

Thursday
29 January 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 29 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.

House of Commons

Thursday 29 January 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Industrial Energy Costs

1. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help reduce industrial energy costs. [907553]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): The Government recognise the challenge of high industrial energy costs. From April we will raise the discount on electricity network charges from 60% to 90% under the network charging compensation scheme, supporting around 550 electricity-intensive businesses. This year we also plan to review eligibility for the British industry supercharger and the energy-intensive industries compensation scheme. From 2027 the British industrial competitiveness scheme will cut electricity costs by around £35 to £40 per MWh for around 7,000 manufacturing businesses.

Nick Smith: Under the last Conservative Government we had soaring energy costs and the highest industrial energy bills in Europe. Now, under Labour, manufacturers, including those in Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, have seen costly levies taken out. Will the Minister please outline what else the Government can do to bring energy bills down further for UK industry?

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for championing the businesses in his constituency. One such business, GS Yuasa Battery Manufacturing in Gwent, is receiving support from the supercharger, exempting it from several renewables levies and electricity network usage costs. This is all part of the Government's clean energy superpower mission, which will cut costs, boost energy security and accelerate grid connections.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I have a fantastic Yorkshire brick company in my constituency. Unfortunately it had to go into administration, but it was rescued. As welcome as the supercharger scheme is, the problem was that the company did not qualify because it did not meet the business level test, so it did not get any Government support. Can the Government engage directly with ceramics manufacturers,

which are huge users of electricity, gas and various other products, because if we export products to be made elsewhere, the carbon footprint is often much bigger than if we had made them locally?

Chris McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I share his concerns about the ceramics industry. He is quite right that many ceramics companies failed to qualify for the supercharger. There will be a review of the supercharger this year, and I have asked officials to look very carefully at the potential to include ceramics companies in it. I discussed that with the ceramics industry at an event in Parliament this week, which the right hon. Member attended—as, I think, did the Yorkshire brick company that he mentioned. I can also inform him that I and my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade will meet ceramics industries in the near future.

Support for Pubs: Fylde

2. **Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support pubs in Fylde constituency. [907554]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): From April, every pub and live music venue will get 15% off its new business rates bill, on top of the £4.3 billion of support announced in the Budget. Bills will then be frozen in real terms for a further two years. We have also raised the employment allowance from £5,000 to £10,500, meaning that 865,000 employers will pay no national insurance contributions this year. We are also going to allow pubs to open later in England and Scotland during the world cup, because they have already qualified, and I hope that Wales will also qualify so that we will be able to do the same for Wales.

Mr Snowden: From the Queens in Lytham to the Hop Shoppe in St Annes, the Hand & Dagger in Treales and the Thatched House in Poulton, Fylde is blessed with many wonderful pubs, but they were hit very hard by the changes to national insurance, and the looming business rates changes that will hit them hard have many of them worried. Some of the changes that have been announced are welcome but will not go as far as mitigating all the cost increases that pubs are facing. What more plans do the Government have to support such pubs?

Chris Bryant: I note the hon. Gentleman's support for pubs in his constituency. It is obviously intense—he basically took us on a pub crawl there. If he is looking for a Valentine's day dinner, perhaps with his wife, the Coach & Horses in Freckleton is offering two mains and two drinks for £25.99. But we will keep it quiet so that it is a surprise for his wife—or whoever else he takes. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Speaker: I know his wife—you want to be careful.

Chris Bryant: Maybe you will be taking his wife to the Coach & Horses, Mr Speaker—who knows?

On a serious point, we are fully aware of the problems that pubs and live music venues have been facing for a considerable period of time. For live music venues, we have been trying to encourage arena tickets to put an

extra £1 on the ticket, on a voluntary basis, so as to be able to support live music venues. I am conscious that over the years many pubs have closed. The hon. Gentleman was not in the House under the previous Administration, but some 7,000 pubs closed in those 14 years, which is something like one every 14 hours. We are conscious of the problems, and we want to do everything we can to help.

Trade with the EU

3. **Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to increase trade with the European Union. [907555]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): Some 46% of the UK's trade is with the EU, but we want to do far better, achieving trade with the EU that is as frictionless as possible. We are in the process of fine tuning the deal that we reached last year on food and drink, and negotiating on joining the single electricity market. We want to improve business mobility and secure the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. We have just appointed three new trade envoys—one for France, one for Germany and one for Italy—as part of our exports drive.

Rachel Blake: I listened carefully to the Minister's response and am encouraged by the progress that is being made. When does he expect the UK-EU summit to take place? Is he expecting a completion of the negotiations on a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement and the youth experience scheme? Will he also update us on the approach to touring artists, to help ensure that they can access EU markets? That would make such a difference to the thriving cultural scene in the west end.

Chris Bryant: On touring artists, we are absolutely determined to secure that—not least because I have personally promised Elton John that we will, as has the Prime Minister. [Interruption.] I see the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) chuntering. I think he is bidding to be a trade envoy for some country. If he would like to come and talk to me later, we can have a discussion about it.

The truth of the matter is that we had a terrible deal with the European Union. We need to improve it, and we are working at pace to try and deliver that. I want British businesses to be able to export without friction into the European market, because we know that is good for them.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Business Secretary raised some eyebrows at the weekend by suggesting that MPs' pay should be linked to economic growth. Who does the Trade Minister think should get the biggest pay rise? Is it the Conservatives and Reform, who have probably knocked up to 8% off our GDP; Labour MPs, who are contributing to as much as 0.5% with all their accumulated trade deals, including with the EU; or Lib Dem MPs, who are suggesting a customs union that could put 2.2%—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we can let that one go. I cannot even begin to see a link. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Liberal Democrats are calling for a new UK-EU customs union—

Chris Bryant: Again.

Sarah Olney: Still! That would cut red tape for businesses across the country, boost growth by more than 2.2% and raise at least £25 billion a year in tax revenue. The Prime Minister's chief economic adviser has recommended a customs union with the EU as one of the most effective ways of generating growth, the Health Secretary has talked up the benefits of a customs union and the Deputy Prime Minister has also suggested that countries within a customs union tend to see stronger economic growth. However, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade told the *Financial Times* last week that negotiating a customs union would be “foolish”. Will the Minister please explain how the Secretary of State plans to deliver growth without a customs union?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady knows that I think Brexit was a terrible, self-inflicted mistake. We need to make sure that we achieve what was promised by the Brexiteers, some of whom are sitting on the Conservative Benches, when they said we would achieve frictionless trade with the European Union as a result of our deal. I think that we can, first, do that on food and when we secure our SPS deal. We are working on the electricity market as well. Then we need to proceed with trying to ensure business mobility so that people can travel across the European Union and, as I said, we need to make sure that British artists and performers can perform across the whole of the European Union.

I have to say that it feels—I hate to use the term “groundhog day” in relation to the Lib Dems, but I can remember when they were in government. O Lord.

Sarah Olney: I can't.

Chris Bryant: No, well quite. This is the problem: the Lib Dems never remember when they were in government and they landed us with half the problems that we are trying to sort out today.

Economic Growth: Coastal Communities

4. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help increase economic growth in coastal communities. [907559]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): The Government are committed to supporting growth in coastal areas such as Bournemouth West. The partnership between Business Growth Dorset and the new business growth service makes it easier for firms to access tailored support. The Department for Business and Trade is also strengthening the conditions for investment and helping high-value sectors such as advanced engineering, aerospace and digital industries to expand. Through national programmes supporting investment, exports and innovation, alongside Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council's economic strategy, we will ensure that Bournemouth's businesses benefit fully from UK-wide measures to boost economic growth.

Jessica Toale: I thank the Minister for that answer. Bournemouth and Poole rightly have reputations as premier tourism and leisure destinations, but less well known is our leadership in the digital and creative industries. Two businesses in my constituency, Content Ignite and Iplc, have been ranked in the top 50 fastest-growing tech businesses in Britain by *The Sunday Times*. Could the Minister please expand on how this Government are supporting fast-growing high-value industries in coastal towns such as mine?

Blair McDougall: I am due to come to my hon. Friend's constituency in little over a month—I do like to be beside the seaside. We often think of constituencies like hers as tourism and hospitality hotspots, but, as she said, they can also be a hive for the creative industries, of which she is such a champion. Through the £380 million creative industries sector plan, we are boosting innovation, skills and access to finance nationwide, which is helping firms, including in her constituency. She will know that businesses in her area also benefit from such a strong talent pipeline coming from her area's great universities, and I look forward to working with her and learning more when I visit soon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his positive, constructive and helpful answers. For Ards and North Down council in my constituency, the thrust of its economic growth strategy is tourism, and there have been many dividends from that. It is important that, right across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we have the chance to advance and do better. The Minister might not have had the opportunity to talk to the local Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Gordon Lyons, on this issue, but I hope that he will do so, and thereby we can all gain from his knowledge of what we are doing back home.

Blair McDougall: I had a fantastic family holiday in Northern Ireland, driven by my son's obsession with the Titanic—I had a very moving visit there. I have met my opposite number with responsibility for small businesses in Northern Ireland, and I am happy to have the discussion that the hon. Member suggests.

Encouraging Exports

5. Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to encourage businesses to export. [907562]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): The UK is the fourth largest exporter in the world and the second largest in services, but we want to do even better, which is why we are pushing forward our new trade deals to cut barriers for UK businesses, strengthening UK Export Finance, providing tailored market advice and targeting resources so that businesses can take advantage of those deals.

Jayne Kirkham: I am grateful to the Minister for last week meeting me and a representative of Watson-Marlow, a business in my constituency, to discuss barriers to export. Many businesses I have spoken to have been frustrated about the difficulty of moving people, goods and equipment to Europe post Brexit, and they face significant additional costs and admin. Fugro and

Pendennis yachts have raised with me issues they have experienced with securing visas for their staff on short-term offshore projects. What steps can the Minister take with colleagues at the Home Office to ensure that some of those barriers are reduced?

Chris Bryant: First, it was great that my hon. Friend and other MPs brought individual constituency businesses along, because one of the things I want to do as Minister for Trade is try to persuade all 650 colleagues to come along with individual businesses so we can work out where there are barriers to export and try to encourage export growth. If we could release all the MPs, who probably know the businesses in their constituencies far better than the Department does, we would drive forward export growth. She is absolutely right that there are issues with visas and business mobility that we need to address. It is one of the things that the Home Office and the Department are discussing with our European allies. We need to do better on this, and we also need to get to a place where we have mutual recognition of professional qualifications so that people can simply transact their business more effectively.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): With reference to what the Minister said earlier about trade and investment envoys, I remind him that I was a trade and investment envoy to Georgia and Armenia some years ago. The problem is that the trade and investment envoys are now pretty much all Labour, whereas previously, under all Prime Ministers, they were cross-party. Can I suggest that the Government revisit the strength of having a cross-party approach? That might help business exports. I think he publicly offered—unless I misheard—for me to become a trade envoy again; if I was approached, I might do that. On a serious point, on UK Export Finance in high-risk investment areas, such as rebuilding Syria by getting jobs and investment into that country quickly, can I ask that UK Export Finance underwrites with insurance those high-risk investments?

Chris Bryant: I noted that there was another application, but just because the right hon. Gentleman has applied for the job, it does not necessarily mean that he will get it. He makes a good point about UK Export Finance, particularly in war-torn and other difficult areas. It is why we set aside a specific amount of money for Ukraine. I was delighted to be in Kyiv the best part of 10 days ago, where the Russian Government are, I would argue, engaging in war crimes by deliberately targeting the heating systems in the city—many elderly and vulnerable people have no heating, electricity or access to water. I was very proud to see Scottish steel and British architects designing the bridges that are helping Ukrainians to get to work again after the original bridges were blown up when the Russians tried to invade as part of their full-scale invasion. He makes a good point about export finance. I have also had discussions about how we can roll that out in relation to Syria.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Last week I visited the brilliant family-run Clark Door company in my Carlisle constituency. Clark Door designs, manufactures and exports right across the globe, and supplies venues such as the Tate Modern, the Qatar national centre and, topically as we approach next weekend's super bowl, the National Football League media centre in New York.

What support can the Government give to exporters such as Clark Door so that their pioneering research and development ensures their continued export success, and will the Minister visit Carlisle to take a look behind the—Clark—door?

Chris Bryant: We are doing well on UK exports, which were up to £929 billion in the 12 months ending November 2025—up 4% on the year before. I am happy to consider ensuring that UK Research and Innovation, which is part of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, provides R&D support. Getting all our different strategies working together—the trade, business and industrial strategies—combined with UKRI, will drive exports forward. I cannot promise a visit, because I seem to be sent abroad a lot.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Defence and aerospace make up a huge element of our export business. As the Minister knows, plans without resources are hallucinations. The defence investment plan was promised to us in the autumn, and then by the end of the year, but it is still not there. When will the Government get their act together and stop dithering over the defence investment plan so that we can fuel our export economy?

Chris Bryant: Defence is an important part of both our industrial strategy and our export strategy. We are running a series of export campaigns, which are either titled “platinum” or “gold”, and several of them relate to defence expenditure. For instance, when I was in New Zealand just before Christmas, we talked about the potential for the UK to build a new dry dock and provide frigates for the New Zealand navy. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman, who makes a fair point, gets an answer from the Ministry of Defence, which has primary responsibility for that area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): We know that some British businesses are put off exporting by the costs, particularly the cost of cross-border payments. One solution is the adoption of innovative digital payment methods, which is why I warmly welcomed the Government’s announcement of the transatlantic taskforce for markets of the future. However, since its announcement last September, we have not had a great deal of detail on it from the Government, so will the Minister provide an update on the status of the taskforce and what he hopes it will achieve for our exporters?

Chris Bryant: I will certainly write to the shadow Minister about that. Electronic commerce generally is one thing that we will need to address at the World Trade Organisation ministerial conference in Cameroon at the end of March. There has been a moratorium on tax in relation to that, and we would like to make it permanent—we are discussing that with our international allies.

On exports, I was at Fever-Tree on Monday morning. Its adverts used to say, “If three quarters of your gin and tonic is the tonic, why on earth do you not care about the tonic?” *[Interruption.]* I note that several Members are querying whether three quarters of their gin and tonic is the tonic—it might be 50:50, or even the other way around. The point is that many really successful

businesses in this country, including Fever-Tree, know that three quarters of their business can be exports. That is what we need to drive up.

Gareth Davies: I thank the Minister for that response. This is an area that we genuinely agree on. Digital payment technology will genuinely provide an opportunity for British exporters, so I gently ask the Minister to get on top of the detail on that taskforce and provide an update as soon as he can. We asked DBT Ministers last June exactly what the Government’s strategy on digital payment technology was. We were promised that it would be part of the industrial strategy, but it was missing. Can he explain why?

Chris Bryant: The Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), has just whispered in my ear that he met the main providers in this area only a couple of weeks ago. As I say, I will write to the hon. Member with some more detail. Some of these issues are difficult to land because of the international co-operation needed. I am pleased that in some of our trade deals we are talking about not just goods and services but ensuring a digital element, because that is where a lot of our economic future lies.

Hospitality Sector: Hartlepool

6. **Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the hospitality sector in Hartlepool. [907563]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I know my hon. Friend has been actively engaging with his local businesses, such as Camerons Brewery, to highlight their importance to the local economy, and I thank him for that. We have introduced permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, while providing £4.3 billion to shield ratepayers from bill increases. On top of that, the Chancellor announced a 15% reduction in new business rates bills for pubs and live music venues, with bills then frozen for a further two years. We are also advancing licensing and planning reforms for the hospitality sector, and through the work of the hospitality support fund, we are providing £10 million to help hospitality venues grow and support jobseekers into the sector. Later this year, we will bring forward a new high streets strategy and work with the industry on its development.

Mr Brash: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Marine hotel in Seaton Carew in my constituency of Hartlepool has been run for the last 30 years by Lee and Claire Dexter. It is a family business run by hard-working people who are committed to their community, yet they have seen their business rates rise significantly, driven not by the multiplier but by the sharp increase in the rateable value. They need help, so I welcome the steps set out this week to support pubs. Will the Minister meet me to look at ways that we can fix the business rates system, which is failing hotels and wider hospitality in Hartlepool?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for championing businesses like the Marine hotel in Hartlepool. Hotels will continue to benefit from the support for business

rates announced at the Budget, including the transitional relief scheme, which will cap increases for those seeing large overnight increases. We have announced that we will review the way that hotels are valued. We recognise that hotels have expressed concerns about how they are valued for business rates, and those valuations are undertaken in a different way from some other sectors. The methodology used is well established, but as with pubs, specific concerns have been raised, and it is right to review this to ensure that it accurately reflects the rental values for these sectors. I am happy to discuss this further.

Arms Export Licences: Israel

7. Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Whether he plans to resume previously suspended arms export licences to Israel. [907564]

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): We regularly assess Israel's compliance with, and commitment to, international humanitarian law. It was those assessments that led us in September 2024 to suspend licences where the items might be used in military operations in Gaza. Most of the licences suspended at that time have since expired, but we have continued to refuse licence applications on the same basis.

Iqbal Mohamed: The Secretary of State said that revisiting the pause on arms export licences to Israel was “intrinsically linked” to movement towards a so-called sustainable peace. Since then, during the so-called ceasefire, Israeli forces have killed over 481 Palestinians in Gaza, struck defenceless tents housing cowering families and bombed to kingdom come schools used as civilian shelters. What they have not done is allow the flow of humanitarian aid; instead, 37 international non-governmental organisations have been suspended. Yet this Government continue with a business-as-usual approach to arms trade with Israel. How can the Government justify revisiting the decision to pause arms export licences, rather than suspending arms exports altogether, to pressure Israel to comply with international law?

Chris Bryant: I agree with one part of what the hon. Member said, which is that we do want to see humanitarian aid get to the people who need it, and we need to see a proper, lasting peace, based on peace and justice, working together, and that is our commitment. He is, however, completely wrong to suggest that it is business as usual. We have suspended some licences, in particular where we think that because of Israel's failure to comply with international humanitarian law they might be used in relation to operations in Gaza. Export licences are required only in relation to military and dual-use equipment, and some of that dual-use equipment is used by non-governmental organisations—armour for journalists and things like that—so of course it is right that we adopt a case-by-case approach. As I say, we have suspended a series of licences where we think that there is a threat to Gaza, but we maintain the export licence criteria that were laid out in Parliament.

Hospitality Sector

8. Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the hospitality sector. [907566]

10. Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps he is taking to support hospitality businesses. [907569]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): Hospitality businesses are vital to our community and city centres. We have introduced permanently lower business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties and have provided £4.3 billion to shield ratepayers from bill increases. On top of this, the Chancellor announced a 15% reduction in new business rates bills for pubs and live music venues, and bills will be frozen for a further two years. We are also advancing licensing and planning reforms for the hospitality sector, and through the work of the hospitality support fund we are providing £10 million to help hospitality venues to grow and to support jobseekers into the sector. Later this year, we will bring forward a new high streets strategy, and we will work with the industry on its development.

Joe Robertson: What the Minister does not say is that the Government have also taxed those businesses and made it harder to employ people, which is why there are 100,000 fewer people working in hospitality since her Government came to power. Hospitality businesses in my constituency are hanging on to one thread of hope: the vague assertion that the Government will look again at valuations. Will the Minister look again right now, scrap business rates for hospitality and back our high streets?

Kate Dearden: Every high street in every corner of our country is supported by our hospitality industry. They are absolutely vital to our economy, supporting over 2 million jobs. The sector is really personal to me; my first job was in the hospitality industry, and I know that many Members across this House also have that personal connection. We are reversing the damage that Conservative Members did to our economy, and businesses still do not thank them for it. Nor do people whose wages under the previous Government simply did not give them the disposable income to spend in their local pubs, spend in their high streets and support restaurants. That is why we are reversing that, ensuring that people see a rise in their living standards, cutting costs for households and raising wages to boost and support our high streets. That is what we are absolutely focused on doing: rebalancing our economy so that it works for working people and businesses alike. That is a responsible Government taking action.

Christine Jardine: The Minister referred to there being hospitality businesses in every corner of this country. Unfortunately, the change in business rates does not help hospitality businesses in every corner of this country because business rates are devolved in Scotland and Wales, and the businesses in my constituency of Edinburgh West are struggling. Hospitality is absolutely vital to the Scottish economy, and so far the SNP Government have proved completely ineffectual at dealing with the issue. The Minister speaks about the strategy coming later in the year. In it, might it be useful for VAT to be reduced for businesses in this sector across the UK, so that every corner of the United Kingdom can benefit?

Kate Dearden: All the devolved Governments have full control over the structure and level of business rates within their jurisdiction. As the hon. Lady mentioned,

the new relief applies to England only; however, the devolved Governments have additional funding to allocate according to their priorities. We call on the SNP to decide whether to match the support for pubs and music venues that we have decided this week to provide. It is up to them to decide how to spend their money; we have made it clear this week what our priorities are and how we would do it.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): A lot of the hospitality small and medium-sized enterprises in my constituency start out as market traders. As we know, our markets are a vital part of our identity and central to our local ecosystem, giving businesses the space to start, test and grow. Does the Minister agree that markets and hospitality are key to reviving our high streets, and will she meet me to discuss a national traders strategy to secure a strong pipeline for future success?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and for championing the brilliant hospitality sector, businesses and markets in her constituency—I have the wonderful Halifax borough market in my constituency, so I know the importance of thriving traders to our high streets and local economies. I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and hear her thoughts on how we can work together to restore pride in our high streets; our traders are vital to that, which is why our high streets strategy this year will be so important. It will look at all those areas, directly investing in our communities to ensure local businesses can thrive, high streets bustle and pride is restored to our high streets and communities.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Hospitality in Blackpool is struggling. The cuts under the previous Government made Blackpool the most deprived coastal community and town in the country, but it has a solution: a new Blackpool tourism enterprise zone that expands our current enterprise zone along the promenade into the hospitality and tourism businesses. Will the Minister meet me and the managing director of Blackpool Tourism Ltd, Kate Shane, to discuss her idea to create jobs and unlock growth and investment in Blackpool?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for all his work on behalf of his constituency and businesses in Blackpool. He makes an excellent point, and I would be keen to hear more about his work and discuss it further. Through the hospitality zones that we are looking to create, there is a real opportunity to drive investment and ensure that businesses and people alike benefit across our country.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Hospitality is on its knees, and it is already too late for many of the pubs and restaurants in Harpenden and Berkhamsted that are closing down. The small café Nook in Markyate is a real lifeline for that village, but Helen, the owner, talks about business rates, national insurance costs and the minimum wage. The Liberal Democrats have long been crying out, alongside the hospitality sector, for Government help for the sector. Although we welcome the U-turn, I call on the Minister and the Government to hear that cry before the next one, when it will be too late for the next swathe of hospitality businesses that will have closed down.

Kate Dearden: Over the longer term, we have committed to reviewing the methodology used for business rates purposes. If necessary, we will make changes to ensure that the next revaluation accurately reflects the rental market for these properties. We will be conducting that expert review, working closely with the hotel and pub sectors. We want to see our high streets thrive, and hospitality is key to that, in the hon. Lady's constituency and across our whole economy. That is what I want to see, and it is what we are committed to work towards.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool's hospitality sector and its small businesses continue to tell me that soaring business rates are pushing them to the brink. Many independent shops, cafés and community venues—pillars of our local high streets—are now facing increases far above what they can absorb, especially in energy and supply costs. These are businesses that create local jobs, drive footfall and keep our high streets alive, so can the Minister explain what immediate steps the Government will take to reform the business rates system so that it no longer disproportionately penalises areas such as Liverpool, and will she commit to meet affected business owners in my constituency to hear directly about the pressures they are facing and the urgent support they need to survive?

Kate Dearden: We are introducing new, permanently lower tax rates for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties worth nearly £1 billion per year, which will benefit over 750,000 properties. Next year, the rate for small RHL properties will be the lowest since business rates were introduced more than 30 years ago. This is paid for through higher rates on the 1% most expensive properties, which includes many large distribution warehouses such as those used by online giants—that high value multiplier is 33% more than the multiplier for small RHL properties. That is what we committed to in our manifesto. Creating a new, sustainable system with permanently lower multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties will make a massive difference for people. We will be publishing a call for evidence in September, exploring potential longer-term reforms, and I urge my hon. Friend to get involved in that call for evidence and to share it, too.

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

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The Minister has just heard from across the House continuing pleas to support the hospitality industry. It is always a good day when the Government U-turn and provide more support for pubs, so we welcome that. However, unless the Minister can explain to us when a pub becomes a gastropub, when a gastropub becomes a restaurant, and when a restaurant with rooms becomes a hotel and descends down that wormhole, will she make representations to the Chancellor to extend the same measures for pubs that she U-turned on this week across the whole retail, hospitality and leisure sector? The truth of the matter is that 90% of that sector will not benefit from this week's U-turn.

Kate Dearden: Good morning to the shadow Secretary of State. I am sure he had a stiff drink after his performance at Prime Minister's questions yesterday.

All pubs and live music venues that meet the definition set out in the guidance qualify for the support, and he will be able to see that clearly online. We will be working with local authorities to ensure that the definition includes establishments open to wide sections of local communities. I have already discussed valuations for pubs, how we take turnover into account and how we will work closely with the wider sector on valuations going forward. This is a Government who are working closely with the sector and are committed to listening. That is being a responsible Government, and we are doing the right thing.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The heavy burden of Labour's national insurance contributions rise, compounded by high energy costs and the business rates increase, has raised alarm about the affordability of hospitality businesses' monthly employment costs. Some 84,000 jobs in the hospitality sector alone have been lost since the NICs rise was introduced, and that is particularly damaging to young people, many of whom have traditionally found their first jobs in the hospitality sector, including the Minister, as she just said at the Dispatch Box. With the sector struggling to employ new workers, damage is being done to the career prospects of our young people, and it will be detrimental to the broader economy in the long term. Business confidence is down, job vacancies are down and unemployment is up, so what steps will the Department take to tackle high unemployment costs, support businesses and bring down those increasingly high levels of unemployment?

Kate Dearden: A decade of stagnant growth and living standards will not be turned around in 18 months, but there are signs of progress. The Conservatives left one in eight young people out of education, employment and training, and we are working relentlessly to turn around that disgraceful figure. We recognise the challenges that businesses have to work through as a result of the actions undertaken by the previous Government. On youth unemployment, we have announced an £828 million funding package to give a generation of young people a brighter future. Over the next three years, 1 million young people on universal credit across the country will benefit from support designed to get them into employment and learning, and that includes what we are doing with small businesses on apprenticeships, which we are partly funding. That will be significant, especially for the hospitality sector, in encouraging more jobs. Those jobs are a key lifeline for people to get into the employment market. That is something I recognise, as the hon. Lady noted. We know the importance of this issue, and we want to work closely with the sector and with councils in the significant wider work we are doing on the strategy.

Economic Growth: Morecambe and Lunesdale

9. **Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to help increase economic growth in Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency. [907567]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): The Department is driving economic growth by delivering the long-term certainty

that businesses need and by supporting the growth of businesses across the UK, including in Lancashire, where the Lancashire business growth hub is ensuring that businesses in Morecambe and Lunesdale have the advice to grow, to scale up and to succeed.

Lizzi Collinge: In my constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale, we have the Electech innovation cluster, which is a growing group of small and medium-sized firms, many of which supply specialist components into the clean energy sector, particularly nuclear, and into the vital defence sector. The Minister would be welcome to visit them. How is the Department supporting SMEs, such as those in the Electech innovation cluster, and how will they benefit from the Government's investment in industry?

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for her work in championing small businesses in her constituency, particularly the Electech cluster, where businesses such as Teleplan Forsberg, Like Technologies and Mazuma are working in the clean energy sector. Our clean energy industry sector plan focuses on capitalising on the strengths of these businesses and doubling investment levels across our frontier industries to more than £30 billion a year by 2035. That will directly support businesses in that cluster. I would of course be delighted to come and visit.

Workers' Rights: Bracknell Forest

11. **Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve workers' rights in Bracknell Forest. [907570]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): Our plan to make work pay will bring employment rights legislation into the 21st century by extending the protections given by the best British companies to millions more workers, including those in Bracknell Forest. We are delivering this change in partnership with businesses, trade unions, public sector employers and civil society. When implemented, the Employment Rights Act 2025 will increase protection from sexual harassment, extend and strengthen statutory sick pay, end exploitative zero hours contracts, and tackle fire and rehire, with over 18 million workers gaining greater fairness and security.

Peter Swallow: Across the country, millions of fathers can be denied time off work to spend with a newborn child. Thousands of carers are out of work because employers will not give them the flexibility they need. This Government are delivering day one paternity leave, and we are listening on carer's leave. I know what a difference that will make to my constituents. Can the Minister think why the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) and his Reform MPs voted against this change?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for his really important question; he is absolutely right to raise this issue. Reform voted against the Employment Rights Act at every single opportunity. The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) would row back on the protections that we have given to 18 million workers across the country, including the vital day one paternity leave and parental leave, statutory sick pay for the lowest paid, protections for pregnant workers, increased protection

from unfair dismissal, an end to exploitative zero-hours contracts, a new right to bereavement leave and so much more. Reform is simply not the party for working people; Labour is. Reform Members voted against the Act, and their plans would threaten employment up and down the country.

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

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Of course, it is not just Bracknell, and one day those on the Labour Benches will understand that there are no workers' rights if people have no work. Youth unemployment is up significantly. That is a tragedy that everybody should be ashamed of, and it is going up on Labour's watch. Small businesses, which provide so many jobs, are very worried about the administrative burden of trade union access. We are talking about the very smallest businesses—pubs, restaurants, garden centres and small catering businesses. They are the backbone of our communities. As the Minister tries to implement the Employment Rights Act, will she consider lifting the threshold for the trade union access agreements to a headcount of 250—that is recognised elsewhere in law as a threshold—which would protect our very smallest businesses from that administrative burden?

Kate Dearden: To hear the Conservative party try to lecture us across the Dispatch Box on trade union engagement, industrial relations and how we operate our economy is very interesting. The hon. Gentleman knows that I am working really closely with businesses of all sizes—small and large—and with our trade unions and partners, because that is the right thing to do. The Employment Rights Act is a significant piece of legislation. We want to get it right, but we also want to fundamentally change how we do things in this country. That is the right thing to do, and we are taking the responsible action to do so. We recognise that there are lots of changes, which is why we are working in a staged way over the next two years to implement them, and we are doing so in partnership with businesses and trade unions. We want to work together to deliver this. It represents significant change for 18 million people across the country, and businesses are vital in delivering it. That is why we are working together to do so.

Single Worker Status

12. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the implementation of single worker status. [907571]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I am having quite the outing today, Madam Deputy Speaker!

