is there a bridging role that Britain can play? What planning is under way with our partners in the region to respond to further threats from the Houthis?

On Syria, the actions targeted at Daesh were absolutely essential, but there are still many concerns about stability in Syria. When will progress be made on tackling sectarian violence, protecting minority rights and delivering democratic transition? What quantity of chemical weapons has been disposed of? What measures are being taken to stop the criminality, the gangs, the drugs and the weapons?

Finally, on the el-Fattah case, I welcome the way in which the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has instigated its inquiry. When will the inquiry into what has happened be completed? Were the Government informed by any other Departments about the views that were expressed? I recognise what the Minister has said thus far. Will Ministers—probably now in the Home Office—pick up the case and work fast to strip Alaa Abd el-Fattah of his citizenship, as the Opposition have been requesting over the recess?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm that I have been in touch with my counterparts in both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and indeed that I spoke to the Yemeni Foreign Minister this morning. We are in intensive discussions with all our partners in the region on the questions on Yemen, which are very significant. I did not speak

about the Houthis, but they remain a very significant threat; I saw some of that threat during my visit to Yemen in November.

In relation to Syria, I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her spirit of cross-party co-operation on the strikes that we conducted. There remain very significant outstanding questions about the security of Syria, which I am sure she and other Members of the House will have been tracking. The violence at the end of December is indeed concerning. There has been progress on a range of questions. We need follow-through on the independent reviews that were conducted into the violence, both in the coastal areas and in the south, including on accountability measures. I have made those points, as has the Foreign Secretary, directly to our Syrian counterparts.

The shadow Foreign Secretary asks the important questions about chemical weapons. I am very pleased that an Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons programme is now engaged to ensure the destruction of chemical weapons. That will be of real interest to this House, given the extent to which chemical weapons in Syria have been discussed here, even before I was elected. That is welcome progress, and it is important for regional security.

On Iran, the shadow Foreign Secretary is right to highlight the bravery of the protesters. I am sure that she will have seen our spokesperson's statement over the past few days, as well as having heard the remarks that I have just made. We are, of course, speaking to our partners in the region. We are careful in the way we discuss matters in Iran. It is absolutely obvious that some in the leadership of Iran wish to portray these protests as externally animated. Of course they are not. This is a response from the Iranian people themselves.

In relation to Mr el-Fattah and the next steps, he was—as the shadow Foreign Secretary knows well—provided with citizenship by the previous Government. That is not something that is stripped lightly. She will have heard the remarks of the Home Secretary during Home Office oral questions earlier today. As for the timeline of the review, we intend it to be swift. We want to draw a line under this matter as quickly as we can and ensure that, in all other cases, appropriate lessons are being learned.

On aid in Gaza, I would like to be clear. We are talking about charities such as Oxfam and Save the Children—credible charities supported by the British public, who have donated generously over Christmas. There have, of course, been concerns in relation to aid in Gaza. We have ensured that wherever they have been raised, they have been investigated, but we should not let that take away from the credibility of the organisations involved. It is vital that those aid agencies be able to work; 30% of Gazans cannot afford basic food.

The shadow Foreign Secretary is right to say that there has been an increase in aid going into Gaza, but the amount is not yet in line with what is in the 20-point plan. Fewer UN truck shipments are going in than was agreed; I think it was agreed that 250 aid trucks from the UN would go in per day, but only 147 are going in. It is welcome that commercial goods are getting into Gaza, but as I said in my statement, it is vital that lifesaving humanitarian aid—particularly tents and medicines—get in.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. I entirely agree with him that, at a time when the humanitarian crisis in Gaza remains so desperately urgent, the decision by the Israeli Government to withdraw accreditation from 37 extremely credible aid agencies, such as Caritas Internationalis, ActionAid and the International Rescue Committee, is an act of cruelty. Will the Minister therefore join me in condemning this decision, and urge Israel in the strongest possible terms to rescind it immediately, before more deaths occur in Gaza and the west bank because of a lack of humanitarian aid? Will he also urge Israel to open the Rafah crossing as a matter of extreme urgency?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. We have engaged extensively with the Israeli Government, both on the importance of overturning the non-governmental organisation registration provisions, and in order to speak against the deregistration process that she described. We have also called repeatedly for the opening of the Rafah crossing and other vital crossings.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I regret that the Government have presented developments in four significant states in one statement, but I will do my best to respond in the time afforded to me.

While the attention of the world is seized by the illegal actions of the US President, it is crucial that the UK works closely with our allies to support just, lawful and humanitarian action in the middle east. After two years of widespread destruction, people in Gaza are already facing severe shortages of food, clean water and medical supplies in the midst of winter. What immediate action are the Government taking to persuade Israel to reverse its decision to bar reputable international aid agencies from Gaza and the west bank? The continued expansion of settlements on Palestinian land by Netanyahu's extremist Cabinet since the House last met is explicitly intended to undermine any prospect of a two-state solution, so will the Government implement immediate sanctions on members of the Israeli Cabinet, and a full ban on the import of settlement goods? Will they finally publish their response to the 2024 International Court of Justice ruling that Israel's occupation is illegal under international law?

The Liberal Democrats condemn the violent repression of public demonstrations in Iran. The US President's casual threats to take unilateral military action there merely serve to escalate tensions. How are our Government working with European and regional partners to co-ordinate lawful external pressure on Iran, and when will the Government commit to proscribing the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in UK law?

The people of Yemen desperately need peace, yet regional powers continue to intervene to support the armed factions. Will the Government review all arms export licences to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to ensure that UK weapons are not enabling them to sustain the conflict? The UN estimates that around 24 million Yemenis desperately need food and protection. How is

the UK ensuring that humanitarian aid reaches those most in need, particularly in areas where access is restricted or contested?

The Liberal Democrats support limited multilateral strikes against Daesh in Syria to ensure the eradication of its infrastructure, and to counter its dangerous and violent ideology in the middle east. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are confident that the recent strikes were fully compliant with international law and proportionate to the threat, and what steps are the Government taking to ensure that the new Syrian Government are protecting the rights of all, including minorities and women?

Mr Falconer: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for the spirit in which he asked his questions. I put so many developments into the statement because there were so many developments that I wished to update the House on at the earliest opportunity, and I wanted to provide Members with an opportunity to ask questions on any element of the statement.

We will continue to voice our position on the vital importance of the right to assembly in Iran, and indeed the right to communication as well. We will continue to do that alongside our partners, as well as in our own voice. I am confident and can assure the House that the strikes on Syria were consistent with and compliant with international law. As I said to the shadow Foreign Secretary, we continue to raise with the Syrian Government the importance of accountability in relation to violence in Syria.

On developments in Yemen, particularly relating to aid, there is, I am afraid, a very significant divergence between the ability of the UK to deliver aid in the areas controlled by the Houthis and the areas not controlled by the Houthis. The Houthis have continued to seize aid workers and aid premises. It is simply not possible under those circumstances to have an aid operation that operates at the scale of the needs of the Yemeni people. I again call on the Houthis, as I have done repeatedly, to release all those whom they have detained, leave those offices, and abide by humanitarian principles. If they do not, it is simply not possible for the UK, or indeed any other humanitarian actor, to ensure that the Yemenis get the support that they require.

On arms sales, as I know the Liberal Democrat spokesperson is aware, we have the most robust arrangements in the world. I am confident that they have been followed in this case, but of course, as ever, we keep these matters under close review.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I was one of those MPs who campaigned hard for the release of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, so it is important, when we consider the overall process, that there is an accurate narrative. The narrative is partly this: yes, there were vile social media interventions by this person, which we all condemn, but which he apologised for. More than that, he became a campaigner in his country of Egypt—he is a joint citizen—for civil rights, civil liberties and religious freedom, and against antisemitism. For that, he served 10 years in prison. Not many in this Chamber have gone anywhere near that record of campaigning for civil liberties, so maybe that narrative could be taken into account when this individual is considered.

Mr Falconer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I do not want to prejudge the review, but we provide consular assistance to many thousands of British nationals every year. There is, of course, a debate, which the shadow Foreign Secretary alluded to, on whether or not Alaa Abd el-Fattah should have been made a citizen in 2021, but in 2024, when we came into government, he was undoubtedly a British citizen. We will continue, I am sure, to provide consular assistance on a non-judgmental basis if a British national is in considerable distress overseas. British nationals of all kinds can rely on the support of the United Kingdom if there are outstanding questions about their treatment.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): First, I welcome the Minister's statement. I certainly agree with him on the strikes in Syria, and with the view that he has taken towards the Houthis in Yemen, who have murdered so many people over recent years. May I ask him about a separate aspect of the Iranian situation? We see extraordinarily courageous protestors on streets across Iran, in various cities and towns. We also see Russian cargo aircraft landing in Tehran, presumably carrying weapons and ammunition. We hear reports of large amounts of gold leaving Iran. Could he update the House on any of those reports, which suggest that the regime is preparing for life after the fall?

Mr Falconer: For reasons that I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will understand, I am not in a position to give a detailed update on the reports that he alludes to. I simply underline the point that I made in my statement, which is that the freedom of assembly and the right to protest are inalienable rights of the Iranian people, and we want to see the Iranian Government respect that.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all his work on Yemen, which gets too little attention. It is a personal commitment of his. The humanitarian crisis there is truly horrific. As he said, over Christmas, the Israeli Government banned 37 international humanitarian organisations, many of them British, from delivering lifesaving aid in the state of Palestine. They include Medical Aid for Palestinians, the International Rescue Committee, Action Aid and Médecine sans Frontières. In doing this, Israel follows in the footsteps of other aid-banning regimes, such as North Korea, Russia and Myanmar. More civilians are dying as a result. We know from the past two years that words and statements have no impact on the behaviour of this Israeli Government. When will the UK take real action and impose sanctions on all the Israeli Government officials who are involved in this illegal, inhumane ban on humanitarian organisations?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend speaks with considerable experience of delivering aid in Palestine. She will know that I will not comment further on sanctions, but the question of the NGOs' ability to operate in Gaza is obviously vital for the very pressing questions facing the Palestinian people, and the British Government will continue to raise it.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I also very much welcome the fact that the Minister made such reference to Yemen. As the hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) has just said, we often say that Sudan does not get

enough attention in this Chamber, but I am afraid that the attention that has been focused on Yemen in this Parliament, given the scale of the crisis there, has been pitiful, and I hope that today reflects a change in that. How can the Minister convince us that that he and the Foreign Office can actually deliver on prioritising these issues when, as we heard in the previous statements, there are so many other issues that are commanding attention?

Mr Falconer: I would just like to emphasise wholeheartedly that I would like it if there were fewer issues on the international stage, and indeed in the middle east, particularly over Christmas. There are clearly a range of significant and important developments happening in the region I am responsible for and in those of my colleagues. Yemen is a priority for us; I was glad to be the first Minister to visit in six years. The developments subsequent to my visit underline both how dramatic the stakes are in Yemen and how important it is that the UK remains focused. It is one of the reasons I have been speaking to my colleagues in Yemen, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over the past few days.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the fact that, as the Minister said, the UK is spending £116 million this financial year on vital aid to the Palestinians, providing healthcare, food, clean water and sanitation. However, that aid is often stuck at the border because of the continued closure of the Rafah crossing. More importantly, at a time of desperately urgent humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the decision by the Israeli Government to withdraw support or accreditation for NGOs such as ActionAid, CARE International, the International Rescue Committee and the Norwegian Refugee Council is an act of calculated and unconscionable cruelty, is it not? Will the Minister join me in condemning that act and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) says, urgently consider the question of sanctions against the Israeli Ministers responsible for it?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner on these issues since he arrived in the House. I do not have much to add. The British position on the deregistration of NGOs is absolutely clear; we opposed the proposals when they were first mooted, and we oppose the deregistration now. My hon. Friend refers to many of these credible organisations, many of which featured in the appeal by the Disasters Emergency Committee ongoing through Christmas; I know that many of our constituents, including mine in Lincoln, will have contributed generously because they are so keen to see aid entering Gaza, as we all know it needs to.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Minister speaks at length about humanitarian need and the UK's desire to lead, yet the reality is that this Government have cut aid to its lowest level this century and that the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Yemen and Syria all face cuts—aid to Syria alone this year has been slashed by 35%. How can the Government credibly claim urgency on humanitarian access, stability and peace while simultaneously withdrawing aid budgets? The Minister rightly condemns the suspension of international NGOs' licences in Gaza, but the restriction of humanitarian aid is against international humanitarian law. Beyond these words, what consequences will this Government place on the Israeli Government?

Mr Falconer: We have talked at some length before about the actions we have taken, including sanctions against two Israeli Ministers. I will not, for reasons I have already alluded to, speculate on sanctions from the Dispatch Box.

On the questions about aid, it is absolutely incontrovertible that we have made tough decisions in relation to aid budgets, but we have to be clear on the restrictions that are in place, which no amount of money can overcome. We talked about the situation in Yemen, particularly in the Houthi-controlled areas. I am not saying that the overall volumes of aid do not matter, but the question that in all these contexts is most vital is whether access to the aid is allowed. We can spend an awful lot of money on aid that then ends up waiting in warehouses, and that is why we have been focused in the way that we have.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement. The lack of progress in Gaza is a real concern. On top of this, we have seen a shockingly callous display by the Israeli Government in their banning of 37 organisations. It is just incomprehensible. I want to focus on what is happening in the west bank, where people are being stripped of their land and murdered in cold blood. As the illegal settlements are expanded, when will the Government act in lockstep with international allies and use the legislative tools at their disposal, such as the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, so that we can stop the illegal trade that is happening and ensure that we are banning goods, services and investments from the illegal settlements?

Mr Falconer: I know that my hon. Friend has written to the Foreign Secretary and I on those questions, and I will respond fully to that letter. She knows that the Government are deeply concerned by the expansion in settlements and the violence associated with it. That is why we joined our E4 colleagues—France, Germany and Italy—in a statement. It is why we condemned the most recent announcements from the Israeli Government about settlements, and it is why we have continued to press them not just on the approval of settlements but on correspondent banking, which is an issue of vital importance to the Palestinian economy. It was good that there was a temporary extension of correspondent banking arrangements for the west bank, but that must be extended further.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for a comprehensive regional update. It looks like we may be seeing the beginning of the end of a wicked regime that has ruled Iran since 1979. However, despite the best intentions of Israel and the US last year, a large part of Iran's nuclear inventory remains intact and potentially poses a threat if the regime crumbles. What measures can reasonably be taken to ensure that that inventory is secured and put beyond use by any malign state or non-state actors?

Mr Falconer: My predecessor is knowledgeable on these questions and invites me to comment on a speculative proposal about what would happen should the Iranian Government fall in response to the protests. I have learned in this job not to make predictions or speculate in that way. All I will say is that the status of Iran's nuclear programme remains of the utmost interest and

priority to the British Government. It is why we reimposed the snapback sanctions late last year. We will continue to monitor these developments very closely. Nuclear proliferation is among the gravest threats to not only regional but global security, and we will continue to give it the focus that it deserves.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The reality is that Israel continues to breach the ceasefire while the international community continues to offer words and statements of concern without any real action. As we have already heard, this week it announced that 37 international aid organisations will now be prevented from distributing aid in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That means that more women and children, already starving, will die in continuation of Israel's genocide in Gaza. Does the Minister not think that the time for words and statements of concern without action is over? When will he finally announce proper meaningful action, including ending all arms sales, putting widespread sanctions on Israel in the same way that we have done to Russia for its war crimes in Ukraine, and ending all trade with illegal settlements?

Mr Falconer: I have already set out the continued aid efforts and the work we are doing both alone and alongside partners to ensure that the points we are discussing are made to the Israeli Government with the force they require, and we will continue to do so.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, it will not surprise you that I will more or less echo what many hon. Members across the House have said on Gaza, which is that 1.6 million people are facing starvation, winter floods, winter storms and freezing temperatures. Aid has been totally blockaded, with 37 non-governmental organisations including Médecins Sans Frontières, the Norwegian Refugee Council, ActionAid, Oxfam and others denied access, and less than 10% of the aid that was received before October 2023 is now getting through. The question that keeps getting asked in the House is this: what is the next concrete step that the UK Government are prepared to take if we cannot discuss sanctions? Can something other than talk be offered to all of us in the House who are desperate to hear that some further progress will be made?

Mr Falconer: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that this has been a priority through the Christmas period. We will continue to work on it with the urgency that it requires, and I will continue to come to the House to provide updates.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I must press the Minister on the further 19 settlements announced over the Christmas period in the west bank. Minister Smotrich has been explicit that that is deliberately about making it impossible to establish the Palestinian state. That brings the total in the last three years alone to 69 new settlements in the west bank, several of which had previously been dismantled. These actions are provocative at best, and deeply disturbing for a peace process that will benefit so many people in both Israel and Palestine as a result. The Minister has said that the Government condemn the settlements, but we know from the history of the crisis that condemnation is not enough; we do need concrete action. What more can he tell us about his conversations with our allies in America,

for example, who are also concerned about the settlements, and what action will he take to stop this deliberate attempt to stop the peace process?