I welcome the question from my hon. Friend, whose business experience as the chief executive of an international trade association gives him acute insight into this topic. This Government are committed to tackling the pressing issues with the current employment status framework, and we will publish our consultation as soon as possible. The consultation will seek to address issues with the framework that can enable worker exploitation and leave vulnerable workers without core employment protections.

Chris Bloore: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will know that too many parcel couriers in my constituency and across the country are on bogus self-employment contracts and worse terms and conditions, with no holiday pay or sick leave. That is driving down standards across the sector and, of course, robbing the public purse of national insurance contributions. I welcome her commitment to announcing the consultation on single worker status. Can she guarantee that both employer and employee representations will be included in the consultation?

Kate Dearden: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and I thank him for doing so. I agree that it is completely unacceptable for businesses to seek to undercut others in a race to the bottom through bogus self-employment. Employers should never seek to deny people their employment rights and to avoid their own legal obligations by claiming that someone is self-employed when in reality they might not be. We will therefore consult on the changes to the status framework and our action to improve compliance, and we will of course engage with all stakeholders as part of that.

Business Operating Costs

13. **Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): What steps he is taking to support businesses with their operating costs. [907572]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): The Government are working hard to reduce operating costs for all UK businesses, including those in Chichester. We are working to reduce the annual administrative burden of regulation by £5.6 billion by 2029, enabling businesses to unlock growth and boost innovation across key sectors. We are introducing the most significant legislation to tackle late payments in over 25 years, providing a support package worth more than £4 billion over the next three years to help business rate payers and fully funding apprenticeship training costs for all eligible 16 to 24-year-olds.

Jess Brown-Fuller: The irony for many small businesses in Chichester is that they are busy, well established and popular. It is not bad business, but bad policy, that is making them struggle.

"The current business rates system disincentivises investment, creates uncertainty and places an undue burden on our high streets."

Those are not my words; they are lifted from the Labour party manifesto. When should my local businesses expect the changes to business rates that they need, and will the Government please explore a commercial landowner levy in their upcoming review?

Blair McDougall: The hon. Member is right to highlight the Government's commitment to tackling inadequacies in the way rates are calculated, and that is exactly what my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury spoke about from the Dispatch Box the other day. Beyond the rates issue, we are protecting high street businesses from upward-only rental review clauses, and we are introducing a community right to buy so that people can take ownership of valued community assets on the high street. We also have rental options for

empty properties on the high street and action on bogus businesses, as the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden), mentioned. We are doing a great deal to help the businesses the hon. Member described.

Modern Industrial Strategy

14. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps he is taking to implement the modern industrial strategy. [907573]

15. **Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to implement the modern industrial strategy. [907576]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): We are focused on delivering our industrial strategy so that we are once again a nation that makes things, invents new industries and exports around the world. We are investing £100 billion in industries through the National Wealth Fund, directing £9 billion in research and innovation funding to key growth industries, and bringing forward a huge increase in support for exporters through UK Export Finance.

Liz Twist: For 14 years under the last Government, my constituents' living standards stagnated. Across Blaydon and Consett, we have many successful manufacturing and engineering firms such as Slaters Electricals and Petersen Stainless Rigging in Blaydon, Gardner Aerospace and CAV Systems in Consett, and many more. Can my hon. Friend set out how our modern industrial strategy will support businesses in my constituency to raise living standards for my constituents?

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend is such a powerful advocate for the industrial strengths of her part of the world, and it is on exactly those strengths that our industrial strategy is working to drive up business investment to create the high-quality jobs that will improve living standards and deliver better public services for everyone. The Government's northern growth strategy aims to increase the potential of the northern growth corridor to catalyse growth in sectors such as those she describes, and I know we will continue to work with her to make sure her constituents get the most out of that.

Luke Akehurst: County Durham has been home to proud British industries for centuries, but for decades they have been in decline, and communities such as mine in North Durham have paid the price. Our modern industrial strategy will work to fix that. It is going to invest billions in defence, advanced manufacturing and clean power, which are sectors where the north-east has a unique advantage. Can the Minister assure me that our modern industrial strategy will bring jobs, growth and reindustrialisation to my constituency of North Durham?

Blair McDougall: Yes, I can assure my hon. Friend of that. The industrial strategy recognises the great strengths of the north-east, for which he is such a strong champion. As part of the North East combined authority, County Durham is benefiting from targeted measures, including at least £30 million from the local innovation partnerships fund and the pilot to develop a resilient electric vehicle

supply chain. This will support locally critical components and capabilities backed by DRIVE35. We will shortly set out further detail on our northern growth strategy, building on the commitment to invest up to £45 billion in Northern Powerhouse Rail.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): There is only one rebar mill in the UK—in Cardiff—and it can make enough to meet only a small portion of our needs, which means that we are reliant on imports. Even if we open a new facility, we will not have enough capacity for things like the rail projects and the 1.5 million new homes. The ending of the roll-over tariffs is leading to unused quotas. Companies such as Hy-Ten in my constituency cannot risk making an order when, by the time it arrives in this country, the quota has been used up and it cannot be imported. Will the Minister meet me to look at the impact of these changes on the ground before they strangle economic growth?

Blair McDougall: The hon. Lady is right to raise industry worries about the turbulent international trade environment. That is why it is so important that the Government are out in the world engaging—because businesses, including the one that she mentioned, need stability. I would be very happy to arrange that meeting with her.

Topical Questions

T1. [907579] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Chris Bryant): The Secretary of State has asked me to reply, because he is in China with the Prime Minister. In the last few weeks, our Department has concluded an enhanced trade deal with the Republic of Korea, published a critical minerals strategy and secured the Employment Rights Act 2025, which will see the biggest improvement in employment rights in a generation. At home and abroad, we are resolutely on the side of business, tackling barriers to trade, improving productivity, driving up growth and winning business for Britain. Growth is up, productivity is up and business confidence is up.

Chris Vince: Last weekend, I had the pleasure of visiting the Advanced Aquarium Consultancy in my constituency of Harlow, where they breed, grow and sell coral. I am not going to make any coral jokes, which will be a reef to everybody. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] What is unique about Advanced Aquarium Consultancy is the amount of energy it needs to use. What are the Government doing to support such businesses to bring down energy costs?

Chris Bryant: I was told that my hon. Friend was going to ask a question about choral farms; I was wondering how one farmed tenors, altos and contraltos. He makes a very fair point. As the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), said earlier, there is a whole series of industries for which the cost of energy is a significant part of the problems they face. That is precisely the kind of work that we are engaged in as a Department and as a whole Government, and why it is so important that my hon. Friend is in two Departments and therefore able to bridge these issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Yet again, the Business Secretary is not here for his departmental questions. This time, he is in China, trying to sort out the mess that is British steel strategy. He is burning through £2 million a day of taxpayers' money keeping the Scunthorpe furnace going, the Chinese owners are asking for £1 billion in compensation, and decommissioning could cost more than £2 billion. His steel strategy is literally melting before its long-awaited publication. Given that when the Prime Minister negotiates, Britain loses, what is a good outcome here?

Chris Bryant: Honestly! [*Laughter.*] Sometimes my heart wants to fall through my body when I hear Conservative Members, who seem to have completely and utterly lost the plot, whether it is enormous, multibillion-pound demands for extra cash they are making or anything else. As I understand it, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) is a chartered accountant, but he does not seem to be able to count, while the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) seems to forget that when she was in government, the previous Prime Minister refused even to visit any of the steel companies in this country. We are determined to get a good outcome.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire attacks the Business Secretary for going to China, but it is important that we engage with all the big economies in the world. China is our fourth biggest export market, and there are lots of businesses doing trade with China. She is absolutely right that we have to get a good set of outcomes for steel, which is why we will soon produce a steel strategy that will answer all her questions. At a previous session of Business and Trade questions, I said that we wanted to publish soon what we will do with our steel trade tariffs after July.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: Madam Deputy Speaker, you can see why the Business Secretary needs to be here to answer questions, because I did not hear an answer to my question. I will try a different topic, which is also really important to our constituents. Sixteen million of them got their Royal Mail parcels and letters late this Christmas—my constituents have made many, many complaints. What has the Minister done to hold Royal Mail to account for its unacceptable level of service?

Chris Bryant: I think every single Member has heard similar complaints about service delivery. I am aware of people in my constituency receiving letters for NHS appointments after the appointment itself. The Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), is meeting Royal Mail next week. We really need to ensure we get a better service across the whole country, and that is something we are absolutely focused on achieving.

T3. [907583] **Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab):** When shifts are cancelled at the last minute, too many of my constituents struggle to get by. That is why protections introduced by the Employment Rights Act 2025 are so important. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all workers can access those rights, including a contract that reflects their regular working hours and compensation for cancelled shifts?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that all jobs provide a baseline of security and predictability, and she perfectly outlines exactly why that is important. The next step is to consult before setting regulations to get that detail. I would love to hear from her further about those experiences—she has done hard work in this area over a long period of time. Providing workers with guaranteed hours is crucial for security.

T2. [907582] **Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP):** In its recently published quarterly statistics, the Aberdeen chamber of commerce confirmed that business confidence in the north-east has slumped to levels not seen since the height of the covid pandemic, with almost half of companies forecasting a fall in profits. The clear reason cited was the Labour Government's refusal to ditch the tax on Scotland's energy, resulting in 1,000 jobs being lost each month—akin to what Thatcher was doing to the coal communities in the '80s. Can the Minister tell me why his Government are happy to see crucial north-east businesses suffering, and the communities that their workers support? Will he apologise to the workers of the north-east for the thousands of jobs that have been lost at the hands of this Labour Government?

Chris Bryant: We have been working hard to secure good outcomes for many businesses in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Walker's Shortbread is doing a phenomenal job of exporting around the world. I know that because I have seen them in supermarkets in Auckland, Melbourne, Dubai and all over the place. Similarly, we are trying to get a good deal with the United States on whisky. We already have a good deal with India on whisky, and the Prime Minister and others will be talking about whisky in China over the next few days. I do wish the hon. Gentleman would be a bit cheerier. He has one of the most beautiful constituencies in the land. Whether it is the Lairig Ghru, the Rothiemurchus estate, the ospreys in Loch Garten, or Loch an Eilein, it is absolutely beautiful. He could just be a bit cheerier!

T5. [907587] **Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op):** The north-east has one of the largest pharmaceutical clusters, identified in the north-east growth plan as a key growth sector. My constituency has some of the leading companies, such as Organon and Sterling Pharma, who are providing good-quality jobs and exporting around the world. How are the Government backing our pharmaceutical sector, and supporting the north-east to secure and expand opportunities in this area?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): I thank my hon. Friend for the work she is doing to highlight the north-east's role as a key part of our life sciences and pharmaceutical industries. She mentions Organon in her constituency. Its Cramlington site was singled out by the leadership of that business at the J. P. Morgan healthcare conference in San Francisco recently. In two weeks' time, I will be opening Fujifilm's biotechnology factory in Billingham in my own constituency—a £400 million investment in north-east biosciences. Our life sciences sector plan is backing the pharmaceutical manufacturing industry with £2 billion of investment and our UK-US deal is delivering zero-tariff access for UK pharmaceutical exports.

T4. [907586] **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): Charmaine from Cox and Co Salon in Plymstock in my constituency has been in contact because Government business decisions are making it incredibly difficult for her business to stay afloat. The National Hair and Beauty Federation has highlighted the fact that business rates remain the largest fixed cost facing this incredibly important industry. Will the Minister commit to extending business rate relief beyond pubs to all high street businesses, especially those in the health and beauty sector?

Chris Bryant: We have already had quite a bit of a discussion on business rates and I do not have much to add to that. I will just say that the health and beauty sector is not only a sector in the UK, but one that is vital to our new exports. I am sure the hon. Lady is aware of this, but because we managed to get tariffs down on beauty products in our free trade agreement with India, we have been facilitating lots of businesses going out to India as part of a trade fair to drive up our exports around the world. The whole of the sector has an opportunity to prosper when we manage to secure better free trade agreements.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Almost one in three pubs in this country is a tied pub. In Calder Valley, one such pub saw its payments to Stonegate jump from £800 to £1,700 a week, just days after the six-month probationary period ended. I welcome the Government's support for pubs, but that pub will still be paying 17 times more to Stonegate each year than it will in business rates. Will the Minister look at those unfair charges, and what can be done in regulation?

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important case. He is my neighbouring colleague in wonderful Calder Valley, and our constituencies have some of the best pubs in the country. As he knows, the pubs code in England and Wales regulates the relationship between pub-owning businesses with 500 or more tied pubs, including Stonegate and its tied-pub tenants, and it aims to ensure that tenants are treated fairly. The Government are currently undertaking the third statutory review of the effectiveness of the code, and it may help to inform the review if my hon. Friend could write to me setting out the details of the example he mentioned.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): When will the Government announce the results of their British industrial competitiveness scheme consultation, and provide the fabulous manufacturing industry in my constituency with some much-needed help towards its energy costs?

Chris McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that the British industrial competitiveness scheme will provide a significant discount to up to 7,000 manufacturing businesses of up to 25% of their energy costs. It will certainly help manufacturing businesses in his constituency and across the whole UK. I encourage businesses in the hon. Gentleman's constituency to contribute to the consultation, the results of which we will announce in due course.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Recently I met with employees and union reps from SYNLAB, a thriving pathology laboratory in Abergavenny. It has been taken over, and now more than 30 jobs are at risk,

meaning that these highly skilled opportunities in science, technology, engineering and maths could move out of my constituency. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden), for meeting me earlier this week, but would she meet with colleagues in the Welsh Government and myself to discuss how we ensure that we keep these kinds of high-tech jobs in Wales, as it should not just be big cities that benefit from these STEM opportunities?

Chris Bryant: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend; it is great that she is a Member of this House because we hear her unambiguous support for small businesses up and down her constituency—not just in the big towns, but in the small villages, as she says. She is right that Wales is a good place for high tech. I am delighted that £1.4 billion of additional investment was announced at the Welsh investment summit in December, taking the total linked investment since the summit was launched to £16 billion. I am sure that that is going to deliver more jobs across south Wales in precisely the way that my hon. Friend asks for.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): While I always enjoy the soliloquies of the Minister of State, it might be an opportunity for the Minister who has responsibility for Royal Mail and postal services to answer this question, given that I wrote to his office about the catastrophic failure of the letter delivery service throughout Shropshire. Would he agree to meet with me and my hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) to discuss resolving that issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): I am very happy to do so. The right hon. Member will understand that Royal Mail is a private company regulated by Ofcom, but it is also a critical part of our national economic and social infrastructure. It is not acceptable if people are not getting their post, which is a message that I will deliver to Royal Mail in person next week.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentioned the music venue levy earlier. He knows that my constituency has amazing music venues, so when will the first payment from that levy be made to those smaller venues?

Chris Bryant: I am afraid that I have changed job since I was pushing that levy very hard. The intention was for those payments to be happening fairly soon. I will ensure that the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts responds directly to my hon. Friend. The levy is a really important opportunity. Every time someone goes to a big arena gig, there should be a £1 levy on their ticket. I urge all promoters, artists and concert arrangers to ensure that that money gets to small music venues.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): The use of the toxic chemical paraquat was banned in the UK by the previous Labour Government in 2007. It is associated with the development of Parkinson's and is deemed too dangerous for use on our own soil, but continues to be produced here and sent elsewhere, perpetuating harms that would not be tolerated at home. What is the policy on exporting UK-manufactured products such as paraquat to other countries?

Chris Bryant: I haven't the faintest idea. I will write to the hon. Lady.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank the Minister for Industry for his engagement with Ceramics UK this week, meeting the organisation and ceramics companies from across Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, the west midlands and further afield. He will have heard from them about the importance of getting ceramics firms into the supercharger scheme. I was pleased to hear what he said about trying to extend eligibility, so could he give us an idea of when we might hear some positive news on that front?

Chris McDonald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for so clearly representing the importance of the ceramics firms in his constituency. I heard the message loud and clear from the ceramics industry this week about the impact of energy costs and, as I mentioned earlier, in the review of the supercharger scheme, I have asked my officials to look carefully at the opportunities for including the ceramics sector.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Ajax armoured vehicle programme is currently under threat, but work is due to be completed at the Merthyr Tydfil factory next summer. Could the Minister confirm whether there are any conversations through the UK Defence and Security Exports office around securing an export package for the Ajax vehicle and guaranteeing work at the factory going forwards?

Chris Bryant: Obviously we would like to do so. As the MP for the next-door constituency, and having visited the factory myself, I am keen to ensure that we do so. A large part of this programme is a Ministry of Defence responsibility, and I will make sure that the MOD writes to the hon. Gentleman.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I return again to the steel industry, and thank the steel Minister for the meeting we held a few weeks ago. I was contacted

by a couple of employers in Scunthorpe last week who expressed concern about recent reports of publicly funded contracts using foreign-produced steel. Could the Minister give an assurance that British-produced steel will take priority in such cases?

Chris McDonald: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his positive and constructive engagement on this issue. I do understand the concerns of the steelworkers in Scunthorpe. I know precisely the projects he is referring to; they were not procured under public procurement rules, and the developers and tier 1 contractors involved have followed their own rules and commitments. However, it is the case that this Government want to see more British steel used in both public and other projects around the country, which is a matter both for developing steel capability and, potentially, for reviewing our procurement rules.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): For the final question, I call David Mundell.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Latin America, I was interested to note that, after 25 years of negotiations, the EU has announced a trade deal with the Mercosur South American trading group. What is the position of the UK Government on a trading agreement with Mercosur?

Chris Bryant: It is certainly true that now that the EU has secured a Mercosur deal, having taken 25 years to do so, there is a danger that British business will be left out and excluded because there will be preferential rates for European businesses. It is something we are looking at very closely, and I hope to be able to update the right hon. Gentleman very soon. As he knows, I am passionate about trying to increase our exports to Latin America. I would just note that some companies, such as Inca Kola, were created by British firms.

Business of the House

10.43 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 2 February will include:

MONDAY 2 FEBRUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill, followed by motions relating to the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill.

TUESDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (17th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 5 FEBRUARY—General debate on road safety, followed by a general debate on obligation to assess the risk of genocide under international law in relation to the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 6 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 9 February includes:

MONDAY 9 FEBRUARY—General debate on the UK-India free trade agreement, followed by a debate on a motion on increasing survival rates of brain tumours. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Debate on motions to approve the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2026 and the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2026, followed by a debate on motions to approve the draft Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Order 2026 and the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments, National Insurance Funds Payments and Extension of Veteran's Relief) Regulations 2026.

WEDNESDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

THURSDAY 12 FEBRUARY—General debate on LGBT+ History Month, followed by a debate on a motion on mobile connectivity in rural areas. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House of Commons will rise for the February recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 12 February and return on Monday 23 February.

Jesse Norman: I thank the Leader of the House very much for the business.

As the House will know, this is the week of Holocaust Memorial Day, and I am delighted that we will be debating it in this Chamber later today. I am sure colleagues will have visited the extraordinary exhibition of shoes in Portcullis House. I visited Auschwitz in 1988, when Poland was under communist control, and saw the originals of that exhibition—it was a profoundly

moving experience. I know that everyone present will share my sense of sorrow and remembrance for all those who died.

This is also the week in which we note with great sadness the death of Captain Philip Muldowney in a live-fire exercise. We send our very best to his fellow soldiers, his friends and his family. I also put on record my personal sadness on the death of Howard Flight, Lord Flight, a dedicated servant of this House and the other place over many years.

This week, the Prime Minister demonstrated his genius and political touch once again by getting Andy Burnham barred from standing in the Gorton and Denton by-election, in which he would almost certainly have been hammered if he had stood—problem solved.

Meanwhile, the Resolution Foundation has calculated that the extra uncertainty created by the Chancellor's repeated U-turns has already cost, or will cost, this country £8.2 billion, which will only increase over time. The figure is based on official Office for Budget Responsibility numbers and includes the Government's U-turns on personal independence payments, universal credit and the winter fuel allowance, but not the additional uncertainty created by their recent U-turns on business rates for pubs and inheritance tax rules for farmers. Those will take the cost closer to £9 billion-worth of unnecessary extra burden on the people of this country created by the Government since July 2024. And lest we forget, even without any U-turns, the extra cost of servicing UK Government debt since July 2024 has been, and remains—again, thanks to the Chancellor of the Exchequer—higher than in either the US or the eurozone. That is according to Labour's own friendly think-tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research.

Finally, extraordinarily—irony of ironies—we hear that Sir Tony Blair will sit on President Trump's so-called board of peace for the reconstruction of Gaza, to which one can only say, in the words of the late, great Tom Lehrer, "Satire is dead." This is the man who took this country to war in the middle east on a false prospectus. One must ask: have the people of Gaza not suffered enough?

I note that AstraZeneca is accompanying the Prime Minister on his trip to China. As the House will know, AstraZeneca is the single biggest investor in research and development in the United Kingdom. Its best-selling, global best-in-class breast cancer drug, Enhertu, is available for reimbursement in America, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia and Japan. Within these islands, it is available for reimbursement in Scotland, but not in England, outside a few special cases. That is an insult to AstraZeneca, but still more to the 46,000 women a year who are diagnosed with breast cancer in England, and the millions more who have had breast cancer, who are at risk and who are unable to be treated affordably as a result. There is deep concern among all Members of the House about this issue. Does the Leader of the House share my view of it, and will he take up the matter urgently with his Cabinet colleagues?

Finally, data from this week shows that over the last year police numbers have fallen sharply. Between September 2024 and September 2025, the number of full-time equivalent police officers fell by 1,318. Police staff were down 529, and police community support officers were down 204. The number of special constables was down 514, and police volunteers were down 429. In total,

[Jesse Norman]

around 3,000 fewer people are now involved in policing our communities. Those figures compare the same point in both years, precisely because recruitment happens in cycles, so there can be no statistical disguising.

I actually rather agree with Commissioner Rowley, who has said that police should be judged by outputs rather than inputs—a very welcome corrective to the endless tendency started, I am afraid, under Messrs Blair and Brown to trumpet increased spending as though it is the same thing as results—but that hardly applies to the number of volunteers and specials, both of which are down. In general, fewer officers and staff mean fewer crimes investigated, fewer patrols on our streets and slower responses to 999 calls. The Home Secretary's announcement earlier this week was silent on protecting overall police numbers, so could the Leader of the House spell out whether the Government's policy is to allow police numbers to decline over time? Could the House have an up-to-date statement on that specific issue?

Sir Alan Campbell: First of all, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, may we send our best wishes to Mr Speaker and wish him a speedy recovery from his recent injury?

As the shadow Leader of the House said, Tuesday was Holocaust Memorial Day. During Cabinet we heard from Mala Tribich, who shared her testimony. She actually sat in the Cabinet Room, which is the first time a Holocaust survivor has done that. Yesterday I had the honour of joining Annick Lever in speaking at an event in the Cabinet Office. Holocaust Memorial Day reminds us that societies who do not learn from the mistakes of the past run the risk of repeating them. We must stand together against hatred, prejudice and intolerance wherever it occurs. The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day this year is "Bridging Generations". The theme is a reminder that the responsibility of remembrance belongs not only to survivors but to us all.

I echo the sentiments of the shadow Leader of the House in paying tribute to those who have died. I want to add a tribute to Sir Christopher Jenkins, the former first parliamentary counsel in the Cabinet Office, who died recently. Sir Christopher was renowned for his mastery in drafting legislation and worked on many important pieces, including the Summer Time Act 1972 and the first devolution Bills for Scotland and Wales. He will also be remembered for pioneering explanatory notes, which clearly explain the purpose of the Bill. I am sure that the whole House will join me in passing on our condolences to his friends and family. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

That gives me an opportunity to reflect on the work of those in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. They work tremendously hard behind the scenes supporting Ministers in bringing forward legislation. I want to take this moment to pass on my thanks to them for all their hard work.

Speaking of legislation and Government action, this week the Government published the draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill, which will deliver on our manifesto commitment to reform the commonhold model, making it easier for existing leaseholders to convert to commonhold and banning the use of leasehold for most new flats. It will significantly improve the current

system for over 5 million existing property owners, ensuring a better deal for future generations of homeowners in England and Wales.

We also published a police reform White Paper, which the shadow Leader of the House referred to, announcing the largest reforms to policing since the police service was founded around 200 years ago. The reforms will create a police service that is more rooted in local communities and remove the barrier that prevents police from focusing on what really matters to our constituents.

Let me turn to the specific points raised by the shadow Leader of the House. He referred to the cost of what he calls U-turns. I notice that he did not welcome in his remarks the changes that we made to farmers' inheritance tax and, indeed, the help that we brought forward for pubs. He cannot have it both ways. He talks about the cost of borrowing. It is, of course, important that that cost, and indeed borrowing, is brought down so that money is spent on better things, including public services. I gently ask him, however: who ran up the borrowing in the first place? Why is the cost of borrowing so high in this country? The answer is that it is because of the Truss Budget, which crashed and trashed the economy.

Breast cancer drugs, which the right hon. Gentleman raised, are a very important matter. I accept that there is concern, but this Government are determined to do more to address not just breast cancer but other cancers. I will draw his remarks to the attention of the Secretary of State.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman mentions police numbers, but forgets that the number of police officers fell by 22,000 under the Government he supported. When they did recruit officers, they put them into offices—they were not on the frontline. The Home Secretary has been absolutely clear that we need to get more officers on to the frontline and we are determined to do that. The right hon. Gentleman wants me to spell out our ambitions for that, but he will need to wait slightly longer. I have just announced the business, which includes a debate on police funding on 11 February, when we will not only be able to spell out our plans for increasing the number of police officers, but be happy to compare our record against that of his Government.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of the Leader of the House about Holocaust Memorial Day. Coming from a family with Jewish heritage, I feel that very strongly.

One of the worst aspects of the austerity years was the impact on young people. In a community such as mine of 23 separate mining villages, all isolated, the future of the youth, who are after all the future of our country, is very difficult. Will the Leader of the House think about recommending a moment when we might discuss youth services in the country? That would give me an opportunity to raise the issue of a piece of land that has fallen into private use in Upton in my constituency. There is a covenant held by the coalfields authority, which I hope it will enforce. Such a debate would allow me to press that case.

Sir Alan Campbell: This Government have brought forward a young people's strategy for the first time in more than a decade. A review is also being undertaken into how we can best tackle the difficult issue of bringing

down youth unemployment. However, I will draw the matter to the attention of the relevant Secretary of State and see what plans we have to bring forward a debate, or perhaps a statement, so that my hon. Friend can make those points himself.

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

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I associate myself with the comments made by the Leader of the House about Holocaust Memorial Day and the tributes he paid to the people we have lost.

Last weekend, all the plotting and deceit finally reached a climax. I have to say that the man from the north who I wanted to win that battle did not quite make it. Still, Faraaz played a good game and I thought that Stephen and Rachel were worthy winners of “The Traitors”—*[Laughter.]* I thought that deserved more.

Moving on, I think the whole House can agree that the world has become less safe. Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and the instability that Trump has brought to the NATO alliance has focused minds across Europe. We all know that we now need to find a way to increase defence spending as quickly as possible. This week, the Liberal Democrats put forward an idea about the possibility of issuing defence bonds. That would raise funds not only via the financial markets but allow ordinary Brits to take part. We could issue them on a fixed-term basis and hypothecate them specifically to capital spending on defence. We believe that that could help us achieve 3% of defence spending by 2030 and allow everybody to participate in the effort.

Pension funds and investment portfolios allow people to select the style of portfolio that they would like. Sometimes people tick a box to say that they want to invest in environmental, social and governance measures. We believe that if there was a UK-focused portfolio, many people would choose to opt in. In fact, research suggests that Brits would be willing to see lower returns on their investment if they knew that their money was going to a good cause, and to British assets in particular. Could we have a debate in Government time on just how we can get to that 3% target as quickly as possible? We need to build cross-party consensus on that.

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are absolutely committed to increasing spending on defence to 2.5% of GDP by April next year, and the Prime Minister has set out his ambition to spend 3% of GDP on defence in the next Parliament, but I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, because the world appears to be a less safe place. That means that we need to build better, deeper coalitions with our allies, but of course we must also play our part fully by increasing defence expenditure, and the Government are absolutely committed to doing that.

I find the idea that the hon. Gentleman raised of a defence bond genuinely interesting. I will raise it with the Secretary of State, at least to get the hon. Gentleman a response. I happen to believe that we do not debate defence enough in this House. *[Interruption.]* Well, not compared with how it was some time ago. I will therefore see what prospect there is of bringing forward a defence debate in the near future, in which we talk not just about what is happening in the world, but about how we might best support our armed forces.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting Ali Davies-Marsh, the fantastic founder of Greener Littleover in Derby, which does outstanding work bringing people closer to nature, through initiatives such as the Great Big Green Week, and by doing outreach in our local schools. Does the Leader of the House agree that volunteer-led initiatives like Greener Littleover should be recognised, because they represent the best of our communities in Derby and across the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to champion the work of Greener Littleover and organisations like it. The work done by volunteer-led initiatives is admirable, and it represents the very best of our communities. I hope that everyone in the House will join me in praising Greener Littleover’s commitment to protecting, enhancing and celebrating local green spaces.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House announced, on Monday 9 February there will be a Select Committee statement from the Procedure Committee, the subject of which is secret. That should encourage Members to come along and listen to what is being said. It is secret because the Committee has not yet published its report. On Thursday 26 February—if we are allocated that date—we have offered a St David’s day and Welsh affairs debate, so I am sure the Leader of the House will not want to upset the Welsh.

In Westminster Hall, on 3 February there will be a debate on town and city centre safety. On Thursday 5 February, there will be a Select Committee statement on behalf of the Scottish Affairs Committee, followed by a debate on sustainable drainage systems and a debate on secondary breast cancer. On 10 February, there will be a debate on the Independent Water Commission final report. On Thursday 12 February, there will be a debate on onshoring in the fashion and textiles industry, and a debate on which we are waiting for confirmation. On 24 February, there will be a debate on Government support for the healthcare system in Gaza.

The Leader of the House and I had a very good meeting on Monday. I look forward to the necessary changes to the Standing Orders coming forward to assist the Backbench Business Committee in doing its work.

The Mayor of London is wrestling with a £260 million gap in the finances. There are proposals to close police counters across London to save about £6 million a year. Since 6 October 2023, hate marches across London have cost the Metropolitan police £82 million, and officers have been dragged in from all over London to police them. Council tax payers of London are outraged about having to pay to police those marches. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Minister who responds to the debate on the police grant tells us how the Government will make sure that the organisers of such demonstrations—rather than the council tax payers of London—bear the cost of policing them?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his update, and for our very productive meeting earlier this week. He rarely leaves us in such suspense in his

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

updates, and I look forward to finding out what that Select Committee statement is about. Our intention is certainly not to upset the Welsh; that has been the job of his party over the years.