Mr Falconer: Let me say a little bit about the 19 settlements that were announced. I condemned them immediately. I have sanctioned the Minister in question—I announced it in June—Minister Smotrich, who is completely committed politically to opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state. As I announced in my statement, today we have a Palestinian embassy in London. The British Government now irrevocably recognise a Palestinian state. I recognise the force of what my hon. Friend says. There are Ministers in the Israeli Government who are completely opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state. That is not the policy of the British Government, and those are not the actions that I and the rest of the Government have taken since July 2024.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As the Minister pointed out, the situation in Gaza remains catastrophic. I join colleagues in recognising that, against that backdrop, the barring or denial of access for those aid agencies is particularly cruel and wicked; it is horrifying to think what the motivation might be. Of course, those agencies also deliver services in the west bank where, as colleagues have also pointed out, the situation deteriorates, with home demolitions, summary executions and seemingly psychopathic thugs roaming the territory, burning homes and attacking innocent Palestinians.

Happily, we have recognised the state of Palestine and, as the Minister said, we have now established full diplomatic relations. Against that backdrop, if the Palestinian Government were to request that the UK ceased trading with foreign nationals illegally resident on its territory, on what basis would we refuse that?

Mr Falconer: As with the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), I will resist the temptation to be drawn into speculative questions, but let me just be clear that the west bank is considered Palestinian territory, and Israeli goods must be labelled as being produced within green line Israel if they are to benefit from the trade arrangements that Israel has with the UK. If they are not produced in green line Israel, they are subject to very different arrangements indeed. I think that the right hon. Gentleman has signed the letter that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has written, and I will provide a full response in due course.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I want to pick up on my hon. Friend's point about the paucity of the aid getting in and to highlight the utter ridiculousness of how Israel is frustrating not just the quantity of aid but the basic elements of aid, such as tent poles, tents, razor blades and generators, by claiming that they are somehow dual use and therefore a potential threat. Can I urge him, on a humanitarian basis, to pick up with his opposite number just how wrong it is to deny humanitarian aid to the people of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend makes important points. The dual use list, which restricts aid into Gaza, is clearly having very significant humanitarian effects, as it covers a wide range of items, including the shelter items he describes. It has also had an adverse effect on the ability

to ensure even the rudiments of health provision in Gaza. We will continue to call on the Israeli Government to review the dual use list to ensure that vital supplies get in, in the quantity required and with the urgency demanded.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement and the good news about the establishment of the Palestinian embassy in London today. However, my question concerns Sudan. As a member of the International Development Committee, I know that the latest assessment we have of the number of killings in El Fasher is now 75,000 people. The horror that those poor people are living and dying through every day demands action before the city of El Obeid suffers the same fate or worse. With millions of people at risk of starvation through this war, what discussions are being had with the UAE to stop the flow of weapons, and with the African Union to see an expeditionary peace force put together to save Sudan?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the situation in Sudan. It is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Despite the many other pressures that I have described in other parts of the world, we are doing all we can politically and diplomatically to end the fighting. It remains a priority for the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Africa, and we are working alongside the US-led Quad, including in engagements with our colleagues in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and with all those with an ability to influence.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): This morning I had the honour to attend the official opening of the Palestinian embassy in my constituency by His Excellency Ambassador Husam Zomlot and also by 14-year-old Obeida, who was evacuated to the UK for medical treatment after losing two of his limbs in Israeli bombings. I thank the Minister for his work in achieving recognition, which his predecessors failed to do in the past 80 years, and also for supporting the medical evacuation, but can I press him on the point about action against settlements? When the Israeli Government have a declared policy of using settlements to prevent the very Palestinian state that we have just recognised, what reason can he give for not taking action to stop investment in settlements and to stop trade with settlements?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind opening remarks. It is easy, with so much going on, to lose sight of the individual cases in these conflicts, and meeting some of the children that we have medically evacuated is a truly humbling reminder not only of the horror of war and what is happening in Gaza, but of the power of the UK to really make a difference to people's lives. I am grateful to him for bringing that to the House's attention.

We are not only committed to a Palestinian state; we have recognised one. We have set out clearly where that Palestinian state is, and that clearly has implications under international law—points we have made both in relation to the most recent set of settlements announced by the Israeli Government and, indeed, some of the other very significant settlements, including the E1 settlement that has been announced. We are also taking steps on the correspondent banking questions, which are also vital.

[Mr Falconer]

I can assure my hon. Friend, and indeed the House, that we will continue to work on these issues through the new year.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the Minister for his statement. He rightly condemns the outrageous blocking of the delivery of humanitarian aid, which is desperately needed in Gaza. His statement did not mention the west bank but, as colleagues have highlighted, another development over the Christmas period was the decision by the Israeli security council to permit the establishment of 19 new settlements. He rightly condemned that, but repeated condemnation that is repeatedly ignored by an Israeli Government that repeatedly break international law is simply not enough. Will the Minister finally take the straightforward and concrete step that is open to him by banning all trade with illegal settlements? They are illegal; their proceeds are the proceeds of crime. Why will he not take that step?

Mr Falconer: I remind the House that I have announced three waves of sanctions in relation to settlements in the west bank. I have announced sanctions on both Mr Smotrich and Mr Ben-Gvir—the two politicians in the Israeli Government that colleagues from across the House have most often referred to in their understandable concerns about the expansion of settlements. I will respond to the letter in relation to goods. As I said to the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), there are very different arrangements in place for trade with those settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The number of illegal settlements approved by the Netanyahu Government in the occupied west bank has shamefully reached the highest level since 2017. Alongside that, with the wholly inadequate level of humanitarian aid reaching desperate Palestinians in Gaza, the Israeli Government have cruelly withdrawn the accreditation of a further 37 NGOs and have cruelly blacklisted some essential items. Does the Minister agree that this continued intolerable suffering must stop? What is the UK Government doing to increase aid and ensure that NGOs can operate freely to distribute aid to the vulnerable and the dying?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has pushed these points with force, and I know that he will continue to do so in this House. I have set out our position on de-registration. I have also set out our position on the importance of removing restrictions and ensuring that the aid that we and so many others are providing—including, I am sure, some of his constituents in Slough via the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal—gets to the people who need it in Gaza, and we will continue to work on that.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): More than 500 aid workers have been killed by Israel in Gaza since October 2023. Back in October 2024, our Prime Minister said to Israel that

“the world will not tolerate any more excuses on humanitarian assistance.”

Will the Minister please explain any tangible policy steps—not words or condemnation, but tangible policies—that the UK will take now that Israel has taken further actions to obstruct much-needed aid and endangered our aid workers?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk of the danger to aid workers. He and many others across the House will be aware that more than 500 aid workers have died in the Gaza conflict. I have set out some of what we are doing to try to ensure that aid gets into Gaza. We will continue to take those steps. We will continue to work with our partners in the way that I have set out.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I agree with the Minister that Mr el-Fattah’s tweets are abhorrent, and I am glad that the Government have made their position on his views clear, but I cannot understand the clear lack of due diligence on such a high-profile case, which has led to getting him over here being a priority for successive Governments. It calls into question the adequacy of the procedures within the FCDO if even the civil servants working on the case were not aware of his tweets. Will the Minister set out what he will do to ensure that due diligence is conducted on high-profile consular cases, so that officials can provide advice and Ministers can make decisions with as full an understanding as possible of the facts relating to any particular case?

Mr Falconer: It is precisely the concerns that my hon. Friend outlines that led to the Foreign Secretary commissioning the permanent under-secretary to conduct the swift review that I described in my statement. We will update the House when that has concluded.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is quite difficult to know what to focus on in this wide-ranging statement—the rights of women and girls in Iran or the awful situation in Yemen—but I would like to focus on Israel banning 37 international aid organisations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Oxfam, from Gaza. The Minister used passive language in his statement. He said:

“Too much aid is still stuck at Gaza’s borders”.

This might be the ex-Reuters editor in me, but I think that is wrong. The aid is not “stuck” at Gaza’s border; it is being deliberately held there in an act of cruelty by the Israeli Government, who do not want the aid to help the people of Gaza. Will the Minister tell the House exactly what the UK Government are doing to restore access? What leverage are they using to force the Israeli Government to reverse this cruel decision, and when will they work with EU allies to bring in much wider sanctions? Perhaps it is time for trade, sport and cultural sanctions against Israel so that it will really listen, rather than just a passive statement that is clearly making no impact on the Israeli Government’s actions.

Mr Falconer: I hesitate to argue with an editor, but I think the British Government’s view on the restrictions on aid imposed by the Israeli Government has been absolutely clear in my statement today, and indeed in all my statements from the moment I went myself to the warehouses in Al Arish, where aid was being blocked from crossing the border by the Israeli Government.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The provision of aid and healthcare is needed at pace, yet over the past 27 months pace has not been the response. Is the Minister taking a step back and looking, for instance, at the instruments available to him, such as the international law framework, to ensure that they can

operate at pace? Clearly, without pace, the Israeli Government feel that they have impunity to do whatever they wish.

Mr Falconer: As I alluded to in my previous answer, we have wanted more aid to go into Gaza almost since the first day that we were in government. I have travelled extensively to the region and seen the restrictions on aid. I have called repeatedly for the Israelis to allow that aid in. We will continue to work to try to see that aid getting in at the pace and scale that is required. We are doing a range of things. We are part of the Civil-Military Co-ordination Centre—I believe the shadow Foreign Secretary visited the CMCC and met our UK embeds within it—we have worked with the Jordanians on airdrops, we have gone to Al Arish ourselves to make these points, and the Foreign Secretary went to Jordan in November. I would not wish my hon. Friend, or anybody else in the Chamber or watching at home, to draw any conclusion other than that the British Government are committed to getting aid in as quickly as possible.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I would like to pick up the theme of increased settlements and trade, which has been mentioned across the House. Along with the concerns expressed across the House, I have a particular concern that there are currently Israeli settlements that are trading with the UK but passing their goods off as coming from Israel. As the Minister himself said, there are more favourable trading arrangements with Israel than with the settlements. Will the British Government commit to publishing segregated trade statistics by category of good and by origin of good vis-à-vis green line Israel versus the settlements?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. He raises the spectre of those in the Occupied Palestinian Territories falsely labelling their goods as being within the green line. Publishing more detail about the goods that he alludes to potentially being falsely labelled probably would not enlighten the House or anybody else on the truth of the situation. I say to all those in the Occupied Palestinian Territories who are producing goods in settlements that if they breach the arrangements set out very clearly for trade with the UK, they will be in breach, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs will investigate and we will take action.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): As the Minister alluded to, British taxpayers have witnessed atrocities committed by Israeli authorities in Gaza and then acted by donating to NGOs that are ordinarily able to deliver much-needed humanitarian aid there. However, Israeli authorities continue to impede full humanitarian access, leaving aid paid for by the British public out of the reach of those who urgently need it. Can the Minister explain to the British public how the UK plans to urgently solve this ongoing issue and ensure an end to the obstruction of British charities?

Mr Falconer: As I set out in my statement, it is very clear in the 20-point plan what the aid provisions need to be. It includes the unimpeded operation of the UN and humanitarian agencies, and that is what we need to see. We are talking to all our partners and raising these points directly with Israel to ensure that, as my hon. Friend says, the aid provided from the UK and many other places gets into Gaza in the way it needs to.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): As Israel continues its brutal treatment of Palestinians in Gaza, aid remains blocked even as people face the flooding, severe weather and freezing conditions that have already claimed the lives of infants. Why are the Government not demanding full unrestricted access for international aid workers, UN agencies and medical teams? Why are foreign media still barred from Gaza, and what is the UK doing to ensure that independent international journalists can report freely so that the world can see the true scale of the devastation and the horrific crimes being committed?

Mr Falconer: I have already set out why we want international NGOs in Gaza and why it is so vital that aid can get in unimpeded. It is also vital that international journalists—indeed, journalists of all kinds—are able to report freely.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is aware of the case of Marwan Barghouti, which was reported by the Inter-Parliamentary Union to have been in violation both of the Oslo accords and the Geneva convention. He was abducted by Israel from the west bank and put on trial in Israel. The Minister will have seen reports today that Minister Ben-Gvir said that Barghouti should be executed—an unconscionable statement by a sanctioned Israeli Minister. Have the Government assessed the compatibility of Mr Barghouti's trial and detention with international humanitarian and human rights law? If so, has their assessment informed any representations made to the Israeli authorities, beyond calling for access for the ICRC?

Mr Falconer: Let me be clear: the British Government oppose the use of the death penalty in all cases everywhere, as a principled position. We have also recently raised the treatment of detainees in Israel. I am happy to come back to my hon. Friend on his more detailed question about Mr Barghouti.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I was extremely proud to serve on the anti-Daesh campaign in the Foreign Office and the Army. It is important to recognise that that campaign is just and represents the UK learning lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq in what has been a largely successful intervention. I strongly welcome the new Government in Syria, but it is concerning that there has been an increase in ISIS activity in the past year. In my experience, perhaps the most intractable issue with ISIS are the 27,000 ISIS members and their families in prison camps in Syria, including many children who are being radicalised. Can the Minister assure me that the Government and the global coalition are monitoring that risk and taking what practical measures they can to prevent the next generation of ISIS from emerging?

Mr Falconer: I thank the hon. and gallant Member for his service both in the Foreign Office and in the British military. I can confirm that the camps in north-east Syria remain a high priority.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for being so quick to condemn Netanyahu for yet again trying to block aid from getting into Gaza, and for his condemnation of the new settlements, which, I hope, will not actually go forward.

[Dr Scott Arthur]

I want to talk about Iran. Before Christmas, I visited a few schools in Edinburgh South West—Boroughmuir, Balerno, Currie and Tynecastle high schools—where I met young people who were really keen to vote in our Scottish Parliament elections this year. By contrast, I see on social media that young people of around the same age in Iran are out on the streets risking everything to vote—particularly women, given the pressures in that country. Will the Minister join me in applauding those young people in Iran, particularly the women, for all that they are doing? When he meets his Iranian counterpart, will he remind them that those people have the right to protest and determine their country's future?

Mr Falconer: We do remind the Iranian authorities of the right to protest. It is vital that that people are able to conduct that right with access to communications, which have come under pressure in Iran in recent days, and indeed without the threat of violence.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Deep down we all know that there is no real ceasefire. How can it be a ceasefire when more than 500 civilian Palestinians have been murdered, approximately 100 of them children? We all celebrated the new year with family and friends with fireworks, while Israel Defence Forces soldiers celebrated new year by firing unlimited bullets into Gaza blindly. The level of depravity is unspeakable. We now know that 37 reputable organisations are being prevented from providing humanitarian aid. Here is one suggestion. We know that nine countries, along with the UK, expressed their concern. What stops the Minister and this Government joining with those nine countries and making a visit to the International Criminal Court to raise this matter, so we get a ruling and then enforce it, if necessary with military?

Mr Falconer: The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the deliberations of the ICC already in relation to this conflict. The ICC is supported by the UK, but it operates independently and at a distance, rightly, from the Ministers of this country and any other country.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement and his continued work in the region, but the IDF continues to deliberately target children in Gaza. The ongoing genocide and the systematic destruction of medical facilities in the region mean that desperately sick and injured children are unable to access the medical attention they need, but I thank the Minister for meeting with Obaida and Mahmoud, two medically evacuated children hosted by the Prime Minister in No. 10 just before Christmas. Will the Minister update the House on what work is going on to increase the number of Gazan children medically evacuated to this country for the support they need?

Mr Falconer: I was deeply moved to meet the injured Gazan children with my hon. Friend. As I said during that meeting, it is vital that we ensure that children in Gaza have access to the healthcare that they need. It is vital that the supplies to provide that healthcare can get into Gaza. It is in most cases going to be more appropriate that children who currently have to leave Gaza to get medical assistance are provided with that assistance in

the region, but there clearly are specialised cases where the UK can make a real contribution. We continue to look at that and I will return to the House shortly on it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his detailed statement; it is much appreciated by all of us in this House who have a very deep interest in human rights—we know his heart is in it and we appreciate and thank him for that. Iran is in the throes of street protests over the price of, and access to, food, with 31 people killed. Women and girls are denied basic human rights, and for years Christians, Baha'is, Shi'as, Sunnis and many other religious groups have been directly abused and murdered, with churches destroyed. Religious groups have been denied access to education, health, jobs and property, and even the right to have their own burials of their co-religionists and their own graveyards. It is truly time, I believe, to step up all actions to protect these religious groups in Iran and to provide the freedom that Iranian people desire. What can be done with the Iranian Government in exile to deliver freedom, liberty and democracy, and the secular and non-nuclear republic that all Iranians desire?

Mr Falconer: Alongside many of our international partners, we set out a statement covering a range of rights-based issues at the UN General Assembly Third Committee in November. Freedom of expression and freedom of religion are important rights for which we will continue to advocate across the world.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): On behalf of my constituents, I welcome the establishment of the Palestinian embassy in London today.

Syria's long-term stability depends on protecting its long-standing diversity and preventing sectarian violence, as the Minister said. In the light of recent violence and the lack of progress this weekend in integrating the Syrian Democratic Forces in north-eastern Syria into national institutions, what would the Minister say about the progress that has been made towards building an inclusive Syria for the future?

Mr Falconer: It is vital that Syria is a place that is seen as safe and secure, not just by its majority but by the important minorities, which are a vital part of Syria's fabric. My hon. Friend refers to the Kurds of north-east Syria, but there are a range of other minorities, not limited to the Alawites, the Druze and others. It is vital that the Syrian Government provide all minority communities in Syria with assurance of their place in the new Syria, and we discuss these questions regularly with the Syrian Government.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The combined operation of the Royal Air Force Typhoons and French aircraft in Syria reminds us of the continuing threat that Daesh poses to the people of Syria and our partners in the region, the importance of our European allies, and the importance of funding a strong and capable military. Does the Minister agree that we should honour our brave servicemen who took part in the operation? Will he outline what steps are being taken to ensure the continued security of Syria?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his service in the RAF. I am proud to be the MP for RAF Waddington, but he probably trumps me in closeness

to the RAF, given his long service. The RAF performed vital work in countering the threat of Daesh in Syria. We will continue to use our diplomatic and all other levers to ensure that Daesh does not re-emerge in Syria, and pose a threat not just to Syria but to the region and the UK.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Late last year, I met constituents who run a community link with Jayyous in the west bank. Villagers there have described a daily life of hostility and obstruction by police, and intimidating and threatening intrusions by nearby settlers, despite repeated Israeli court rulings in favour of the villagers. Will the Minister advise the House how the UK's recognition of the state of Palestine will translate into practical steps to protect communities like Jayyous and to advance peace, security and democratic governance?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend and her constituents. We will continue to take action as required to ensure that the rights of Palestinians are protected. Indeed, as she said, Israeli courts have upheld those rights on a number of occasions, and it is vital that the rule of law is seen and operates in these areas.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for all the work that he has been doing on these issues. What reason has the Israeli Government given for stopping NGOs operating in Gaza? If it is clear, as has been mentioned by other Members, that it is a deliberate act of cruelty to prevent healthcare and aid going into Gaza and to defeat the peace plan, what actions are we taking as a UK Government against Israel and to reinstate those NGOs?

Mr Falconer: As they have set out publicly, the Israeli Government have sought more detail about the Palestinian staff of those NGOs, but many of the NGOs have not provided it, given concerns over the targeting of aid workers. That impasse has led to the deregistration of many of those NGOs. A number of international parties, including the UK, have proposed acceptable solutions, consistent with humanitarian principles, to try to navigate these concerns, but they have not been taken up.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): The Minister advised in his statement that consular cases of British citizens detained abroad are at the heart of the work of the Foreign Office, and he provided an update on some of those cases. My West Dunbartonshire constituent Jagtar Singh Johal has remained arbitrarily detained in India for more than eight years; in two weeks' time, it will be 3,000 days. What is being done to secure his release, beyond just raising his case with Indian counterparts? We have been doing that for eight years with no effect.

Mr Falconer: I know how dedicated my hon. Friend is to the case of his constituent. I raised in particular the cases in Iran, but I do not want the House to draw

conclusions about relative priority. There are a range of cases across the world of great sensitivity, and I am sure that the Minister responsible for India, where my hon. Friend's constituent was detained, would be happy to meet him to discuss the case further.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I welcome the Palestinian embassy, but with the crisis in Gaza still acute, the Israeli Government's decision to strip NGOs of accreditation is unconscionable and puts vulnerable families at even greater risk. I welcome the steps taken to bring injured Gazan children here for treatment, but many are just too unwell to travel. What additional steps, whether through field hospitals, specialist equipment or teams and medicines, will the Minister take for children still in Gaza who are unable or not stable enough to travel to receive specialist treatment?

Mr Falconer: I need to be clear that the contribution that the UK has made to the provision of aid to children will always be a tiny drop in the ocean of overall need. We are working in the ways that I have set out to try to ensure that medical assistance is provided in Gaza, with all the equipment and expertise that that involves. Where that is not possible, we have provided aid to the Egyptian healthcare system, in order to support Palestinians there; I have met some of them myself, in El Arish general hospital. As I set out to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson), where there are specialised cases, we must look at them, and I will say more to the House in due course about that.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for taking over an hour's-worth of questions on the updates he has provided on the situation right across the region. He has a very difficult job to do, particularly given the decimation of the United States Agency for International Development, and the cuts in our aid. What are we doing to open the borders for those people who have family in, and connections to, the UK, so that they can escape the horror that they are in in Gaza, and can get a visa to visit family in the UK? Can he update the House on any progress in getting those borders open, or any discussions that he has had with the Home Office to stop biometrics-related restrictions, and to help people apply for visas from Gaza?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has been a committed campaigner for cases in her constituency, and I know that there are colleagues right across the House with a constituency or personal interest in these cases. As I said to the House shortly before we rose for Christmas, there are a range of cases in which we have been able to provide support, both to Chevening students and to the injured children we have discussed. It remains a real challenge to ensure that people with a legitimate reason to travel can do so, and I am happy to take up any individual cases.

Point of Order

9.48 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you advise me on how I might elicit satisfactory responses to a series of written questions I have tabled to the Treasury on the impact of business rates on retail, hospitality and leisure businesses? I asked for very specific figures relating to the number of businesses that the Treasury expects to be eligible for transitional reliefs, how many premises will be brought into paying rates for the first time as a result of the recent revaluations, and an analysis of the number of businesses that previously enjoyed retail, hospitality and leisure reliefs and would see increases from 1 April. None of those questions have received substantive replies. I raised the matter with the Leader of the House by letter before Christmas, but I have not yet had a response. Can you please advise me on whether any other routes are available to me and other parliamentarians, so that we can receive accurate and data-rich responses to questions, and can effectively scrutinise Government policy, which is hammering our high streets?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Lady for notice of her point of order, which will have been heard by Government Front Benchers. As has been said before, the Chair is not responsible for the content of Ministers' answers. However, the Procedure Committee is conducting an inquiry into written parliamentary questions, which is accepting evidence until Friday 16 January. I am sure it will be interested in the issues that the hon. Lady has raised.

In the absence of the Member to present the Bill, we will move on to the next item of business.

Business without Debate

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

Ordered,

That Alison Hume be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Sojan Joseph be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Rights of Women and Girls: Afghanistan

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

9.50 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to bring forward this debate on Government support for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan because, put simply, the situation for women and girls there is catastrophic. As Human Rights Watch has said, it is

“the most serious women’s rights crisis in the world.”

Since coming to power in 2021, the Taliban have launched an all-out attack on women, systematically stripping away the economic, political and social rights of millions of women and girls. Today, I will speak about what this means in practice, and how the UK Government can support women and girls in Afghanistan.

To start, I pay tribute to Afghan women, who, despite everything they endure, continue to fight for their rights, both in Afghanistan and from overseas. Their hope rings true in a young woman—let us call her Naila—whose right to finish her degree was stolen by the Taliban. She said,

“In the deep silence, something inside me refuses to break. In the darkness I have held on to my dreams, like small candles in my hands, protecting the fragile flames from the wind. I write in my secret notebook, whisper my dreams to the night sky and promise myself that one day, the world will hear Afghan girls again.”

However, I have heard from many Afghan women that they feel that the world has simply forgotten them. We must be clear that we stand with them, so let us ask today what more we can do—both the Government and we parliamentarians—to support women and girls in Afghanistan.

Some people might ask why I have chosen to speak about this topic. Why, with so much live conflict across the world, should we care about this issue today? Because not only is the erasure of women’s and girls’ rights in Afghanistan wrong, but if we do not stand with Afghan women and girls—if the world tolerates this erasure of their rights—we are sending a message that the rights of women and girls everywhere are up for negotiation. We are sending a message that the world does not care enough, and that we will turn a blind eye when half our population are under threat. That is a message that I refuse to send, and I hope it is one that this whole House refuses to send. If we care about women’s rights anywhere, we must care about women’s rights in Afghanistan. As Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan politician and former Deputy Speaker of the Afghan Parliament, said recently before the International Development Committee,

“Today, millions of girls in Afghanistan’s hopes are stripped away from them. It is not only us. We are the frontline defenders of this...It can reach anywhere, any country.”

Let me turn to the situation on the ground. The dystopian fantasy played out in many films and much fiction is a real-world nightmare in Afghanistan. The rights of women and girls are being systematically erased, alongside their presence in public life; they have no right to education post primary school, no right to employment, and no right to travel by themselves. Of course, before the Taliban took power, there were huge challenges, with Afghanistan ranked among the lowest countries in the world for gender equality. However,

there had also been hard-won gains, which are being systematically undone, one by one, under the cruel hand of the Taliban.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate to the House. I spoke to her beforehand, just to give her an idea of what I was thinking about. As of late 2025, over 37,200 people from Afghanistan have been resettled in the UK through Government-sponsored schemes—specialised, safe and legal routes—including the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme and the Afghan relocations and assistance policy. Targeting demographics is crucial, and we must do more to ensure that such schemes focus specifically on vulnerable groups, especially women. Does the hon. Lady agree with me and others that there is more we can do, through resettlement, to protect women and girls, by creating safe and legal pathways to ensure their safety from the Taliban?

Alice Macdonald: I thank the hon. Member for that important point. He is right. The Government have set out new proposals on immigration that have a focus on safe routes, and it is important that we stand with female human rights defenders from Afghanistan. Many of them came over here before there were those routes. It was not easy for them, and many people worked incredibly hard to make that happen. I hope that we can have safer passages, and that it can be much clearer how they can be accessed.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Member and I are members and officers of the all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls. On the point about education and access to healthcare for women, we hosted a meeting last year with Dr Feroz, a former Health Minister in Afghanistan. He spoke movingly about the case for medical care for Afghan women. One of his key asks was for more support in Afghanistan for women to be trained as midwives to improve maternal outcomes. I am potentially anticipating the Minister's response, and I know how challenging the situation is, but does the hon. Member agree that we should be able to discuss this from a bilateral perspective?

Alice Macdonald: I thank the hon. Member for her contribution, and for everything she has done as chair of the APPG. She has been advocating for Afghan women and girls for a long time. I totally agree, and I will come on to healthcare a bit later in my speech.

To return to education, Afghanistan is the only country in the world that bans girls from attending school beyond the primary level, depriving 1.5 million girls of secondary education. Those girls are stripped of their right to learn and their hopes and dreams for the future. On employment, the Taliban have incrementally removed women from professional roles. Instead, they are confined to their home. Over the past three months, we have heard that the Afghan Ministry of Defence and the Afghan army have reportedly prevented women employees from entering the UN compound and its premises across the country, forcing them to work from home, further isolating women and impacting on the effective delivery of aid.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Milton Keynes is proud to host four hotels full of Afghan evacuees. I have had the pleasure of meeting many women who completed their education, become

professionals, finished university and become judges, lawyers and doctors. They could no longer work in their country and were evacuated. Their fear above all was for their younger sisters, who they left behind, and who are now under this cruel regime. Their fear was that these young girls would never experience the joy of learning, the joy of practising and the joy of being able to do their job. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is unconscionable, in a world where women should be as valued as men, that these girls have no hope for the future?

Alice Macdonald: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. This week, girls in the UK are going to school, and it is a right that we take for granted. It is a right that so many countries take for granted. A country that bans education is putting a brake on its prospects.

According to UN Women, only 24% of women are part of the labour force in Afghanistan now, compared with 89% of men. Amid this worsening economic situation, child marriage is on the rise again, with 10% of Afghan girls under the age of 15 married.

There is also the issue of the right to travel and live in liberty. In August 2024, a Taliban edict banned women from leaving home without a mahram or chaperone. The crackdown has become even more draconian; it involves things that we could not imagine would even be possible, such as directives ordering women not to sing and the removal of windows through which women might be seen. The most recent action to cut internet connections across multiple provinces has shut down the last lifeline that many women and girls had to access learning. The young girl I referred to, Naila, said that since the internet outage

“the silence became even heavier. It felt as if the world had drifted far away, leaving us in complete isolation. No message could reach us...It felt like we were being erased”.

The impact of all these actions cannot be overstated, both for women now and for the future, and they are happening amid an ongoing humanitarian crisis: 1.4 million people face food insecurity, and 4.2 million people are internally displaced. As the Minister knows well, the crisis has been made worse by the return of Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan; more than 2.6 million returned in 2025 alone. A significant number had lived outside Afghanistan for generations and lacked family property or social networks to support reintegration. Women account for approximately 60% of returnees and face compounded risks. As the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) mentioned, a chronic national health crisis is preventing women from receiving healthcare. UN Women estimates that this will increase maternal mortality by 50% this year, and that is made worse by the ban on women training to be midwives and nurses.

Yet, amid all this darkness, I take hope from the courage of Afghan women and girls who continue to fight for a better future. I was fortunate enough to travel to Afghanistan in 2011 when I worked for Harriet—now Baroness—Harman, and I met numerous women who were working hard for their rights and the rights of many others. I remember visiting a domestic abuse shelter; sadly, I cannot imagine that it can function any more, and I often think about what has happened to the women there. More recently, in Parliament, I hosted the screening of “Rule Breakers”, a film about the Afghan girls’ robotics team who rose to global fame. Led by

[Alice Macdonald]

Roya Mahboob, who I am pleased was present at the screening, those girls triumphed against adversity to fulfil their dreams, and their story is a testament to the resilience and determination of Afghan women. As one Afghan woman said to me recently, women are seeing their souls die in front of them—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gen Kitchen.)

Alice Macdonald: But still those women fight on. Women-led organisations continue to lead the way in so many different respects, delivering humanitarian assistance, supporting survivors and helping communities, all the while navigating life-threatening risks.

I know that the Minister cares deeply about Afghanistan and has huge experience there, and I urge him to continue to do everything possible to stand with Afghan women and girls. I welcome the appointment of Baroness Harman as the UK's global envoy for women and girls, as she has made Afghan women and girls one of her priorities. Of course we cannot solve the crisis on our own, nor should we, but it is imperative that we play our part and that, importantly, we work with other countries that have influence on the Taliban and in the region.

I want to focus on three specific issues on which I think the Government could act, although they are already acting in many of these areas: aid, accountability and the women, peace and security agenda. Let me begin with aid. Just last week the United Nations launched a \$1.7 billion humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan, warning that it will remain one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with 22 million Afghans in need of humanitarian assistance this year; but with major donor countries such as the United States turning away, whether that appeal is heard remains to be seen. Funding cuts have already forced the suspension of 218 gender-based violence service points, affecting more than a million people, mainly women and girls. In the light of our own aid cuts, may I ask the Minister to speak about our commitments to Afghanistan and, in particular, how we are ensuring that the money we spend reaches women and girls and human rights defenders?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again. She is speaking powerfully about aid and contributions. May I briefly mention the global polio eradication initiative? Polio could be eradicated in the next three years, which would be a historic milestone for the world, but to do that the UK Government need to commit £50 million a year to the initiative for the next two years. Given how little we can do to support Afghan at present, this is one tangible action that the Government can take. Will the hon. Lady reiterate that call tonight?

Alice Macdonald: Absolutely. We were, of course, on the brink of eradicating polio. It exists in very few countries, and to see it surge again in countries such as Afghanistan risks so many development gains.

Can the Minister tell us how much is currently being spent on women's rights and how much we will spend next year? Will he commit himself to protecting that

funding for the future, and will he ensure that the money reaches the women's rights organisations and women's rights defenders on the frontline?

However, no amount of aid can address the human rights crisis in Afghanistan, and in that context I turn to my second point, about justice and accountability. Many Afghan women are calling for gender apartheid to be recognised as a crime in international law. Their call is now being taken up by a number of member states as well as international legal experts and lawyers, and I back that call. Can the Minister set out the Government's position on recognising gender apartheid through the new "crimes against humanity" treaty that is currently under negotiation?

We have seen alarming steps taken by some member states to normalise the Taliban. Can the Minister assure the House that the UK will not normalise relationships with the Taliban? More than four years into the ban on girls' education, can he point to improvements that have been made through our direct engagement with the Taliban? If there has been no such progress, what will be done differently?

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Earlier, my hon. Friend mentioned Fawzia Koofi, who spoke to the International Development Committee. In her evidence, she told us that

"the main Taliban agenda is women."

Does my hon. Friend agree that that point, and the point that she is making, demonstrate why the UK Government and our international allies must stand and promote the agenda that she is describing?

Alice Macdonald: I entirely agree: it is a war on women, and we must make clear that we will not tolerate it.

There have been some welcome moves, including the announcement by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court in January last year that he had applied to the Court for arrest warrants for two senior Taliban leaders. I am also pleased that the UK is supporting the case to hold the Taliban accountable for violations of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women at the International Court of Justice.

Will the Minister also tell the House how we will use our role at the UN and on the Security Council to demand accountability? As a witness said at the United Nations Security Council meeting in March last year, if impunity is the disease, accountability is the only antidote.

I also make a broader plea to Members and to the media: we must keep attention on what is happening in Afghanistan. As I have said, women have told me that they feel forgotten and that the world has turned its back. We must do whatever little we can to show that we have not.

Thirdly and finally, the Minister will know that 2025 marked 20 years since the landmark agreement of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, yet two decades on we are failing to live up to its promise. Afghanistan is a focus country for the UK, as is stated in the current national action plan for women, peace and security. We therefore have a particular responsibility for the peace and rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. Will the Minister give an update on how we are delivering

that crucial plan? It is also imperative that women be at the table for any talks. We must always call for that, and we must lead by example by ensuring that all our delegations include women at the table.

The situation for women and girls in Afghanistan is devastating, but we must not give up. Afghan women certainly are not giving up. They are determined and inspiring, and despite the challenges that they face, they are still finding ways to run businesses and work on the frontlines. We cannot abandon them. We must play our role as a party—now in government—that has always championed women's rights at home and abroad.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her important and powerful speech and for giving voice to the plight of Afghan women. Does she agree that recognition of gender apartheid is an essential part of our foreign policy? After four years of direct engagement with the Taliban, it is perhaps the only way we can start shifting the debate.