The hon. Gentleman raises the important matter of policing, as he often does as a constituency MP. The 2026-27 final police funding settlement is up to £21 billion for the policing of the system in England and Wales. The Metropolitan police and City of London police will receive funding of up to £4.1 billion—an increase of £184.1 million.

The hon. Gentleman raises an issue of concern relating to marches. I will ensure that the Minister who introduces the police debate on 11 February is aware of his concerns, but he may wish to attend to make those points directly to the Minister.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let us ensure that questions are short.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome this Labour Government's record investment in repairing and renewing our roads, and in fixing potholes, with £7.3 billion having been allocated to local authorities over the next four years. Following the recent introduction of red-amber-green ratings for how local authorities are spending that money and for their road conditions, I have launched a pothole survey to get feedback from my constituents and ensure that local voices are heard. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging my constituents to fill out the survey and to give feedback about where roads need improvement, so that I can ensure that local voices are heard?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in encouraging her constituents to complete her survey. As has been said, local people are best placed to make local decisions and outline where improvements need to be made, so I pay tribute to her for ensuring that their voices are heard.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Last May, Reform pushed leaflets through the doors of homes in Worcestershire that said that it would cut taxes, but this year, Reform-led Worcestershire county council has sought permission from the Government to increase council tax by a staggering 10%. Does the Leader of the House agree that that inflation-busting rise is a step too far for the residents of Worcestershire? Will he rule it out, and make representations to the relevant Secretary of State?

Sir Alan Campbell: Once again, the hon. Gentleman raises the fact that Reform over-offers and underperforms. I will draw the attention of the relevant Department to his comments and concerns.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Four years ago, the regeneration of Wealdstone—now entirely in my constituency—was poised to begin. Since then, the Conservative councillors who run Harrow council have cancelled or stalled key decisions, so much-needed affordable housing is nowhere to be seen, council offices

are closed to the public, local services have been starved of investment, and Wealdstone High Street is under pressure. Might we have a debate on how to help failing councils lead regeneration initiatives better?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a serious matter. For far too long, people have watched their towns and streets decline. The Government are investing in the future of our local communities, not least through the £5 billion Pride in Place programme, and we are giving local people the power to transform their communities. Should he seek a debate—or indeed use the 11 February debate on local government funding—to make his points, I am sure that he would find common cause with others across the House.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I congratulate the Government on one of their policies: the launch of a UK town of culture. Often, the Government find themselves having to pull their business. I hope that when they are next in that position, they can organise a debate on the UK town of culture. Stone town council is putting in a bid for Stone, which is a great town. It has the Crown Wharf theatre and one of the best food festivals anywhere in the country, and it would be a great recipient of this title. I hope we can have a debate on this issue in Government time.

Sir Alan Campbell: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman welcomes the UK town of culture competition, and I encourage towns across the country to take part. We hope that it will be a huge success, and I imagine that we will want a debate on it at some point. He makes a very strong case for Stone. It would probably be remiss of me to make the case for North Shields, which celebrated its 800th anniversary last year very successfully, and which I understand will put forward its own bid, but of course, I would not mention that.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The Royal National Institute of Blind People's 2024 report, "Turned Out", found that disabled people face significant barriers when it comes to casting their vote, a finding echoed by the Electoral Commission in its report last year. Both those reports informed my ten-minute rule Bill on this subject, which I presented to the House last year. Could the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to make a statement on improving accessibility at our polling stations for disabled people ahead of this year's elections?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are firmly committed to supporting disabled people's ability and right to vote. I know that the team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government regularly meet disability organisations to identify barriers, share good practice, develop products and promote awareness, but I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard my hon. Friend's contribution.

Steve Darling (Torquay) (LD): Storms Ingrid and Chandra have wreaked havoc across Devon, whether it is flooding in Ottery Saint Mary, closure of the Dawlish rail line or having parts of our harbours and seafronts in Torbay ripped apart. Torbay council advised me that these storms have caused more than £3.5 million of critical infrastructure damage. Will the Leader of the House

encourage the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness to open up the Bellwin scheme to local authorities, like ours in Torbay?

Sir Alan Campbell: Alongside partners in the emergency services, local authorities and utility companies, we co-ordinated agencies, so that they could prepare for and respond to the storm, and our hearts go out to those who have been severely affected. As far as the Bellwin scheme is concerned, I will draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of the Minister.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Two weeks ago, the Office for Environmental Protection announced its annual report to Parliament. It found that the country remains off track for the 2030 targets. It also found that this Government were making good progress in some areas, but colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appear to wish to hide their light under a bushel, because we did not get a statement in the House on that, or on the environmental improvement plan. Will the Leader of the House have a word with DEFRA colleagues about ensuring that these important landmarks get a statement? In the absence of that, can we have a debate in Government time on the OEP report and the important environmental improvement plan?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work he does on these issues. He raises a very important matter, and I am confident that DEFRA Ministers want to keep the House updated on our environmental improvement plan. We have ambitious targets, and I will make sure that Ministers have heard his request for a statement.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I thank the frontline staff at the Environment Agency, drainage board and council who are working hard to tackle flooding in Somerset. This year, water levels have risen faster than they did in the 2013-14 floods. Currymoor used to fill in 10 days; this week, it filled in four. Communities in Fordgate and Moorland are watching nervously as water levels continue to rise. Can we have a debate on how the Environment Agency approaches these incidents? Why is it using out-of-date trigger points to dictate its response? Why were the emergency pumps at Northmoor operational only last night? Why is the EA actively withdrawing from main river maintenance, and why are we allowing building on floodplains without proper mitigation?

Sir Alan Campbell: Floods often cause devastation for people who live in areas affected by them. Our floods resilience taskforce is focusing on the delivery of a flood resilience strategy, and indeed investment, because these things have been neglected for too long. The hon. Gentleman began by paying tribute to the Environment Agency workers not just in his area but across the country, who are out working day in, day out to make improvements. He may wish to seek a Westminster Hall debate on the matter, but I will also look at whether there is time to bring forward such a debate.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Keeping our neighbourhoods clean and tidy requires a whole community effort, and that is exactly what we are delivering in Hartlepool. Our Labour council is investing £1 million in its Pride in Place campaign, complementing the

fantastic work of volunteers from Hartlepool Big Town Tidy Up to make a visible difference to our borough. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my constituent, 11-year-old Theo Rhead, a pupil at High Tunstall school, on winning a young litter picker award at the Davina Hodson memorial awards hosted by CleanupUK? He embodies the spirit of Hartlepool.

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to celebrate a community approach to keeping our towns and cities clean, and the dedication of environmental volunteers in that, and to draw attention to the support that the Government are giving through the Pride in Place programme, not just in terms of resources but by putting the community in charge. I think the whole House will join me in congratulating Theo Rhead on his young litter picker award, because his commitment sets a bright example for us all to follow.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Redbourn village faces a potential 70% housing increase after this Government reclassified swathes of open land as grey belt, leaving villagers powerless against unplanned development, with legitimate infrastructure and environmental concerns compounded by being next to the M1 and 7 miles from Luton airport, which is expanding. The ministerial answer to my recent question about grey belt impact assessments referred me to yet another update of the national planning policy framework, which is under consultation. As councils cannot pause their planning timelines, may we have a debate in Government time on how Members can address live planning issues during this consultation limbo, before it is too late for our villages?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady is of course free to apply for a debate, perhaps one in Westminster Hall or an Adjournment debate, in which she can raise these matters. Matters of housing and infrastructure are often raised with me. I gently say to her that what we are trying to do in updating the legislation is ensure that we are building the houses that the country needs. It is really important that we get on with building those houses. I will draw her remarks to the attention of the relevant Department.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): Many girls in my constituency, some as young as 12, have told me that they face misogynistic abuse and sexual harassment in school from boys of a similar age. Some have even told me that reports of their experiences have fallen on deaf ears with the school leads, some often saying, "You should be flattered." Will the Leader of the House please condemn such words from school leads, and allow for the Education Secretary to lay out what steps her Department is taking to tackle the scourge of misogynistic abuse in schools and academies?

Sir Alan Campbell: I think most people would condemn the words that my hon. Friend set out. He raises a really important matter, because every parent should be able to trust that their daughter, or indeed their son, is safe in school. Too often, toxic ideas take hold early and go unchallenged. Our violence against women and girls strategy, published in December, seeks to ensure that girls will be better protected from violence and, crucially, that young boys will be steered away from harmful misogynistic influences. I will raise my hon. Friend's concerns with the Secretary of State.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I do not know whether the Leader of the House is a keen cyclist or mountain biker, but I am sure that he will share my excitement, and that of my constituents, that after the grand départ in Edinburgh, the Tour de France will pass through Innerleithen, Walkerburn and Canonbie in my constituency. Along with the forthcoming opening of the mountain bike innovation centre in Innerleithen, does he agree that this will showcase the Tweed Valley as the best cycling venue not only in the United Kingdom but in the world?

Sir Alan Campbell: What an opportunity to showcase what the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say is a very beautiful part of the world. As he can probably imagine, I am not renowned for my cycling ability or my history of such things, but I know that a lot of my constituents and people across the country are, so it is a great honour to have the course routed through the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. I wish everyone involved well.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I recently met Unison health and care workers from Liverpool, who highlighted deeply worrying reports of migrant care staff being underpaid, overworked and, in some cases, intimidated because their work visa is tied to their employer. Not only does this exploitation harm dedicated workers, but it drags down standards across adult social care at a time when we desperately need to strengthen the sector. When will the Government make time for a full debate on the impact of the changes to the skilled worker visa, and on their implications for the ongoing exploitation and poor pay and conditions in social care and other sectors?

Sir Alan Campbell: We utterly condemn any examples of underpayment or exploitation, and I put on the record that care workers do a fantastic job up and down our country. As for when we may get the opportunity to debate these matters, I will draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of the Secretary of State and will do everything I can to find an opportunity for her to raise these matters in a debate.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Yesterday, in response to a question from the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), the Deputy Prime Minister made a statement in the Chamber that was incorrect, misleading and disrespectful to Lord Brodie—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Gentleman should please be seated, as I am on my feet. We do not accuse other Members of misleading the House—inadvertently perhaps, but not misleading. Perhaps he can correct the record by starting his question again, and keep it short.

Seamus Logan: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Deputy Prime Minister made a statement in the Chamber that was incorrect, inadvertently misleading and disrespectful to Lord Brodie, who is chairing a public inquiry into events at the Queen Elizabeth University hospital in Glasgow. He stated that the Scottish Government had

“sided with the health board and dismissed families who went through tragic circumstances.”—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 900.]

That is categorically untrue, given that it was the SNP Scottish Government who set up the public inquiry. [*Interruption.*] Worse, it was a naked pre-election smear and an act of desperation on behalf of the Labour party, which is struggling to make third place in the polls. What does the Leader of the House propose to do to put a stop to Ministers coming to the Dispatch Box and repeating falsehoods, and will he call on the Deputy Prime Minister to apologise for undermining Lord Brodie?

Sir Alan Campbell: Of course, it is important that Ministers, and indeed Members of this House, are accurate in their comments. However, as the hon. Gentleman will have heard—not least from Members behind me—this matter is one of dispute, and his version of events is also disputed. I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister will hear the hon. Gentleman's remarks, but it is disappointing that, on such an important matter, he seeks to make a political point about polling and elections. I gently suggest that the Scottish Government should get on with the biggest settlement we have ever given to Scotland, and spend it better.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): A week ago, a 175-year-old Thames Water main pipe burst, leading to a devastating flood in Holland Park, which has forced dozens of my constituents into temporary accommodation and caused massive damage. Those same residents were flooded in 2021 and now face months out of their homes, so Thames Water again has major questions to answer. Can the Leader of the House assure me that the Government will give due consideration to strengthening the governance, oversight and accountability of Thames Water, so that this does not keep happening to my constituents?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—that sounds like an untenable situation for his constituents. The Government have launched the largest ever crackdown on poorly behaving water companies—we have already banned bonuses, secured record levels of investment and introduced tougher laws. However, he may wish to raise this matter directly with Ministers at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions this time next week.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Over the past month, more than 35,000 men, women and children have been shot dead—murdered—in Iran. Overnight, the French Government backed a move to put the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the EU's terrorist list. The majority of those shot have been shot by operatives of the IRGC. The Government have said that they cannot put the IRGC on the proscribed list because it is a state group, rather than a non-state terror group. However, given what the French Government and other EU Governments have done, can the UK Government at least bring forward new legislation on proscription, bringing together hybrid legislation in some way that allows the Government to take action to support all those men and women standing for freedom and democracy in Iran?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government have already proscribed and sanctioned 550 organisations and individuals around the IRGC. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we keep these matters under constant review. I am not sure I would characterise the Government's position on

the IRGC quite as definitively as he has, but we keep these matters under consideration. If, as we do that, we find that the legislation falls short, we will come back with changes to it.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): My constituent Muhammad is a young man educated at a local school and hoping to go on a school trip in a couple of weeks with his classmates. His application for citizenship was received by the Home Office in November 2024, but a decision is now eight months late, and if he went on this trip, it would void the application. Can the Leader of the House encourage Home Office colleagues to expedite an outcome to this delayed application, so that this young man can attend this vital educational trip?

Sir Alan Campbell: If my hon. Friend gives me the details of the case, I will ensure that the relevant Department gets that information and hopefully can act in the way he suggests.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It has been brought to my attention by an employer in my constituency—a vape manufacturer—that there are products on sale in this country by importers that are either circumventing or exploiting loopholes in the legislation. They are selling vapes that are big puffs and break the regulations. They are rechargeable but are being discarded because they are so cheap, creating a fire hazard. Will the Leader of the House enable me to speak to a Minister to see how we can address the issue?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I will.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): After beaches in Burntisland and Kinghorn recently had their water quality downgraded, many of my constituents will be angry that Scottish Government-owned Scottish Water are hiking bills by almost 10%. Both beaches were closed for periods last summer due to pollution, and people became sick from exposure to it. That is particularly galling after the chief executive of Scottish Water was handed a £50,000 pay increase. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is long past time for the SNP Scottish Government to get a grip and to clean up our coasts? Will he make time for a debate on water quality?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I agree that it is time, and I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for an Adjournment debate so that she can raise these matters directly with the Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill that we sent to the other place is being scrutinised extensively, and it has been reported this morning that the Parliament Act 1911 may be invoked to force the Bill through to become an Act. Given that it is a private Member's Bill and was not in the Labour manifesto, can the Leader of the House assure the House that he will not allocate Government time to do that?

Sir Alan Campbell: I read those reports, as I am sure did other Members of the House. The Government's position has not changed, and this is not a Government Bill. However, the hon. Lady started off by talking about scrutiny in the House of Lords. They have every right to scrutinise, but I hope that they do so responsibly, because

this House made clear its position on the Bill. I hope that progress can be made. When there is what looks like an impasse or a slowdown, people will be looking for a quick route around that—or any route around that, to be honest—but the Government's position has not changed. Once the Lords have completed their scrutiny, we will if necessary find time in this place to debate those amendments, because the will of this House was very clear. I hope that we will, without having to go down the avenues that have been described, be able to resolve this matter.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Last Friday, we launched the Bournemouth town centre citizens' panel action plan. This was the culmination of seven months of work by 50 local residents of all ages and backgrounds to set out a shared vision for our town and action points for the future. The citizens' panel was an effective way to meaningfully centre residents' voices in the future of our town. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking those residents, who put so much time and passion into the project, and will he assure me that the Government are giving due consideration to how we centre residents' voices in our high street strategy?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for the innovative work that she and her constituents are doing, and I join her in praising them. We are supporting local businesses and our high streets in all sorts of ways, not least through Pride in Place. As I have said consistently, local people are best placed to make decisions about their local communities, and it sounds as though my hon. Friend is helping to make that happen.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Patients, cancer charities and healthcare professionals have been calling for urgent investment in oncology to prevent a postcode lottery of care. Unfortunately, regional inequalities exist, denying many patients access to effective treatment or quicker diagnosis. Will the House schedule time to consider what funding and workforce measures are being prioritised in the national cancer plan to address the gaps?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important matter: the postcode lottery that can exist in cancer care. Of course, the Government do not want that to happen, which is why we are investing more across the NHS, but also through the NHS plan, to ensure that we iron out any differences that exist across the country. I will draw his remarks to the attention of the Health Secretary to see if and when he can bring forward a statement on these matters. Otherwise, we might be able to have the debate that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): When will the Government publish the full national security assessment of global biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse? No. 10 is said to have pulled the full report last autumn because it was too alarming. Given that the truncated version, published last week, says that "every critical ecosystem is on a pathway to collapse", with an

"irreversible loss of function beyond repair", and that this will affect national security and national prosperity, and give rise to conflicts between states, is it not vital that this House examines the full report and that the Government schedule a debate about it in Government time?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter, and I know he takes these matters very seriously indeed. I cannot give him the answer he seeks, but I can request a meeting with Ministers so that they can explain to him what the plans are going forward or, if necessary, the concerns and difficulties that mean they cannot proceed in the way that my hon. Friend asks for. If he wants that meeting, I will arrange it.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that your constituents, like mine, were absolutely shocked this morning to discover that their water bills from South East Water will go up by 7%, while the company is being investigated by Ofwat. The water industry is a failed industry. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on adopting the Liberal Democrat call for a mutual ownership model for the water companies?

Sir Alan Campbell: The previous Government should never have allowed the water sector to get into this state, with record levels of sewage and ageing water infrastructure. I understand very well how consumers will react to the news that their bills are going up yet again, and the Government are absolutely committed to improving the situation. As I said before, we are calling out water companies that are underperforming. I am not sure that we can promise to go as far as accepting a Liberal Democrat solution to these problems, but I am sure there will be ample opportunity to debate these matters going forward. Water is such an important consideration for our constituents, not least because it adds to the cost of living, which we are equally determined to tackle.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Let us aim for much shorter questions and much shorter answers.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): The Arthur Terry Learning Partnership runs 24 schools in the west midlands, including six in my constituency. It is currently trying to plug a £6 million gap in its finances that was caused by what it characterises as an accounting error. The National Education Union has taken nine days of strike action at Arthur Terry schools this month, with nine more planned for February. The Department for Education's engagement with my office on this issue yesterday was excellent, but may I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that the relevant Minister meets me and other affected MPs as a matter of urgency to discuss the ongoing dispute?

Sir Alan Campbell: This is a difficult situation for children, and indeed families and teachers, in Lichfield and the west midlands in general, so I will help to secure the meeting my hon. Friend asks for.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): The Leader of the House will be aware that, on Monday, I joined my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman) at a huge rally in support of our brave British veterans, a magnificent occasion organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). The message from veterans was clear: Labour's plans to enable the perpetual persecution of soldiers who served in Northern Ireland is "diabolical". Indeed, I would say it is a betrayal. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate about

how the United Kingdom has ended up with a policy of giving legal protection to the terrorists who killed British subjects, while the soldiers who protected civilians in Ulster face prosecution simply for doing the job of serving Queen and country?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government are replacing a system that, quite frankly, we found was not legal, could not be enforced and therefore did not give protection to our brave servicemen and women. He will have ample time to continue this debate as the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill continues its progress. Whether his new hon. Friend the Member for Clacton can be bothered to be in the Chamber to take part remains to be seen.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I recently had the pleasure of visiting St Mary's Catholic primary school in Blackhill to learn about its Solar for Schools project, and the children were really engaged in learning about solar power and saving energy. This is funded by Great British Energy and the Government through the Solar for Schools project. Can we have a debate in Government time to talk about the importance of extending such projects?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the enthusiasm of students at St Mary's primary school in Blackhill, which is the place where I was born. I am happy to hear about this example of one of over 250 schools benefiting from our £255 million scheme to deliver new rooftop solar power for public buildings. I encourage her to apply for an Adjournment debate on the matter.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): The Chapel in Cotford St Luke in my constituency is a fan favourite, but because of the decisions of this Government, it is dying. It has been hit exceptionally hard by VAT and the business rates regime, as is the case for many establishments in our part of the world, many of which rely heavily on tourism. Can the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on how we can better support the hospitality and tourism sector, and prevent much-loved businesses from closing their doors?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady will be aware of the support that the Government have recently brought forward for pubs, and we keep under review what other support we can give the hospitality sector. Her concern about what more can be done will be shared not just by Members on the Opposition side but by those on this side too. Should she seek an Adjournment debate, she can air those concerns herself.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Tetrosyl is a Rochdale-based company that has recently used fire and rehire tactics to, in effect, dismiss staff, rehire them with £7,000 a year less in their pay packets and remove their right to paid leave, all despite its shareholders receiving £2 million last year. Does the Leader of the House agree that the company should even now get around the table with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers? Does he also agree that this Government's new Employment Rights Act 2025 will finally outlaw fire and rehire, give day one rights to sick pay and parental leave, and give basic rights to every worker who deserves them—rights that Reform Members voted against in this House?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to the House and, yes, I do agree with him not only on the need to get around the table, but on the shameful approach taken by Reform on these matters. This Government's Employment Rights Act represents the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. As he said, it will end exploitative zero-hours contracts, end unscrupulous fire and rehire practices, prevent the misuse of non-disclosure agreements, and strengthen statutory sick pay and the collective voice of workers.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Storm Chandra has left the south-west in havoc, including deep flooding in Dorset, with routes blocked, villages cut off and even part of our historic Wimborne Minster underwater. Some residents have suggested that blocked drains are the cause, but the best flushed gullies would not cope. I welcome the reference to the upcoming flood strategy, but as weather warnings return I repeat my call following last summer's fires for a debate in Government time on climate resilience and response, so that Members can have their concerns heard.

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady is right to raise the concerns of her constituents; where they have been affected, I am sorry to hear that. She has raised these matters before, and should she wish to meet with a Minister and outline the experience of her constituents to see what further can be done, I will arrange that.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): We face a serious skills gap in the construction sector. Colleges across the country are doing fantastic work to help solve this issue. In my constituency, Kirklees college is a testament to the value of such institutions. I welcome the Government's commitment to train 60,000 more skilled workers by 2029, but can we have a statement from the Government on the steps that they are taking to support institutions such as Kirklees college to meet the high demand for places and close the skills gap?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter and welcome the vital education and training that Kirklees college provides to its students. The Government announced a construction support package worth more than £600 million to tackle the shortage of skilled workers in the construction sector. That investment is a key part of our wider strategy to support our national infrastructure, but I will draw my hon. Friend's request either for a statement or debate to the relevant Secretary of State's attention.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as the chair of the all-party group on infant feeding. In December last year, as part of their child poverty strategy, the Government published their response to the Competition and Markets Authority on infant formula milk. There were a number of recommendations to which the Government said no, including restricting unverifiable claims on formula packaging. This is a vital issue that affects parents up and down the country, so will the Leader of the House make Government time to debate infant feeding?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government did announce important steps forward, but I am not across the specifics

that the hon. Lady refers to, so if she wants to meet with a Minister to explore what more can be done, I will arrange that.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): As Member of Parliament for West Dunbartonshire, I have the honour of following in the footsteps of a very distinguished predecessor, Lord McFall, the Lord Speaker, who steps down this week after 40 years at Westminster. He has served my community and our democracy with great wisdom, courtesy, grace and humility. Will the Leader of the House join me in expressing gratitude for his decades of service, and send both him and his wife Joan our warmest wishes?

Sir Alan Campbell: I think I can speak for everyone across the House in thanking Lord McFall for his service and commitment to both Houses. He was a fine Whip and Minister in government and a truly tremendous parliamentarian. Alongside my hon. Friend, I wish Lord McFall and his wife Joan all the best for what is to come.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): It has been raining hard in my constituency and across the west country generally. I pay tribute to Somerset council, North Somerset council, the internal drainage board and the Environment Agency for their work. The land, however, is saturated. If one were to put the water in Somerset and the little bit of North Somerset that I represent end to end, it would flow from mid Somerset to Singapore. It is 8,000 miles-worth of waterway. Will the Leader of the House please ask his colleague with responsibility for planning and housing to insist that new housing is not built on the floodplain, because when Flood Re finishes in a few years' time residents will be left high and dry with their insurance but certainly not in their homes?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to everyone involved in dealing with what is a traumatic situation. As I said, we do have a need to build houses, but we need to build them in the right place and build them safely, so I will draw her remarks to the attention of the relevant Minister.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Last year I hosted Blackpool's biggest ever jobs fair. It showed just how strong the appetite is in our town for work, skills and opportunity. On 26 February, I am bringing it back, bigger than ever, in conjunction with the jobcentre and Blackpool Tourism Ltd, with 120 businesses offering around 2,000 jobs for local residents. The event will include entry-level roles, opportunities for career change and wraparound support, with employers ranging from the NHS emergency services to major local and national firms. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging Blackpool residents to sign up through my website to take part in the event, which aims to connect people with good jobs, skills and training? Will he also give a nudge to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who is sat next to him on the Government Front Bench, to whom an invitation has been extended to open the event?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. The Government's growth mission is committed to securing good quality jobs for people in our local

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

communities and, I have to say, nobody fights harder than him to bring jobs to his local community. I join him in encouraging his constituents to sign up for what sounds like a worthwhile jobs fair. I am sure the Secretary of State, who is sat next me, will have heard his remarks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The fifth anniversary of the military coup in Myanmar-Burma will be on 1 February. It overthrew the democratically elected civilian Government, and created a severe humanitarian and human rights crisis. It is in that context that the military regime is proceeding with elections that exclude opposition parties, criminalise criticism and disenfranchise large parts of the population. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to set out what steps the Government are taking to challenge any attempt to legitimise the elections, press for the release of political prisoners, and hold the Myanmar military accountable for ongoing violations of human rights and freedom of religion or belief?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman undoubtedly knows, the UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all. We have long opposed the persecution and marginalisation faced by minorities in Myanmar. Particularly concerning are the race and religion laws, which entrench prejudices against ethnic and religious minorities. I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary hears his concerns, not least in the light of what he says about elections, and responds to him.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I was recently contacted by one of my constituents regarding a four-month delay to her daughter's provisional driving licence application, relating to her type 1 diabetes diagnosis. My constituent's application remains outstanding. She has been unable to obtain an update from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency or any timescale for the conclusion of her application. My constituent's mental health is now being affected by the delay, as she has lost her driving instructor and feels as though she has been treated differently due to her diagnosis. Will the Leader of the House allow for a debate in Government time to discuss the important issue of delays in the DVLA system, in particular for individuals with disabilities and health conditions?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. The DVLA is currently rolling out a new casework that which will deliver significant improvements to the services provided to drivers with medical conditions. That perhaps comes as cold comfort to those who are still waiting in a queue, but I would be happy to follow up this particular case with the Department, should he wish me to.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): Last Sunday, I joined the congregation at St Augustine's church in Slade Green to celebrate the retirement of Rev. Jim Bennett. Jim has been a long-standing pillar of our community in Bexleyheath and Crayford, having worked for Greenwich and Bexley community hospice for 16 years, starting as a fundraising co-ordinator and eventually becoming its chief executive. Following his retirement from that post, he took on a new career later in life. Following his ordination, he spent over six years as the priest at St Augustine's church in Slade Green. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Jim for his work in supporting my constituents across Bexleyheath and Crayford, and wish him all the very best for his retirement?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Rev. Jim Bennett. His work at both Greenwich and Bexley community hospice and St Augustine's church has greatly contributed to his community. In paying tribute to Rev. Jim Bennett, let us pay tribute to all the churches and churchmen and women across our country, who play such an important part in our local communities. I wish Rev. Jim Bennett a very long and happy retirement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The final question is from the ever-patient Josh Newbury.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Stafford Pride is a fantastic event that brings together thousands of people every year in a celebration of the diversity that makes our county such a fantastic place. Two councillors on Staffordshire county council awarded money from its community fund to Stafford Pride, and yet, despite all other recipients having had their funding, approval for Stafford Pride's allocation has, we are told, been with the Reform cabinet for months. Stafford Pride is taking a stand, not for the money but against what it sees as institutional homophobia. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on Reform UK Staffordshire to get on with processing this legitimate funding application, and can we have a debate on the worrying increase in discrimination against LGBT+ organisations by certain councils?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for his local area. Initiatives such as Stafford Pride aim to honour and celebrate the LGBTQ community and are vital for our local communities. It is such a pity that Reform is seeking to pursue divisive policies, and I agree with my hon. Friend that Reform should get on and process the legitimate application for funding so that the community can get on and celebrate diversity.

Women's State Pension Age Communication: PHSO Report

11.51 am

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): In November, I informed the House that the Government would make a new decision in response to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report into the way changes to the state pension age were communicated to women born in the 1950s. This followed relevant evidence coming to light as part of legal proceedings challenging the original decision announced by my predecessor in December 2024. We have now concluded the process to make a new decision and are placing copies of the Government's full response in the Libraries of both Houses.

Before I turn to the substance, I think it is important to be clear what this decision and statement is about, and what it is not about. There are legitimate and sincerely held views about whether it was wise to increase the state pension age, and in particular whether the decision taken in 2011 by the coalition Government to accelerate equalisation and the rise to the age of 66 was the right thing to do. But the issue we are discussing today is not the merits or otherwise of past policy decisions about the state pension age. What the ombudsman investigated was how changes to the state pension age were communicated and whether within a specific and narrow time period there was maladministration and injustice—and if so, whether that warrants compensation.

In March 2024, the ombudsman published its final report. As with so many other issues, the previous Government left the report on their desks, issued no response, took no decision, and left it to this Government to respond. In December 2024, the then Work and Pensions Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), set out the Government's response, having considered all the information provided to her.

However, given that relevant research from 2007 about the effectiveness of sending letters subsequently emerged that had not been provided to my right hon. Friend, I wanted to ensure that the right and proper process was followed to take account of this alongside the information previously considered. Of course, I asked the Department not just to consider the 2007 report, but to undertake new searches as part of an extensive review of relevant historical documents to help inform the new decision.

We accept that individual letters about changes to the state pension age could have been sent earlier. For that, I want to repeat the apology that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West gave on behalf of the Government. I am sorry those letters were not sent sooner. We also agree with the ombudsman that women did not suffer any direct financial loss from the delay.

However, the question is about the impact of the delay in sending those letters. The evidence taken as a whole, including that from 2007, suggests that the majority of 1950s-born women would not have read and recalled the contents of an unsolicited pensions letter, even if it had been sent earlier. Furthermore, the evidence also suggests that those less knowledgeable about pensions—the very women who most needed to engage with a letter, and for whom it might have made a difference—were the least likely to read it. An earlier letter would therefore

have been unlikely to make a difference to what the majority of women knew about their own state pension age. Indeed, the 2007 report concluded that automatic pension forecast letters had only a negligible impact on pensions knowledge and planning, and the Department stopped sending them.