Alice Macdonald: I agree, and I welcome my hon. Friend's support. Gender apartheid speaks to the systemic dismantling of a whole system of women's rights, not individual cases of persecution. We should listen to the people who are calling for this, because it is a unifying call from many Afghan women.

If we turn our back on this crisis—on the gender apartheid unfolding in Afghanistan—we are failing not only Afghan women, but women everywhere. As Baroness Harman wrote recently,

“it is clear that we will not achieve global equality without tackling the systematic oppression of Afghan women and girls. The importance of this cannot be underestimated, not just for Afghan women, but for the hard-won rights and freedoms of women around the world.”

This is not just a moral issue. It is also a security issue, because we know that gender equality is essential for lasting and sustainable peace. We must hold true to our values, we must display them proudly as a sign of hope for the oppressed across the world, and we must do everything we can to uphold the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

10.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to her for her work with the all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls, and indeed to the other doughty champions for Afghan women represented in the Chamber this evening. As she alluded to, Afghanistan matters to me not only as a Minister, but as a person who knows the country well. I have first-hand experience of dealing with the Taliban, and I am determined that they should be held to account for their horrific treatment of women and girls.

My hon. Friend set out the situation well. She is right to point out that Afghanistan is now one of the worst places in the world to be a woman. Every single aspect of life is restricted by the Taliban. Girls cannot attend school after the age of 12. Women's employment is almost entirely blocked. The sound of a woman's voice outside her home is considered a moral violation. Millions are being systematically excluded from society and robbed

of their future. Afghan women deserve meaningful, equal participation in all areas of life. These infringements on their freedoms must be reversed.

The UK Government have consistently condemned the Taliban's treatment of women and girls. Senior officials travel regularly to Kabul, most recently in December, to urge the Taliban to reverse their barbaric decrees. On every visit, the treatment of women and girls is raised. Our officials press the Taliban to meet their international obligations, and we use our voice on the world stage to keep up the pressure. This includes speaking out at the UN, in the UN Human Rights Council and in our other international forums.

During my visit to the UN last January, I made it clear that the Taliban's actions are unacceptable and that we will not allow the voices of Afghan women to be forgotten. In December, at the UN Security Council, the UK condemned the ongoing restrictions on female staff at the Islam Qala reception centre, which is near the border with Iran. We use our position as chair of the G7+ group to mobilise and co-ordinate international engagement on Afghanistan. We also support the initiative of key member states to hold the Taliban to account for violations of the UN convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

I recognise the powerful calls to classify the situation in Afghanistan as gender apartheid. This is a complex and emotive issue. We are still determining our position, but we are actively engaging with civil society and international partners to understand all perspectives.

Wendy Chamberlain: I know the Minister's commitment to and experience of Afghanistan. Before Christmas, the APPG, including the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), met the UNHCR Afghanistan representative. As we know, many people are returning to Afghanistan from Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere, and they are often from single female-headed households, so they are doing so with a degree of trepidation. My understanding from that meeting is that that body receives no funding from the UK Government. Would the Minister consider looking at that, because that surely must be an item of leverage in the meetings with UK officials that he has described?

Mr Falconer: We are providing support to returnees from Iran to Afghanistan, and that support is mostly funnelled through the International Organisation for Migration. We have not yet announced our allocation of aid for Afghanistan next year, but we will of course come back to this House when we are in a position to do so.

This year, the Human Rights Council voted to establish an independent accountability mechanism. We are exploring how the UK can contribute meaningfully to that, especially as the scope and operational details become clearer.

There is a growing humanitarian crisis across Afghanistan, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North made so clear—23 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. As the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) highlighted, women and girls bear the brunt. Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous places in the world to give birth, with the highest maternal mortality rate in the Asia-Pacific region.

[Mr Falconer]

We remain committed to tackling this crisis. We have allocated more than £150 million this financial year for lifesaving aid to Afghanistan, ensuring that at least half of the beneficiaries are women and girls. Last November we hosted a successful food security and nutrition conference in London, strengthening our response to the hardships and hunger facing Afghan families. We are focusing on effective solutions, working alongside international partners and those in Afghanistan who know the country best.

Turning to human rights and accountability, we support the mandate of the UN special rapporteur on Afghanistan, Richard Bennett. I met him last year to discuss the situation, and we remain in regular contact with him. We also maintain regular engagement with Afghan women to hear their perspectives. I have met them, and the doughty Baroness Harriet Harman, the UK special envoy for women and girls, held a roundtable for Afghan women in September and attended a parliamentary event on sexual and reproductive health in November.

The UK special envoy to Afghanistan, Richard Lindsay, joined me to brief parliamentarians today. He regularly meets Afghan women both in the diaspora and in their home country. We seek their perspectives on how we can better support their cause and hold the Taliban to account. My hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, recently met individuals from the Hazara community. They discussed the discrimination faced by Hazaras, including the plight of Hazara women and girls, and he and I remain focused on supporting such vulnerable communities.

In December, Foreign Office officials participated in the Hear Us conference led by Afghan women demanding accountability for Taliban human rights abuses. Their courage and perseverance in the face of adversity are profoundly inspiring, and their resilience commands my deep respect. Our work on accountability is strengthened by our close engagement with Afghan civil society, both in the UK and abroad.

Those responsible for international crimes in Afghanistan must be held accountable. The Taliban's systematic erosion of the rights of women and girls is the destruction of every kind of freedom. The Foreign Secretary's

recently announced All In campaign reaffirms our desire to tackle violence against women and girls. At its launch, Dr Sima Samar, an Afghan human rights activist, was present and spoke about the appalling situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, making it a central focus of the campaign.

I have been privileged, both as a Minister and in my previous life, to meet many non-governmental organisations, activists, campaigners and politicians who want a better future for Afghan women and girls. Earlier today I hosted a briefing for parliamentarians on the latest situation. I look forward to meeting, on Wednesday, Chevening scholars from Afghanistan who are now studying in the UK. Some of these women had to be chaperoned out of Afghanistan to take up their studies here. Their studies—from psychology to human rights; from health to construction—put them in a strong position to shape tomorrow's Afghanistan for the better.

Wendy Chamberlain: The Minister rightly mentions the Chevening scholarship scheme. I also commend the work of the Linda Norgrove Foundation in relation to the 19 female Afghan medical students who are brought to the UK to study at Scottish universities. That was really groundbreaking work between the UK and Scottish Governments on funding for their studies and the visas that allowed them to come. There are very small numbers of individuals who would like to do the same. Will the Minister take away that request to ensure we have that pipeline, so that hopefully in future those women can return to Afghanistan and provide the care that is required?

Mr Falconer: I am very happy to take that away.

In conclusion, the UK will continue to fight for the rights of Afghan women and girls, and will continue to urge the Taliban to reverse their barbaric decrees. As the Foreign Secretary recently said,

“there cannot be peace, security or prosperity without women playing their part, free from violence and free from fear.”

Question put and agreed to.

10.15 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 5 January 2026

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

Free Bus Travel: Over-60s

4.30 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 702845 relating to free bus travel for people over 60.

Happy new year, Mr Mundell. It is, as always, a privilege to serve under your chairship.

I start by thanking the petition's creator, Mrs Karen Hickman, and the 101,000 people who signed the petition—including 211 of my constituents in Folkestone, Hythe and Romney Marsh—for securing this debate on extending free bus travel to all over-60s across England. I also thank Transport for London, Age UK London, Independent Age and the Local Government Association, which were incredibly helpful in my preparation for this debate, which I am leading for the Petitions Committee.

There are many areas of our country where there is free bus travel for the over-60s: London, Liverpool, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Bus services are a critical form of public transport. They are a public good: they get people to work and allow them to visit friends and family, travel to health appointments and participate in social activities. Bus services support active lifestyles, reduce social isolation, and reduce car use, lower air pollution and make our environment cleaner and safer. It was a pleasure to meet Mrs Hickman. She was particularly frustrated by the regional differences that we have in this country when it comes to bus services, and she would like to see greater investment in rural bus services in her area of Lincolnshire.

In our country, there is a growing misperception that if someone is over 60, they are somehow financially blessed, with a house on which the mortgage has been paid off, and they have plenty of assets and capital washing around. Many people think that the over-60s do not need free bus travel. I challenge that narrative, as does Mrs Hickman. Based on households below average income data, 875,000 people aged 60 to 64 are living in poverty. A new report from Standard Life identifies a substantial rise in financial insecurity among people in their early 60s, after the increases in the state pension age since 2010, and highlights that there are a quarter of a million more people aged 60 to 64 in relative income poverty than there were in 2010.

In the UK, carer prevalence is greatest among adults in their 50s and early 60s, with people in that age group twice as likely as those in a younger adult group to be carers. Due to the rising pension age, many people in their 60s are seeking work. The high level of redundancy in this age group during the pandemic is one factor that has led to increased unemployment among 60 to 64-year-olds. Many people in this group are key workers: health and social care—a sector that is growing in my constituency—and retail are among the sectors with the highest proportion

of older workers. In addition, over-60s with a disability or long-term health condition are more likely to face financial hardship.

There is already free bus travel for the over-60s in several parts of the UK, so this policy can work. The 60+ London Oyster photocard, operated and funded by TfL, is available to London residents over 60. There are 383,000 active users of that photocard, which I know makes a positive difference to the lives of the 24% of Londoners in that age group who live in poverty.

Residents of the Liverpool city region are eligible from age 60 for free travel on buses, trains and ferries. That is funded by the transport levy that the Merseyside local authorities pay. Looking for a moment at a younger age group in Liverpool, I commend the Liverpool city region combined authority for its recent introduction of the care leavers travel pass, giving free local travel on buses, trains and ferries to young adults leaving the care system. That is a commercially funded offer.

What most or all of these schemes have in common is that they were implemented as a result of local powers being used by local people for the benefit of local people. Is that not how our local communities should be run? In my view, it is. Local people know what the local needs are. I understand Mrs Hickman's frustration at the regional differences that can occur when some local areas have powers that others do not, but thanks to the Bus Services Act 2025, passed by this Labour Government, all English local transport authorities now have the power to set routes and fares. In my view, it is right that each local authority now grasps the nettle and gets on with delivering the high standards of bus services that the public are entitled to.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The issue that we face in Torbay is a significant shrinkage in the number of available commercial routes, whether for bus pass users or other bus users. Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that we need sustained investment in bus services to drive a better service for all our communities?

Tony Vaughan: I completely agree with the hon. Member. Central Government have to support local government in properly funding bus services. As I will come on to say, that is exactly what this Government have been doing, but the critical question will be whether those local authorities spend the money in a way that benefits passengers.

Mrs Hickman's view is that this policy should be centrally administered and nationwide. According to the Local Government Association, making the policy nationwide would cost central Government roughly an additional £250 million to £400 million a year. Without that money, evening and weekend services would likely collapse. Losing more bus routes would be damaging for over-60s who rely on buses to get to work.

As the LGA suggests, many councils argue that £1 fares for apprentices and students offer a higher economic multiplier than free travel for the over-60s. That is especially important when we are desperately trying to raise our economy's growth rate and reduce unemployment. There is also a strong argument for focusing more on getting apprentices and students to use buses, because that cohort of young people will develop the habit of getting on a bus, which will help to secure a more stable long-term revenue stream for bus operators.

[Tony Vaughan]

As I just said, what we need is ample central Government funding for local authorities so that they can decide how best to run the bus network. The Government are backing our bus network with a £3 billion multi-year bus funding settlement for 2025 to 2029, helping to create more certainty, stability and predictability for our bus system. The aim of the funding settlement is to deliver lower fares and more frequent and reliable bus services, and the national single bus fare cap was extended to run until March '27. The Government's Bus Services Act empowers local authorities to take greater control of bus services, and makes them more reliable, accessible and affordable by enabling franchises, lifting bans on municipal bus companies and mandating zero emission buses.

In this debate we are rightly talking about the 60s, but it was the '80s when it all started to go wrong for our bus network, with its reckless privatisation under the Transport Act 1985. The Bus Services Act takes a completely different approach by allowing local government to create locally and publicly operated and owned bus services.

Local authorities across the country have received significant funding boosts to improve local bus services. For example, the petitioner's council, Reform-run Lincolnshire county council, received a boost of £11.8 million to support better bus services. In my area, Reform-run Kent county council this year received a boost of £42 million to spend on better bus services. The Government are not being partisan with funding decisions; Reform-run councils are receiving cash boosts to improve bus services from now until 2029, and the public should expect Reform to deliver in places such as Kent and Lincolnshire. We must hold them to account in ensuring that they spend the money not on political advisers, or mad adventures such as the Elon Musk-inspired DOGE 2.0 cuts programme, but on making bus services work more accessibly, reliably and affordably.

In December, I ran a bus survey to hear from my constituents how they would like the £42 million of extra bus funding to be spent. Many told me that bus services are not frequent enough and are often unreliable, with too many late and even cancelled services. Many highlighted the issue of affordability. They want Reform-run Kent county council to spend that £42 million of extra funding on protecting existing routes from private sector cuts, more frequent bus services, cheaper fares, improved evening and Sunday services, and better bus links to schools, colleges and hospitals.

One constituent suggested extending free bus travel to the over-60s, but many of my constituents talked about wanting routes that had been cut under the failed experiment of privatisation to be reinstated. They asked for changes such as frequent, direct bus services from Folkestone to the William Harvey hospital, more evening and weekend bus services across Kent, and the reinstatement of routes such as the 73, 77, 78 and 111 services in Folkestone, Hythe and Romney Marsh.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Before I was elected, I ran mental health services, including for older adults, so I understand the importance of older people being able to access services in a way that means they do not lose their appointment. We have 47,226 over-60s in

Bournemouth, and many decisions about bus routes have not been taken with their views in mind, particularly in Throop, where I am trying to reinstate a bus service, but also across Southbourne and Tuckton. It sounds like my hon. and learned Friend might agree, but does he also agree that we should be using our new bus legislation to make sure that those communities that have been disenfranchised, left behind and left out are considered by local councils when they are deciding on routes?

Tony Vaughan: The situation my hon. Friend describes is symptomatic of what I call the begging bowl approach of trying to reinstate routes, where a private company decides how it will run the service, it cuts the routes that are more difficult to make money on but which people really need, and we all go with our begging bowl, banging on the door and asking the company to sort it out for our constituents. The way that all local councils should be using the Government's legislation, now they have the money, is by actually listening to what local people want and providing services that allow our communities to be joined up. What he describes is exactly what I have experienced in my constituency and why these changes are desperately needed.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the speech that my hon. and learned Friend is making and I thank the 237 people in my constituency who signed the petition. At the root of this debate is the issue of inequality. There are many forms of inequality around bus use. The petition draws attention to the geographical inequality, but we also see socioeconomic inequality, particularly when we look at putting resources into enabling older people to access bus services so that, instead of paying £6 for a return journey, they can access things such as health appointments on time. Is it not worth looking at people living in deprivation and putting money into supporting people from those communities to use buses?

Tony Vaughan: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. That is exactly why the Government introduced the Bus Services Act: to allow local authorities to be held to account for the decisions they make about how to fund bus services. I completely agree that bus services are a fundamental public good and a public service. In my constituency, they are essential to allow people living in rural areas, often in rural poverty, to reach GP surgeries or hospital appointments many miles away. It is not as if they can walk or rely on somebody to give them a lift; often, that is not available. A reliable and affordable bus service is often the difference between someone being able to access the town, with its shops and chemists and all the things that are needed to make life work, and sitting for days in pain, entirely cut off. I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

One survey response that stood out for a negative reason was this one:

"Doubt Reform will take much notice frankly".

I totally understand that hard cynicism about Reform, given its bewildering incompetence in Kent. I implore Reform to spend the money wisely. I will take my bus survey responses and put them directly to the council, because we must see accountability and competence in the way our public services are delivered in Kent.

While I am sympathetic to the arguments for extending free bus travel to all over-60s across England, I believe that our policy focus should be on encouraging and supporting more local authorities to set up municipal bus companies so that we can reverse bus privatisation, which has, like in the rail and water sectors, been a failure and meant that, all too often, the interests of the private company and the shareholder have been put above those of the passenger.

Before closing, I have a couple of questions for the Minister. What action beyond what I have talked about are the Government taking to make bus travel more accessible and affordable for the over-60s? What are the Government doing to make rural bus services more accessible and reliable, especially for that age group? What measures will the Government put in place to hold to account councils such as Reform-run Kent county council and Lincolnshire county council to ensure that they spend their additional bus funding prudently and purposefully? How do the Government plan to use investment in our bus network to help to increase economic growth and lower unemployment? Finally, can the Minister explain how empowering local government can lead to improved bus services?

The answers to all those questions would be gratefully received, because my constituents constantly press me on this issue. We are a long, coastal constituency, so it is very difficult to get around unless there is reliable public transport. That is what we have to achieve over the coming years with the funding and the new powers that Kent county council has.

4.45 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on introducing this important debate, which I welcome. I want to make clear that I strongly support e-petition 702845. The fact that more than 100,000 people signed it shows how strongly the public feel about the issue and how far it reaches into people's everyday lives.

The petition is simple and reasonable. It calls on the Government to extend free bus travel to people over 60 in England outside London, bringing England into line with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. At present, those living outside London must wait until state pension age—currently 66—to qualify, despite the fact that mobility, confidence in driving and independence often decline well before that point.