The evidence shows that the vast majority of 1950s-born women already knew that the state pension age was increasing thanks to a wide-range of public information, including leaflets, education campaigns, information in GP surgeries, and information on TV and radio, in cinemas and online. To specifically compensate only the women who suffered injustice would require a scheme that could reliably verify the individual circumstances of millions of women, including whether someone genuinely did not know that their state pension age was changing and whether they would have read and remembered a letter from many years ago and acted differently. It would not be practical to set up a compensation scheme to assess the answers to those questions conclusively.

A flat-rate scheme would cost up to £10.3 billion and would simply not be right or fair, given that it would also be paid to the vast majority who were aware of the changes. I have heard calls for compensation aimed at lower-income pensioners, and we have focused in the past 12 months on raising pension credit uptake, but in the context of this decision, a scheme focused on any single income group still would not specify who may or may not have suffered injustice. That is why, in taking this new decision, we have come to the same conclusion on compensation as that announced by my right hon. Friend the previous Secretary of State in December 2024.

I know that many people feel that the state pension age should not have gone up in the way that it did; indeed, Labour argued against the 2011 policy decision put in place by the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition that accelerated the increase. However, I repeat what I said at the start of my statement: that is a different issue to the one the ombudsman investigated and that I am responding to today, which relates to the communication of changes in the state pension age and, narrowly, to a delay in sending letters over a relatively short period.

The changes from 2011 underline the importance that decisions on the state pension age carry and the impact they have on people's lives, and I take seriously the need to weigh carefully any future changes. That is why, together with the ombudsman, the Department has been developing an action plan for the future. Work on that had stopped pending today's decision, but I can confirm that it will now resume.

It also underlines why we are determined to ensure that all pensioners on lower incomes, the majority of whom are women, have a better life in retirement, just as Labour has done in the past—from the Wilson Government, who first formally linked the uprating of pensions to the higher of earnings or prices, to the previous Labour Government, who lifted 1 million pensioners out of poverty. Labour introduced pension credit, which is vital in topping up the incomes of the poorest pensioners, with women consistently making up the majority of those benefiting since we first introduced it in 2003. This Government are ensuring that more pensioners get that extra income with the biggest ever campaign to increase take-up, which saw tens of thousands more pension credit awards in the year up to November than in the previous year.

[Pat McFadden]

In addition, our commitment to the triple lock for this Parliament means that women will see their state pension rise by up to £575 this year, with incomes up to £2,100 a year higher by the end of the Parliament. Indeed, overall spending on the state pension is set to be more than £30 billion higher a year by the end of this Parliament than in 2024-25. We are also putting record investment into the NHS, meaning that thousands more pensioners are getting the operations and treatment that they need, rather than being left in pain on waiting lists. This is the positive difference our Government are making.

I believe it was right to review the evidence and that, having done so, we have made the right decision based on due process and the body of evidence. At the same time, looking to the future, we are taking important steps to support women in retirement and help them to build a better life for themselves and their families. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

As constituency MPs, we will all have met many campaigners from the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign group—the WASPI women. I am sure that many Members will have received a large amount of correspondence on this matter recently. If they are anything like me—I have had 150 emails recently about it—they will really feel the strength of opinion out there. It is safe to say that both our constituents and us as Members of Parliament have been left wanting by this Government.

In December 2024, the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), told this House that the Government would not compensate these women. Let me remind colleagues what her rationale was. She said that

“the Government do not believe that paying a flat rate to all women, at a cost of up to £10.5 billion, would be a fair or proportionate use of taxpayers’ money”—[*Official Report*, 17 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 168.]

She also tried to argue that they could not afford it because of holes in the Government finances. However, as my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions rightly said:

“Government compensation should always be based on what is fair and just.”—[*Official Report*, 17 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 170.]

Before getting into government, it seems that Labour MPs did think that an injustice had been done. Let us remind our colleagues of what members of this Government have said in the past. The Prime Minister himself called this situation “a huge injustice”. The Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary slammed the “cliff edge” that he said faced WASPI women. The Foreign Secretary said that she was

“fighting for a fair deal for the WASPI women.”

The Chancellor of the Exchequer claimed to “want justice for WASPI women”. Even the current Secretary of State for Work and Pensions got in on the action, putting out a social media post with the caption:

“MPs campaigning for a better deal for WASPI women.”

It is therefore no wonder that the WASPI women, who were promised so much, are so angry; the people who used to stand beside them have now turned against them.

If the Government really believed that these women had faced a great injustice, they would have found a way to compensate them. They could have avoided a deal with Mauritius that will cost us all £35 billion, but they chose not to. They could have found savings on our country’s benefits bill, but they chose not to. They had 14 years to prepare for government and are messing up by doing nothing.

That brings us to the statement from the Secretary of State today. Is it not convenient that he should choose a sitting day when most MPs are not here? It is almost as if he does not want to hear the criticism from his own Back Benchers. In reality, all that the Secretary of State is doing is announcing that nothing has changed and that the Government will not be compensating WASPI women.

I have a few questions. Given that the Secretary of State previously campaigned for a better deal for WASPI women, does he think that today’s announcement provides that better deal? In his statement, he tried to argue that this issue is somehow the Conservatives’ fault. However, he forgets that the maladministration that the previous Secretary of State apologised for was committed under the last Labour Government, before 2010—the ombudsman’s report made that explicit. Can the Secretary of State hold up his hands and take accountability for those mistakes?

This is a really interesting point. The Secretary of State chose to mention the triple lock in his statement and to say that the state pension will go up by up to £575 this year, with incomes expected to rise by up to £2,100 a year by the end of this Parliament. We all know that there is no cap on the triple lock. [*Interruption.*] There is no cap on it, but he made the point that that would rise by “up to” £2,100 a year. Is he implying that the triple lock is about to be capped? Will he confirm that he is apparently U-turning on the Government’s policy on the triple lock by imposing a cap?

Is it not just a fact that, frankly, this Government resemble a bunch of joyriders pulling handbrake turns in a Tesco car park, when Labour should be a serious party of government? Their Back Benchers keep being marched up the hill, only to be told to march down again. The Government even take the Whip away from them for having a conscience, only to tell them later that Ministers are proud to support policies for which support was only recently a sackable offence. Does the Secretary of State really think that this constant back and forth is fair on WASPI women? I look forward to his comments.

Pat McFadden: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s questions. He is right that there has been a forceful and energetic campaign, which has resulted in lots of emails and contact with Members across the House, but his Government had this report from the ombudsman. They could have taken a decision before the election, but they chose not to, as with so many other issues. And perhaps the ombudsman had an inkling of how unlikely it would be to get a decision from the previous Government, because the ombudsman made the recommendations on remedy to Parliament rather than to his Government.

The hon. Gentleman refers to Labour, to me and to other MPs on this side of the House, and I remind him that we voted against the acceleration in the rise of the state pension age that was put through by the coalition Government.

On re-examining the decision, I thought it was right to do so, to make absolutely sure that we got this right, considering not just the 2007 report but a whole range of evidence and documents. I have repeated my predecessor's apology for the maladministration found by the ombudsman. There is no change in our position on the triple lock, and the figures quoted reflect the estimates of the Office for Budget Responsibility throughout the Parliament.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I am sure my right hon. Friend appreciates the enormous disappointment on this side of the House. Only two years before the general election, our now Prime Minister spoke in favour of a just settlement for WASPI women. I acknowledge that my right hon. Friend says that this was not in the manifesto on which we all stood, and that we did not make that promise, but he will recognise the real sense that an injustice has been done to these women. Today has not remediated that.

Pat McFadden: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question, and I understand what he says, but it is also important to consider exactly what is at issue here. Many people are unhappy with the rise in the state pension age and the decision to equalise it, and this decision does not deal with that. The decision deals with the specific issue of how it was communicated over a specific period of time. It is really important to separate those two things. I believe that, on that ground, we have considered it very carefully—not just once but twice—and given it due and proper process. It is right to apologise for the maladministration, but I believe the decision we have taken on remedy and compensation is the correct one.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I met the Secretary of State a few weeks ago, and we reflected on his being a fan of Celtic and Bruce Springsteen, but I was not aware that he is also a member of the Magic Circle. He is clearly trying to set up a number of illusions by saying that this is to do with particular issues and comments, but it is actually about whether these women were communicated with adequately.

I reflect on what other colleagues have said, and it is about injustice. Being elected as an MP—though, as a Liberal Democrat, I was somewhat disappointed not to be a member of the Government—is about seeking out and tackling injustice, yet the Secretary of State is putting this in the “too hard to do” file. The more than 3.6 million WASPI women across the UK will feel this as if it were a punch in the stomach. They will feel utterly betrayed, because false hope was given to them in the autumn. That hope has been dashed.

I thank the more than 100 MPs from across the United Kingdom who supported the letter I co-ordinated calling for justice for WASPI women, but sadly it fell on stony ground. What engagement did the Secretary of State have with the ombudsman before coming to his final conclusions, and will he please explain further why he has chosen to ignore the ombudsman's recommendation to give justice to WASPI women and pay compensation?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is certainly right about my allegiance to both Celtic and Bruce Springsteen, but there is no illusion about the position of the Liberal Democrats. He says, with a tinge of regret, that he wishes that they were in government, but they were in government—and that is the point. In 2011, they took the decision to accelerate the equalisation and raising of the state pension age, so they were in a position to take decisions on it.

At the heart of this issue is something different: how the decisions were communicated and whether people could have done something differently. The hon. Gentleman asks about engagement with the ombudsman. I have, of course, looked at the report, and the current ombudsman recently met the permanent secretary. As I said in my statement, we will pick up the work that was paused on the action plan so that in future when we consider the state pension age we fully consider not only the policy but all aspects of communication and the period of warning—things which were distinctly not done when the decision to accelerate the state pension age was taken by the coalition Government.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows just how disappointing many will find this statement, particularly the WASPI women who feel so strongly the injustice that they have suffered. I appreciate that he has set out the reasons in principle and in practice and explained how the Labour Government will support low-income pensioners, but I want to talk about the personal aspect. I suspect that the Secretary of State, like me and many other Members, started full-time work in his twenties that was not physically arduous. I think of a constituent of mine who started work aged 15—hard, physical work—and found herself required to continue working many years after she expected to have retired and as her health deteriorated. What help and support can the Secretary of State offer her?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to say that as the state pension age has gone up, the way people have been affected is influenced by the kind of lives they have led and the toughness of the work that they have done. But that argument is about the raising of the state pension age, and while I appreciate that a lot of the correspondence has been about that, it is a different issue from the one that the ombudsman was looking at. In terms of our policy, the exactly reason why we have pension credit is to help lower-income pensioners; it is why we put it in place in 2003, and it is why we have put extra effort into making sure that the benefit is taken up by those who are entitled to it.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Secretary of State is a fellow west midlands Member of Parliament, and he will know Shropshire very well. Many WASPI women born in the 1950s from my constituency will be very disappointed by today's announcement. He talks about miscommunication and maladministration but, of course, says little about compensation, which means that the injustice continues. Could he give a little more detail on how the action plan will assuage some of the anger that will no doubt have come about as a result of this disappointing non-announcement? What real help can be given to WASPI women in different ways, including those who do not qualify for and are not entitled to pension credit?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to my west midlands colleague for his question. He talks about disappointment. The shadow Minister could have, in the time allocated to him, promised to take a different decision were the Conservatives ever to return to power. They had the chance to take a different decision when they were in power, but they chose to not even respond to the report let alone outline what the decision might be.

On the action plan and specifically what it will cover, two things are at the heart of it: communications and the handling of complaints. If we are to raise the state pension age in the country over time, it is important that we get the communications right. That is what we want to do, and I will work with the ombudsman going forward.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): There are 300,000 WASPI women in Yorkshire and 6,500 in my constituency. In Yorkshire we believe that politicians should say what they mean and mean what they say. Labour opposed the proposal when it was first introduced. Our leading spokesman continued to say that Labour wanted to and would deliver justice to the WASPI women. This is not justice.

For the many women in my constituency and elsewhere who I have met and discussed this issue with, the idea that there would be an accelerated process of getting to a higher pension age came like a bolt out of the blue. They had no idea that it was coming so quickly. It disrupted families' plans and the financial structures of their lives. It was a disgrace, and it was introduced by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The Government still have a chance to put this right, and I say this to the Minister: he has not heard the end of this problem or of the voices of the WASPI women.

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to remind the House that we were opposed to the acceleration. We voted against it and opposed many policies of the coalition Government and the Tory Governments who were in power over the past 14 years. He is also right to say that five years' notice was not enough; that is why we voted to oppose it, and when it comes to our responsibilities now, it is why we have put such stress on looking after pensions properly and maintaining the value of the basic state pension. I outlined what that would mean for this Parliament in my statement. For poorer pensioners, we are making sure that there is maximum take-up of pension credit so that people can access the benefits to which they are entitled.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the Government's apology for the maladministration and the Minister's clarity today, but many Salisbury WASPI women will be very disappointed by the decision. Could the Secretary of State say a little more about what options he looked at to compensate the poorest, most vulnerable of the WASPI women? I recognise that the enormous cost would be too much overall, but what options did he pursue? When I was in government, the option to withdraw the winter fuel payment was one that I resisted, because of the impracticalities of doing it fairly. What options were put to him, and could he not have compensated the poorest? I think many would have been sympathetic to that.

Pat McFadden: I have great respect for the right hon. Member. He will have considered some of these issues in government because of his long service as a Treasury

Minister. I like the right hon. Gentleman a lot, but I have to say that he could have taken decisions on this when the Conservatives were in power.

On the right hon. Gentleman's question about the lowest-income pensioners, I repeat what I said in my statement: the problem with any flat-rate scheme is that it will compensate people who knew about the state pension age rise as well as those who did not. The reason we have pension credit is precisely so that pensioners who are living on particularly low incomes have access to another benefit. We introduced pension credit back in 2003, and since we came back into office in 2024 we have put extra effort into making sure that it is taken up. That has resulted in tens of thousands of additional pensioners having access to pension credit.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I should declare an interest as a 1950s-born woman. This is a disappointing statement, and I can only associate myself with the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), which I do not always do. I take the opportunity to thank all the WASPI women who have been campaigning and working so hard on this issue with many of us. How has this decision been communicated to the WASPI group?

Pat McFadden: I agree with my hon. Friend that, as I have said, the WASPI women have run an energetic, sustained campaign that has made a big impact on Members. We can see that from the questions being asked. On the communication, as soon as it became clear that there was relevant evidence that had not been shown to my predecessor, I decided to retake the decision, looking not just at that but at a wider body of evidence. I came to the House in November to inform Members that I would do that. I also told Mr Speaker and the House that when I had gone through the process and reached a conclusion I would come back at the earliest opportunity and announce those conclusions. That is exactly what I am doing today.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): The ombudsman's ruling in March recommended that some women should get a payout and an apology. Now the WASPI women in my constituency have another apology, but they have not received a penny in compensation for the maladministration found by the ombudsman. Why have the Government chosen to accept one half of the recommendations—I think it is probably the easy half—but not the other? At £1,000 to £2,950 for each woman, it is hardly a high cost for justice in the grand scheme of Government funding considerations.

Pat McFadden: As I say, we accept the finding of maladministration. On the difference earlier communications would have made, particularly to those who knew the least about the increase in their state pension age, all the survey evidence in the round suggests that a majority of women knew the state pension age was increasing. The hon. Lady minimises the up to £10 billion that it would cost for a compensation scheme. I do not want to be excessively partisan today, but it is the easiest thing to come here every day to call for billions for this and billions for that and then oppose all the revenue-raising measures that have to be put through in any Budget. This is not a situation where we should do that and

simply add to that pattern. It is a substantial amount of money. If we were to go down that road, we would end up compensating a significant number of women who knew that their state pension age was increasing and to whom no injustice has been done.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that the evidence shows that the vast majority of 1950s-born women already knew that the state pension age was increasing. I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist), am also a 1950s-born woman. Does the Secretary of State honestly think there would have been such a massive campaign over all these years by WASPI women and their supporters if they believed that that was true and that they knew about their pensions? With particular reference to the 1954 women who were treated so unjustly by the coalition Government, surely the Secretary of State believes that they deserve compensation for the terrible shock they received back in 2011.

Pat McFadden: A decision document relating to the evidence that I have considered has been placed in the Library of the House, which sets all that out together with various surveys, all of which are in the public domain and which were considered in the course of my reaching the decision. I think the campaign is understandable because of the steep acceleration that was legislated for by the coalition Government. We opposed that at the time. The lesson for the future is to give good notice and predictability about rises in the state pension age. That is at the heart of the action plan that we are working on with the ombudsman.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Secretary of State's colleagues stood with WASPI women holding boards saying, "We support the WASPI women" and "We support compensation for the WASPI women". He now stands at the Dispatch Box holding his hands up and saying, "I am very sorry that the previous Administration forgot to send out a letter, but we are not going to do anything about it because it would not have made a difference anyway." Has he listened to the voices of WASPI women who have come to every single one of us and said, "I did not get that letter"? They said, "I did not know that the state pension age was increasing and I found myself"—as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah) said—"having to work in a physical job far longer than I ever expected because I was not given notice." Is that the change that the Labour Government promised when they came in last year?

Pat McFadden: I will defend to the hilt our protection of the state pension, our increase in the state pension of £575 for the new state pension from April and our extra help for poorer pensioners. There was a wide range of communications about this matter. Letters are one, but not the only, part of that. When we take into account the survey evidence as a whole, we find that most people knew that the state pension age was increasing. If the hon. Lady wants to pledge compensation in some way, she is entitled to do that, as I said to the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt). We have looked at the evidence in the round. I repeat the apology for the maladministration, but I think we have reached the right decision today.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is a very serious individual and his statement was very serious. It helpfully enumerated that the majority of pensioners on lower incomes are women and that women make up the majority of those depending on pension credit. The anger that WASPI women feel about the steep increase in age is very understandable. Many of those women paid what my mother used to call "the small stamp", which makes their situation even more vulnerable. I accept that the Secretary of State's statement is largely about the ombudsman's decision. Will he indicate what conversations he has had with the ombudsman, specifically about why he made that recommendation? Will he also tell the Chamber what communication he has had with the WASPI women about his decision?

Pat McFadden: We are often encouraged to make our statements to Parliament first and that is what I have done. When I announced in November that I was retaking the decision, I made that statement to Parliament first and pledged that when I had reached a conclusion I would come back to announce it in Parliament first. That is the right way to communicate this decision.

My hon. Friend talked about women who paid "the small stamp". That is right, and that is why we have moved away from the old system to a new state pension for the future. For the majority of pensioners on lower incomes, I stress again the importance of pension credit and our efforts to make sure that those pensioners who are entitled to it, the majority of whom are women, take advantage of their entitlement and make the application. That is what it is there for: to help lower-income pensioners.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I have thousands of WASPI women in my constituency, which is already very deprived. I cannot express how angry and disappointed they feel today. I am afraid that I will have to use strong language: this is simply gaslighting by this Labour Government. They know full well that it was not about whether the letters were sent earlier; it is about whether they were sent at all. Does the Secretary of State not need to accept that point?

Pat McFadden: It is right to focus on exactly what this is about and what it is not. We opposed the acceleration of the change to the state pension age. The ombudsman looked at the specific issue of when letters were sent over a specific time period, so I feel that I have been accurate in the statement I have made today. If we go back to the 2011 decision, the lesson for the future is that increases in the state pension age should be announced in good time, so that people have the chance to prepare. That is a policy decision; that is not the specific decision about communication that the ombudsman examined.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): This Government have rightly taken action for Hillsborough victims and sub-postmasters affected by the Post Office scandal, and on the mineworkers' pension scheme, yet this situation seems to have been put in the "too hard to deal with" box. Why does my right hon. Friend think that these women should accept this outcome, and why is it always women who seem to get the rough end of the deal?

Pat McFadden: I know that the equalisation of the state pension age has produced quite a lot of opposition. The 2011 decision was too quick; that is why we opposed it at the time. On the issue of compensation to which my hon. Friend refers, if we were to compensate everyone in this age group, we would end up compensating a significant number of people who knew that their state pension age was increasing. We do not think that would be the right and fair thing to do, and that is why we have reached the conclusion that I have announced.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the 5,000 WASPI women in my constituency, I must register my deep concerns about the way that people are hiding behind the ombudsman's report, and saying, "No, we can't help the WASPI women." The WASPI women back home speak to me every week about this subject. They ask, "Jim, what's happening now? Where are we?" Unfortunately, the most vulnerable people, including the elderly and disabled people who have waited all this time, have nothing; I need to put that on the record. Some who are listening to the case that the Secretary of State has made will ask, "What does that actually mean?" The WASPI women need some explanation; is there some way of giving them that?

The last point the Secretary of State made was about the pension uplift, pension credit, and how they can help. Can I suggest one other way that the Government could help those people? It would not be in any way a fallback case, but it would be something. When it comes to self-assessment and letters, WASPI women and those over a certain age find it incredibly hard to go online. There has to be some methodology, so that elderly people can know that every penny they get will not be lost in tax beforehand. There must be a methodology and a system, rather than elderly people having to go online, which they cannot do.

Pat McFadden: I remind the House that by the end of this Parliament, due to our commitment to increase the basic state pension, we will be spending an estimated £30 billion a year more on the state pension. That is testament to our commitment to maintaining the value of the basic state pension and ensuring that people have a good and decent retirement. That is, of course, for the hon. Member's constituents as much as for any other Members' constituents.

On the full reasoning behind the decision, there is a full decision document, which I have deposited in the Library of the House today. That is available to the hon. Member. On online and face-to-face services, he is right that it is important that when people access a benefit, they can do so through a range of channels, so that people do not lose out for the reasons that he gave.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and the repeated apology on behalf of the Government, but like many Labour Members and other Members across the House, I have long supported WASPI women. I commend the WASPI women in west Lothian and Falkirk for their perseverance over many years. I have spoken to several women who have experienced significant financial hardship and emotional and physical strain, and I share their undoubted disappointment today. Has he considered

the impact of the decision on perceptions and, indeed, the efficacy, of the ombudsman, which recommended that compensation be paid?

Pat McFadden: We take the role of the ombudsman very seriously. The report was fully and properly considered, but decisions on a compensation scheme of this scale will always, in the end, be for Ministers and Government to take, and I think that is the right and understandable approach.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I have no doubt that my 6,000 WASPI women will be very angry about this decision. Will today's announcement mean that the legal proceedings challenging the Government's original decision will continue? What plans do we have, if any, to get round the table and try to avoid legal proceedings?

Pat McFadden: The initiation of legal proceedings is not a decision for me, and I cannot predict what will happen in future legal proceedings; that is a matter for others. My responsibility is to set out our decision to Parliament in the proper way, and I believe that in the statement that I gave in November, and in the one that I have given today, I have done that, and have given the House our reasons.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): In my constituency, I have 5,400 women affected by this decision. Not all of them know about it; my mum sort of shrugged her shoulders and went, "Oh, okay," but some women do know, and they will be listening today and will be really disappointed. I was proud to put my name to, and campaign for, the brilliant support that the Government offered on the mineworkers' pension scheme and the British Coal staff superannuation scheme—there were hundreds of beneficiaries in my constituency—but it looks like we are letting down women of a certain age, women who were so frequently on the back foot. The message sounds like, "It's a little bit too tricky to address." While I acknowledge that paying £10.3 billion in flat-rate payments might not be the right thing to do, is there not something we can do to acknowledge the campaigning of these women, whom we have supported for many years?

Pat McFadden: I mentioned the difficulties of a flat-rate scheme, but an individual scheme also would face great practical difficulties, which I set out in my statement. We would have to ascertain who did and did not get a letter, who can remember getting a letter, what they would have done differently, and so on. There are great practical difficulties in doing that, and there are difficulties in having a flat-rate scheme.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is an extremely significant matter to announce on a Thursday, when the House is usually light in attendance, with limited notice, and with a very detailed document having been lodged in the House of Commons Library. Through your offices, and through liaison with those on the Treasury Bench, can time be found over the next fortnight for a full and comprehensive debate on this issue? I know that when I get back to my constituency, there will be many very angry people who feel let down, if not betrayed. Members need the opportunity to reflect the concerns of their constituents here.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The timing of statements is a matter for the Government. However, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard his point of order. There is also the avenue open to him of applying for a Backbench Business debate.

Prison Capacity: Annual Statement

12.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on prison capacity.

Today, the Government are publishing the second annual statement on prison capacity, a copy of which will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The statement reflects this Government's determination to be open and honest about the state of our justice system—not to hide the problems or downplay the pressure, but to face reality and act decisively.

Today's annual statement sets out the latest prison population projections and supply forecasts, and the picture that it paints is clear: our prisons are still under severe strain. The risks that we inherited from our predecessors have not vanished overnight, and the figures show that, without this Government's action, which was opposed by the Conservatives and Reform every step of the way, our law and order system would be in crisis today, with criminals allowed to roam the streets, and victims failed. For the first time in a very long time, we are no longer forecasting a chronic deficit in prison places. When the impact of this Government's landmark sentencing reforms is taken into account, supply is now expected to keep pace with demand in our central projected scenario. That is real progress, but let me be absolutely clear: this is no time for complacency. The system remains under considerable pressure, the margin for error is slim, and the work to stabilise it is far from finished. The statement only furthers the Government's determination to fix the system fundamentally.

Let us remember where we came from. This Government inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse. At one point in 2024, there were fewer than 100 places left across the entire adult male estate. Had we allowed prisons to overflow—a risk the Conservative party was happy to take—courts would have been forced to suspend trials, police would have been unable to make arrests, and criminals would have been left to run amok on the streets of this country, as we would have been forced to release thousands of offenders as an emergency measure, the previous Government having left no proper plan in place. We were just one bad day—a protest turned ugly or a surge in defendants in custody awaiting trial—from a total collapse of the criminal justice system. This is not alarmism; that was a dangerously real possibility, and it was the direct legacy of 14 years of neglect by the previous Tory Government. In more than a decade, only 500 prison places, net, were added, while demand surged relentlessly.

The shadow Justice Secretary, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), whom I welcome to his place, had a role in this sorry mess. In 2016 and 2017, when he was chief of staff to the then Prime Minister, his Tory Government closed 262 more prison places than they opened. Now, in opposition, they oppose every action to fix the problem that they caused. In short, doing nothing—as advocated by the Tories and Reform—would have risked the total breakdown of law and order in this country. We know that the previous Government chose to stick their head in the sand and not face up to the crisis that they had created, but we

[*Jake Richards*]

cannot ignore this. The alternative—doing nothing—would have been a reckless gamble with public safety, which no responsible Government could countenance.

That is why, in September 2024, when we were faced with the immediate risk of gridlock, we took decisive emergency action. We changed the automatic release point for certain standard determinate sentences from 50% to 40%, to ease the intolerable pressure on the system. That was not an easy decision, but it was the responsible one. Emergency action bought us time, and, in December 2024, we set out our 10-year prison capacity strategy—the most ambitious prison-building programme since the Victorian era. We committed up to £7 billion towards the delivery of 14,000 additional prison places by 2031.

Today's statement shows that that commitment is not just rhetoric, but a reality that the Government are driving forward. Since July 2024, we have delivered around 2,900 additional prison places, including by opening HMP Millsike in March 2025, and a new house block at HMP Fosse Way in December. Around 5,000 more places are now under construction, including new house blocks at existing prisons, and a brand-new prison in Leicestershire, HMP Welland Oaks, is due to open in 2029. [*Interruption.*] Major infrastructure projects always carry risk, but based on the latest assessments, the Government have retained our delivery target of 14,000 new places by 2031 —[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am interested in hearing what the Minister has to say, as are our constituents.

Jake Richards: I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We cannot just build our way out of this problem. Without further reform, the prison population is projected to rise by around 3,000 people every year, outstripping supply even while the largest prison-building programme in generations is under way. That is why wholesale reform is essential. This Government had the courage to act. First, we launched the independent sentencing review, led by former Lord Chancellor David Gauke. Secondly, thanks to that work, we delivered the landmark Sentencing Act 2026, which will ensure that punishment works to cut crime and protect the British public.

Those reforms are about being smart, responsible and honest about what works. They will keep dangerous offenders off our streets, end the revolving door of less serious offenders going in and out of prison, and put victims first, with tougher and more credible punishments outside prison. The provisions in that Act include a presumption in favour of suspending short custodial sentences for less serious offenders, which we know do not work in many cases. Almost 60% of those jailed for less than a year reoffend within 12 months—that means more crime and more victims. This reform is expected to have a particular effect on women in prison. Nearly 80% of women who receive custodial sentences spend mere weeks in prison, which causes huge problems for their prospects of rehabilitation and costs the taxpayer millions. We can do much better.

For offenders who do go to prison, their release will depend on their behaviour while inside. Release at the earlier point will be theirs to lose, and those who behave

badly can be kept in for longer, right up until the end of their sentence. That model is based on the one used in Texas, where crime is down, prisons are being closed and the taxpayer is saving money. When offenders are released, they will face a strengthened licence period, with swift recall to custody if they step out of line. New strict licence conditions, such as banning alcohol-fuelled offenders from pubs or keeping troublemakers away from football matches, will be tailored to risk. More offenders will be forced to pay back their debt to victims and the communities that they have harmed, through financial penalties or unpaid work. Taken together, those reforms are expected to reduce the prison population by around 7,500 places by 2028, while improving outcomes for victims and keeping the public safe. To take that further, the Act will also make it quicker and easier to deport foreign national offenders from our prison estate. We have already seen a dramatic increase in the number of foreign national offenders leaving our country under this Labour Government, and the Acts that we have passed will expedite that ambition.

Let us be abundantly clear: today's figures also show that the Labour Government will keep more prisoners behind bars than ever before by the end of the Parliament—a sustainable system keeping the public safe. We cannot solve this capacity crisis if we do not support our Probation Service, which lies at the heart of these reforms. Probation officers supervise some of the most complex and challenging individuals in our justice system. If sentencing reform is to work, probation must be strong, professional and properly supported. That is why the statement also sets out the state of probation capacity—caseloads, workforce and the action that we are taking to strengthen it. The Government are investing up to £700 million more in probation and community services by the end of the Parliament—a 45% increase on current funding, and the largest ever investment in community justice. In so doing, we are delivering on Sentencing Act provisions, workforce growth and expanded electronic monitoring. At least 1,300 trainee probation officers will be recruited in 2025-26. By September 2027, probation officer staffing levels are expected to have risen to around 6,500.

There is no disguising the challenge ahead. There is an inevitable time lag before new officers can carry full, complex caseloads independently, but the Government are committed to rebuilding probation for the long term, and we are using innovative solutions to assist us. More than 30 digital and artificial intelligence initiatives are under way, including Justice Transcribe, which has already reduced the time spent on note-taking by around 50%, allowing officers to focus on the vital face-to-face work that turns lives around and protects the public.

As we promised in last year's statement, the Government have, through the Sentencing Act, made the publication of this annual statement a statutory requirement. That locks in transparency, forces evidence-based decision making, and holds future Governments to account. Those steps mark a turning point. This landmark reform was never a choice; it was a necessity—doing nothing was never an option. We are increasing capacity, strengthening accountability and tackling problems in our criminal justice system that have been ignored for far too long. The Government are determined to ensure that Britain never again faces a situation in which there are more prisoners than prison places. Only this Government have been willing to take the tough decisions,

invest at scale and reform the system to protect the public. We are facing this challenge head-on, and we will see it through. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.49 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): This is my first chance to speak about prisons as shadow Justice Secretary, and I want to get straight to the point: prison works. By taking dangerous and repeat criminals off the streets, prison works. By punishing people who have done wrong, prison works. By sending a clear message that if someone is thinking of committing a crime, they will face consequences, prison works. So when the Government produce sound plans to increase prison capacity, we will support them, but let us cut the spin from the substance in that statement.

The Minister seems to want a medal for letting criminals out of prison early, and what he said about the new prison places created since the election was utter nonsense. Those places were inherited from the last Government. All he and his colleagues are doing is turning up to new prisons to cut the ribbon. Millsike, Fosse Way, Welland Oaks and other prisons he did not boast about were all set up and funded before the Minister and I were even elected to this House.

The Minister pretends that the plan for 14,000 new prison places by 2031 is some radical new departure, but that number depends entirely on the thousands of places from new prisons and houseblocks started under the last Government. Let me read his answer to a question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty):

“No new prisons have been (a) planned or (b) approved since 5 July 2024.”

It is a pity he was not so candid in his statement just now. What about the milestones in creating the new prison places? What will be the consequences if Ministers fail to reach them? Is the Minister satisfied that the planning framework, as changed by this Government, will mean no delays in construction? How many projects have been stopped since the construction company ISG went bust? If he cannot rule out delays, what is his plan B? Can he promise the public that there will be no extension to Labour’s early release scheme? The crime statistics out today show that sex offences are up by 8% and shoplifting is up by 5% compared with last year, but with Labour’s sentencing policies, many of these criminals will avoid going to prison altogether.

What about the performance of the Prison Service? For all the talk of transparency today, at no point did the Minister admit that prison officer numbers are down under this Government by 468. Will he confirm that fact? With reports today that record numbers of offenders are being recalled to prison, will the Minister comment on the serious allegation made by the Prison Officers Association that many criminals are breaching their probation terms so that they can return to prison to sell drugs?

On the deportation of foreign criminals, there was another statistical sleight of hand. Deportation numbers under this Government remain roughly in line with the average of the coalition and Conservative years in office and are lower in half of those years.

Jake Richards indicated dissent.

Nick Timothy: That is true. But I agree that those numbers remain too low, because we should be deporting all the foreign criminals in our prisons. Can the Minister confirm that that is also his aim, and can he tell us how he will stop the European convention on human rights getting in the way? The Opposition are clear that we will leave the ECHR. Will he condemn the actions of his boss, the Justice Secretary, who in opposition actively campaigned against the deportation of foreign rapists?

Finally, I want to ask the Minister a question of principle. He told a journalist this week:

“a pretty big chunk of the overall population... shouldn’t be in prison”.

His colleague Lord Timpson says that only a third of prisoners should be locked up. These are my most important questions, and the Minister needs to answer them clearly: is it true that only a third of prisoners should definitely be behind bars, and will he say very clearly that he agrees with me that prison works?

Jake Richards: I welcome the new shadow Justice Secretary to his place; I hope he can do a better job than his predecessor. Let me deal with his last question first. If he had read what I said in that interview carefully, he would know that I was talking about the Youth Custody Service; I was not talking about the adult estate. I urge him to go back and read that interview and perhaps come to the House to correct the record.

On the issue of whether prison works, prison can work. I was abundantly clear in the statement that at the end of this Parliament, under this Labour Government, there will be more criminals in prison than ever before, so prison can work. But I gently urge the shadow Justice Secretary to delve a little deeper and look at short-term sentences, for example. Is it the Conservatives’ position today, which it was not by the end of their time in government, that short-term sentences should not be reformed at all? It was proposed in legislation put forward by the Conservative Government in their final year in office that never saw the light of day because of the general election to make exactly the same changes we are making now—but now they oppose it. I am afraid that the Conservative position on sentencing is all over the place.

When it comes to prison building, the Conservatives expect to get some praise for panicking in their last year of government, realising that they had not done anything for 13 years, that they had underfunded prisons and that places were not keeping up with demand, so they started doing something about it. But none of those places was delivered under a Conservative Government. Unless I am hallucinating, I have been to these sites—I opened them; I put the shovel in the ground. It is a Labour Government who are delivering where the Tories completely failed.

On foreign national offenders, I do not accept the figures that the hon. Gentleman set out today. Foreign national offender deportations are up under the Labour Government. Through the Sentencing Act 2026, which the Conservatives opposed, we are making it far easier to deport foreign national offenders.

The Conservative Opposition have a real problem. They oppose every single step this Government are taking to solve the crisis they created, and then they step up and moan about it. They should support us.

[*Jake Richards*]

We are getting on with the job—we are reforming sentencing, building prison places and making sure the prison system is fit for the future. They should support us, rather than moaning from the sidelines.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The prison population is comprised in significant part of cohorts of prisoners who, for a variety of reasons, should not be there in current numbers. That includes prisoners serving indeterminate sentences for public protection, foreign national offenders, remand prisoners and, according to press reports today, record numbers of recalled offenders, only around 20% of whom have committed new offences. What more can the Government do to reduce the numbers in prison without any threat to public safety? Should the annual statement not also include statistics on rehabilitation, as the Justice Committee called for in its recent report? In the long term, stopping reoffending is the surest method of controlling prison numbers, so will the Minister comment on the hugely disappointing news in his response to our report that core education in prisons—one of the keys to rehabilitation—is being cut by an average of 20% to 25%?

Jake Richards: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Let me deal with the education point up front. There has not been a cut to the overall education budget, but it is right to say that there are challenges because the cost of the contract has increased. We are looking at making proposals about how we can ensure that education provision has the appropriate amount of resource. We will make further announcements in due course, and of course, we have an ongoing dialogue with the Select Committee.

On my hon. Friend's central point about the number of people in prison who some people feel do not need to be in prison, as the provisions in the Sentencing Act—which received Royal Assent just last week—come into force, they will have an effect on some of that population. We have had a regular dialogue about IPP prisoners. Lord Timpson in the other place is leading on that issue and continues to take that cohort under review.

On foreign national offenders, as I have just said to the shadow Justice Secretary, this Government are taking more action than the last Government, and the legislation we have just passed will make it easier to take further action. We have conversations all the time with other nations about prisoner transfer agreements, which will make it far easier and safer to deport foreign national offenders. This is not the end of the way; the Sentencing Act is just the beginning. As I set out in my statement, we continue to work hard to ensure we are never again in the situation we were in 2024.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): This Government inherited a justice system in a shambles after years of Conservative complacency and mismanagement. Overcrowding, administrative failures and cuts to vital services mean the Ministry of Justice too often appears

to be moving from one crisis to the next as it tries to fix an entire justice system that has been broken for a long time. We in the Liberal Democrats welcome the long-term provisions the Government have made to reduce pressure on the system, such as the presumption against short sentences and investment in capacity. It is clear from today's statement that those provisions in the Sentencing Act will have a meaningful impact on demand for prison places in coming years, but I have some questions for the Minister.

The proportion of female prisoners serving less than 12 months is four times that of the male population. Given the presumption against custody introduced by the Sentencing Act, can the Minister outline what, if any, work is being undertaken to consider the capacity that may be freed up in the female prison estate?

The report outlines the Government's ambition to secure new land for the provision of future prison builds. Can the Minister outline a timeline for that, and for when prison places that are currently under construction will come online?

The Minister laid out plans to increase the number of probation officers to 6,500 by 2027. The retention of officers has been a long-standing issue within the probation system, which has been compounded in recent years by the uptick in less experienced staff. Will he set out what measures the Department will take to improve retention, and whether the Government will meet the HM Prison and Probation Service staffing level of 7,114 officers by the end of this Parliament?

The Minister rightly said that reducing reoffending is key to easing long-term pressure on the system. Education is central to that ambition, as it provides prisoners with the skills they need to rejoin society after their sentences end and avoid making the same mistakes again. Yet prison education is being cut, not strengthened, as the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), said. In fact, last month the independent monitoring board wrote to the Prisons Minister outlining the impact that real-terms cuts beyond inflation rates were having on education. Will the Minister before us please explain how the Government expect to deliver a rehabilitative system and reduce reoffending while prison boards are being forced to make dramatic cuts to education budgets?

Jake Richards: I welcome the hon. Member's questions. As I set out in the statement, the issue of short-term sentences disproportionately affects female prisoners. As I recall, the average sentence that a female prisoner faces when they are sentenced to less than 12 months is around seven weeks, which is often completely absurd and can affect the prisoner and her family detrimentally and not lead to rehabilitation. Our policies on short-term sentences are a massive part of what we trying to do around that cohort. Lord Timpson is leading on the women's justice board, which is looking at provisions for us to assist that particular cohort, who often have very particular needs.

On prison places, of course there is always market volatility. As the House knows, the Government are trying to build 1.5 million houses, and we have a commitment to invest in infrastructure. That is always complex. It can be too difficult at times, and we are trying to change that. Part of the reason for having this annual statement is to make sure that any Government

are held to account for the prison places to which they have committed. We have committed to building and delivering 14,000 by 2030, and I am confident that we will do that.

On probation officers, the hon. Member is right to raise the issue of retention. We are having regular conversations with the relevant trade unions, and of course meeting probation officers on a regular basis is a very important part of my job and that of all Justice Ministers. That work is ongoing and we hope to be able to update the House on it shortly.

I understand the hon. Member's point on education. We are undertaking a lot of work in this area, often working with the third sector. There is no point in pretending that there is no fiscal pressure in the justice system at the moment. Our twin focus is on ensuring that we solve the prison capacity crisis and deal with the court backlog, but we will make sure that we support educational provision in our prisons wherever possible.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I support the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) about there being too many people in prison who should not be there. Part of the problem with prison capacity is that our laws on joint enterprise mean that someone can be convicted of a serious crime without having made a significant contribution to that crime, often leading to multiple people serving mandatory life sentences when only one person was guilty. Locking up multiple people results in a lack of prison capacity, so does the Minister agree that we need urgent reform of joint enterprise laws so that only those who make a significant contribution to a crime can be found guilty?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend has been a champion on this issue for a long time. I am very happy to meet with her and the group to discuss the complexities of the issue, because it is very complex. I will get my office to arrange that in due course.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that the release of prisoners will depend on their behaviour while inside. Can he confirm that his definition of good behaviour will include mandatory attendance at education and training, which should result in reduced reoffending, and can he advise the House how he will achieve that, given that the Government will commission 25% less education in the coming year? He says the reason for that is that the price has increased. Well, that is because the Government only contract very large quantity contracts. Were he to delegate those budgets to prison governors and give them the freedom to use local suppliers, rather than relying on two or three enormous providers that have the Government over a barrel, the price would fall.

Jake Richards: I am sympathetic to the argument that the hon. Member makes. We need to look at how we involve third sector and private sector organisations wherever possible, and we are looking at that. Clearly the adjudication process will be developed and implemented over the coming months, now that the Sentencing Act 2026 has received Royal Assent, but to my mind it is a welcome reform, based on the Texas model, which showed that it was possible to close prisons, reduce crime and save the taxpayer billions of dollars. We hope to achieve a similar outcome.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I remind Members of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a member of the POA.

I want to back up what the Minister said in retaliation to the shadow Justice Minister. Prison can indeed work, but words alone are not enough, and when a party is in office, it has to back them up with action and actually run the prison estate properly. I cannot convey in words just how dangerous the overcrowding got leading up to July 2024. I, for one, will never forget it, as I have said in this House many times. I think it is pretty brazen to come to this Chamber now and claim that all these places were a result of decisions taken in the Conservatives' last year in office. *[Interruption.]* Those decisions should have been taken a decade before. Having rushed them in the last year and literally left prisons at the point of collapse, the Conservatives have no jurisdiction to talk on this matter in the House today. *[Interruption.]*

I thank the Minister for his statement and ask whether he will meet me to discuss what more can be done to increase safety for staff in our prisons. I welcome the decision to introduce PAVA into the youth estate—another decision that was delayed by the Conservative party. I also ask him to look at the national care leavers strategy, because they are grossly overrepresented in our prison system. If we are to reduce the population, we need to look at that in the next 12 months.

Jake Richards: I always welcome my hon. Friend's contributions on this issue. I gently say to Conservative Members that perhaps when a former prison officer, who has worked on the frontline, is speaking in the House, they should listen rather than chunter and shout. *[Interruption.]*

I welcome what my hon. Friend said about PAVA. She will know that the former Justice Secretary introduced PAVA into the youth estate, it was challenged in the courts, and the High Court gave a judgment on that last week. There are absolutely no plans to change the current position, which under statute we will review in the summer of this year in any event. I am very happy to meet her to discuss care leavers and prison leavers, and how we can make sure that the system properly supports offenders as they re-enter society.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Almost one in six of the prison population is on remand, and more than 2,500, which is the population of all three prisons in Dorset plus the prison in Wiltshire, have been on remand for more than the custody time limit, including my constituent Liam. Many of them are not a flight or reoffending risk, and some may be innocent. Dealing with the backlog will help, but that will take time. Curfews and tags can be used for some of these people, which will create space more quickly but will require court capacity to hold more bail hearings. Will the Minister look at that option?

Jake Richards: The hon. Member will know that decisions on individual cases about remand and bail are for our independent judiciary. She is right that fundamentally this is about the backlog in our Crown courts. I look forward to the Liberal Democrats supporting legislation that will solve that issue in due course.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I thank the Minister for updating the House with this important annual statement. Unfortunately, the Jailhouse Café, which is a fantastic rehabilitation initiative for both prisoners and ex-prisoners on Portland, is set to close its doors in the next few days. Expia, the brilliant charity that runs the café, is currently not in a financial position to carry out essential repair works. The funding that it needs to fix up the café requires a 10-year occupancy agreement for the café building, which so far it has been unable to secure. I know that we can find a practical solution to this, so will the Minister work with me and Expia to find a simple solution that supports the Jailhouse Café to reopen later this year?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for his constituency, and in particular for its cafés, including this one—he has been telling me all about how important it is to the local community. I am very happy to meet him, and we will do everything we can to keep that café open.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): A Crown court judge in Shropshire recently referenced the county's "shoplifting epidemic". Page 6 of the Minister's statement says that

"more credible punishments outside prison...include a presumption to suspend short custodial sentences for less serious offenders—because we know these do not work."

Does the Minister accept that shoplifting is a crime; that it is not victim-free; and that in many circumstances, a custodial sentence might still be relevant? Despite the Sentencing Act 2026, the retailers and shopkeepers of Shropshire should know that when they go to work in the morning—getting up early, working hard and going to bed late at night—the profits they make are not going to walk out of the door with somebody who is shoplifting, getting away scot-free and getting a free pass from this Government.

Jake Richards: I was going to say that I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, but he sort of ruined it at the end. Shoplifting is a crime, and the Home Secretary made an announcement earlier this week about ensuring that we prosecute it. There is a presumption against short-term sentencing, but clearly we are not banning short-term sentences; they are vital in lots of cases, particularly in domestic abuse cases and for prolific offenders, which many shoplifters are.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement. He has said that the number of extra prison places created since July 2024 is 2,900, but can he say how many cells have been temporarily or permanently closed due to fire safety concerns and other maintenance issues? Can he also state what his Department anticipates will be the result of the Leveson review? Will the Justice Committee—on which I sit—receive his updated modelling, which includes these reforms, and will he come and speak to the Committee about these things?

Jake Richards: I am very happy to come and speak to the Justice Committee as and when invited. The hon. Member raises an important point about fire safety; I do not have the exact figures to hand, but there are

definitely issues with fire safety across the prison estate—of course, safety is the primary focus, but that has an effect on capacity and maintenance more generally. I am happy to write to her with those figures. As for the effect of part 1 of Leveson's report and the forthcoming part 2, the modelling and assessments will be set out as and when the legislation comes before the House, and I am sure they will be sent to the Justice Committee as well.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Regarding prison capacity, my understanding is that none of the 14,000 prison places that are planned is category A. Can the Minister confirm how much remaining capacity there currently is within the prison system at category A, and is he confident that there will be enough going forward?

Twelve prison projects, including the new prison in Buckinghamshire, were due to be delivered by ISG Construction Ltd before it went into administration, and both the major project portfolio programmes it was working on are red-rated within that. Can the Minister confirm that all 12 of those projects have recommenced, and that a new contractor is now delivering them?

Jake Richards: I will write to the hon. Gentleman on his last question—I just do not have the details, and I do not want to mislead him or the House on that particular case. As for high-security prisons, there is an ongoing workstream within the Department to look at the future of that estate, and we will update the House in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he accept that in their rush to free up space, the Government have missed the rehabilitation aspect that is essential to any real reform? How can the Government show prisoners a different way, teach them new skills and give them confidence in their ability to change when sentences are cut regardless of where they are in the rehabilitation process? Bearing in mind that Northern Ireland is similar to England and Wales, reoffending there is significantly higher among those serving short sentences, with approximately 51% of adults released from sentences of less than 12 months reoffending within a year.

Jake Richards: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He said that there was a rush to free up space—that was because we absolutely had to. If we had not freed up space in our prison system, the criminal justice system would have collapsed, so there definitely was a rush.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned rehabilitation. This Government are absolutely committed to rehabilitation—that is a thread throughout the Sentencing Act, which has just received Royal Assent. Thinking about my diary over the next few weeks, I am going to visit a literacy project in Doncaster and colleges that are linking up with prisons. We have to look at this issue creatively and holistically to make sure we have the services and resources in our prisons to offer educational and work programmes. As I said to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), there is no point pretending that there are not fiscal pressures in the criminal justice system at the moment. There are, and we have to think a bit creatively and work with partners to overcome those pressures.

First 1,000 Days of Life

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Health and Social Care Committee. Paulette Hamilton will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not the relevant Minister. Front Benchers may, however, take part in questioning.

1.15 pm

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): On behalf of the Health and Social Care Committee, it is a pleasure to present to the House our fifth report of this Parliament, which is on the subject of the first 1,000 days of life. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this statement. We chose this subject because this period of life is crucial for long-term health, educational outcomes and life chances, and because child health in this country is in an alarmingly poor state. As the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has stated, our children have some of the poorest health outcomes in Europe. That is why this report is so important, and why it is essential that we get this right.

We know that investment in early intervention is highly cost-effective, yet we continue to see rising obesity, uneven vaccination coverage and persistent inequalities. We therefore welcome the Government's expansion of the family hub network. However, we must be clear about the scale of the challenge those hubs are being asked to address—supporting a much broader range of children than the previous Sure Start system with fewer resources. That is why we have called on the Government to go further by ensuring access to family hubs in every community, underpinned by reliable, long-term funding. A single hub per county is simply insufficient and will leave families isolated. This must be matched by urgent action to restore the health visitor workforce, which is the backbone of early years care. Since 2015, numbers have fallen by 43%, leaving a shortfall of 5,000 posts. Caseloads remain dangerously high, sometimes exceeding 750 children. We have therefore called for a funded plan to recruit at least 1,000 additional health visitors.

The wider workforce is also critical. Health visitors are not the only key professionals involved in supporting children and their parents during that first 1,000-day period—midwives, children's nurses, general practitioners, early years practitioners, speech and language therapists, paediatricians and others all play incredibly important roles. The Government's forthcoming NHS 10-year workforce plan must include specific, funded targets for increasing the number of professionals working in early years roles, underpinned by updated modelling of future demand. However, we cannot focus solely on the NHS, as many of these professionals work outside it. That is why we have supported the call of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health for a children's health workforce strategy to address the staffing needs holistically.

Our report also addresses the serious decline in vaccination uptake. Vaccination is one of the most effective public health interventions, yet rates have fallen since 2012, with stark regional and ethnic disparities. It is indefensible that one child died of measles and 11 lost their lives to whooping cough in 2024. The Committee was also unimpressed by the Government's unwillingness to revisit their vaccination strategy. The Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), told us the strategy was "stabilising" vaccination numbers, but we need a strategy capable of reversing current trends. We have called on the Government to develop a new plan to reverse the decline and to reinstate the target of 95% coverage in the NHS planning guidance.

Finally, we need to ensure that the many agencies involved in supporting children at the start of life are all working towards the same goal and that it is easy for them to work together. Challenges in sharing data and the absence of a shared outcomes framework undermine accountability and strategic planning across local systems. We look forward to the Government's plans to publish a shared outcomes framework in April this year, which they must use as a tool to drive better integration and joint working, including between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education.

Every child deserves the best start in life. Failing to support children and their parents properly during those first 1,000 days is short-sighted, as it merely stores up problems for the future. However, if we get it right, we will create a generation that is healthier, better educated, ultimately wealthier and, most importantly, happier. I hope that this report and its recommendations can play a part in making that happen. I commend the report to the House.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): It was a pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend during our Committee's inquiry into the first 1,000 days of life. I was particularly struck by how, at this crucial period in a child's lifetime—for those who are not aware, the 1,000 days begins at the moment of conception and goes up until they are two years old—so many services that should basically be placing a hug around the family and around the child have instead been decimated. Those services come at a critical stage. I am grateful that the Minister for Early Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey), is on the Front Bench to hear the statement.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton) agree that if the Government does not grasp the scale of this challenge or accept our Committee's recommendations—I urge them to do so in full—we run the risk of undermining some of our reforms in special educational needs and disabilities? By investing in the early years and by taking the action that that my hon. Friend has outlined—we must ensure early intervention and that we rebuild the health visitor network, so that the families who need extra support and care are identified early and can be got into the network of family hubs to receive that support—the rest of our reforms, including to the SEND system, can go ahead. Without that investment, and without the Government taking heed of what our Committee has recommended, we run the very real risk of all that work being undermined.

Paulette Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for all the hard work she put into this report. It could not have been achieved without everybody on the team working so diligently. Family hubs are an incredibly valuable resource, and they deal with all the issues that she raises. The problem is that we just have not got enough of them. One per county will not do. If we are really talking about early prevention, working with families and raising standards of care, we need more family hubs and more healthcare professionals and paediatricians within those services. We need to ensure that we are looking at this holistically, and not just as a preventive measure.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement and the Health and Social Care Committee for all its work on this vital stage of childhood. Last year, the Education Committee published our report, “Solving the SEND Crisis”, which highlighted the following: the importance of early identification of special educational needs and disabilities; the absence, all too often, of health from the network of support that children with SEND need; the lack of accountability around these services; and, inconsistent access to expertise on SEND in early years settings. I welcome the Health and Social Care Committee’s call for a children’s health workforce strategy. Will my hon. Friend say more about how the Government can help to ensure that we have the early years workforce we need? Did the Committee look specifically at the question of accountability for health services in delivering support for SEND?

Paulette Hamilton: My hon. Friend raises a crucial point. These services are just not joined up. We have got young children who, from birth to two and a half years old, are not getting the health services they need. They then go into the education system and are falling behind. The strategy is just not appropriate, as has been highlighted. As the Committee highlighted, we need a new strategy, and it must be joined up. We need a strategy that takes into account not just health issues, but education and care issues. Through that, we will incorporate all the professionals who are needed for that wraparound service to be delivered.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for today’s statement and for her excellent work in chairing the Committee’s important inquiry. It is much appreciated. There is much to welcome in this report. Colleagues have already touched on a number of the measures, so I will focus in particular on vaccination.

The state of vaccination rates in this country shocked me during the inquiry. I think we all came to accept the success, the prevalence and the uptake of vaccinations, but now, for a number of reasons—including disinformation, some of which comes from elements in this Chamber—vaccination rates have been declining across the board for many years. This week, the UK lost its measles elimination status, which is shameful and an indictment of the situation in which we have got ourselves.

In the light of that, does my hon. Friend agree that we need to accelerate things such as the health visitor pilot for delivering vaccinations? We heard positive things about that in the Committee, but progress has been slow. Does she agree that we need to accelerate those actions already in train? Does she agree that we should restore the World Health Organisation target of 95% vaccination uptake nationally? Finally, does she accept that the last Government’s vaccination strategy, developed in 2023, has clearly failed, considering where we are today? Does she think that the Government need to look again at a new national vaccination strategy so that we can get back to where we once were and then make more progress, ensuring that every child has the vaccination they need to protect them and to live a healthy and fulfilling life?

Paulette Hamilton: My hon. Friend is passionate about the administration of vaccinations, and he has asked quite a lot of questions. I absolutely agree with them all, but I will focus on his questions relating to health visitors and to having more of a strategy on vaccinations. I hope that everybody present has read the report, which states very clearly that health visitors have massive caseloads of over 750. That means they are not able to give children the time that they need. We have recommended that we employ 1,000 extra health visitors, but we have also noted in the report that health visitors have a statutory right to visit children five times until they get to the age of two and a half. We have said that we should increase that to a minimum of six visits, which is what already happens in Wales. The minimum number of visits in Scotland is 11, and I think it is nine in Northern Ireland—I apologise if I have got that figure wrong. England has the lowest number of visits in the United Kingdom, and it needs to be increased.

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we need to have more of a focus on vaccine levels, and to get the new strategy in place. Without a strategy, we are not going to get what we need in this area as quickly as we need it to happen.

Backbench Business

Holocaust Memorial Day

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Peter Prinsley, who will speak for up to 15 minutes.

1.32 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to be able to open this year's Holocaust memorial debate.

In *The Sunday Times* of the week before last, the Chief Rabbi described the dilemma of the teacher faced with the question of what to do on Holocaust Memorial Day. Given the polarising impact of the events of October 2023 and the terrible loss of life in Gaza, it may be simpler not to have an event at all this year. In 2023, 2,000 schools held events to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. Some 1,200 schools did so in 2024, 854 did so in 2025, and almost certainly there will have been fewer this year. The Chief Rabbi asked the question that we are all asking: as we lose the last survivors—the eye witnesses of the Holocaust—how will we keep our oft-repeated promise to them that we will never forget?

The Chief Rabbi speaks of the moral foundation of our society, and of how the Holocaust did not start from nothing. It started with a normalisation of division, prejudice and hatred, building on the oldest hatred of all. There is a warning here for all of us: do not imagine that it can never happen again in our time. That is why it is so important to remember, why I believe it is so important for us to build a national Holocaust memorial, and why I am so pleased that that was included in the Government's legislation. Let us get it done before the last eyewitnesses pass into the history books.

I have lived with my family in East Anglia for 30 years. I am a part of the Jewish community of Norwich, a member of the synagogue and a past president of the community. There is a beautiful restored synagogue and a small thriving community. The community was established in the 19th century following the arrival of Jewish people from Europe, who were largely fleeing discrimination and persecution. I am delighted that Mrs M. Leveton, aged 80-plus, and her husband Mr B. Leveton, aged 90-plus, were both awarded the British Empire Medal in the new year's honours for their lifelong service to the community.

However, ours is not the first Jewish community in Norwich. Jewish people came to England with the Normans. Communities formed in many cities under the protection of the Crown, at Norwich, Bury St Edmunds, King's Lynn and Thetford—all over the successfully growing economy of East Anglia. Moneylending was forbidden to Christians, so Jews began to work in finance and moneylending. A special Exchequer of the Jews was established by the Crown to collect taxes. Great chests with multiple locked clasps were made to keep Exchequer rolls and documents. There were five locks, with the keys held by Crown agents and local citizens so that they could only be opened together, to prevent any disagreements. Lately I discovered just such a chest in a church at North Creake.

The county archive in Norwich contains hundreds of medieval property leases and documents, many of which are written in Hebrew. They have curiously wavy and crenelated margins, for they were written in duplicates

to enable matching copies and ensure that there were no forgeries. These are called indentures. The leases have allowed a detailed map of the ancient city centre to be drawn, showing the location and the ownership of the houses, and the location of the synagogue, the school and the physician, for there were Jewish doctors in Norwich 1,000 years before I was appointed.

On King Street there is a great merchant's house, which still stands. It was the house of Isaac Jurnet. It is the oldest house of Jewish habitation in England, and the vaulted crypt is unaltered since the time of Jurnet, who was the financier of the cathedral and much else besides. The house is presently in need of restoration, and there is a plan to create a centre for the study of antisemitism with the department of Jewish studies at the university. Never has this been more essential.

Which country in Europe was the first to expel the Jews? It was right here in Parliament, in 1290, that King Edward decreed that the Jews must leave. They were not allowed to return until the time of Oliver Cromwell, hundreds of years later. We should not imagine that this is a uniquely German idea; this is an ancient hatred and, with the leave of the House, I will tell Members something about it. It was in Norwich, in 1140, that the Jews were falsely accused of murdering a boy called William to use his blood for sacrifice—something that Jews never do. This is the infamous blood libel, which sparked antisemitic hatred all over England and echoes throughout the ages, even to this day.

Some 20 years ago, a shopping centre was under construction. A medieval well full of skeletons was revealed—17 skeletons from three families, including children. A BBC "Hidden History" documentary brought the story to our attention when it was revealed that they were almost certainly Jewish skeletons. The bones were handed to the local community, and here I must name my dear departed friend, Mr Clive Roffe, who insisted that the bones be given a dignified Jewish burial. I held the bones in my hand, and there was a large hole in the side of a skull. Even after all these years, it was obviously not a natural hole. DNA studies by the Natural History Museum here in London showed that there were genetic matches to contemporary British Jews. Here we have scientific evidence of an English pogrom in 1190. Antisemitism is not new.

Holocaust Memorial Day is so important. This year, the theme is "Bridging Generations". Last weekend, I was privileged to attend the Holocaust Memorial Day events at Wells-next-the-Sea. A small group of non-Jewish people have established a regular series of cultural events at the Maltings arts centre. Diana Cook spoke about her mother, Margot, who escaped in the days before the outbreak of the war to become a nurse and who lost all her family in the Holocaust. Diana is part of an oral history initiative called G2G—Generation 2 Generation—which carries the story of the Holocaust down the generations. Margot spoke little of her childhood, and only after she died did Diana fully appreciate the crucial importance of oral history and of Generation 2 Generation. I thank her from my heart and soul.