The Government's response recognises the value of bus services and points to welcome investment, including the funding announced in the recent Budget. I welcome that funding, but the response ultimately sidesteps the core issue. Responsibility is shifted to local authorities and devolved Governments, rather than making free bus travel a statutory entitlement across England. That matters because leaving it as a discretionary measure creates inequality and uncertainty. Local authorities are under immense financial pressure, and people's access to free travel should not depend on where they live or how stretched their council's budget happens to be. National problems require national solutions.

We also need to be honest about the scale of the gap that people face. It is not a short transition period. The difference between age 60 and state pension age is

six years, and that gap is set to increase further as the pension age rises. It is six more years during which people might be driving less, losing confidence behind the wheel, or giving up their car altogether, but are still expected to pay rising transport costs.

For many older people, particularly in towns and areas with patchy public transport, the alternative is often taxis. That becomes harder in later life in retirement when people are more likely to live on a fixed income, watching every pound and trying to stretch their pension as far as possible. What was once an occasional expense can quickly become unaffordable.

This debate is not just about transport policy, but about mental health, dignity and independence. I have spoken many times in Westminster Hall and the main Chamber about adult mental health and the importance of prevention. One of the clearest contributors to declining mental health in later life is loss of freedom of movement. Research by the London School of Economics shows that a policy of free transport for the over-60s would deliver powerful and measurable benefits. Older bus pass holders are 37% less likely to be sedentary, improving their physical health through everyday activity like walking to and from shops. They are also one third less likely to experience social isolation, a factor strongly linked to poor mental and physical wellbeing.

The NHS increasingly recognises the importance of community mental health for all older people and the importance of staying socially connected, active and engaged. When people cannot get out to see friends, attend community groups, volunteer or even make simple, everyday journeys, isolation sets in. Loneliness, anxiety and depression are not abstract risks, but real outcomes of restricted mobility, and free bus travel for over-60s is therefore not just a concession, but an investment in wellbeing, independence and prevention.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I apologise for interrupting the hon. Gentleman's flow. I do not think anybody would disagree with what he says; we would all love free bus travel for over-60s, and perhaps for even more people than that, but it is a question of cost. He talks about investment, but how much does he estimate that this will cost?

Iqbal Mohamed: I am afraid that I do not have cost figures to hand, but the research that I referred to in preparation for this speech demonstrated the quantifiable economic benefits of the policy. I believe that any cost incurred from implementing it would be paid for many times over through reduced visits to GPs and hospitals, as well as increased economic spend by people who can get out more.

Free bus travel also supports healthier ageing, reduces isolation and helps people to remain part of their communities for longer, easing pressure on health and social care services in the long term. I urge the Government to listen to the strength of feeling behind the petition, to move beyond passing responsibility elsewhere and to consider making free bus travel for over-60s a fair national and statutory entitlement. If we are serious about equality, prevention and supporting people through later life, that is a change that we should be willing to make. Providing free bus travel for over 60s is a proven, practical and popular policy. The evidence is clear, the public support is strong and the need is urgent—the Government must act.

4.51 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the 148 constituents in Bedford and Kempston who signed the petition in support of the introduction of free concessionary travel for people over 60 across England.

Concessionary travel is an important issue for older residents, many of whom rely on public transport to maintain their independence and participate fully in their communities. Local authorities, including Bedford borough council, are facing unprecedented financial pressures, with some councils approaching bankruptcy. This means that, despite the clear benefits of concessionary travel, many councils simply do not have the funds to provide support at a local level. Without central Government intervention, older people risk being left without affordable transport options.

Free bus travel for over-60s would not only provide much-needed financial relief, but help to reduce social isolation, support access to healthcare and enable continued engagement in work, volunteering and community life. It is a small investment that delivers significant social value and improved quality of life for thousands of older residents. I urge the Government to back this proposal and ensure that older people across England can access free and reliable transport, regardless of the financial situation of their local councils, so that bus users in England have the same provision as those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

4.53 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell.

London's Freedom Pass model is the envy of older residents across England, and it has become embedded in the expectations of many that free public transport is one of the benefits of living in our capital city. However, free travel for older residents is not the only element of a successful transport policy. Regular, reliable routes, safety on and off the bus and non-polluting vehicles all add up to a successful public transport network. All the characteristics of a proper bus service are more possible now than they have been for years, as a result of both the investment put in by this Government and the Bus Services Act 2025, which gives transport authorities the powers to make bus services more affordable, more reliable and safer.

Kent county council, which commissions the buses in my part of the world, East Thanet, has 7.5 million fewer bus miles now than in 2010. That is 7.5 million fewer opportunities for people to get to work, healthcare appointments or simply go out and have fun—and that reduction did not happen by magic. It happened as a result of choices made by the Opposition, who probably rarely, if ever, take buses outside London and therefore have little or no experience of the impact of their neglect and obsession with privatisation, which have battered our buses over more than a decade. The Government have changed that. Our multi-year funding means that there is now a £3 billion boost to end the plight of bus routes being scrapped at short notice and tighter requirements for cancelling vital bus routes.

That £3 billion, however, translates to £42 million in Kent. I would and should be celebrating that investment in opportunities for our county council to improve

bus services, but unfortunately the decisions by the administration in Kent mean that very little of that investment will come to Thanet. Leafy and well-heeled Tunbridge Wells will receive more than £3 million-worth of investment in its bus services. Thanet, with some of the most deprived communities, including the poorest pensioners, is receiving a mere £500,000.

We may all agree that decisions should be made by government as close as possible to the communities that they serve, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) pointed out, but the way that Kent county council has gone about that allocation is grossly unfair, and suggests that it is not interested in investing where bus services can significantly benefit the community. Thanet is effectively receiving only 2.3% of Kent's bus subsidy funding.

The Bus Services Act gives Kent county council the power to restore vital bus services, such as the No. 9—I say that in the same way that my hon. and learned Friend mentioned several bus numbers from across his constituency. Bus numbers matter to communities; they are the difference between being able to get out and about and being locked at home. Buses need to be regular and reliable, and they also need to be affordable, safe and clean.

When I conducted my bus survey we received a number of representations, one of which was specifically about the No. 9—to put it in the context of free public transport and bus travel for all of the over 60s, there would be no point in having free bus travel for many of my East Thanet constituents trying to get to a hospital appointment in Canterbury, because there is no bus to get there. They cannot shop in Canterbury, whether the bus is free or not, because there is not a bus to take them there. When we are developing a bus service for our communities, we must ensure that it has reliable routes as well as affordable fares.

I have received representations in support of the Transport Committee's recommendation for free bus travel for the under-22s—representations that I am extremely sympathetic to. We have young people who simply cannot get to work when they are on apprenticeship wages, or cannot get to their colleges because they do not have significant and sustained income. They are being penalised for trying to do the right thing.

Tom Hayes: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, as per usual. Just before Christmas I held an inclusive bus roundtable, to which I invited Bournemouth Gateway Club and the Cambian Wing college. The Cambian Wing college calculates that it costs around £300 a year for its students to reach the college, because it opens at a time outside the operating period of the concession pass. That is clearly bizarre, but it is particularly bizarre because the Cambian Wing supports people who have special educational needs, and we as a Government are trying to provide more workplace opportunities for people with special educational needs, and also with wider needs. Would my hon. Friend agree that, as a major part of our work and welfare programme, having not only reliable bus routes, but affordable buses is absolutely critical?

Ms Billington: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. When talking about increasing the opportunities for young people in my constituency, I find it frustrating when people say that young people need more aspiration.

I remind them that, frankly, young people need a bus service that gets them to where they can fulfil the aspirations they already have.

In Thanet, our allocation will not be able to meet the needs and ambitions of our community, and that is deeply depressing. It is important, however, to put on record that the strongest message from our survey about people's experience of the bus service in East Thanet was the friendliness and helpfulness of our bus drivers. That should not be underestimated when we talk about the experience of going on the bus. There is no point if the service is not there, and there is no point if it is grumpy. Our coastal communities in particular lack connectivity. Buses are essential, and can help us to move away from reliance on cars, but free bus travel is of little value if there are no buses. Concessionary travel for disabled people and for young people, as my hon. Friend says, are strong contenders for investment.

Finally, I ask the Minister: when will the Department for Transport acknowledge that bus journeys are as good an indicator of economic activity as car movements?

5.1 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for his introduction to the debate. His contribution, along with that of my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), reminded me that I should be grateful that Edinburgh benefits from a publicly owned bus and tram service. Both are award winning nationally and compete against commercial services. In Edinburgh, the bus service runs essentially without subsidy and often returns a dividend to its owner—the people of Edinburgh—to be spent in Edinburgh, while its bus drivers are among the best paid in the country. I am sure, Mr Mundell, that you have experience of Lothian Buses, and that you will not disagree with me that the worst Lothian bus is better than the best London bus, by far. I note that you are smiling, so I will take that as agreement.

Members might be glad to hear that I want to use this debate not just to speak about Lothian Buses, but to pay tribute to my Scottish Labour colleague Sarah Boyack MSP, who is set to retire this year. I use the word retire gently, because I do not think she particularly enjoys hearing it. As you will remember, Mr Mundell, she served in Donald Dewar's Cabinet as Scotland's first Transport Minister. Scotland had a hotchpotch of concessionary travel delivered by local authorities across the country, but Sarah changed that in her role by taking steps to establish national minimum standards of service for all old age pensioners—that is what older people were called back then—and disabled people. To start with, that was free travel outside morning peak times, but it was soon expanded to free 24/7 travel, and more recently to include all people under 22. I do not know what Sarah would say was her greatest achievement in politics, but I feel that free bus travel for older people, disabled people and now younger people must have had the greatest impact of all her decisions.

This is not just about saving money; it is about ensuring that people can keep in touch with friends and family, thereby helping tackle social isolation that many older and disabled people face. Interestingly, when Sarah started on this journey, there were different thresholds

for access to free service, because retirement ages were different back then, but over time, they have aligned to allow those aged over 60 to access free travel. Although my head tells me that it does not make sense to provide free bus travel to over-60s who are travelling to well-paid jobs in Edinburgh, many people in that age range—I am only 1,254 days away from being eligible for my free bus pass in Scotland—see that pass as a reward from the country for their contribution to the community or greater society. People hold it dearly, and it would be brave of any Scottish Government to suggest that it should be removed.

I hope that Members across all parties will listen to the experience in Scotland, and I hope that the Chair will join me in wishing Sarah well as she approaches her non-retirement.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Indeed I do join the hon. Gentleman in wishing Sarah Boyack well. She has made a huge contribution to the Scottish Parliament in the 26 years she has served there, in different capacities.

5.5 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for putting the key points across so well when he opened the debate. I thank the 226 people in my constituency of Harrogate and Knaresborough who added their name to the petition.

Free bus travel is already available to people aged 60 and over in London, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The provision also exists where local authorities have chosen to finance it, such as in Merseyside. Across the rest of England, an older person's bus pass gives access to free bus travel for people who have reached the state pension age, but that age is set to increase in due course. Over the last decade, and certainly under the last Government, we saw a stark decline in the number of bus journeys taken, with 1 billion fewer passenger journeys in 2023 than in 2015. Bus services have been chronically underfunded.

Everyone should have convenient, affordable options for getting around, whether to get to work or to the shops, to visit friends or family, to go to school or to hospital, or to access other vital services. That is particularly important to those aged 60 and over, who face greater odds of social isolation and who might have less access to private vehicles or active travel options.

When I speak to people in my area, and across Yorkshire as a whole, I am particularly concerned by the loss of other services that might have offered a replacement for or an alternative to bus provision. Councillor Andrew Hollyer talked to me about how City of York council failed to replace the Dial & Ride community transport service that many people who are 60 and over could have used in the two years since it folded. I recognise that the petition is trying to increase provision for people who might experience such inequality of access.

Frequent and affordable buses are important for quality of life. That is of particular concern in rural areas, where transport options are limited. Sadly, far too many parts of our country do not have a decent bus service. Under the last Conservative Government, bus services withered,

[Tom Gordon]

isolating pensioners and breaking up friends and families. Many rural communities have been effectively cut off from the public transport that they need, and between 2015 and 2023 fares increased massively, by an average of 59%. The Liberal Democrats are campaigning to restore and expand bus services and better integrate them with other forms of public transport, so we welcome the funding and new powers introduced in the Bus Services Act, but we want the Government to go further.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) mentioned that we end up with what many describe as a postcode lottery, where different local authorities have different offers. That is a key point. Just last month, before Christmas, I held a drop-in with Whizz Kidz, and we had the Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, there. He talked about Manchester's two successful trials of removing some restrictions on certain types of bus passes, including for older persons and for disabled people. He is now looking to make those changes permanent. He said that although that is a great local decision that his powers and funding allow him to take, a national funding fix is needed. We heard the same from Bus Users UK and from Whizz Kidz: where these powers exist without the funding to go with them, there is not really a choice. I have mentioned that extensively to the Minister in debates and questions, and I am sure he is not surprised to hear me making that point again.

Tom Hayes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I thank the 207 people from my constituency who signed the e-petition. Liberal Democrats run Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council. Next year it will receive £3.7 million, then £4 million the following year, £5.3 million the year following that and £6.3 million in the year following that—2030. It also gets the benefit of long-term funding certainty. Does he welcome the fact that the Labour Government are working together with the council to enable it to get on with making the funding allocations to give people the routes and fares that they are entitled to, particularly given that the Liberal Democrats tend to enjoy their time in Bournemouth whenever they hold a conference?

Tom Gordon: This is an issue where party politics can be left at the door. It is about ensuring that we have better bus routes and better access across the board. I absolutely want people to get around the table and work collaboratively where possible. I have worked with several colleagues, including the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), on access to disabled bus passes. I do not think anyone needs to be overtly partisan and tribal on this issue; it is about improving public transport, which is often a lifeline for people.

Earlier, the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) talked about her constituency and leafy Tunbridge Wells. I know my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) well, and his constituency is rural. Obviously, the hon. Member for East Thanet has challenges in her constituency, but this is not about dividing and conquering or pitting people against each other. We want good bus services everywhere. We do not want anyone to lose out; we want to raise the bar across the board for everyone.

The Bus Services Act gained Royal Assent last year. The Liberal Democrats supported many positive measures in that Act, such as those that empower local authorities to operate bus services and implement services for socially necessary local routes. However, we want the Government to go further to fully address the needs of rural areas, tackle lack of provision and assist local authorities in the transition to net zero buses. We believe that bus services should remain affordable, and we will continue campaigning for the restoration of the £2 bus fare cap, which is vital to passengers who struggle to meet the cost of living and to deal with the effects of bus route cuts made under the Conservatives.

Last year, I went on a visit with the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes and spoke to some clinicians, who said that restrictions on bus passes and a lack of free travel mean that people miss appointments, do not turn up on time or, quite often, do not show. That frustrates me, because expanding concessionary travel to people over 60 or people with disabilities might create greater savings in other services and other parts of Government. The cost of a missed hospital appointment pales in comparison to the cost of a bus fare. We need a bigger, joined-up approach to buses to fund vital services down the line through savings. What economic assessments have the Minister and the Department made of how extending the English national concessionary travel scheme might save other Departments and services money? If that has not been done, will he look into it and assure us about it?

I fully support the aspiration to see free bus travel for people over 60. I think the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe mentioned that it would cost £250 million, which does not exactly sound affordable in this current climate, but I think it is the direction of travel in which we should be heading. Expanding disabled bus passes, which cost on average only £75,000 per year per travel concession authority, would be more affordable than free bus travel for over-60s. Perhaps the Minister would like to comment on that.

5.13 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Happy new year to you, Mr Mundell, and all other hon. Members. I thank the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) and, through him, Mrs Karen Hickman, who created the petition we are debating, which comes from a sentiment that we can all agree with. We want bus services that serve passengers well and as cheaply as possible. Everyone who uses buses wants affordable journeys. This debate provides us with an opportunity to explore how essential buses are to our constituents and, in particular, the role they play for older people.

Maintaining and improving the existing concessionary scheme, which offers free bus passes in England to those of state pension age and disabled people, is a critical responsibility of the Government, but fundamental to its success is that it remains financially sustainable in serving those who have reached state pension age. We know how valuable the bus pass is to those who have reached pensionable age, affording the opportunity for older people to take journeys and leave their homes. We must make sure that we do not jeopardise the scheme by expanding it beyond the bounds of the Treasury's willingness to pay for it.

The importance of the scheme is apparent when we look at the experiences of older people. Age UK data suggests that more than 2 million people in England who are over the age of 75 live alone, and more than 1 million older people have said that they go over a month without speaking to a friend, neighbour or family member, which is quite a sobering statistic.

Considering such statistics, the case for bus passes for older people becomes self-evident. Providing an incentive for old age pensioners to travel from their homes into the community clearly has extraordinary merit, but then we come to public funding. The starting point for the provision of any service is that those who benefit from the service should be the ones who pay for it. A free bus pass, after all, is not free. It is just paid for by someone else—in this case, other taxpayers—so we need to be sure that it is a sound reason for increasing taxes, which is the inevitable consequence of increasing public support.

We all know of schemes in our constituencies that seek to bring people together. In my constituency of Broadland and Fakenham, the Aylsham and District Care Trust runs a network of minibuses to bring older people to a central hub to connect them to the community. A free bus pass for pensioners continues that approach and sends a clear message that being older should not be a barrier to remaining a valuable part of the community.