On Monday, I attended a most moving service at the Foreign Office, and I must thank the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the embassy of Israel and the chargé d'affaires, Daniela Grudsky Ekstein, for the invitation. We heard the extraordinary testimony of Marla, who with her brother Ben Helfgott,

[Peter Prinsley]

were the only members of a large family to survive. I have heard Marla speak before, but her haunting testimony only amplifies in significance as one hears it again. We heard the quite incredible voice of Cantor Turgel, the grandson of Gena—the bride of Belsen—who married the British soldier who liberated her. He sang the prayer for the departed, “El Male Rachamim”—“God full of compassion”—the prayer which asks God to grant rest to the souls of the deceased.

On Holocaust Memorial Day itself I was so proud to stand in the cathedral of Bury St Edmunds, alongside local Jewish citizens and the schoolchildren of Suffolk, and to make the declaration of remembrance as the first Jewish MP for this ancient town, for we are living in a time of increasing polarisation and division. This is our struggle. I have seen the marches, and they fill me with foreboding. We have seen the protests, and we have seen the rise of far-right, so-called populists all over the world, including right here on Westminster bridge. Too often, the legitimate street protests against the actions of the Israeli Government have simply degenerated into shocking antisemitic chanting. The murderous attacks on Jews on Yom Kippur in Manchester and in the attack in Australia did not arise from nowhere. This is our real and present danger, and we must not underestimate it, for it is pervasive.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a fascinating opening speech, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. Could I ask him to re-emphasise the point he has just made, which is that such a grouping of an entire religion, race or ethnicity with the actions of a Government is an entirely antisemitic act?

Peter Prinsley: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member: that is exactly the case. He makes the point extremely well, and I thank him for doing so.

The banning of a Jewish MP from a local school in Bristol was simply an outrage. We receive messages from families of isolated Jewish pupils in rural East Anglian schools where there are persistent taunts and worse, and the schools are simply unable to cope. Resources must be found to address this problem, because this is urgent.

Antisemitism, which never disappeared from this country, exploded after the events of 7 October 2023, even before the actions of the Israel Defence Forces. There has been a terrible war in Gaza, but the origins of the political problems are ancient and complex, and it is not the responsibility of the law-abiding Jewish citizens of this country, who have been intimidated and vilified. I welcome the measures that our Government have announced to address this.

I am a Jewish MP for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, and the very first Jewish MP for the town that was the first to expel its Jews in 1190 following the slaughter of 53 Jewish citizens—commemorated with a steel teardrop in the abbey gardens—so history has come full circle. There is no greater honour in my life and no greater duty than to ensure that we will always remember them.

1.43 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to follow an excellent opening speech from the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley).

I congratulate him on the way he has introduced this debate. I declare my interests as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the Holocaust memorial and education centre, co-chairman of the APPG on Israel and sponsor of this year’s Holocaust memorial reception in Portcullis House, on behalf of the Holocaust Educational Trust.

We gather today to mark Holocaust Memorial Day, which commemorates the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau on 27 January 1945. That moment exposed to the world the full horror of the Nazi regime’s systematic murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children—for the benefit of the BBC, I say Jewish men, women and children. However, Holocaust Memorial Day is also a moment to remember the millions of others who were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis, such as the Roma, disabled people, political dissidents and others. We remember not only to honour the victims, but to understand how such an atrocity became possible and how we must never allow it to happen again.

The Holocaust did not begin with the gas chambers and the death camps, and too often we forget the context. In the decades before, hatred was allowed to grow in Germany; prejudice became normalised; and language, institutions and social norms were slowly corroded. In the great war, Germany was defeated, and afterwards it was economically shattered. The treaty of Versailles imposed territorial losses, military restrictions and severe reparations, the burden of which fell heavily on ordinary people in Germany. The Weimar republic, although democratic in structure, was fragile, and economic catastrophe soon followed. In fact, hyperinflation in the early 1920s left Germans burning paper money to keep warm, because the currency’s value had fallen away. Widespread poverty took hold, and in times of despair, many people searched for simple explanations—and for scapegoats.

It was in that climate that the Nazi party rose to prominence. Hitler and his supporters offered simplistic answers to complex problems. They promised national revival, strength and unity, while identifying enemies within. Jews were portrayed not as fellow citizens, but as outsiders. They were dehumanised and blamed for Germany’s defeat, its economic hardships and the perceived decline of society. Hatred was not accidental; it was systematic, deliberate and relentlessly reinforced. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, antisemitism became state policy. Just imagine that: it was state policy to outlaw a particular religion. Persecution began not with mass violence, but with exclusion. Jewish civil servants were dismissed, Jewish businesses were boycotted and Jewish professionals were barred from practising law and medicine, and from teaching. Those measures were designed to isolate, humiliate and impoverish an entire community.

It is important to stress that while most people did not actively participate in persecution, most chose to look away while it happened. Silence, passivity and indifference allowed injustice to become embedded and, ultimately, unstoppable. Persecution soon escalated. The Nuremberg laws of 1935 stripped Jews of citizenship and basic rights, reducing them from equal members of society to subjects of the state. Violence became overt. In November 1938, Kristallnacht marked a decisive turning point. Synagogues were destroyed, Jewish homes and businesses were attacked, and thousands were arrested by the state—not by mobs acting alone, but by authority itself.

With the outbreak of the second world war, persecution turned into annihilation. Jews were forced into ghettos, and we will no doubt hear about harrowing testimonies of overcrowding, hunger, disease and despair. From 1941 onwards, death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka and Sobibor were constructed for one purpose alone—mass murder. Trains arrived from across Europe, and people were selected, exploited and killed on an industrial scale. There were some who resisted, often at immense personal risk, and they remind us that choices are always possible, but they were the exception, not the norm.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Again, my hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Does he share my horror and disgust that yesterday, a member of the public thought it was entirely appropriate to dress as a prisoner of one of the concentration camps? Surely this is the hatred he is describing.

Bob Blackman: Indeed, I condemn that action, and all actions that seek in some way, shape or form to glorify or justify the Holocaust.

The lesson matters profoundly today. Holocaust Memorial Day plays a vital part in educating the public on the dangers of prejudice, discrimination and hatred—dangers that, if left unchecked, can escalate once again into violence and even genocide. It honours survivors and preserves their testimony, particularly now that the number of first-hand witnesses is sadly diminishing—a point to which the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket alluded. The theme for this year, “Bridging Generations”, is therefore a powerful call to action. The responsibility for remembrance does not end with the survivors. It must be passed on to their children, grandchildren and all of us, so that memory becomes responsibility. That matters, because antisemitism in the UK remains at alarmingly high levels. Following the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, antisemitic incidents surged dramatically. According to the Community Security Trust, 1,521 antisemitic incidents were recorded in the first half of 2025 alone—the second highest total ever recorded for that period. Although that is lower than the number in the record year of 2024, that still represents a sustained and deeply troubling level of hostility that is far above the pre-October 7 averages.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): As the hon. Gentleman knows, I do not always agree with him, but I very much agree with the case that he is making today and what he is saying. He mentioned the surge in antisemitism in the UK. Would he agree that Ofcom needs to crack down on online hatred—particularly antisemitism, but also Islamophobic tweets? The Jewish community and those of many other faiths are subject to a terrifying amount of online hatred.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, for that intervention. The sad reality is that following my question to the Deputy Prime Minister yesterday, my social media accounts were loaded with antisemitic tropes. It is a disgrace, and Ofcom has to take action. It is our duty to ensure that hate speech is never allowed to continue. I believe in free speech, but I do not believe in preaching hatred to one another, regardless of religion, and action has to be taken on that.

Greater London and Greater Manchester remain hotspots of antisemitism; there was an attack on the synagogue in Manchester during Yom Kippur. Online antisemitism, to which the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) just referred, now accounts for well more than a third of all incidents. Holocaust-related abuse appears with disturbing frequency, and there has been a sharp rise in the glorification of the Holocaust. Behind these statistics lies a chilling reality: many Jewish people in Britain feel unsafe, unwelcome or forced to hide their identity in public. Surveys suggest that around half have considered leaving the UK due to antisemitism. That should trouble every one of us.

We must be honest about the ways in which contemporary antisemitism often disguises itself. Increasingly, anti-Israel activism functions as a Trojan horse for antisemitism, allowing ancient prejudice to re-enter public discourse under the cover of political critique. Legitimate criticism of any Government is entirely valid, but when Israel becomes uniquely demonised, Zionism is used as a slur and Jewish institutions and individuals are targeted, regardless of their views, we are no longer in the realm of political debate. CST data shows that a significant proportion of antisemitic incidents now blend anti-Zionist language with classic antisemitic tropes: claims of secret control, collective guilt or global conspiracy. On campuses and online platforms, and in public demonstrations such as yesterday's, Jewish students and citizens are increasingly made to feel responsible simply for who they are. That not only undermines free speech; it poisons it.

We must confront the disturbing rise of Holocaust inversion: the grotesque distortion that portrays Jews or Israel as the new Nazis. That is not merely offensive rhetoric; it threatens and trivialises the Shoah, inverts reality, and inflicts profound harm on survivors and their families. Equating the Star of David with the swastika or accusing the Jewish state of genocide is not historical analysis; it is antisemitism. We must be clear and unequivocal in condemning it.

On Holocaust Memorial Day, we should acknowledge the historical link between the Holocaust and the modern state of Israel. Zionism long predates the second world war, but the genocide of European Jewry underscored with devastating clarity the need for a Jewish homeland—a place of refuge and self-determination. Many Holocaust survivors helped build that nation, carrying the scars of the camps with them. Attempts to de-legitimise Israel ignore that history and risk erasing the fundamental lesson of “never again”.

Finally, I want to turn to the future. Last week, the Holocaust Memorial Act 2026 received Royal Assent, paving the way for the national Holocaust memorial and learning centre to be built in Victoria Tower Gardens, beside this very Parliament. Proposed by a cross-party commission more than a decade ago, the memorial will honour the victims and educate generations to come. The proposal was started by Lord Cameron and was supported cross-party. As the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket said, we must get that memorial built before the last of the survivors is no longer with us. Its location matters. It will stand as a permanent reminder, at the heart of our democracy, of where hatred can lead when left unchallenged.

As we remember the victims today, we also reaffirm our responsibility to challenge antisemitism wherever it appears, defend democratic values and human dignity,

[Bob Blackman]

and ensure that history is neither forgotten nor distorted. When we see demonstrations and attempts to blockade Jewish businesses, restaurants and synagogues, we must call it out for what it is: antisemitism, pure and simple. Remembrance is not only about the past; it is a warning for the present, and a duty that we owe to future generations. I and, I believe, the whole House will recommit to carrying out that duty.

1.56 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2026 is “Bridging Generations”. That recognises that as the remaining survivors who can directly bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust pass away, living memory must become collective memory. As Jews, we know all about collective memory. The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, said:

“One of the most important halachic responses to tragedy is the act of remembering, Yizkor. More than it has history, the Jewish people has memory. There is no word for history in the Tanach, and modern Hebrew had to borrow one, *historiah*. But the word *zachor* (remember), occurs no fewer than 169 times in the Hebrew Bible. The difference between them is this: history is someone else’s story; memory is my story. In history, we recall what happened...so that it becomes part of us and who we are... We cannot bring the dead to life, but we can keep their memory alive.”

This Shabbat, Jews around the world will be reading Parashat Beshalach. The Torah portion opens with the Pharaoh pursuing the Israelites into the desert and the miracle of the splitting of the Red sea. It ends with victory over the Amalekites, the first enemy that the Israelites face upon escaping Egypt. There are so many biblical teachings through which we can approach the Shoah in Beshalach. In particular, we can approach it through grappling with the evil of Amalek and the Pharaoh, and we can contemplate the act of remembrance through how we are commanded to commemorate these events. This year, I came across a perspective that is both subtle in the closeness of the reading of it, and also completely striking in its depth.

I have been reading “Esh Kodesh”, written by Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, of blessed memory, the Rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto. Composed between 1939 and 1942, it is a truly astonishing body of work. Reflecting on Parashat Beshalach, he notes that in the text, Exodus 13:21 begins:

“And God goes before them by day with a pillar of cloud to guide them along the way, and by night with a pillar of fire providing them with light to travel day and night”.

This is the first place where the text uses the present tense. With extraordinary faith and courage, and recognising the “bitter reality” that people were living through, he concludes:

“we must use the judgments and suffering we endure properly, utilising them to worship God, to keep going day and night”.

That this present tense speaks of the presence of God in their midst at a time of unimaginable privation, and is a source of strength for them to draw on, is profoundly moving as a contemporary reader. Later on in the parashah, Exodus 15:1, it reads:

“And they spoke, to say, I will sing to God for his great victory”.

Noting here the future tense, Rabbi Shapira says:

“Already, when still in Egypt, they could see God’s salvation, and so they were able, in their minds, to ‘sing in the future’—‘to say’ implies that they succeeded in establishing this for future generations”.

Rabbi Shapira did not live to see this victory, to sing in the future. He was murdered in Aktion Erntefest—Operation Harvest Festival—at Trawniki concentration camp on 3 November 1943. Jewish prisoners were separated from non-Jewish prisoners, and up to 43,000 Jews at the Majdanek, Poniatowa and Trawniki concentration camps were killed in two days—the single largest German massacre of Jews in the Holocaust. In all three camps, Jews were forced to strip naked and walk into dug trenches, where they were shot dead. Loud music was played to cover the sound of the gunfire.

Rabbi Shapira’s writing, however, survived to inspire future generations, buried in milk cannisters as part of the Oneg Shabbat underground archive, established in 1940 by Emanuel Ringelblum and a secret group of scholars and writers, to document the suffering, resistance and daily life of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, ensuring their story was not lost. They said:

“It must all be recorded with not a single fact omitted. And when the time comes—as it surely will—let the world read and know what the murderers have done.”

We mourn the 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. We mourn the lives cut short, the lives never lived, the children and grandchildren never born; the art, music and literature never written; the enormous loss to humanity itself of a tragedy at a scale we can barely fathom that reverberates through modern history and into our present. But as we mourn, we remember. As Jews, we can take forward our cultures, teachings and traditions to future generations, as we have always done, from the Exodus onwards, denying Hitler what the theologian Emil Fackenheim called “a posthumous victory”. Many Jewish communities around the world read and learn Torah from Czech scrolls from the desolated synagogues of Bohemia and Moravia, honouring the communities who were killed and keeping the flame of their memory alive.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and educational speech; I thank her so much. Will she join me in thanking John Hajdu MBE, who came to Brent yesterday to share with us his story of how he survived the Holocaust? As a young boy, he survived only because a non-Jewish family hid him in a cupboard for days on end. Will she join me in thanking him for sharing his story, so we can keep it alive?

Charlotte Nichols: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and share her thanks to the survivor she mentions, but I also send our thanks to that generation of survivors who were so determined to ensure that their stories were carried forward so that we can learn from them.

Right hon. and hon. Members can visit the museum not far from here at Westminster synagogue, home of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust, to see the scrolls I referred to and artefacts from those communities.

Remembrance of the Holocaust is, however, a society-wide effort that Jews cannot undertake alone. At a time of rising antisemitism globally, when Jews in Manchester and in Bondi Beach are killed just for being Jews, this same antisemitic poison is again taking root and must be confronted. We should remember the evils of the past

to fight the evils of the present, taking strength from the everyday acts of resistance, large and small, and bringing their stories with us to secure for us all a safe and secure future. Eight decades on from the Holocaust, that is more important now than ever.

2.4 pm

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): I am honoured to be here for this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for leading the debate, and opening it with such an incredibly moving speech.

Genocide does not just happen. There is always a path: there is always a terrifying and evil journey towards it. The intention to destroy a group of people is an unspeakable idea. It is difficult to comprehend and yet it has happened not once but multiple times across the globe. Remembering the Holocaust is not just a Jewish issue; it is a human one. Education, reflection and, crucially, action become more and more important each day as we face increasingly fractured communities, inflammatory online rhetoric, and the casual othering of minority groups. Recent events both in the UK and abroad reiterate that “never again” cannot rest on remembrance alone; it needs conscious action.

The Nazi regime systematically murdered 6 million Jews, including 1.5 million children. That is 6 million stories, 6 million people who loved, 6 million people who added immeasurable value to this world. That murderous regime also killed Roma and Sinti people, disabled people, gay men, political opponents, Jehovah’s Witnesses and others that they deemed undesirable. In total, around 10 million people were murdered. But the Holocaust was not carried out by mobs and Nazis alone. It was enabled by the systematic involvement and compliance of institutions, including the police, civil servants, universities, courts and local authorities—the very institutions that were created to protect and serve. Instead, those institutions enforced discriminatory laws, facilitated deportations, and normalised othering and, eventually, murder. Prejudice becomes policy when institutions fail to act against hatred.

We are talking about a scale of suffering and terror that is beyond comprehension, and that is why personal stories are so crucial to our learning and reflection. I would therefore like to share some stories of my constituents who survived.

In 1939, Leonard Kaufmann’s uncle managed to secure a place for him on the Kindertransport, leaving behind his siblings and parents who later died. At four years old, Leonard remembers sitting on a barstool on his arrival to the UK, all alone and waiting to be collected, not able to speak English, scared and completely unsure of what was to come. Leonard went on to lead a successful career and have a happy family home in Gatley, despite experiencing one of the hardest starts to life anyone could imagine. He was a proud administrator at Yeshurun synagogue, which sits proudly in the heart of Gatley.

Peter Kurer was taken in by a Quaker family in Manchester with his brother and parents after they learned the SS were coming for his father. Later, Peter selflessly volunteered considerable time towards the establishment of a retirement home in Didsbury for Jewish refugees.

Martin Hyman shared with me the story of his mother who grew up in 1930s Vienna and was expelled from school simply for being Jewish. Aged just 13, she was sent alone to Britain on the Kindertransport. She never saw her parents again.

Sadly, these stories are not unusual. Martin said to me:

“In 1938, 272 Jews were recorded as having lived in the street in Vienna where my mum grew up. She was one of only 13 who survived the Holocaust.”

They reflect the experience of thousands of children whose lives were saved only because others acted. I am asking everyone in this House today to imagine the pain and suffering inflicted from just these singular stories and multiply that by 1,000 and then multiply it again.

I would like to pay tribute to Paul Porgess, a survivor of the Holocaust who was not only my friend, but a mentor to me. Paul was born in Czechoslovakia to parents Victor and Olga. During the second world war, his family were deported to the ghetto in Warsaw. After falling ill, Paul was separated from his parents, but was helped to escape by the Polish resistance. He eventually made it to England, where he earned a doctorate in chemistry at the University of London, before moving to Cheadle with his wife Joan. He was one of the first Liberal councillors to represent the Cheadle area and did so for four decades.

During his time on the council, Paul held a many positions, including on the equal opportunities special panel and the social inclusion and community cohesion working party. His experience so early on in life drove his passion to prioritise inclusion and community in Cheadle, and he also fought tirelessly for refugees in our region. Paul knew more than anyone just how important it was to be the voice for those who could not defend themselves. I was deeply honoured to replace Paul on Stockport council, and still to this day I try to ensure that I live up to his legacy. I miss him dearly.

It is no secret that hate crimes have risen year on year, misinformation continues to spread like wildfire online, and politics is becoming increasingly polarised. I visited the Community Security Trust earlier this week and heard directly about the work and resource that goes into ensuring that Jewish communities are protected. But heartbreakingly, the Heaton Park synagogue attack on Yom Kippur just three months ago shows that despite every effort to ensure people are safe and secure, the evil of antisemitism poses a real and murderous threat to our Jewish communities.

The latest statistics, published in October, showed that Jewish people had a higher rate of religious hate crimes targeted towards them than any other faith group. We have a duty today to remember, reflect and take action to stamp out this hatred now. Martin Hyman highlights that his grandparents, like many others, believed that civilisation, culture and the rule of law would protect them. But that was not the case. The Holocaust was not a sudden collapse of morality, but the end point of an insidious process in which discrimination was legalised, exclusion enforced, and dehumanisation made routine by ordinary people.

Education plays a critical role in responding to that. Organisations such as the Northern Holocaust Education Group and the My Voice project work to ensure that survivor testimony and lived experience continue to reach schools and communities. The Holocaust Centre

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North provides a permanent exhibition, learning programmes and an archive rooted in local survivor and refugee stories, helping young people and the wider public understand how a global atrocity unfolded through ordinary lives.

When people feel connected and invested in common values, they are better able to work together to address division and tackle hatred. The Common Ground award is an important initiative that goes some way in supporting that aim, and I hope that the Government will keep on funding it. The Government must also publish the community cohesion strategy that was promised last year, so that communities can work together to confront all forms of extremism by building understanding and trust.

Britain is a country of shared values and it has a history of being a nation that offers a hand to those in need. We must never forget that and must continuously pursue that aim. We celebrate the idea that people in our country should be able to live free from discrimination, and that no one's rights or dignity should ever be taken away or compromised because of who they are, where they come from or what they believe. We must not lose sight of that, even though there are some who seek to undermine it.

A Jewish man in Manchester recently said to the *Manchester Evening News*,

"My daughter, she wears the Star of David but she puts it away...Ours are the only children that go to schools behind fences with guards."

That cannot continue, so we must revert to our shared values, celebrate our differences and call out all forms of hatred and bigotry. "Never again" cannot rest on remembrance alone. It requires conscious action, every day. Holocaust Memorial Day offers an opportunity to reflect on not only what happened, but the responsibility we all have to ensure that the legacy of people like Paul Porgess never fades.

2.12 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) and for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for their powerful and moving testimony. They are a credit to their community and their constituents.

Holocaust Memorial Day is a time when we remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust. The theme of this year's memorial day is "Bridging Generations". It is the solemn duty of all of us, in this place and beyond it, who have had the privilege of meeting Holocaust survivors, to pass on their testimony to younger people so that we all may bear witness, collectively, to their suffering and their memory.

On that note, it was a real honour last week to meet 95-year-old Mala Tribich MBE in Parliament, and to hear her very moving testimony of how she and her brother were the only members of her family to survive the Nazi Holocaust, following her imprisonment in Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen camps. Many Members will agree how heartbreaking it was to hear of her pleading with the SS guard not to put her on a train. Mala told me afterwards how proud she was of her brother

Ben, who went on to represent Britain at the Olympics as a weightlifter. Ben, who passed away in 2023, was one of the 700 Jewish youngsters taken to Cumbria from the death camps.

Ike Alterman, who passed away at age 97 in December last year, was the last surviving Greater Manchester member of that group of so-called Windermere children. I mention Ike because his story is well known by the children of Rochdale, particularly in Falinge Park high school, which he visited three years ago to share his experiences. Ike recalled picking sprouts in the bitter Polish winter for the SS officers' Christmas dinner. He and the other Jews had no proper clothing and no shoes—Ike strapped straw to his feet to walk in the snow. The SS officer said that if he and fellow children sang "Silent Night" they would get a bonus: a ladle of warm water to put sprout skins in. Ike said:

"To this day I've never touched sprouts again."

Ike was just 13 when his family were lined up in the town square alongside other Jews. He saw his mother, sister, and brother led away by men with rifles. Later he found out they were likely sent to Treblinka, an extermination camp. At Birkenau, Ike's job was to take bodies from gas chambers to the crematoriums. He said,

"At Birkenau they had four chimneys and they were glowing 24 hours a day, day and night."

That is invaluable testimony to the children of Rochdale from someone who was there. Someone whose story cannot be denied, and someone who we still remember with great fondness. Despite his passing, Ike's testimony lives on because his talk to the students was captured on video and is shown by the school every year, thanks to the great efforts of the excellent teachers, such as the Holocaust education lead at Falinge Park, Adele Turner.

Falinge Park has legacy beacon status as one of the schools under the umbrella of the University College London Centre for Holocaust Education, and has developed a special Holocaust ambassadors and youth champions programme. Its youth champions are year 9 pupils who design and lead the extracurricular lunch time and afterschool sessions on the Holocaust for younger children in the school—beautifully bridging generations even within their school, which is the theme of this year's memorial.

Last week, Greater Manchester's commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day featured a video of Falinge Park high school pupils Abiha Imran, Willow Greenwood and Dylan Ogden, as they joined Andy Burnham to interview Tomi Komoly, another Holocaust survivor. Tomi revealed he had spoken to 27,000 students in his 10 years of work with the Holocaust Educational Trust—27,000 students who will remember his story. His advice to the next generation was simple. He said,

"the one word that immediately pops into my mind is tolerance. Just look at other people in the world and accept that we each have our own way of living and habits...just be respectful of that, and live peacefully side by side."

This year has shown that antisemitism is not just the world's oldest hatred, but very much a current one, fed by extremists that blame Jews across the globe for the actions of Israel's Government. The Bondi Beach attack was truly appalling, but in the north-west, we will never forget the Heaton Park synagogue attack on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. We remember Adrian Daulby, 53, and Melvin Cravitz, 66, who were killed in that attack on that dark day.

Marc Levy, who many of us in this place know, is Manchester's Jewish Representative Council leader, and his father Alan, is a chairman of the synagogue. They were deeply affected by that incident and the loss of their friends. Alan recently recalled how Adrian Daulby leapt up from his seat and ran the length of the synagogue to help them hold shut the front doors from the terror attack, before he was shot and killed.

It is truly disgusting that within hours of that attack, a local councillor in Rochdale shared on his Facebook page an article called, "False flag...could the Manchester synagogue attack be orchestrated?" which is an antisemitic dog whistle, as clear as day. But there are glimmers of light amid the darkness. Marc Levy told me that his children marked their B'nai Mitzvah at Heaton Park recently—a very powerful moment of resilience and remembering.

Teaching about not just the Nazi Holocaust but genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur has been part of the national curriculum for 35 years. Hatred based on race or religion, with victims scapegoated for sins they never committed, demonised, blamed, and punished for things that had nothing to do with them, becomes a narrative that curdles into deadly extremism. Our school children are taught of that danger. But with young people online more than ever, it is not what happens in the classroom that really worries many of us, but what happens outside it. The potential for them to come across antisemitic content and Holocaust denial and distortion—conspiracy theories that the Holocaust never happened or antisemitic theories that it was orchestrated and faked by Jewish people or Israel—is greater than ever.

Meanwhile, we have had regular debate on xAI's Grok in this House in recent weeks. The AI tool has not only denigrated and degraded women, but generated multiple antisemitic comments, including praise for Hitler, denying the scope of the Holocaust and using so-called Jewish-sounding surnames in the context of hate speech. I hope that Ministers will engage with the Antisemitism Policy Trust to see how the Online Safety Act 2023 can actually crack down on such memes on Reddit and other online platforms.

As others have said, Holocaust Memorial Day is also a time to remember all the Roma and Sinti people, gay men, disabled people, political opponents and others murdered by the Nazi killing machine. We also remember all those affected by the subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur and Bosnia.

Speaking of Bosnia, it was a truly humbling experience to visit the Srebrenica memorial centre and cemetery in Bosnia last year. In July 1995, more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were murdered by Serb paramilitaries driven by religious, nationalist and ethnic hatred to commit the worst genocide on European soil since the Holocaust. I went to pay my respects and meet the incredible Mothers of Srebrenica campaign group, and to see the very moving testimony in the memorial centre itself.

Charlotte Nichols: I want to add my voice to my hon. Friend's comments about the Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves association. I had the real honour of meeting them myself around a decade ago, and their work is absolutely extraordinary. Will my hon. Friend join me in encouraging all Members of the House to take the opportunity to learn from them about what we

can do to ensure that we do not carry into the future the hate that caused them to lose their husbands and sons?

Paul Waugh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I encourage all Members of the House to take a trip to Srebrenica to see for themselves the mass graves, the cemetery and the museum. It is incredibly moving. The centre director, Emir, and the head of oral history, Hasan, were encouraged to hear that Rochdale schoolchildren are taught about the Srebrenica genocide as part of their Holocaust education.

As the MP for Rochdale, it is my duty to remind everyone in my constituency of the horrors of 7 October, the worst pogrom of Jews since the second world war. It is also my duty to call out the deaths of the men, women and children in Gaza that followed. The need for testimony, evidence and accountability is as important as ever.

I signed the Holocaust Educational Trust's book of commitment in Parliament, which is part of the trust's ongoing effort to educate children about past and present atrocities across the globe. It is only through education that we can tackle the ignorance that fuels hatred. The responsibility of remembrance does not end with the survivors; it lives on through their children and grandchildren and, of course, through all of us.

I will finish with a poem sent to me by Zeeshan Shafqat, a 17-year-old student at Rochdale's Hopwood Hall college:

"In ashes of pain, where names were erased,
We stand together now, face to face.
Muslim and Jew, hand in hand,
Guarding the truth that history demands.
Never again, our shared vow remains—
To honour the lost, and break hatred's chains."

2.33 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I think it is important that I start with some of the realities as vividly as I can. Six million Jews were murdered in a deliberate attempt at the extermination of European Jews. I think it is shameful that the BBC did not speak about Jews in its opening report about Holocaust Memorial Day.

One million of those Jews were children. One million were killed in the forests by bullets. In order for the Nazi regime to save bullets, they would make mothers hold their babies to their heads so they could shoot both at the same time. One of the reasons the gas chambers were put in place was not just to mechanise mass murder, but because the German authorities recognised that there was a large psychological impact on the soldiers who were getting covered in brain matter and blood from murdering children. They decided that they must stop the people doing their bidding feeling like that; it was far simpler to herd the Jews into gas chambers and then get Jews themselves to remove the bodies and put them into the furnaces.

Dehumanisation happened in order for millions of people to accept what was going on, and I very much doubt that there were a great many people in Germany who did not have an idea of what was going on—none truer than in Bavaria, the region where Nazism had its roots. As has been described, there was a long history of growing antisemitism; with those decades and decades of hatred, when Germany faced tough economic

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

circumstances coming out of the first world war—feeling that it had been punished by the whole of Europe, despite not losing any territory—and Adolf Hitler looked for a scapegoat, one was easy to find.

Germany paid a price for that—not just in terms of the price of the war and what happened, but because it led to an incredible brain drain of academic talent. Albert Einstein is one example. It drove huge intellect—scientists, engineers, doctors—out of Germany, because among those who were murdered, as has been mentioned, were academics and anybody who might challenge the regime. I am afraid that we are now seeing levels of hostility in the United Kingdom that mean that many people are thinking that they might be better off leaving. Beyond the absolute moral outrage of the issues of 80 years ago happening in front of our eyes today in the 21st century, our country will be far poorer for that.