However, as we all know, such schemes do not come without cost. DFT statistics show that £995 million—nearly £1 billion—in net current expenditure is spent on concessionary travel, with about £800 million of that being reimbursed to travel concession authorities. The Government's response to the petition highlighted the importance of cost, saying that

“any changes to the statutory obligations, such as lowering the age of eligibility, would...need to be carefully considered for its impact on the scheme's financial sustainability.”

The challenge of extending the scheme to those over 60 is not just a matter of cost; it should also consider the impact on the wider use of bus services. The profiles of the over-60s and those who have reached state pension age are very different. Look at rates of employment: the employment rate of those between 60 and 64 is 58%, but it drops to just 12.8% for those aged 65 and over. In addition, of those who have decided to retire early, the majority have taken that decision because they are in a sufficiently comfortable financial position to do so.

On the issue of available income, looking across the community as a whole, it is not at all clear that blanket taxpayer support for all those over 60 is an effective use of taxpayers' money. We must ensure that policy decisions relating to buses create affordable trips for all. That is why the last Government's decision on the £2 fare cap was so effective—it set a price reduction for all bus users, improving affordability for everyone and encouraging the take-up of services across society, not just for one part of it.

We should also recognise that not all parts of the country are the same. I agree with the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe that where a local authority has identified a particular need in its community, it is the organisation—not central Government—that is best placed to focus appropriate support, including local bus schemes.

Numerous Conservative councils across the country have taken steps to increase bus budgets and use enhanced partnerships to increase ridership. That includes my

own Norfolk county council, which since the pandemic has increased ridership by over 40% through its enhanced partnership. Just two counties away, Essex has increased its ridership by more than 50%. In passing, it is worth pointing out that this growth in bus ridership surpasses that of Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, despite his much vaunted Bee Network.

A blanket change across the whole of England is completely different from these targeted approaches that respond to local need. Extending free bus travel to an additional 4 million people, irrespective of their income and based solely on age, is likely to cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of pounds every year through increased taxes—between £250 million, as suggested by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon), and £400 million, as we heard from another speaker.

Ultimately, the Conservative party has made it clear that reforms to our bus services need to be realistic, and that we have to focus on passengers. I fear that the result of an expensive scheme could be increased costs for passengers more widely. We have already seen the Government encouraging local authorities to jump into franchising, which may put some local authorities at significant financial risk. We do not want to see further policies that may undermine financial stability, which would be bad for passengers in the long run, as well as for taxpayers.

I recognise that there are parts of the UK in which bus passes are available to those over the age of 60, but if we look at Scotland and Wales, which have had that policy in place for many years—led by the SNP and the Labour party—many of the same challenges present in England regarding buses remain, despite 100% subsidies. Between 2010 and 2025, the number of journeys per head decreased in Scotland and Wales by 31% and 41% respectively. Those decreases were more than, not less than, the fall in journeys per head in England, outside London. That suggests that the Conservative £2 fare cap policy was, in practice, a better solution than free bus passes to the over-60s. It is a great shame that one of the Government's first acts was to increase that cost by 50%.

Tom Gordon: The shadow Minister seems to be saying that he disagrees with free transport for over-60s in the devolved nations. Is it his party's position that if it were elected in the important elections in just a few months' time, which is increasingly unlikely, it would get rid of that free transport?

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful for the intervention as it brings me to my next point, which is that Government funds are limited. The support provided needs to be focused exclusively on areas in which it can do the most good. A blanket increase to 100% subsidies for a cohort that is mainly in employment does not appear to pass that test. I fear that, by increasing the cost of support for older people more widely, it would risk the current levels of support for pensioners. I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on this matter.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell, and I wish all colleagues a happy new year. I am grateful to the Petitions Committee for

[Simon Lightwood]

scheduling today's debate, and to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for representing so clearly the views of the petitioners who want to see free local bus travel extended to everyone aged over 60 in England.

I begin by reaffirming the Government's commitment to the English national concessionary travel scheme, which is a cornerstone of local mobility that supports independence, tackles isolation and connects people to essential services. Under the scheme, free off-peak local bus travel is available to those of state pension age and to those with eligible disabilities from 9.30 am until 11.00 pm on weekdays, and all day on weekends and bank holidays. I am proud that this scheme exists for all residents of England as a statutory entitlement. Of the 38 member countries of the OECD, the UK is joined only by Ireland, Luxembourg and New Zealand in having a nationally run, completely free bus travel scheme for older and disabled people.

The petitioners are asking us to lower the age of eligibility for the older person's bus pass to 60, and I understand why. For many people in their early 60s, buses are a lifeline to work, caring, volunteering and staying active in their communities. However, eligibility for an older person's bus pass in England is set in legislation at the state pension age, which is currently 66. That link reflects changes in longevity and helps to ensure that the scheme remains equitable and affordable over time. Any change to national eligibility would therefore need to be considered carefully.

The concessionary travel scheme is a significant national entitlement. Local authority spending on concessionary travel, supported by the Government, is around £795 million a year. Changing the national statutory eligibility would carry substantial additional recurring costs. Any such proposal would have to demonstrate clear value for money, alongside other priorities for improving services for passengers.

It is important to underline that local communities already have powers to go further than the statutory minimum, where that suits local priorities and local budgets. For example, they can lower the age of eligibility or extend hours of use. Some areas already offer precisely these enhancements. For example, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe noted in his speech, the Liverpool city region combined authority has made the over-60s eligible for free travel on all local buses under the Merseytravel over-60s travel pass.

These additional discretionary concessions are designed and funded locally, allowing communities to tailor support, whether that is early eligibility, companion passes, wider modes or earlier start times, while the national statutory requirements of the concessionary travel scheme remain in place.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the Minister for giving way, and I apologise for not being here earlier due to the urgent question in the main Chamber.

I have previously spoken to the Minister about the concessionary travel scheme. He is talking about the ability of local authorities to institute pick-and-mix approaches, but does he not recognise that such a

postcode lottery approach to concessionary bus travel is a real problem? We need a consistent approach across the country, and we particularly need wider eligibility for disabled people to use their bus passes at all times of the day. Does he recognise the need for young people to have concessionary or free bus travel? They cannot drive, and they need to get around, too.

Simon Lightwood: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. It comes back to affordability. The whole scheme needs to be couched in an affordable way. I will come on to a few of her other points later in my response.

Alongside safeguarding the sustainability of the concessionary travel scheme, our focus is on delivering better buses for everyone. At the end of last year, we confirmed long-term investment of more than £3 billion over the next three years to support local leaders and bus operators across the country, in order to improve local bus services for millions of passengers over the remainder of this spending period. This includes multi-year allocations for local authorities under the local authority bus grant, totalling nearly £700 million a year, ending the short-term approach to bus funding and giving councils the certainty they need to plan ahead and improve services for local communities.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) talked about the sustainable funding model, and I think that my response addresses that point. It also addresses the affordability issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) said that funding must come with the powers. Again, I believe funding has followed the powers under the Bus Services Act.

Rachael Maskell: Would the Minister look again at the settlement he has given to the Mayor for York and North Yorkshire? There will be fewer choices available to the mayor because of the reduction in that settlement. The mayor would perhaps also like to use some of his other transport budgets to subsidise bus travel, so that he can make positive choices for buses and bus users right across York and North Yorkshire.

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I continue to work closely with the Mayor of York and North Yorkshire. I know that York and North Yorkshire is one of our franchising pilot areas, and a little later in my speech I will talk about the formula—the fairer formula—that has dictated the amounts that different areas across the country have received.

The funding I mentioned is in addition to the £1 billion we are already providing in this financial year to support and improve local bus services and to keep fares affordable. It enables councils and operators to protect local routes, improve reliability, upgrade stops, enhance accessibility and support local discretionary concessions, where it is judged right to do so. These measures should help to make bus travel more accessible and affordable for all, including the over-60s.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe specifically asked about supporting improvements to rural bus services. We know that bus services in rural areas can be a lifeline for many people, providing the only means of getting around. That is why, in our multi-year funding allocations for local

authorities, we have revised the formula to include a rurality element for the first time, ensuring that the additional challenges of running services in rural areas are taken into account.

My hon. and learned Friend also asked about measures to ensure that local authorities use their bus funding to truly improve services for passengers. I can assure him that this funding will be linked to an outcomes framework, which will track the impact of funding against a suite of indicators aligned with the issues that matter most to passengers. Crucially, this framework will help us to identify where local transport authorities may need additional support to deliver the improvements that their communities expect.

We know that the debate around access to free bus travel is rooted in concerns about the affordability and quality of local bus services, and we are taking steps to address those concerns. The Government introduced the £3 single bus fare cap at the beginning of last year, and announced at the spending review that it would be extended until March 2027. The cap is helping millions of passengers to save on their regular travel costs. Without it, single fares on some services on the more expensive routes could soar above £10.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe asked what further steps the Government are taking to lower the cost of bus travel. Local leaders can use the funding provided by the Government to improve bus services and to introduce their own local fare measures below £3, if they wish to do so. That is already the case in places like Greater Manchester and the north-east.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough raised the challenge of extending travel times for disabled person bus passes. The Government are committed to improving public transport—we have had the debate often—so that it is more inclusive and enables disabled people to travel safely, confidently and with dignity. Seventy-six per cent of local concession authorities offer some form of extension to the 9.30 am start time for disabled bus pass use. That could include full or partial extensions, or discounted travel before 9.30.

Tom Gordon: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I am going to make progress. I have a lot to cover, and I want to ensure that all Members get the courtesy of a reply.

We believe that the Government's reforms to bus services more widely will help to improve access to local bus services. Our Bus Services Act 2025 starts to do just that by giving local leaders the powers that they need to deliver better bus services for passengers and empowering them to choose the model that works best in their area, whether that be franchising, strengthened enhanced partnerships or setting up local authority bus companies.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) said that bus numbers matter. I quite agree, which is why I am pleased that 1 billion bus miles were travelled in the year ending March 2025—up 2% already. She also expressed concerns about her Reform-led council and ensuring that it invests that money fairly across its whole geography. The BSIP—bus service improvement plan—guidance is clear that improvements must deliver across the whole local transport authority.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe highlighted the accessibility of bus services. Our Bus Services Act also takes steps to address that, by including a new requirement for local authorities to develop a bus network accessibility plan to review the current accessibility of the networks and how they will improve them in future. The Act represents the next phase in the Government's ambitious bus reform agenda aimed at reversing the decline in bus services, improving the passenger experience and increasing bus usage nationwide. My hon. and learned Friend also highlighted economic growth and unemployment. As part of a modern and effective transport network, bus services have a vital role to play in delivering the Government's mission to kick-start economic growth. We believe that improved services will contribute to lower unemployment by better facilitating access to jobs and education.

Let me make it clear that the Government recognise the strength of feeling expressed through this petition and the value of concessionary travel to those who use it. We remain committed to the scheme and to ensuring that it is sustainable for the long term. We will continue to empower local leaders to go further where it is right for their areas, and we will keep working with authorities and operators to enable them to deliver better, more reliable and accessible bus services across the country.

Once again, I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe for bringing the petitioners' views before the House, and all Members who have spoken for their contributions to this important subject. I look forward to continued engagement with Members as we implement reforms and support local decision making to the ultimate benefit of passengers.

5.33 pm

Tony Vaughan: It seems to me that everyone agrees about the importance of buses generally and to their local communities. I was glad to hear from the Minister about the addition of a rurality element to how bus funding is allocated. In areas such as mine, in Folkestone and Hythe, route after route has been cut, because we are told that not enough people use them and that it is too expensive to drive all the way out to rural and remote villages, of which we have many. That is an important factor, as are hospital appointments and GP services. We heard a number of colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell), talk about the importance of being able to get to GP and hospital appointments.

The issue, and the point of difference, seems to be about whether this proposal is a good use of money and is affordable. The Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), said that it would not be targeted at those who need it, and made arguments about the relative increase in passenger numbers in Wales and Scotland versus in England, due to free travel for over-60s versus the £2 cap. It comes down to whether we think that bus services should be run by local people, taking into account local people's needs, or we think that there should be a top-down Government edict on how every single local authority in the country should run its system.

The Government's approach, which I think is the right answer, is that it is for the local authority to decide how it spends that money. That does mean, however,

[Tony Vaughan]

that we must have accountability, so I was encouraged to hear from the Minister that there will be an outcomes framework to track the use of the funding, and to identify additional support where it is not being followed. I invite the Minister to look not just at support but at ways of ensuring that the money is spent in the right way, if necessary through a slightly tougher approach.

I was worried to hear my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) talk about being pushed down the list when it comes to the amount of money her constituency—a very socially deprived area—gets versus somewhere like Tunbridge Wells, where there is not such deprivation. One wonders why her constituency is getting so much less than areas where levels of car ownership are probably much higher. There must be accountability about how the money is being used. Substantial amounts of money are being given, so it cannot be suggested that the Government have not properly funded this. It is down to local authorities to spend the money in the right way. I will continue to do my job to hold Reform-led Kent county council to account on the way in which it is delivering its service.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 702845 relating to free bus travel for people over 60.

5.37 pm

Sitting suspended.

Length of the School Week

[WERA HOBHOUSE *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 727514 relating to the length of the school week.

It is a pleasure to take part in a debate in which you are presiding, Mrs Hobhouse, and to move this motion on behalf of the Petitions Committee, especially because I was a secondary school teacher for almost a decade before I came to this place. The petition calls on the Government to reduce the school week from five days to four, while making each of the remaining school days one hour longer.

Ahead of these debates, I always try to speak with the petition's creator to get a sense of why they started it, and I spoke with the creator of this petition before the Christmas break. He joins us in the Gallery with his mother, who is a teacher herself, and that is a central part of the reason why he began the petition. He had learned in school that almost a third of teachers leave the profession within five years. He hoped that a four-day school week would give teachers more time to spend with their families and encourage them to stay in the classroom—where we all want our best teachers to be—and he thinks that pupils could use their day out of school to do volunteering or other positive things in their local community.

The proposal attracted significant interest; the petition has been signed by more than 126,000 people. Unfortunately, I do not have a breakdown of the ages of those signatories—[*Laughter.*] However, I suspect—and the laughter tells me that colleagues do too—that, given that this issue affects so many young people, many of the people who signed the petition may well be of school age. I think it is important that we bring their views into this debate.

Last month, I had the privilege of meeting secondary school pupils visiting Parliament, who were constituents of the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), and hearing their thoughts about this idea. I spoke to some Back Benchers before going, and they said, “Well, of course they’re going to support it; it’s another day off school,” but yet again, adults overlooked how seriously young people would take it. Before we dismiss their enthusiasm out of hand, there are some really important things to consider that underpinned their interest. Yes, they liked the idea, but more than 15% said that they thought it would reduce school absences, and more than a quarter thought that it would improve their mental health.

That is a really serious point. The most recent NHS children and young people’s mental health survey found that one in five children aged eight to 16 had a probable mental health condition. We know that mental health concerns among young people have risen since the covid-19 pandemic, when many were so isolated. Factors such as climate change, extremism in politics and the cost of housing leave many young people feeling pessimistic about the future.

The pupils I spoke to also had some serious questions about the proposal, and went straight for the logistics of how it would work. Three big worries came through.

The main argument against the idea, particularly among the pupils we polled, was that a longer day would be too tiring and that, by the time people got to what I referred to as period 6 when I was in school and when I was teaching—the sixth hour of the day—brains would be overused and they would not be quite as productive. Some thought that they would get more homework, that it would be harder to do it on top of longer school days, and that that would mean a reduction in the face-to-face time they got with their teachers.

Other pupils had questions about where the new periods would be added. Would they get extra breaks? Would the period go at the start or the end of the day? Older pupils, in particular, were concerned about the impact on their exams. Their school had six 50-minute lessons a day, and they were worried about where the lost hours would come from if they got 200 minutes back in four additional 50-minute lessons.

The final concern that came through strongly, which is easy to overlook but is vital when we consider this issue, was safety. Many pupils pointed out that, despite attending a school on the edge of a major city and having much better access to street lighting than some in rural areas such as the one I represent, a longer school day would mean that they would go home or to school in the dark, especially in the winter. It would be even worse if they wanted to do an extracurricular activity for an hour after school, in which case it could well be 5.30 pm or close to 6 pm by the time they went home. As we see outside today, it can be very dark at 6.05 pm. A number of pupils expressed real concern about whether they would be safe walking home in the dark if the proposed change were made.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): This is a devolved issue, but I did post about it on my Facebook page, because it is an interesting question—I think the post had about 100,000 views and just under 400 comments. One of the challenges that people brought up, which I think my hon. Friend missed from his list, was the impact of longer days on kids with additional support needs, and how their learning might be supported in the classroom as well as on the day off. We have to acknowledge the impact on students and their learning, but does he agree that we also have to think about the impact on children with additional support needs and their families?

Dave Robertson: My hon. Friend makes an important contribution. So often the system has been designed in one way and within it there is huge complexity, particularly when it comes to pupils with additional needs or special educational needs and disabilities. Redesigning the entire school week would obviously mean redesigning many of the other support factors that go around it. That point could easily be missed if we looked at this issue without the required detail. My hon. Friend's level of social media engagement shames me; I shall have a drink with him later to ask how he is getting on with it.