Leeds has a large and proud Jewish population. They are strong and resilient. Jews have been in Leeds for more than 150 years. They have added hugely to the businesses, community and fabric of society that Leeds has become. I am proud that I have so many friends in the Jewish community, including, I am proud to say, the Lord Mayor of Leeds, Councillor Dan Cohen. However, they are frightened. They find it difficult to go into Leeds city centre on Saturdays during protests. They want to stand up to what is being said, but get pursued down the street and have vicious abuse thrown at them.

I stand here today not just to remember the Holocaust, but to say that remembrance is not enough. Speeches today, including the opening of my speech, have outlined what happened in the Holocaust; other Members have outlined the causes that led up to the Holocaust. But we are sitting back and not naming and shaming those who are encouraging the root where this started.

I have said this before in this Chamber and I am going to say it again today. There is a councillor in my city of Leeds, Councillor Mothin Ali—who has now become the deputy leader of the Green party—who put out social media on 7 October 2023 praising Hamas and what they had achieved. He was not a councillor at that point, but he was a candidate. There is a complex issue between what is freedom of speech and what is agitation, but there can be no doubt, frankly, that he agitated a mob that forced the Jewish priest of the University of Leeds, Rabbi Deutsch, into hiding. The leader of the Green party on Leeds city council, Councillor Penny Stables, who is a councillor in my constituency, brushed that aside. She said that it did not matter what he had said before he was elected, as he was not a councillor. I really have to take issue with that. As we have heard, it is the acceptance of people making these comments that eventually leads to history repeating itself.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) made some very important points. He talked about fake news and how things are twisted. I cannot remember who it was, but another Labour Member said that Ofcom must take a much stronger view with regard to content being put online. We know what is poisoning children's minds, but that is a different debate. I was knocking on doors and I met a gentleman, who must have been retired. He started off by absolutely laying into me for my support for Israel defending its security and saying

what a disgrace of a human being I was, and then he said to me, "You know as well as I do, because you will have seen the video footage, as I have, that Hamas had nothing to do with 7 October. It was the Israelis who murdered their own people so that they could invade Gaza." He said that to me as a fact, with absolute conviction. That is the level of hatred being generated because the Israelis are Jews. Let us call this out. This is beyond politics; this is Jewish hatred.

Huge protests have been taking place. People have a right to protest and to condemn what they see going on in the world, but where are the protests about what is happening in Sudan or against the Iranian regime, which may well have murdered a five-figure number of people?

Peter Prinsley: The right hon. Member is making a really powerful speech. Does he agree that there is a strong suspicion that some of the hate marches we have seen on the streets of Britain have been orchestrated by Iranian agents?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: There is a lot of evidence to back that up. The phrase passes me by, but there is a sphere of influence that Iran wanted to put in place through Iraq and Syria, with Hamas and Hezbollah as its proxies to run things, and we have debated in this Chamber so many times the malign influence of Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the proscription of that body that that is undoubtedly true.

We have tolerated things for too long. We tolerated streams of cars along Marylebone Road, many years ago, beeping their horns and claiming that the Jews should be murdered and the women should be raped. That did not get the crackdown that it needed. On the flipside—I will not go over this again, because we know what happened—we see West Midlands police deciding that it was far easier just to ban Israelis. Let us remember that the fans were not all Israelis; there were plenty of British citizens who are fans of Maccabi Tel Aviv who wanted to go to that football match. Rather than protecting the laws that fans who go to a country should respect, people in authority thought, "It is far easier just to stop them." How did we get to that point? For an easy laugh, we decided, "The Jewish community is so small, and there are lots of people who hate it, so it is easier just to say, 'You can't come'." That is shameful.

I have given notice that I am going to name the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). When he led the Labour party—a great and highly respected political party in our country, with much history—I am afraid that he gave a safe space to antisemitism. I praise the Prime Minister for the action he took in driving antisemitism out of the Labour party.

I look around, and I look at the agitation of the councillor I have named and of the people associating themselves with some political parties, and I say this: it is the responsibility of the leadership of the Green party to follow the example of the Labour party in how it addressed the creeping in of antisemitism into its party. I am not saying that it is the policy of the Green party to be antisemitic—I am not saying that at all—but it must address the issue far more seriously than it has done, because I see a repeat of the years from 2015 to 2019.

As I bring my comments to a close, I want to mention the actions of Leeds city council. The protests that take place in Leeds are one thing—the police give permission, and we have powers in place so that when there is hate speech and laws are broken, people can be arrested and prosecuted—but West Yorkshire police has made it clear to Leeds city council that when protesters want to use its land, it should charge them rent. The reason West Yorkshire police wants that is that it attaches an organisation to what is happening. Leeds city council has refused to do that; it is giving permission to bodies to protest, but it is not using the system, which is in place, to charge for the use of land. West Yorkshire police has said that it will be able to crack down on hate speech, violent speech and incitement to violence if it has somebody held accountable. That accountability on its own may temper what is happening.

There was a speaker called Dr Rehiana Ali—quite frankly a vile individual—at one of those rallies, and she called for the targeting of the Jewish schools in Leeds. That has nothing at all to do with the war in Gaza. Schoolchildren—let alone British citizens or anybody, quite frankly, who is not running the Israeli Government—have nothing to do with the actions of the Israeli Government. That is antisemitism as raw as it gets, but it was difficult to bring her to justice, because it was difficult for West Yorkshire police to be able to prosecute directly. I believe that the Met Police prosecuted in the end.

Let me finish on a point about Sudan, Iran and the Russians in Ukraine. The one thing that they all have in common is that they are not Jewish. That shows the level of antisemitism in this country. If we are dealing with a Jewish community, people think, “Let’s whip up a mob. Let’s say what we like. Let’s watch authorities like West Midlands police stand back and think it is easier to just stop the problem happening.” The road to hell is paved with alleged good intentions.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you advise me on what course I can take when a Member of this House repeatedly uses speeches to misrepresent members of the public, who are not able to be present to speak for themselves?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The hon. Lady will be aware that that is not a matter for the Chair. At any point, she would have been able to seek to intervene on the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke).

2.38 pm

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to speak in this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for opening it in such a powerful way. I was struck by his earlier reflection on whether it is sometimes easier not to commemorate and remember. That testimony is combined with the moving speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) about the words for history and the words for remembrance. I want to make the case that it is important to remember, and that how we remember, and the actions that remembrance brings to us, are hopefully what will matter most today.

As has been mentioned, the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “Bridging Generations”. Every day, the recollection of survivors passes from memory into history. Like most hon. Members here today, I have had the privilege of hearing my constituents’ recollections and memories, and those of Holocaust survivors, of what this means to them. Passing down their experience is increasingly vital to preserving our understanding as a society of the atrocious crimes committed in the Holocaust. We must never allow ourselves to forget or minimise these horrors, and bridging the generational gap is more important than ever.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: In talking about the events that happened, we have spoken about the dehumanisation. The Holocaust Educational Trust runs visits to Birkenau-Auschwitz, as part of which, at the end, family photographs and things like that are displayed to rehumanise people. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has been able to attend, but I think it is one of the most exceptionally moving things anyone could witness.

Rachel Blake: I thank the right hon. Member for recalling that exhibition for us. What we have seen in Parliament over the last few weeks has been incredibly powerful.

A key part of bridging the generational gap are the very youngest generation of survivors, many of whom first arrived in the UK on the Kindertransport. A memorial to that stands in my constituency at Liverpool Street station, where many of the children met their foster families. Most of them remained in the UK, and they and their descendants are our neighbours, our families and our friends.

This week, I joined City residents and workers in the congregation at Bevis Marks, the oldest synagogue in continuous use in Europe, for the Holocaust Memorial Day service. Bevis Marks is a testament to London’s history of tolerance, openness and pluralism. I pay tribute to the work of the local community in creating the Jewish Square Mile project, which is bringing together the community and recording this long and deep history.

The City of London’s Jewish population dates back to the time of William the Conqueror, and it has long held a stake in the City’s civic life. This early history was a painful one. London’s Jewish population was falsely accused of practices such as coin clipping, and it was barred from the coronation of Richard I and subjected to multiple massacres across the middle ages. However, moving into the 18th and 19th centuries, as pogroms swept across the continent, it was to London that hundreds of thousands of European Jews fled. Many of their descendants later hosted the refugees from the Kindertransport.

The Kindertransport is a reminder not just of what Britain and its people can achieve when we work together, driven by compassion, but that we cannot be complacent that good intentions are enough on their own. That complacency has too often been the case when we, as politicians, have failed adequately to address the rise in antisemitism in recent years. We have condemned and lamented hate crimes, but have we done enough to prevent them from recurring? We have spoken with Jewish leaders, but have we truly heard their concerns? I know that many of my Jewish constituents do not believe we have made the progress that is needed.

[Rachel Blake]

I am not the first today to mention last October's horrific attack in Manchester. In the months leading up to it, we will all have spoken to or heard directly from community leaders who warned that something exactly like that might happen. I have spoken to young constituents who are fearful of walking to shul. Jewish people across the country are experiencing prejudicial antisemitic hate. It needs to end, and we need to end it. Every Member of this House has a role to play in bridging generations and communities. We are leaders in our neighbourhoods, villages, towns and cities. At a time when relations between and within communities remain so broken, our time to act is now. I ask each and every one of us: what is next? What are we doing to convene leaders of all faiths and none? What are we doing to ensure that our children are being taught about the reality of the Holocaust in school and online? What are we doing to address the hatred and violence of the past few years head-on? Will we remain determined to tackle online hatred and antisemitism?

The road to ending hatred sadly takes years to travel, and the results will take longer to show than many of us would like, but we have gone down the road of detoxification before, so a way exists. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) for his suggestion on how to proceed. It centres on the human contact, recognition of shared values, empathy and respect that was shown to the 10,000 Jewish children whose lives the British public were able to save.

We must remember the Holocaust alone in deep reflection, but we must also come together to remember the extremes of good and evil that regular people are capable of. If we leaders recognise that we can shape things through our empathy, compassion and respect, we will stop it happening again.

2.46 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is an honour to be here, representing my Dwyfor Meirionnydd constituents and Plaid Cymru, to remember, first, the 6 million Jewish children, women and men murdered in the Holocaust, and also the millions more murdered in the Nazi persecution of other communities, which many other Members have mentioned.

I hand my greatest congratulations to the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on his excellent introduction, and to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols). We will bear in mind those words:

"history is someone else's story; memory is my story."

Of course, there has also been reference to our history in the United Kingdom. When we look abroad, it is very important that we know what has happened here.

As we commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, we remember other atrocities: the Holodomor in Ukraine, and genocide against the Armenians, and in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. Forgive me, but that is not, and cannot be, an exhaustive list. There have been, there are and there will be other crimes of genocide. We cannot comfort ourselves by presuming that these events are consigned to history.

The convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide is the treaty that criminalises genocide. The definition is deliberately narrow:

"any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

We know that this is happening now, and that it will happen in the future. We need international bodies and the rules-based order to hold people to account for genocide, to define it, and to take criminal steps as necessary. We know that we need that, because we can look back and learn that from history.

In the noise and confusion of present events, we are required to call out genocidal actions, wherever and by whomever they are committed. It is our duty to be the watchdogs warning against genocide, be it in Myanmar against the Rohingya Muslims, in China against the Uyghur Muslims, or in Gaza against the people of Palestine.

The International Court of Justice is, as we speak, deciding on the application of the convention of genocide to Myanmar. This decision will be of immense significance in relation to forced displacement and Myanmar's military attacks on the Rohingya. If the Court rules that mass deportation was a motive, not a defence, for genocide, that may become a precedent for a similar ruling against the Israeli Government; it is important that that is said today.

The theme for International Holocaust Memorial Day this year is "Bridging Generations". It is a reminder that the responsibility of remembrance lives on through not only survivors, but their descendants, and all of us. It is also a reminder of our fragile link to the Holocaust. A 2026 study from the Claims Conference shows that approximately 196,000 Jewish holocaust survivors are still with us. They are a living testimony to the horrors imposed by Nazi Germany, and a lesson from history to never repeat those horrors. They are also ageing. The median age of Jewish holocaust survivors is 87. By preserving the link with our past, we can ensure its retelling. It is vital that we keep listening to and sharing their testimonies, so that future generations can understand how distortions of truth can lead to the greatest crime of all: genocide.

The manipulation of truth is a vital component of genocide. The Nazis played on prejudice and stereotypes to scapegoat and dehumanise people they regarded as subhuman. The Nazi regime also practised a propaganda of deception by hiding details about the "final solution"; there were press controls to prevent the public reading statements by the allies condemning Nazi crimes. One booklet printed in 1941 glowingly reported that in occupied Poland, German authorities had put Jewish people to work, built clean hospitals, set up soup kitchens, and provided Jewish people with newspapers and vocational training. The authority of the written word and the broadcast word was abused to manipulate the truth.

Carla Denyer: The right hon. Member is giving a most powerful speech. On her point about false narratives, I wonder whether she agrees that it is so important to distinguish between legitimate criticism of the actions of a state, and hate directed towards people because of their religion. It is worrying to have heard remarks in today's debate—a debate on the Holocaust, of all things—that seemed to blur the line between those two things.

Liz Saville Roberts: The hon. Member makes an important point. I think that we can be sophisticated enough to call out the horrors of Hamas while criticising actions that may well be found in future to comprise genocide. We have not reached that point in law yet, but we in this place should be open to questioning received narratives.

Most Members here are trying to phrase our arguments in the measured way that the debate deserves. We are talking about horrific crimes against humanity in the past, and possibly in the present. That needs to be done in a balanced way. All of us are horrified by the actions of Hamas and the attacks in Manchester last year. At the same time, there are wider questions—how we find a balance, and how we, in our privileged position, use the language at our disposal to make sure that we are not pushing truth further and further into the undergrowth.

Jan Karski was a Polish Catholic diplomat who brought eyewitness reports of the true scale of Nazi atrocities to western leaders as early as 1942. He risked his life to alert the world to murder. Largely ignored at the time, Karski argued that

“the common humanity of people, not the power of governments, is the only real protector of human rights”.

His memory is a challenge to all of us who speak as public leaders.

If this year’s theme teaches us anything, it is to be alert to those who would distort the truth for their own ends. We must listen to genocide survivors and support those who shine a light on grave injustices, wherever they are. It is only through listening to testimony, and through our common humanity, that we can learn from the past and secure genuine justice for victims. We must stand against actions such as the terrible attacks in Manchester last year.

In an increasingly troubled world in which the rules-based order is threatened, we would all do well to remember that the genocide convention obligates state parties to pursue the enforcement of the prohibition on genocide. Though the promise of “never again” has been ignored time and again, we must all play our part in listening and learning from the stories of the victims of genocide.

2.54 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for opening the debate, and everybody else who has spoken so compassionately, with clarity and authenticity. The feeling that has come out is clear for everyone to see.

The Holocaust inflicted pain on a scale that most of us will never truly comprehend—pain that did not end in 1945, and that still echoes through families, memory and generations of the Jewish community. This is not history at a distance; this was cruelty by design. It was mass murder, carried out deliberately on an industrial scale. Its trauma did not disappear; it was inherited.

Today, I will speak about one survivor—one voice that we must listen to while we can. Her name is Susan Pollack. She is a Holocaust survivor who recently turned 95, and whom I had the privilege of meeting and interviewing. Susan was born in Hungary. Long before the camps, hatred crept into her life: graffiti on walls, Jewish students barred from universities, and her brother being beaten at a boy scout meeting. Each sign carried the same message: “You do not belong.”

Then came the order. Susan’s family were forced from their home. They were told that they were being resettled. She clung on to that word, because hope—even false hope—was all she had. A letter followed; all Jewish fathers were ordered to attend a meeting. Susan’s father went, desperate to protect his family. He was beaten, forced into a lorry and taken away. Susan never saw him again. To this day, she does not know how or where her father died.

Then came Susan’s turn. In May 1944, she and her family were transported by cattle trucks to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She was 15. Somebody whispered to her, “Don’t say you’re younger than 15,” so when she was asked, she said, “15 and a half.” She later learned why. Children under 15 were sent with their mothers directly to the gas chambers. Susan lost her mother, and with that loss came horrors beyond language: mothers watching their children die; children searching for protection that could not come; entire families murdered in minutes. That is what hatred looks like when it is given power.

The cruelty did not stop. Susan’s hair was shaved, she was inspected—yes, inspected—starved and silenced. She watched people die, not by accident but by policy. She was later sent to Bergen-Belsen. By then, she said,

“dehumanisation killed any thoughts in our heads.”

For an entire year, she did not speak. She once recognised somebody from her village. The next day, that woman was dead.

When liberation came, Susan told me something that must never be ignored: there was no joy at being liberated. She had lost her parents, 50 members of her family, her entire community. She did not even know whether her brother was still alive. Liberation could not undo what had been destroyed. That was Susan’s experience, and it was the experience of 6 million Jewish people and millions of others, systematically murdered because hatred was allowed to rule. The Holocaust did not begin with the gas chambers; it began with words—with lies repeated until they sounded like the truth, with people labelled as “other”, with hatred normalised, and with silence excused. That is why remembrance alone is not enough, because “never again” is not a slogan; it is a test—a test of whether we challenge antisemitism when we see it and when it is inconvenient to do so, whether we confront fascist rhetoric when it masquerades as opinion, and whether we defend human dignity when it costs us something.

Six million Jews were murdered not because the world did not know, but because too many looked away. Susan Pollack survived Auschwitz. She survived Bergen-Belsen. She survived an attempt to erase her humanity. But survival alone was not justice, and silence was never safety, so the lesson of the Holocaust is clear: when hatred is tolerated, it grows; when lies go unchallenged, they spread; when humanity is divided into us and them, violence is never far away.

That is why this House must be unequivocal: we will not excuse antisemitism. We will not tolerate fascism. We will not stand by while people are dehumanised, in our politics, in our communities or in our public life. Because remembrance demands resolve—resolve to speak when others stay silent, to act when others hesitate and to defend our shared humanity every time it is threatened. We owe that to Susan Pollack; we owe it to

[*Jas Athwal*]

the six million; we owe it to the future. If “never again” is to mean anything at all, it must mean now and it must mean us.

3.1 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate once again. There have been some profound, passionate, emotional and informative contributions, as is so often the case when we put our political exchanges to one side. As Members have mentioned, this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day theme is, “Bridging Generations”. Every year we move further away from the horrific events of the Holocaust, it becomes even more distant, and every year more of our Holocaust survivors pass away. I understand that the median age of Holocaust survivors globally is 87. It is becoming harder and harder for those few remaining survivors to share their testimonies in person. Nothing compares to the raw shock of hearing the horrors of the Holocaust spoken from the mouth of someone who experienced it. When those voices pass away, who will pick up the mantle?

That is why this year’s theme is so important. We have to bridge the gap between the generations. We must begin the process of passing on the responsibility of remembrance from survivors to the next generations. Sadly, as a global society, we have not learned the lessons, and we know there have been many examples of genocide since the Holocaust.

Last year, I spoke in this debate ahead of the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, which the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) mentioned—I apologise if I make some of the same points. I have taken a particular interest in the western Balkans because when I studied for my politics degree, one of the units was the break-up of Yugoslavia. When I arrived here in Westminster, I became involved in the various all-party groups that focus on the region, and I subsequently served as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to the western Balkans.

The Srebrenica genocide took place in July 1995 during the Bosnian war. As has been said, 8,372 Bosniak Muslim men and boys were murdered, and it is legally recognised as the first genocide on European soil since world war two. It was a campaign of war crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide against the non-Serb population. The war cost over 100,000 people their lives and caused the displacement of more than 2 million men, women and children.

Like others, I had the privilege of meeting some of the Mothers of Srebrenica, a group that represents the mothers, wives, daughters and families of those who perished. It does magnificent work in keeping the world focused on the terrible events of July 1995.

Today, as we look back on three decades since that darkness fell over Bosnia, we can ask the same question about the Srebrenica genocide. When the voices that speak of that genocide finally fall silent, who will speak for them? Sadly, as with our Holocaust survivors, in the coming years and decades the direct testimonies of Srebrenica survivors will be merely written ones.

I have before spoken in the Chamber about my visits to Srebrenica. As with visits to military cemeteries in Belgium and France, or indeed to country churchyards

where a handful of graves are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the sacrifice of so many people hits home on those visits to Srebrenica. Like any location where tombstones stretch for row upon row, the harrowing sight and silence of the Potočari battery factory stirs the emotions.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the gravestones that mark massacres in Bosnia and elsewhere. They emphasise the importance of Holocaust Memorial Day and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, because millions of people were cremated so that there was no evidence of genocide.

Martin Vickers: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend.

Srebrenica is located in Republika Srpska, a semi-autonomous region of Bosnia and Herzegovina controlled by Serbs as part of the Dayton peace agreement. Many perpetrators are still at large, and genocide denial is widespread among some groups of Bosnian Serbs. Had it not been for the involvement of the international community, the Potočari memorial may never have come into being at all.

The decision to locate the Srebrenica-Potočari memorial and cemetery and to secure its funding was made by the UN High Representative. Much of the funding came from foreign countries. The village of Potočari was chosen by survivors and bereaved relatives because it was where many of them last saw their loved ones. The Srebrenica-Potočari memorial complex was subsequently established in May 2001. Beginning as a cemetery, the site was officially opened by former US President Clinton on Saturday 20 September 2003.

The lesson we learn from Srebrenica is that hatred and intolerance can flourish if left unchallenged. In Bosnia, people of many faiths lived as neighbours for generations, and yet in a short time those neighbours were viewed not just as the enemy but as an enemy so threatening that they must be ethnically cleansed. Not only were 8,372 men and boys massacred, but thousands of women and girls—some estimates are as high as 50,000—suffered sexual violence. Thousands of women and children were forcibly deported. For children born today, Srebrenica is as much a historical event as the Holocaust was to my generation. And that is the worry: there is danger in distance as it can lead to detachment, and detachment can allow the seeds of division to grow once more.

That leads me to my next point, on addressing the issue of genocide denial. Sadly, we see a rising tide of genocide denial across the western Balkans today. To bridge generations, we must arm our young people with the truth. We cannot allow the history of 8,372 murdered men and boys to be debated into non-existence by those who seek to revive the same nationalist hatreds that led to those murders in the first place. We must ensure that our schools teach not just the dates of the Bosnian war and the genocide in Srebrenica, but the mechanics of them. How does the slow drip of dehumanising rhetoric turn a neighbour someone has lived alongside for many years into an enemy they are willing to destroy? It is young people we must reach; it is for them that the lessons of Srebrenica, the Holocaust and subsequent genocides are most important. They are our future, and it is they who we will rely on to avoid the mistakes of the past.

We live in an increasingly dangerous world—one in which human decency is sometimes in short supply; one that is forgetting the lessons of the recent past. Let us state today that the story of Srebrenica, the Holocaust and other genocides will not fade into the archives and that we will never forget how stripping people of their humanity can lead to some of the worst crimes in human history.

As is often the case, we can turn to the words of our forefathers who wrote the religious texts of the many faiths that are represented here and throughout our country. The service of Compline in the Book of Common Prayer says that we must

“be vigilant, because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour”.

It is vivid, stark language, but sadly the devil can enter the hearts of people, especially when propaganda and evil leadership are involved. We must never forget the brutality of which man is capable, and it is right that we use parliamentary time to commemorate these horrific events.

To the young people watching this debate today or taking part in Holocaust education events in their schools or communities, I say: pick up the mantle. Do not let these testimonies fade away and be forgotten. Bridge the gap between the generations and carry the lessons of the Holocaust forward. When my daughter was in her late 20s, she went on a social project to Rwanda, where she met people who had survived the genocide there. That had an enormous emotional impact on her, which is why I believe it is particularly important that young people are involved. I attended a Holocaust memorial event in the town of Brigg in my constituency last Sunday, and one of the highlights was the readings from pupils of a local school at the short service. We rely on our young people to succeed where past generations have failed.

3.11 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) who, as so often on topics like this, speaks with great authority.

I rise once again this year to remember the Holocaust, one of the darkest chapters in human history. The industrial-scale extermination of 6 million Jewish people and millions more prisoners of war, political prisoners, Poles, disabled people, members of the LGBT community, Roma and others is a horror so bleak that we must ensure the memory of what was done and those whose lives were taken never fades.

The theme for this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is “Bridging Generations”. In last year's debate, we marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Like a number of other Members, I shared some of my own family's story and spoke about my Jewish great-grandfather. In the intervening year, we have lost more Holocaust survivors who were determined to let the world know what happened to them, their friends and their family in that horrific place. Holocaust education is not just teaching history; it should play a crucial role in combatting antisemitism and hatred, and preventing future genocides. As we are able to hear from fewer and fewer survivors each year, there is an additional duty for all of us to educate future generations on the atrocities that were committed on European soil.

In my constituency just last month, a group of masked young men were photographed giving the Nazi salute and brandishing the symbol of the SS on the steps of our town house in Kirkcaldy. It was so shocking that at first, I thought the image must have been generated by AI, because things like that don't usually happen round our way, but the local police confirmed that it was real. It was honestly frightening that those men felt comfortable participating in such an act in broad daylight, not 400 yards from our Holocaust memorial or the war memorial, which commemorates the hundreds of Kirkcaldy men who died fighting the Nazis.

Acts like this are a warning to us all: hatred spreads in plain sight. There are those among us, including some who sit in this place, whose purpose is to sow and stir hatred and division in our communities. It is fostered and spread online, in the presence of vulnerable young minds. This is an eradication of historical record and memory in favour of misinformation. I am grateful to my local police force in Kirkcaldy for its swift action in identifying, arresting and charging suspects, as well as to the many Fifers who expressed their outrage that such an ignorant, offensive and dangerous act had taken place in our midst. I have said to my constituents that, in the months and years ahead, sadly we—and they—must all be prepared to take a visible stand against hate.

Some of the people in that photograph were not men but boys, who apparently said that they had not understood what the gesture of the Nazi salute meant, nor understood the SS symbol on the flag that they held, but that is why the theme of “Bridging Generations” is so crucial. As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, education and memory must become a responsibility. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), in a profound speech, spoke about the difference between history and memory.

We in Kirkcaldy are proud of our Holocaust memorial, designed by students from three Fife schools who visited Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2005. The sculpture is in the shape of a doorway, and has symbols carved into it that were used across Europe and America in the 1930s to tell others, “This is a safe place.” The UK, and towns like mine in Fife, has long been a safe place for minorities and those fleeing persecution. It is incumbent on all of us to call out racism and antisemitism and those who seek to divide us. I know that the vast majority of my constituents—indeed, of our country—agree with that, but we can take nothing for granted in today's uncertain world.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) so eloquently said, we cannot assume that it will not happen again. Indeed, in the wake of the antisemitic attacks on Heaton Park synagogue and Bondi Beach, we must be clear eyed about what is happening. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and world war two, international law and the rules-based order were created, to put lines in the sand about right and wrong and to learn the lessons of what had taken place. Now, as the rules-based order is increasingly trampled on by nations that should know better, we the UK must do more to prevent mass atrocities. There must be better prediction, prevention and response to mass identity-based violence.

Data suggests that since 2012 there has been an increase in the number of countries where mass atrocity crimes are occurring, and action is needed to stop it.

[Melanie Ward]

There is a gap in global leadership on this agenda, and it shows. The UK has never had a strategy for the prevention of mass atrocity crimes. Given the state of global affairs, surely we need one now more than ever. Surely, too, we should seek to build a coalition with like-minded countries to monitor the warning signs and act together to prevent the mass murder of citizens who are targeted simply because of who they are. I ask the Minister to take that away.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, humanity was determined to prevent genocide, mass atrocities and identity-based violence from taking place ever again, but the warning light is flashing red and it is time for renewed domestic and international action, alongside education. Holocaust Memorial Day is often marked by the lighting of a candle. It is now up to us to light that candle, and carry the memory of those who perished with us always.

3.18 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is an honour to represent the SNP in today's debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. Six million Jews were murdered. I was trying to think about what words to use to describe it. The word "tragedy" was one of the first I thought of, but a tragedy is something that is unavoidable—in my head, anyway, it is something that was going to happen. This was evil perpetrated by humans. The hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) talked about the brutality of which man is capable. That was the phrase that stuck with me from today's debate. It is about the brutality that human beings are capable of inflicting on one another.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) talked about othering. The ability that human beings have to begin to "other" humans by grouping them together because of some perceived difference is horrific, and something that we should all be aware of and think of when we talk about the lessons of the Holocaust and learning from what happened in Nazi Germany.

The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) talked about what happened, and a number of other Members have also talked about what did not happen. Not every single person in Nazi Germany was a Nazi, responsible for taking Jewish people to the camps, but enough people in Nazi Germany were willing to turn a blind eye to that. I am not blaming individuals for their actions—maybe their family were being threatened, maybe they were terrified, maybe they had circumstances that we cannot contemplate today—but every one of us who has moments when we do not stand up against hatred and othering needs to think about why we are not doing so. Whether we are Members of Parliament, members of the public, community leaders or faith leaders, we need to think about whether we would be able to sleep at night if we knew people would be looking back through history at our actions and considering us to have been bystanders, rather than people who took action when it was needed—when that othering was happening.

Every human being has value. A person's value is not based on their religion, their country of birth, the colour of their skin, which town they currently live in, how much money they make or what job they do. Every human being inherently has value, and we all have a

responsibility as representatives to ensure that whatever differences exist between us, we recognise and stand up for the value of every one of our constituents and every one of the people across these islands. We have a responsibility to stand up to anyone, whether they are a Member of this place, a politician at a different level or a member of the public, and say to them, "No, somebody is not less because you have put them in a box—because you have suggested that they are somehow other. They have just as much value as you do; it does not matter what country they were born in, who they worship, or what religious text is sitting on their bedside table." We all have value just because we are human beings, and we all have that responsibility.

I want every one of us, whether we are in this Chamber or outside of it, to be able to sleep at night because we know that we have done the right thing—that we have stood up against that drip, drip, drip of the beginnings of hatred that can culminate where we ended up with the Holocaust. I find it very difficult to comprehend how someone can go from being slightly negative about somebody, or about a group, to the mass industrial murder that we saw, because I am not in that situation. I find it very difficult to contemplate how that can happen, but we know that it has—it happened not just in Nazi Germany, but in Srebrenica and Darfur.

The hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) talked about the international rules-based order and the reason why it was set up. None of the international organisations that we have relied on and listened to was set up simply as a trading organisation. The genocide convention was put in place because every country needed to ensure that we had learned those lessons, and were collectively resolved to never do it again. Some comments are being made about international organisations, saying, "We can step away from that trading organisation," but that is a bit misinformed, because it is not just about that. We must ensure that we are working together to prevent genocide, not by policing one another, but by assisting one another to ensure that every country sees the value of every human and that we never "other" people like that again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on her speech. One way to start to address the issue is in schools, at an educational level. Some of the history teachers back home tell me that they struggle to include the Holocaust in the history curriculum. Politics students can come to Parliament and learn all about it and then take it back to their school. I think of my son and his friends from Glactory college back home. They went to Auschwitz as children, and their attitude and life changed dramatically. Does the hon. Lady agree that helping educationally by funding trips to Auschwitz would be a way of addressing these issues?