In addition to meeting pupils from the constituency of the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North, I spoke to the National Association of Head Teachers. It shared some of their concerns, especially around mental health, but ultimately did not think that this proposal was the answer. In the NAHT's view, the best way to ease the strain on pupils would be to reduce course content and the number of exams at the end of courses.

The NAHT had a number of other issues with the proposal. One was the impact it would have on extracurricular activities, which I have already mentioned. That is especially important, because pupils cited that as one of the main reasons for supporting the proposal: they wanted more time away from school to do volunteering or non-curricular stuff from which they get some value. The NAHT worried that the school day running later could mean fewer clubs for sports, music and similar things at the end of the day, and ultimately a less rich offer for pupils. A wealth of educational evidence shows that access to extracurricular activities is one of the things that helps to close attainment gaps right across the country.

The NAHT also worried that an earlier start to the school day would have a bad impact on secondary pupils. Studies show that teenagers' sleep patterns mean they are best prepared to learn when they have slightly later starts, not earlier ones. Overall, like the pupils who opposed the petition, the NAHT was concerned that a longer school day would be too tiring, especially for primary school pupils, who need breaks and shorter spells of concentration to learn at their best.

Importantly, the NAHT recognised the impact on parents. For someone who works five days a week, suddenly needing to provide childcare on one of those days would be a huge challenge. I am a former teacher, and one of the things that always used to wind me up about debates like this was hearing people say, "But what about childcare?" I used to lose my mind, because teachers do so much more than childcare. However, it is a fact that if the kids are in school, their childcare is taken care of, and that taking kids out of school for one day a week would leave a huge void to be filled. Access to childcare is one of the major issues that affects young families, and this proposal would exacerbate that rather than solve it.

However, the NAHT did agree with the petitioners, as I do, that there is a significant problem with teacher retention. Britain has the youngest teaching workforce in the OECD. Not only are teachers leaving the profession, but many are unwilling to take on leadership roles, because the work is just so heavy, especially in primary schools. The NAHT favours a four-day teaching week—five days of classes, but a day a week for teachers to focus on lesson prep and administration, which we used to call PPA back in my day—and making the job more sustainable.

Before I conclude, I want to say something from my personal experience as a classroom teacher for almost a decade. I had the great privilege of working at the largest school in the country. We had a 15-form entry, so we had 15 classes in each year group; we had 2,500 kids on site every day and more than 300 staff. I was the school's principal union rep during my time there. In 2015, we trialled something very similar to this proposal as a way of trying to push attainment up, to make sure that every kid who could just get over that grade got over that grade. We cancelled all staff meetings, we cancelled all staff time with other staff, and we did everything for contact. We put on a period 6—an additional hour at the end of every day. All of my members said, "You know what? If this is for the good of the kids and the school, let's try it. Let's give it a go and see what happens."

We all went for it, and it was such hard work to put on valuable sessions for that sixth hour of the day. When we came to do an analysis in the September, we could

[Dave Robertson]

not find that it had made any difference, positive or negative. What we found from doing it—having to move all this stuff around and the additional workload that came with it—was that the reason why the school day is six hours long, and has been six hours long for so long, is that that is what brains are designed to learn in. Adding that sixth hour had almost no impact—certainly no measurable impact—on pupil outcomes, and we had a big enough sample size to give at least some credence to the conclusion.

It is clear from the Government's written response to the petition that they do not support the proposal, and there are clear reasons for that, but I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on some of the themes that underpin the petition, because it is also clear that there were reasons for starting it that relate to children's mental health, opportunities for hobbies and volunteering, and retention of experienced teachers in order to give our children the best start possible.

6.10 pm

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I have to declare an interest: my children asked me to do so. I think one of them actually signed the petition; I am not sure what the age limit is, but he is certainly very interested in the debate.

I will leave the education questions to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), who has just spoken so eloquently, and to other people who know so much about education. My background is in health, so I come at the debate from that point of view, and I absolutely hear and reiterate the points about mental health conditions for young people, particularly post pandemic. That is a serious issue, and I know that the schools in my constituency have serious concerns about absenteeism and providing the best support that they can for pupils.

In terms of health issues, I want to draw some parallels with research that has been done on a four-day working week. My hon. Friend mentioned that if we did go to a four-day school week, that would obviously have implications for parents, who would need to be able to ensure that their children were safe and cared for on the fifth day. Some good research has been done on four-day working weeks, and it showed—this is within my remit—that in companies that offered one, there was a significant improvement in mental and physical health for workers. The before-and-after data shows that 39% of employees were less stressed and 71% had reduced levels of burnout at the end of the trial, which is very significant and a serious consideration given what we have heard about the enormous number of teachers who are leaving with burnout.

Of the 61 companies participating in the research, 56—that is 92%—are continuing with the four-day week, with 18 confirming that the policy is a permanent change. I wonder whether this debate, specific as it is to a four-day week for schools, is part of a wider consideration, and perhaps a wider cultural change, as to how we reorientate the work-life balance, which I think most of us would say is not optimal for a good number of people in this country and perhaps globally.

I would like the Minister to consider a couple of things and I am sure he will. The petition says that the teaching time per week would stay the same. I know that there has already been a conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield about the curriculum's shape and size and the exam stresses that our children face. Again, I will leave that to people who know much more about education, but does this need to be the case? If the teaching time remained the same on the four days and, as has been said, the fifth day was for teachers to plan, would we be able to right-size and right-shape the curriculum to allow our children to be ready, post 18, to do whatever they wanted to in this world? I do not know the answer, and I would be interested to hear others' thoughts.

This question has also been talked about: if we did move to a four-day week, should that be for all ages? I am a mum of two children who are now in high school, having been through pre-school and primary school. Pre-school—nursery—was mornings. There was no way my two little boys would have been able to cope for longer than that in pre-school. Similarly, having watched them coming out of primary school, I think a longer day there would have been a lot to deal with. But as they get older, I take the point about starting later—getting my 14-year-old out of bed is increasingly difficult. Is a longer day more viable for older children than for younger children? Should this be looked at more flexibly? I understand that in some schools around the country it is already happening—not just a four-day working week, but perhaps four and a half days or a nine-day fortnight. I understand that the Government have good reasons for not planning to introduce such a policy right now, but I do think this is part of a broader conversation. I welcome young people coming into the conversation and I look forward to the conversation continuing.

6.14 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse, and I wish you a very happy new year. I thank the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for opening the debate. He obviously has a lot of experience in the classroom and has taken the themes behind the petition very seriously. I start by sending out heartfelt thanks to teachers up and down the country; I hope they have all had a lovely Christmas break and I recognise how hard they are working, in increasingly challenging circumstances.

Having looked into the reasons behind the petition, it seems that one of the sentiments was that we need to do what we can to keep our teachers in the profession. Teachers are the most important asset in our education system, and with every year of experience gained they become more valuable. We want to see world-class teachers in our classrooms, with the appropriate training and support to deliver the best education to all our children.

However, we currently face a serious teacher retention problem. Heavy workloads created by unnecessary bureaucracy and increasingly challenging pupil behaviour are driving teachers to leave the profession. Although new teachers keep coming in, we are trying to fill a leaky bucket as more experienced teachers leave in droves.

The most recent Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey found that 68% of teachers and school leaders did not think they had an acceptable workload and 55% felt they did not have sufficient control over their workload.

In the same survey, more than six in 10 teachers who responded said that they felt at least half their working time was spent on tasks other than teaching. Those findings highlight teachers' growing frustration with an increasingly unmanageable workload, being swamped by administrative work when they just want to get on with actually teaching the kids.

The Education Select Committee, on which I sit, heard recently about the dire situation we are now in with teacher retention. We were told that 9% leave the profession within a year, a quarter leave within three years and a third within five years. Those figures are far too high and are deeply worrying. It is clear that unless we tackle the reasons for teachers leaving, we will not have a stable, effective and consistent workforce. It does not matter how many teachers we recruit, if we cannot hold on to them after just a few years.

It is therefore important to address the issue of retention, and to note that it is exacerbated in schools in deprived areas. The Public Accounts Committee found that

"34% of teachers in the most disadvantaged schools had less than five years of experience, compared to 20% in the least disadvantaged", a figure that highlights how it is even harder to keep teachers in disadvantaged schools, something that has a knock-on effect on the future life chances of students in those schools, who risk

"being locked out of particular careers due to a lack of trained teachers".

For example,

"31% of schools in the most disadvantaged areas do not offer Computer Science A-level (compared to 11% in the least disadvantaged areas)".

Those are imbalances that we absolutely must iron out.

On the proposal made in the petition, the Liberal Democrats do not believe that switching to a four-day school week is the answer to the recruitment and retention problem. Reducing the school week would create additional challenges for families, as has already been mentioned, but particularly in relation to—and I apologise to the hon. Member for Lichfield—childcare. It would be not only logistically challenging, but financially punishing: parents would need to find extra childcare or reduce their working hours, which would make it harder for them to pay household bills and create even more pressure in a relentless cost of living crisis, and would have a damaging effect on the wider economy.

The impact of a four-day week on children's mental health has been mentioned—but, while many younger people would love an extra day in bed, would it not be better for us to look at the mental health of our young people in a much broader sense? How can we design schools and the curriculum to improve, rather than harm, the mental health of our young people? How can we have more variety, less pressure, and more creativity, music and sport? We could even look at draconian uniform policies and their impact on children's mental health. Let us design a system that is so great that children want to be there five days a week, not less than they already are.

Although it might sound as though a four-day week for teachers would resolve the retention crisis in our schools, it is not a practical solution for the economy at large. Instead, the Liberal Democrats believe the Government should consider offering greater access to flexible working arrangements for teachers while maintaining the five-day

school week. We should follow a balanced approach that seeks to reduce teacher workload and improve retention, while ensuring that pupils continue to receive a complete and varied education. Giving teachers the support they need in the classroom, with enough teaching assistants, has to be part of that too.

The Public Accounts Committee found that, disappointingly, the Department for Education does not seem to understand the root causes of

"why and where workload is high",

despite workload being the top reason for teachers leaving. We are calling on the Government to take a serious look at teachers' working conditions, ensuring that they fully understand teacher workload, better to address the issue of teacher retention.

Furthermore, while the only real action from the Government on this issue has been to pledge 6,500 additional teachers over the course of this Parliament, the Public Accounts Committee found that it is unclear how that pledge will be delivered or how progress measured, or

"what achieving it will mean for existing and forecast teacher shortages."

The Department for Education could not give the Committee a clear explanation of how the pledge was calculated or how it will fill existing gaps, with an estimated need for up to 12,500 more teachers in colleges alone by 2028.

Considering that the last teacher recruitment and retention strategy was published in 2019 by a failing Conservative Government, the Liberal Democrats are calling for a comprehensive teacher workforce strategy to properly address teacher recruitment and retention. Such a strategy would include reforming the School Teachers Review Body to make it genuinely independent of Government and able to recommend fair pay rises for teachers, fully funded every year, with the aim of ensuring that every secondary school child is taught by a specialist teacher in their subject.

We would also ensure that teacher training is properly funded so that all trainee posts in school are paid. Finally, we would introduce a clear and properly funded programme of high-quality professional development for all teachers, including training on effective parental engagement. By focusing on retention, flexibility and proper support for the profession, we believe we can create the conditions teachers deserve and need to thrive, not only for their benefit, but for pupils and families as well.

6.21 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I wish you, Mrs Hobhouse, all Members, Clerks and staff of Parliament, and our visitors today a happy new year. I am pleased to respond to the debate on the length of the school week.

I thank the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for leading the debate and I congratulate the young people behind the petition who have brought us together to discuss it here. I confess I have not told my own children what I am doing this evening; I hope they are not watching the Parliament channel for the first time in their lives, because my job tonight is to complete the party consensus and disappoint the signatories. While we have heard some valid arguments about teacher

[Nick Timothy]

recruitment and retention and how the reality of school works for many children, the challenges that we have heard about are probably best met with solutions other than shortening the school week.

Broadly speaking, we have more knowledge and data about what works in education than ever before, which gives us some confidence in saying we know how to make education work best for young people. Success obviously depends on rewarding excellence and raising standards, and the research shows that reducing the length of the school week would mean fewer opportunities to learn and improve. Less time spent with teachers in the classroom would lead to fewer activities and teaching hours, especially for the most deprived children, who might lack alternatives to those activities away from their schools. If anything, we need children to spend more time at school so they can enjoy the greatest possible benefit from full-time education.

Of course, there should be a balance: schools create opportunities for children to learn social skills, make friends, explore new interests and be active, and no one here wants children to be constantly working without rest or support, especially when they are struggling. However, our schools would be unbalanced by the loss of an entire school day. It is not credible that five days of learning and activity could be realistically compressed into four. Cutting lesson times would harm children, especially those who are struggling the most and need more help.

Not only children, but families would suffer. A four-day week would see more than a month's worth of school time lost over a year. That is 39 days gone—much more than people's total holiday entitlement. The loss of a whole day would force many working parents to find alternative childcare arrangements at huge personal expense. The cost of childcare, already incredibly high, would go up even further because of the spike in demand, while many other parents would simply work fewer hours or leave their jobs to look after children when they were not in school.

Campaigners for a shorter week believe that those problems can be made up for by extending the length of the remaining four days. The petition we are debating today proposed that we add an extra hour to each school day, but that would still mean two and a half hours being lost every week. Even if we extended the school day to a full eight hours under a four-day week schedule, children would be left with fewer hours of education each week.

Under the Conservatives, the minimum length of the school week was extended to 32 and a half hours, which helped children to master their subjects, discover new ones, get catch-up support, receive personalised tutoring and enjoy more extracurricular activities. Schools in Wales, where education is not run by the Conservatives, have also trialled longer school days. A four-day week would leave us a global outlier, with English children having less school time than their peers in other developed countries.

We know that more time spent in school leads to better outcomes. The Education Policy Institute has reviewed a series of global studies, and found

“a more pronounced impact on the academic outcomes of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds”.

The Education Endowment Foundation has also reviewed studies from multiple countries, and concluded that extended school time can deliver an average gain of three months' additional progress for children—four months for children in primary schools, and two months for children in secondary schools.

There is significant evidence of this working in England. The DFE's 2003 to 2010 extended schools and services programme, covering 1,500 schools, featured longer school days as part of its pilot scheme. That contributed towards 74% of schools seeing higher pupil engagement in learning and 82% higher pupil engagement in school, as well as a 54% reduction in discipline problems.

Research shows that the most deprived schools benefited: nearly six in 10 children on free school meals thought the scheme made an impact on schools with more than 20% of pupils on free school meals, but that falls to four in 10 children for schools with less than 20% of children on free school meals. Parents also agreed: surveys showed that 35% of parents believed their child's grades improved as a result, 56% observed their child enjoying learning more and 58% saw their child demonstrating better language skills and being better socialised.

Longer school days are an important part of delivering more and better enrichment. Thanks to the academies and free schools revolution, that insight has been put into practice, with impressive results. Star Academies' Eden Girls' school delivers extra enrichment and learning through additional time between 3 pm and 3.45 pm. It is rated outstanding. Teachers play their part in that extra time, but the school has innovated by working with charities and community groups to give extra activities to its pupils, which means that teachers are enablers rather than being overburdened.

Extended school days have been introduced at St Martin's academy, from 8.30 am to 4 pm, alongside full wraparound care to help parents. The school was rated outstanding last year. All Saints Catholic college, another outstanding school, piloted two non-compulsory extended school days for year 7 and year 8 pupils. The summer term pilot saw a 12% drop in missed homework sanctions and a 16% increase in good behaviour.

Academies at the Inspiration Trust in East Anglia have also proved that the approach works. They extended their school days for children in year 7 to year 11, providing an extra 500 days of teaching, or 20 more weeks of learning. Inspiration Trust has also ensured that teacher meetings are more efficiently organised, and that professional development opportunities are available. The results speak for themselves: 66% of pupils at Inspiration Trust primaries meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, which is higher than the 62% England average; 50% achieve grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs, compared with 45.9% across all state-funded schools; and 83% of all A-level results were between A* and C last year.

Lengthening the school week creates the space for schools to decide how they can best use their time and improve outcomes. Many school reformers rightly believe that that can be done with strong discipline, a knowledge-rich curriculum and teacher-led instruction. That was the insight that shaped the Conservative education reform that made English children the best readers in the world and saw England rise through the programme for international student assessment rankings. However, education reform

is never over; it is a constant fight to keep schools in good shape so that children can get the best education possible.

I congratulate the young people who made this debate happen, and I recognise the good faith of all those who support the proposal. However, it is the position of my party, like that of the Government and the Liberal Democrats—the boring grown-ups that we are—that a shorter school week would weaken our schools and end up letting children down. Instead, we need to ensure that more time is spent at school and focus on giving every child the best chance to succeed in life.

6.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. Happy new year to one and all. I congratulate the young person who started this petition for securing this debate; it is always good to see pupils actively involved in thinking about the world around them and campaigning for the change that they want to see. I started my career as a secondary school citizenship teacher, so I welcome seeing young people using the instruments of their democracy in such a way. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for opening the debate.

High and rising standards are at the heart of this Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity at every stage. Schools in England have made excellent progress in recent years and our brilliant teachers provide high-quality education to millions of children. The success of new freedoms and responsibilities for schools, starting with the city academies programme in the 2000s, our new-found discipline in the pursuit of evidence in the education system in England and the professional development that means we now have the most expert teaching workforce ever have all been hard fought for and are now delivering real results for children.

Although I understand why a four-day school week would appeal to some, it is essential that we do not compromise the great progress that has been made over recent years by reducing the amount of time that pupils spend at school, either in total or spread over a five-day week. Evidence, including research by the Education Policy Institute published in 2024, has shown that additional time in school, when used effectively, can have a positive impact on pupil attainment, particularly for the most vulnerable. Schools need enough time to deliver the curriculum to a high standard while ensuring appropriate breaks and opportunities for wider enrichment. Shortening the school week would upset that balance, making it harder for pupils to secure the knowledge and skills they need to go on to lead rich and fulfilling lives. Compressing more hours into fewer days would squeeze out valuable time for school clubs, sport or homework.

For those reasons, the Government have recently restated our commitment to all state-funded mainstream schools delivering a minimum school week of 32.5 hours. Meeting that expectation is essential to delivering fairness and high standards for every child. Our published guidance encourages schools to consider extending their hours beyond the minimum and focus on how that time can best support pupil development and deliver school priorities. Reducing time spent in school risks having the opposite effect.

High-quality time in school is about far more than being in lessons: it is also about creating opportunities for social interaction, enrichment and personal growth. As well as supporting academic achievement, a broad and balanced education plays a vital role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people; being in school across the working week ensures that they benefit from the full range of support that a high-quality education offers to help them thrive.

Insisting on schools being open and educating pupils five days a week should not negate the importance of testing new approaches to embedding flexible working practices for teachers. In fact, expanding and promoting flexible working opportunities in schools can help to recruit, retain and motivate teachers, as a number of Members have mentioned. There are many positive examples of schools embracing flexible working policies for teachers and the freedom that comes with that. Dixons Academies Trust offers a nine-day fortnight for all teachers without impacting pupil contact time; it achieves that through innovative methods in large group teaching and by using its senior leadership team in different ways. The results look very encouraging.

My Department is also backing 10 ambassador schools across the country to test and share the best flexible working approaches and solutions. Teacher workloads have been a challenge for schools, too often leading to high rates of teacher turnover. That is why it is so positive to see teachers working fewer hours now than in recent years according to the most recent working lives survey, which was published in November. There is certainly more work to do to ensure that teaching is a balanced and achievable long-term career, but positive progress is being made, as it is on retention and recruitment. However, that is probably a subject for a longer and separate Westminster Hall debate.

To conclude, reducing the school week would undermine pupil learning and development, and place unnecessary strain on working families. High standards, equal access and sufficient time in school are essential if we are to deliver on our commitment to give every child the opportunity to achieve and thrive. That is why this Government stand firmly by the principle of a minimum 32.5-hour school week delivered across five days, which ensures consistency, fairness and opportunity for every child in this country. Considering the wider benefits of time in school, I am afraid to say that the Government therefore have no plans to reduce the school week from five to four days, but I thank all the petitioners for engaging in this process so fully, and thank my colleagues from across the House for contributing to the debate.

6.36 pm

Dave Robertson: Again, I thank the petitioners and the petition creator for making sure could discuss this issue. I also thank all those who contributed to this debate: my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), who showed his support for pupils with additional educational needs; my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), who gave her views on the health and wider implications of how such a change might function and its place within the larger debate; and the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), who raised the important issue of teacher retention. The median length of a teaching career has been decreasing for years. When the treadmill is that short, it does not

[Dave Robertson]

matter how fast people are shuffled on to it if they fall off the back just as fast. However, I caution her on one point: we have world-class teachers in our classrooms up and down the country.

I also thank the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) for sharing a rare moment of policy agreement across all the major parties. I am sure normal service will be resumed very soon. We may have to agree to disagree on the simple idea that more education means better outcomes, because I am not entirely certain that it is linear—I think that a maximum can be reached, but I am sure that we can have that debate at length another time. I am also not sure that any robust evidence links school structures, academies and free schools to better outcomes on their own. It is teachers who make excellent education, not school structures.

Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Minister, who has first-hand experience as a teacher, for raising the importance of extracurricular activities as well as the impact that inflexible working has on retention and the ways that we can work around that to support teachers in the classroom. He may, however, have missed an opportunity to flag up Labour's excellent Employment Rights Act 2025 as part of that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 727514 relating to the length of the school week.

6.38 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 5 January 2026

TREASURY

OBR: Spring 2026 Economic and Fiscal Forecast

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I have asked the Office for Budget Responsibility to prepare an economic and fiscal forecast for publication on 3 March 2026.

This forecast, in addition to the forecast that was published in November 2025, will fulfil the obligation required by the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011 for the OBR to produce at least two forecasts in a financial year.

As set out at the Budget, the spring forecast will not make an assessment of the Government's performance against the fiscal mandate and will provide an interim update on the economy and public finances.

The Government intend to respond to this with a statement to Parliament. This is in line with my commitment to deliver one major fiscal event a year at the Budget. This approach gives families and businesses the stability and certainty they need and, in turn, will support the Government's growth mission.

[HCWS1219]

Inheritance Tax: Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): The Government have announced changes to the forthcoming inheritance tax reforms to agricultural property relief and business property relief. The Government announced on 23 December 2025 that the allowance for 100% rate of relief will be increased from £1 million to £2.5 million when it is introduced on 6 April 2026. This means a couple will now be able to pass on up to £5 million of agricultural or business assets tax-free between them, on top of the existing allowances such as the nil-rate band.

Taken together with the reform announced at Budget 2025, which made any unused allowance transferable between spouses or civil partners, it is now the case that widows and widowers will benefit from up to £2.5 million of their spouse's allowance, even if their spouse passed away many years ago.

This increase in the allowance comes after listening carefully to feedback from the farming community and family businesses. The change means the Government are going further to protect more farms and businesses, while maintaining the core principle that more valuable agricultural and business assets should not receive unlimited relief.

This further reduces the number of estates forecast to pay more inheritance tax and further reduces the liability for many of the remaining estates.

Compared with Budget 2025, the expected number of estates claiming agricultural property relief, including those also claiming business property relief, affected by the reforms in 2026-27 halves from 375 to 185. Around 85% of estates claiming agricultural property relief in 2026-27, including those that also claim for business property relief, are forecast to pay no more inheritance tax on their estates under these changes.

Excluding estates only holding shares designated as "not listed" on the markets of recognised stock exchanges, the reforms are also now expected to result in up to 220 estates across the UK only claiming business property relief paying more inheritance tax in 2026-27. This is a reduction from up to 325 such estates forecast to pay more at Budget 2025. This means that just over 80% of such estates making claims are forecast to not pay any more inheritance tax.

The increase to the allowance will be reflected in a Government amendment to the Finance (No. 2) Bill, and this was tabled on 2 January. This will be debated in Committee of the whole House next week, on 12 January.

There is, as the Government have set out, a need to reform agricultural property relief and business property relief. As such, after the increase in the allowance, and subject to certification by the Office for Budget Responsibility, the Government expect the reforms to raise around £300 million in 2029-30.

[HCWS1218]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Animal Welfare Strategy

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): We are a nation of animal lovers. People across the country care deeply for animals, and the UK has a proud history of being pioneers when it comes to ensuring the very best for them. This Government are committed to safeguarding the welfare of animals for the long term, and we are changing how we will deliver the improvements needed to achieve the most ambitious reforms to animal welfare in a generation.

On 22 December, the Government published our new animal welfare strategy. This strategy sets out the UK Government's priorities for England, focusing on the changes and improvements we aim to achieve by 2030.

The strategy is a comprehensive package of reforms that will improve the lives of millions of animals across the UK at home, on farm and in the wild.

We set out how we will deliver our manifesto pledges to ban trail hunting and the use of snare traps, and to end puppy farming and puppy smuggling. We are giving farm animals greater freedom and dignity and protecting our wildlife.

By improving animal welfare standards, we are supporting healthier, more productive livestock that delivers better outcomes for farmers, farm profitability, food security and the high welfare standards that British consumers expect.

The animal welfare strategy builds on this Government's proven track record in delivering reforms for animals. This includes introducing new world-leading standards for zoos earlier this year and supporting the passage of

the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Act 2025 and the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Act 2025.

In November last year, we published a strategy on replacing animals in science, which set out how we would partner with scientists, industry, and civil society as we work towards the phasing out of animal testing.

Rather than piecemeal legislation, we will take a more strategic approach—one that targets intervention where it is most needed. This means tighter regulation where standards are weakest, effective enforcement, and working with the sector to provide animal keepers and owners with additional support where they need it.

This animal welfare strategy has been developed in conjunction with key stakeholders including representatives of the companion, wild companion, wild animal, and farming sectors along with non-governmental organisations, and those involved in enforcement. We have held roundtable discussions on priorities while working to understand the underlying issues that lead to poor welfare. We also received input from other interested parties.

The Government recognise that each sector and species of animal has its own needs and challenges that must be considered to ensure good welfare. As such, different approaches are required, balancing priorities, interventions, legislation and roles for different organisations.

Key commitments in the strategy include:

We are ending puppy farming by consulting on reforming dog breeding practices to improve health and welfare and move away from practices that lead to poor welfare and unwell animals.

We will consider the introduction of new licences for domestic rescue and rehoming organisations to ensure rescues have the right checks in place.

We are promoting responsible dog ownership to protect public safety, and are looking forward to seeing the recommendations from the responsible dog ownership taskforce in due course.

We will consult on a ban on the use of electric shock collars due to the possible harm these devices cause to our pets.

As set out in our manifesto, we will ban trail hunting and will consult shortly on how to deliver this ban.

We will end the use of snare traps because they cause suffering to animals and can catch animals that they were not meant to, including pets and protected wildlife.

We will consider how to introduce a close season for hares which should reduce the number of adult hares being shot in the breeding season, meaning that fewer young hares are left motherless and vulnerable to starvation and predation.

We will consult on moving away from confinement systems such as colony cages for laying hens and farrowing crates for pigs so that animals can express their normal behaviours.

We will improve welfare for pigs at the time of killing by phasing out the use of CO₂ gas stunning for pigs, which causes pain and distress, subject to a consultation.

We will introduce humane slaughter requirements for farmed fish.

We will work with industry to promote the use of slow growing meat chicken breeds.

We will form a fur working group of both industry experts and stakeholders who support restrictions on the trade in fur to help us explore options for addressing concerns in this area.

We will begin by launching two public consultations in January, on the use of cages for laying hens, pullets and breeder layers, and on lamb castration and tail docking, as the first step toward advancing these ambitious animal welfare reforms.

Our vision is simple: we want as many animals as possible to have the highest welfare standards at every stage of their life. Together with industry, non-governmental organisations and individuals, this Government will deliver the most ambitious reforms for animal welfare in a generation, creating a legacy we can all be proud of.

[HCWS1217]

Petitions

Monday 5 January 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Settlement route for British National (Overseas) visa holders

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that altering the 5+1 settlement route for British national overseas (BNO) passport holders, which currently allows them to apply for indefinite leave to remain after five years and citizenship a year after that, but would likely be changed to 10 years under current plans, would be an unfair change on a community of nearly 150,000 people who have made the UK their home following China's imposition of a national security law on Hong Kong in 2020, and are largely expecting to become eligible for indefinite leave within the next year; and further declares that the changes will severely disrupt the dignity and stability of this group of people who are subject to transnational repression from China.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to change course and keep the current 5+1 settlement route in place for those British national (overseas) visa holders already residing in the UK, to ensure that they can continue to settle into their new lives in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Gordon, *Official Report*, 4 November 2025; Vol. 774, c. 881.]

[P003125]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp):

The Government remain steadfast in its support for members of the Hong Kong community in the UK, and we fully recognise the significant contribution that Hong Kongers have already made to the UK, and the role they will continue to play in the years ahead.

BNO visa holders will attract a five-year reduction in the qualifying period for settlement, meaning they will continue to be able to settle in the UK after five years' residence, subject to the mandatory requirements. To achieve this, the BNO route will be included in the new earned settlement framework, with those holding a BNO visa given a five-year reduction from the 10-year qualifying period.

We are seeking views on earned settlement through the public "A Fairer Pathway to Settlement" consultation and will continue to listen to the views of Hong Kongers. Details of the earned settlement model will be finalised following that consultation.

Until the earned settlement framework is introduced, the current rules and process for settlement under the BNO route will continue to apply.

The BNO route is a unique immigration route that was established following China's passing of the national security law and reflects the UK's historic and moral commitment to the people of Hong Kong. Retaining a five-year settlement period for BNO visa holders provides certainty to Hong Kongers and ensures the UK continues to honour its historical commitments.

TRANSPORT

Radcliffe-on-Trent to Cotgrave Greenway

The petition of residents of the constituency of Rushcliffe in Nottinghamshire

Declares that the greenway between Radcliffe-on-Trent and Cotgrave—used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders—is a cherished local asset which, since January 2024, has been out of action due to unauthorised work on one of its embankments; and further declares that almost two years on, despite frequent chasing by residents and resident groups, Parish, Borough and County Councillors, and the Member of Parliament for the impacted area, there has been no clarity provided about the likely costs and timelines for reinstatement, leaving residents in the dark.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with Nottinghamshire County Council to provide much-needed public clarity about the status of the Radcliffe-on-Trent to Cotgrave greenway; to provide a clear timeline for a decision to be taken about the greenway's future; to seek to hold the perpetrators who caused the damage to account; and to prioritise the reinstatement of this much-loved active travel asset as part of its budget setting process for financial year 2026-27.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by James Naish, *Official Report*, 15 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 725.]

[P003150]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

This Government are committed to supporting walking, wheeling and cycling, and, to this end, on 10 December 2025 we announced £626 million for local authorities from 2026 to '30 to deliver new active travel schemes, building on nearly £300 million already allocated for 2024 to '26.

The multi-year investment is enough to deliver 500 miles of new and upgraded walking, wheeling and cycling routes, as well as 170,000 greener, more active trips per day, supporting the Government's plan for change missions on public health, safer streets and economic renewal.

We have also recently undertaken a public consultation to inform the development of the third cycling and walking investment strategy, which we expect to publish in the first quarter of 2026. The consultation proposed a vision that by 2035, the Government want walking, wheeling and cycling to be a safe, easy and accessible option for everyone—allowing people to embed the economic, health and environmental benefits of active travel into their daily life if they choose.

I understand that the Radcliffe-on-Trent to Cotgrave greenway, known locally as the Cotgrave multi-user trail, provides a traffic-free link between Cotgrave and nearby Radcliffe, which has a rail station on the Nottingham to Grantham line. As such, I can appreciate that the closure of this important link has had a significant impact locally, given the lack of traffic-free alternatives.

The trail is situated on the track bed of a former mineral railway. I understand that the embankment supporting the trail just north of where it crosses the A52 has slipped, forcing Nottinghamshire county council, which is responsible for the maintenance of the greenway, to close the trail for reasons of public safety.

I am advised that reinstating or strengthening the embankment is a complex engineering challenge, on which the authority is taking steps to scope potential solutions. Nottinghamshire county council will receive just over £6.7 million in active travel funding over the

next four years, and this can of course be used to support any remedial works to the greenway.

Active Travel England will stay in close contact with the authority on this issue.

Written Corrections

Monday 5 January 2026

Ministerial Corrections

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Industry and Exports (Financial Assistance) Bill

The following extracts are from the Second Reading of the Industry and Exports (Financial Assistance) Bill on 15 December 2025.

Chris Bryant: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time... That is why the Bill builds on two different Acts of Parliament: the Industrial Development Act 1982, which provides grants to industry in the UK, and the Export and Investment Guarantees Act 1991, which enables financial support by means of investment finance.

[*Official Report*, 15 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 707.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time... That is why the Bill builds on two different Acts of Parliament: the Industrial Development Act 1982, which provides grants to industry in the UK, and the Export and Investment Guarantees Act 1991, which enables financial support by means of **export** finance.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Member is absolutely right that the vast majority of the companies we will be talking about are SMEs—88% of the companies that benefit from UK Export Finance are SMEs.

[*Official Report*, 15 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 708.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: The hon. Member is absolutely right that the vast majority of the companies we will be talking about are SMEs—88% of the companies that **benefited in 2023-24** from UK Export Finance **were** SMEs.

Chris Bryant: Well, I hope that I can find the right hon. Gentleman's sweet spot, as he is such a dedicated follower of fashion... It is based on loans being made at normal rates, and sometimes it manages to lever in retail finance as well, which is a particularly important part of its work.

[*Official Report*, 15 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 710.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: Well, I hope that I can find the right hon. Gentleman's sweet spot, as he is such a dedicated follower of fashion... It is based on loans being made at normal rates and **manages to leverage private sector finance** as well, which is a particularly important part of its work.

Chris Bryant: Of course there will be massive contracts, such as the \$3.5 billion expression of interest that we have allowed for the building of the new Dubai airport so that British businesses will be able to put in for some of the ensuing tenders—perhaps for hangar doors, the building of additional facilities, maintenance services or architectural designs. However, 88% of what we are talking about in respect of UK Export Finance is for SMEs.

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Chris Bryant: On cyber, financing and JLR, I might have to correct myself in writing to the hon. Gentleman if I get what I say wrong, but as far as I am aware, I am not sure that JLR has drawn down any of the finances from UKEF that we made available... To give just one statistic, UKEF provided a £590 million loan for SeAH Wind UK, which is building an offshore wind factory in Teesside.

[*Official Report*, 15 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 723.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

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