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree, and I know that a number of schools in Scotland take part in trips to Auschwitz. It is important that that continues, particularly given the theme of "Bridging Generations". Fewer and fewer individuals can talk about their experiences, and it is incredibly important that we remember that history and that this was a real thing that happened. There is too much Holocaust denial of all sorts. We need to be showing people, so that they can tackle that disinformation and misinformation with the evidence of their own eyes.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. This Sunday, I went to our Holocaust Memorial Day event in Leeds and met Trude Silman, my former constituent from when I was a councillor. She is 97 years old, and we have fewer and fewer of these Holocaust survivors. I pay tribute to the children of Holocaust survivors—the second generation—including my father, who gave oral testimony to the Holocaust Centre North. I hope that by next Holocaust Memorial Day that will be transcribed and available to the public, not just so that my children and I can understand our family's history, but so that everybody can learn from that and understand our link in the UK to the Holocaust and how it can echo through the generations.

Kirsty Blackman: I hope that we see that testimony shared more widely. I have a conflicting thought, however: while it is important that we hear testimony, listen to testimony and amplify that testimony, forcing people who may not necessarily want to relive that trauma to continually relive that trauma for us to learn is not always the best way forward. We have to find a balance between how we can educate people and not retraumatising survivors.

I am contacted by a number of people expressing deeply wrong views—not necessarily teenagers, but older adults in some cases. They are “othering” in their minds and putting ethnic or religious groups in some sort of box. Dealing with disinformation and misinformation is not just about young people, but every generation. We must do more to tackle that.

I do not want to take up too much of the House's time, but I thank everybody who does stand up, whether in this place or not. It is appreciated when people take a moment to tackle and challenge those false narratives and are willing to say, “This is wrong. It is wrong to dehumanise people. It is wrong to put people in a box based on their religious convictions, their sexuality or the colour of their skin.” Anyone who is willing to do that in any circumstance is appreciated. It is not easy to do, but we all need to do it, because none of us wants to end up in a situation where we are bystanders as atrocities are committed. I thank everybody who does stand up. I thank all those people at the Holocaust Educational Trust and all those involved in Holocaust Memorial Day for bringing the information to us, so that we can make speeches and talk to our constituents about this and so that we can do our best to listen and to challenge those horrific, untrue narratives.

3.29 pm

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for not just his opening remarks but his commitment to this cause, both in this House and outside it. The Holocaust was a unique event in human history in which the state waged external war with expressly genocidal aims, combined with the industrialisation of killing as a transcontinental enterprise.

The Holocaust matters to us today because we owe it to the dead, and to the living who went through that horror, to commemorate their suffering; because we should pay tribute to those still with us, as well as those who have gone before us and who brought an end to the Hitler regime, whose *raison d'être* was the mass murder

of Jews and others whom they saw as less human; and, perhaps most importantly, because we owe it to ourselves to remind each other of where the poison of racist hatred takes humanity.

Holocaust Memorial Day matters more this year, because there has undoubtedly been an appalling rise in antisemitic violence and in the public and private abuse of Jews. If the Holocaust teaches us anything, it is to stand up and call out hatred and racism. There is now a barely hidden campaign to drive Jews out of public and civic life in Britain—a campaign, I am sad to say, in which Members of this House are active participants or complicit. The eruption of antisemitism in Britain since 7 October 2023 has underlined how supposed progressives and anti-racists are fine to speak out, unless it is about hatred of Jews. Campaigners have marched alongside open supporters of fascistic Hamas and shouted slogans advocating a global war against Jews. They have done all this because they believe that their new-found allies are merely “anti-Zionist” and not actually antisemites at all.

The arguments that dominate today's antisemitic discourse are superficially more sophisticated, and are increasingly shaped by the melting pot of extreme ideas that is provided by social media, but the reality is that the far right, the far left and the Islamists still rely on the old tropes of hidden Jewish power and manipulation, Jewish blood lust, and Jews as the killer of Christ. They now hide this behind the words “Zionism” or “Israel” and hope that people will not spot the difference. Through social media, many of these ideas have seeped into the discourse of what is supposedly mainstream.

In 2019, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman) told the Bruges Group of the supposed threat of “cultural Marxism”, an idea that has direct Nazi roots. It is a phrase that the former MP Andrew Percy warned others against using. In 2024, Liz Truss was forced to remove a bogus and antisemitic quote attributed to Mayer Rothschild from her memoirs. Then there is the case of Reform's recently announced candidate for Gorton and Denton, who, like the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), appears not to believe that ethnic minority children born here can ever be British or understand British humour. This is the antisemites' baseline argument about the otherness of Jews, retooled for the use of today's insurgent far right and far left.

It behoves all of us to call out the issues in our midst, and there has been too much silence in this regard. Members of this House have been involved in stoking the fires of Islamist hatred, antisemitism and Holocaust inversion. Perhaps some will make very fine speeches about Holocaust memorial, as they did last year, but we should not allow ourselves to be fooled. One Member of this House, writing about the middle east on social media, invoked images of the gas chambers, a barbaric creation used for the industrialised and systematic murder of Jews—Jewish men, women and children. That trivialises the Holocaust.

However, there is not only Holocaust inversion; there are outright antisemitic tropes. Members of this House have shared posts on social media of images of political leaders being “dog-walked” or controlled by Israeli politicians or the Zionist lobby. This draws on stereotypes of Jewish power and control, and alludes to some kind of malign Jewish influence. These classic antisemitic

[Joani Reid]

tropes have existed for thousands of years, but are continually being repackaged and updated to fit the contemporary political context.

In the Budget debate, the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) talked about her constituents “bleeding...dry”, because of our Government’s support of Israel, and we also heard a Member of this House talk about Israel’s—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I want to make sure that protocol has been followed. First, we obviously do not mention Members by their names, not that the hon. Member has done that. She has, however, referred to a few Members by their constituencies, so can I have her assurance that she let them know that she would be referencing them in the Chamber during this debate?

Joani Reid: Madam Deputy Speaker, I can confirm that I have written to all the Members I have included in my speech.

Another Member talked about Israel’s “blood-soaked tentacles”. There is no safe limit of antisemitism that we should tolerate, and no requirement for us to apply weaker moral tests of what is an acceptable opinion because of the religious heritage of our interlocutor. Human rights apply universally, and so do human responsibilities. We need to enforce those responsibilities before it is too late. The warning lights are already flashing. We do not have to look back to the 1930s to see how democracies can crash under the burden of political extremism and contempt for the rule of law, because we see that in the news every day.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.36 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is an honour to speak in this debate and to follow such passionate speeches, including that of the hon. Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid). I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) not only on such an eloquent introduction to this debate, but on such an interesting history of the persecution of Jews in Britain for the best part of 1,000 years. That was very informative and provided a much-needed context for our discussion.

Many Members spoke about the individuals, charities and organisations working tirelessly to ensure that the nation and schoolchildren in particular are educated about the Holocaust and will not forget it. As the average age of Holocaust survivors is 87, it is very prescient that the Holocaust Memorial Day theme is “Bridging Generations”. The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust plays a vital role in ensuring that remembrance is not limited to those whose families were murdered in the Holocaust, but includes those who, having been mercilessly killed by the Nazis, were left with no one to speak their names. The legacy of victims with no surviving family or relatives must be safeguarded through education, remembrance and memorial.

If the words “never again” are to mean anything, they must represent a shared commitment to challenge hatred wherever it appears. Sadly, this year’s Holocaust

Memorial Day comes against a backdrop of rising antisemitism. Jewish people in the UK are facing unacceptable and rising levels of hatred and violence—and I know from speaking to my constituents in Winchester just how isolating and frightening that can be. No one should feel anxious or scared when going to their place of worship and no one should be denied the freedom to express their religious beliefs. It ought to be a national shame that we need security measures outside places of worship, but with the murder of two members of the Jewish community just last year outside their synagogue, those measures are, unfortunately, necessary.

For so many British Jews, Holocaust Memorial Day is deeply personal. It is a day of grief, of remembrance and of resilience. Primo Levi wrote:

“The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister alarm-signal.”

While hatred and division persist, that alarm signal must be in our minds today, and must remain in our minds for generations to come. On my way to the Chamber today, I walked past the very moving exhibition in Parliament of the replicas of the shoes of people who were killed in those death camps. Some of those shoes are of little children. That is a stark and haunting reminder of what the Holocaust required. The Holocaust depended on the systematic dehumanisation of its victims, casting human beings as non-human to justify the unjustifiable. To murder millions, the Nazi state had to treat even little children not as children with names, families and futures, but as something less than human.

In this Chamber and in our communities, schools and neighbourhoods, let us all stand with Jewish communities, because antisemitism has no place in our country or abroad. We must do all we can to ensure that Jewish people can practise their faith freely, live openly and participate fully in our society without fear. We remain today, and will always remain, committed to creating a society that never stops learning from the lessons of history.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

3.41 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to speak as a shadow Housing, Communities and Local Government Minister in a debate where Members across the House have been frank, honest, open and emotional. Debates such as this, about our history and our future, often bring out the best in Members, and I pay tribute to all the speeches this afternoon.

I particularly pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), who opened the debate. I do not think that I am alone in saying that he is one of the most gentlemanly and honourable Members of the House in conducting his business. He gave us some beautiful words that we all must learn from, as well as a wonderful history tour. His speech brought our history closer to home, and showed what this country was intrinsically involved in. His honesty in that is admirable.

Notwithstanding the serious nature of this debate, I think that the hon. Gentleman should consider audiobooks, because his dulcet tones should be heard far and wide across the country. They are incredibly soothing. He did a tremendous job today, and I pay tribute to him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) reminded us that the Holocaust was not the start or end of antisemitism. His speech was a stark reminder not just of the need to remember, but to acknowledge what is happening now in this country and the world.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) spoke in graphic detail, and he was right to do so. Having been to Auschwitz and to the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem only last month, I know that we must not become desensitised to our history. His graphic speech reminded us of the horrors of the past. He outlined some local issues to do with councillors at Leeds council, and he had every right to do so on the Floor of the House. It is a shame that the leadership of any political party did not feel the need to vet people properly or act on an incredibly serious incident. I remind the House and my right hon. Friend that Hamas is a proscribed organisation, and I hope that the police will take action following his speech to bring that person to justice. He is absolutely right that we need to call out antisemitism and challenge those who look the other way not just by making points of order, but by making substantive contributions in this Chamber, as he did this afternoon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) said that we must arm young people with knowledge about genocide, despite the dehumanisation and nationalism we have seen in the parts of the world that he mentioned. He is absolutely right. That is just a short peppering of the excellent contributions we have had from across the House today.

Holocaust Memorial Day invites us to pause, reflect and recommit ourselves to ensuring that the darkest chapter in human history is never forgotten. This year's theme, "Bridging Generations", is a powerful reminder that the responsibility for remembrance does not end with the survivors. It lives on through their children and their grandchildren, and through every single one of us. As a nation, we must never allow the history of the Holocaust to fade from our collective consciousness. As the events of the 1930s and 1940s move further from living memory, our duty becomes even more urgent. We must ensure that future generations know and understand the horrors, traumas and lessons of the Shoah, for remembrance is not a passive act; it is a conscious commitment to education, and to the memory of those killed in barbarous cruelty.

Holocaust Memorial Day plays a vital role in sustaining that commitment. On this day, we commemorate the genocide of 6 million Jews—men, women and children—murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. We also remember the millions of others persecuted and killed: Roma and Sinti people, the disabled, gay men, political opponents, and countless others targeted by a regime built on hatred and dehumanisation. The focus on bridging generations reminds us of our collective role in ensuring that the Holocaust remains a lesson for all those in positions of influence and responsibility. We in this place have a special obligation to ensure that the stories of those who came before us continue to be told accurately, compassionately and courageously to future generations. As we reflect, we must also remember that the Holocaust was not the final genocide of the 20th century. The world has witnessed unspeakable brutality again and again. We all, in this House, send our thoughts to

those affected by antisemitic terror, particularly those in Australia, whom many Members across the House mentioned.

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust reminds us that commemorating these tragedies is not only a moral duty, but a hope that through memory we can build the vigilance needed to prevent these horrors recurring, yet remembrance alone is not enough. We must also confront the reality of antisemitism today. Any discrimination or intimidation based on religion or race is deplorable and must never be tolerated. In 2016, the United Kingdom became the first country in Europe to formally adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism—an important step, but one that we must build on with action against a rising tide of antisemitism.

I am afraid to say that data from the Community Security Trust shows deeply troubling trends. In the first half of 2025 alone, 1,521 antisemitic incidents were recorded across the UK—the second highest total ever reported over such a period. The surge in antisemitism that followed the horrific terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023, before there had been any major military response in Gaza, is a stark reminder that antisemitism remains a persistent, poisonous force. In that context, initiatives to strengthen Holocaust education and public memory are more important than ever. That is why the Holocaust Memorial Act 2026, which received Royal Assent just last week, marks a historic and meaningful milestone. It will finally bring to life the vision first announced in 2015 by Lord Cameron of a national Holocaust memorial and learning centre beside Parliament, in Victoria Tower Gardens. It will serve as a lasting tribute to the 6 million Jewish victims, and to all victims of Nazi persecution. It will stand as an enduring educational resource, and a totemic reminder of the consequences of unchecked hatred and the vital importance of resisting it.

At the very moment when education is most urgently needed, we face a worrying decline. As the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket mentioned, in 2023, more than 2,000 secondary schools across the UK took part in Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations, and the number had grown each year since 2019; but in the wake of the 7 October attacks, participation fell to under 1,200 in 2024, and to just 854 in 2025—a drop of nearly 60%. This is alarming, to say the least. Holocaust education should never be seen as political, nor should it be treated as contingent on world events. The Chief Rabbi expressed this with clarity and moral force when he said:

"Holocaust Memorial Day is not a platform for political debate. It is not an endorsement of any Government, perspective or conflict. It is an act of human memory. To insist that it must justify itself by reference to today's headlines is to fundamentally misunderstand it."

The Chief Rabbi also reminded us of another essential point:

"The Shoah was not inevitable. It was the end of a road paved with normalised scapegoating, constant disinformation, violent autocracy and a culture of the most extreme hatred. It began not in concentration camps but in classrooms, newspapers and public squares where people learned to look away."

Holocaust education, then, is not a parochial concern, and it is right that by law children are taught about the Holocaust in the key stage 3 history curriculum. I welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring that the

[Paul Holmes]

Holocaust remain a compulsory topic in the reformed national curriculum, which will be required teaching in academy schools, when it is implemented. It is only through education that we can honour those who were killed. To reference the Chief Rabbi once more,

“Honouring Jewish victims of genocide does not diminish compassion for any other people. On the contrary, it enlarges it, because collective memory is not a finite resource.”

Today, as we work to bridge generations, and connect the testimonies of survivors to the responsibilities of our children and grandchildren, let us ensure that the horrors of the Holocaust are never forgotten, and most importantly, never repeated. Let us, across all generations, all parties and both sides of this Chamber, stand together in remembrance, but also united in hope.

3.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for opening the debate with such a poignant and thoughtful contribution. He set the tone of the debate impeccably. This debate has shown, powerfully and painfully, that the past few years have not been easy for British Jews, or for Jewish communities across the world. Many colleagues have spoken today with a frankness and empathy that reflects the deep concern felt across the House.

Britain is rightly proud of being one of the world's most successful multi-faith and multi-ethnic democracies—it is part of who we are—so it is with a particularly heavy heart that we recall the attack on Heaton Park synagogue in Manchester on Yom Kippur, one of the holiest days in the Jewish calendar, and the shocking attack at Bondi Beach in Sydney. These events remind us that antisemitism is never a problem for someone else to solve. It is a threat to all of us—to our values, our cohesion, and our shared sense of safety.

This debate, however, is not only about confronting rising antisemitism; it is first and foremost about honouring the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered in the Holocaust, and the thousands of Roma and Sinti, disabled people, Jehovah's Witnesses, gay men and political opponents who were also persecuted and killed. It is also about remembering the genocides that have happened, tragically, in more recent times.

More than 80 years have passed since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, yet the lessons about where hatred, dehumanisation and violent bigotry can lead remain painfully relevant. Many of us in this House have had the immense privilege of hearing directly from Holocaust survivors. This year's Holocaust Memorial Day theme, “Bridging Generations”, feels especially poignant. The survivors, who have carried the heaviest of burdens, and who have shared their testimony with extraordinary courage, are fewer each year. We owe it to them to ensure that their voices never fade.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) spoke incredibly powerfully of the memories and stories of that dark period, the profound impact they have, and how sharing them is more important today than it has ever been. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) for sharing the heart-wrenching story of Susan Pollack, which is a harrowing reminder of where hate and othering can lead us.

Over the past two weeks, colleagues will have walked through the atrium in Portcullis House and seen “In Their Footsteps”, an extraordinary exhibition of ceramic shoes. It is a quiet but powerful reminder that trauma and memory echo across generations, and that remembrance is not passive, but active, creative and deeply personal. The exhibition also pays tribute to Danny Herman. Danny and his family arrived in the UK on the eve of the second world war, eventually settling in Liverpool, becoming British citizens and contributing to this country in ways large and small, in everything from wartime industry to professional sport. In the atrium, the shoes created by his family speak of love, survival and legacy. They remind us that every survivor's story is unique, and that everyone deserves to be remembered. The message today is clear: we cannot remember the victims of the Holocaust while ignoring antisemitism in our own time.

Despite the words “never again”, we continue to see violent conflict across the world, and civilians are caught in its path. That underscores the urgency of the work we are discussing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) set out so effectively, we all know that social media can be an extraordinary force for connection, but it can also be a vehicle for spreading Holocaust denial, hatred and division faster than ever before. That is why we must remain vigilant, and why it is so important to safeguard our children—not only to protect them, but to equip them with the critical skills and confidence that they need to challenge hatred when they encounter it.

The Department for Education launched the tackling antisemitism in education innovation fund on Holocaust Memorial Day to address misinformation, improve media literacy and encourage tolerant, informed debate. Some £7 million has already been allocated to tackling antisemitism in our schools, colleges and universities. That includes £500,000 for the University Jewish Chaplaincy, and further funding for the Union of Jewish Students and Palace Yard to train staff to recognise and address antisemitism.

Many Members have spoken today about the importance of testimony. The Prime Minister has made a clear pledge that every student in the country should have the opportunity to hear recorded survivor testimony. Testimony 360, a free digital education programme from the Holocaust Educational Trust that uses virtual reality and digital eyewitness accounts, will help to deliver that promise and ensure that survivors' voices remain accessible long after they can no longer speak in person.

This Government continue to support high-quality Holocaust education through the University College London Centre for Holocaust Education, and the Holocaust Educational Trust “Lessons from Auschwitz” programme—programmes that have transformed the understanding of thousands of students and teachers, and will continue to do so. This education is vital. As Members have said, it is more important now than ever.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) provided powerful testimony about the rising tide of hate and division, both at home and abroad. She is right to demand that we be vigilant, and that we do better. I will take away her call for a strategy to prevent the mass murder of innocent people simply because of their faith, race, ethnicity or identity. My hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and

Westminster (Rachel Blake) was right to remind us that we all have a responsibility to tackle the antisemitism and the rise of hate and division in our communities, and that we must use our empathy, compassion and respect to bridge and hold our communities together. I echo the words of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman): we must all stand up against this hate, and thank everyone who does stand up against it.

I finish by paying tribute to Karen Pollock, the chief executive officer of the Holocaust Educational Trust, whose leadership and passion continue to inspire so many; to Olivia Marks-Woldman and the team at the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, who deliver the national ceremony and countless local events across the country; and to the many other organisations whose work enriches and protects the memory of the Holocaust: the Holocaust Survivors' Centre in Hendon, the Anne Frank Trust, the Wiener Holocaust Library, the Association of Jewish Refugees, Generation 2 Generation, the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in Newark, the Holocaust Centre North in Huddersfield, and the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education.

I ask the House to take a moment to remember the survivors who shared their testimony with us and who are no longer here. Their courage, generosity and determination to educate others, despite the unimaginable trauma that they endured, is a gift to this country. We honour their memory, and wish their families a long life.

3.59 pm

Peter Prinsley: It has been an immense privilege and honour to listen to the many brilliant speeches in the House this afternoon. I thank anybody who said anything kind about me.

I have made some notes about what people said—there is no time to go through all of them, but I must mention one or two. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) spoke with such gravitas; I think she has a future as a distinguished rabbi, should she ever wish to go out of politics, which she perhaps will not. The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) spoke about Peter Kurer BEM, who is my sister-in-law's father. He will be so chuffed to learn that he was mentioned here in Parliament, and I thank the hon. Member for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) spoke about the Windermere children. We all know that story, but Samantha, who was a University of East Anglia student, became a close friend. She is one of the granddaughters of a Windermere boy, so it was great to hear about that. We will never forget the Heaton heroes.

If there is time, let me quickly explain Bevis Marks, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake). Bevis Marks in the City of London should actually be “Bury Marks”, but I have to stop.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): No, you don't!

Peter Prinsley: Oh, there is time! In that case, I will tell hon. Members the story. The great Abbey of Bury St Edmunds had large landholdings all over the country,

including land in the City of London. Wooden stakes were put out each year to define the land, which were called the Bury marks. “Bevis Marks” is simply a spelling mistake.

Rachel Blake: My hon. Friend may know that Bevis Marks synagogue is very close to Bury Street. I wonder if that is part of his story.

Peter Prinsley: I thank my hon. Friend for that information, which I was aware of.

If I have a little time, let me thank the leader of Plaid Cymru, the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—I simply cannot pronounce the name of her constituency. She was correct that we must remember the other genocides, some of which really are a memory for me, not history; many of us can remember several of them.

I was particularly taken by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), who spoke about the expression “never again”. As he correctly said, “never again” is a test for all of us. What will we do to ensure that it will never happen again?

Finally, I would like to say something about my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid), who is the most powerful advocate for the Campaign Against Antisemitism. If it were up to me, I should appoint her as a righteous gentile.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day.

PETITION

Education on methanol poisoning

4.4 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): On 21 November 2024, Simone White lost her life, aged just 28, following a mass methanol poisoning incident. She was one of six tourists who died after consuming contaminated drinks served at a hostel in the tourist town of Vang Vieng in Laos.

Alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) and the hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson), I have met members of Simone's family who live in our respective constituencies. The incident has prompted them to campaign for increased awareness and education about the dangers of methanol poisoning abroad.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Orpington,

Declares that bootleg alcohol poses a considerable danger to tourists and has, tragically, resulted in deaths in countries including Laos, Turkey and Vietnam.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that children and young people are taught about the dangers of consuming bootleg alcohol as part of the PSHE or biology curriculum in schools.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003160]

Non-league Football

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gen Kitchen.)

4.5 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the importance of non-league football and the vital role it plays in communities across the country.

Non-league clubs are often more than football clubs. They are community hubs, employers, charities and a source of deep local pride. Nowhere is that clearer than in Hartlepool. Hartlepool United acts as a veterans hub, supporting those in our borough who have served, and it was the first professional football club in England to sign the armed forces covenant. It was also the first to receive a bronze award from the armed forces covenant employer recognition scheme, an achievement that speaks volumes about the values of our club and our town.

Fans are closer to the players in non-league football than at any other level of the game. In towns such as Hartlepool, football is not just entertainment; it is part of who we are. The fortunes of our club are felt right across the community, well beyond the turnstiles. As a proud season ticket holder, I take my children along to Pools at every possible opportunity. I did so before I was elected, and I will continue to do so long after I leave this place, because Hartlepool United belongs to Hartlepool, and Hartlepool belongs to its football club.

While I deeply appreciate the many colleagues who have come to intervene in support of this debate, and I am sure to plug their local teams, I must say that as this debate is in my name, any suggestion that their team is better than Hartlepool United will be given robustly short shrift.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I bow to my hon. Friend's preference when it comes to Hartlepool, not least because Rochdale were recently subjected to an awful defeat at the hands of the Pools, and I was there to witness it. Hopefully that will not prevent us from winning the national league. He makes a powerful case for the community links of non-league clubs. Will he join me in praising the Dale Trust—the supporters trust—and Dale 1907, which do so much for our local community? Will he also join me at the end of the season, when we put the up into "Up the Dale"?

Mr Brash: Of course I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to those organisations, which exemplify why non-league clubs are so important to their communities. He pre-empted me, because I was going to remind him of our recent match on 30 December, when we beat you 2-1.

I will focus my primary remarks on the national league's 3UP campaign and what it would mean for non-league clubs such as Hartlepool United. The campaign is simple: it calls for three promotion places from the national league into league two, bringing it into line with the rest of the professional football pyramid. It is supported by all 72 national league clubs, by the Football Supporters Association, by fans across the country, by more than 50 Members of this House—on a Thursday afternoon, I appreciate why they are not here—and by respected voices across the game, including Hartlepool legend Jeff Stelling. I take this moment to mention my

hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns), who asked me to make special reference to her support for the campaign. I will not mention the result last time Hartlepool met Carlisle.

This would not be a radical restructuring of football; it would be a straightforward reform to make the system fairer, more competitive and more sustainable. As it would simply mirror the structure of the English football league, it can hardly be regarded as a major upheaval. There are 72 clubs in the national league system, and many clubs currently in the EFL have benefited from time spent in the national league, yet only two clubs are promoted each season. That imbalance limits opportunity, suppresses ambition and places enormous financial pressure on clubs that are striving to succeed. At a time when clubs higher up in the leagues are struggling financially, it does not take much imagination to see how that pressure is felt even more sharply at our end of the spectrum.

I fully recognise that the Government do not directly control promotions and relegations—and probably just as well. Those decisions sit with the EFL, but the Government do have influence, particularly at a time when football governance is under greater scrutiny than ever before. With the introduction of the Independent Football Regulator, there is a clear expectation that fairness, sustainability and the long-term health of the game must sit at the heart of decision making. That is why I was proud to walk through the Lobby in support of the legislation that introduced it.

Too often, our game has been overtaken by vested interests, with as many headlines about ownership and governance as there are about the football itself. Pools fans know that only too well. That is why I want to place on record my thanks and welcome to Hartlepool United's new owner, Landon Smith. His recent takeover has given us our club back. I was delighted to welcome the journalist Robbie Stelling to Parliament. Disgracefully, he was banned from home games by the previous owner, but he is now, quite rightly, welcome once again at Victoria Park. That moment mattered, because it symbolised something bigger: Hartlepool United returning to its supporters, town and values.

Real fans want to see their teams given every possible opportunity to succeed. Real fans want the hope that exists at every other level of the football pyramid. Real fans want 3UP. This change has been stalled for years. It has now been 23 years since the national league was awarded a second promotion place. In that time, the business of football has changed beyond recognition, yet the basic question of parity remains unresolved. The EFL has argued that 3UP should be considered as part of wider reform, but that may take years. National league clubs cannot wait years, and neither can the communities that stand behind them week in, week out.

The EFL board will meet early next month to set the agenda for its annual general meeting, which takes place in early March. This is a critical moment at which a decision could be taken with all member clubs present. If this opportunity is missed, national league clubs face waiting yet another year to be treated as equal partners within the football pyramid.

I ask the following questions of the Minister. What steps will the Government take to encourage constructive engagement between the EFL and the national league? How will the Government ensure that fairness and opportunity are central to the future governance of the

game? How will the new regulator support a pyramid that rewards sporting merit and gives ambitious clubs a genuine route upward?

This is about putting football first. It is about fairness and recognising the enormous contribution that non-league clubs such as Hartlepool United make to our communities. I urge the Minister to use the voice of the Government to support that principle. I will finish by simply saying, “Up the Pools!”

4.12 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) on securing this important debate. I hope he is not too intimidated by the size of the crowd in here this afternoon. *[Laughter.]* He is a passionate advocate for non-league football and his own club. He is a dedicated supporter of Hartlepool and is a season ticket holder.

Hartlepool United is a club that has seen the highs and lows of the professional and non-league game over its history. As a Scot, I feel a bit of a fraud responding in this debate, because I do not know much about English non-league football. I do know a lot about Scottish non-league football. My own club, Heart of Midlothian, is at the top of the Scottish Premiership this season, four points clear of Rangers and flying high.

Paul Waugh: Speaking of clubs that are at the top of their league, Rochdale are at the top of the national league right now. Despite that, we do strongly support the 3UP—and three down—campaign, because although we may well benefit this year from going straight up, we know all too often that clubs can sometimes rack up lots of points but still not go up, as York City did last season even though they were 20 points ahead of Oldham.

As a season ticket holder, like my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash), it is really important that we reward the loyalty of fans and footballers who play for clubs such as Rochdale, Hearts and Hartlepool. I also want to pay tribute to Ian Henderson, who marked his 41st birthday last weekend with a goal and an assist and who plays for Rochdale as our record goal scorer.

Ian Murray: With Ian Henderson’s age, maybe there is still time for my hon. Friend to score a hat trick to take the Dale up. He mentioned in his previous intervention the Dale Trust and Dale 1907, and I pay tribute to them. We tend to forget that, right across the country, all our football clubs have strong community spirit and strong charities and trusts attached to them that do so much in the local community—Big Hearts is attached to my football club. Indeed, the reason I mention my club is not just to get it on the record, as we always like to do, but because it is the largest fan-owned club in the UK. That fan ownership was born out of ownership crisis. The club was owned by a Russian-born oligarch from Lithuania, but when it went into administration and liquidation, the fans bought out the club and now it is riding high.

When we see what has been done at Hartlepool—I pay tribute to Landon Smith for taking over the club—hopefully it will have a bright future with that settled ownership. Clubs such as the Pools—or the “monkey hangers”, a nickname which my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool did not mention—are not just sports

teams; they are part of the very identity of our towns and the communities within them. They are the institutions that provide pride in place, which is a concept that I know my hon. Friend champions, and they play a vital role in the social and economic fabric of all our communities. Without our football clubs, our communities would be hollowed out, so congratulations to everyone who runs a non-league club.

British and English football is a global success story. Of course, it was invented in Scotland, and Scotland won the world cup in 1967 by beating England at Wembley. *[Laughter.]* This Government are committed to ensuring that football’s foundations remain strong, sustainable and supported for generations to come, and crucially, that fans are put first. That is really important.

As my hon. Friend has highlighted, the influence of non-league football extends far beyond the pitch. Clubs are frequently the beating heart of our communities, serving as hubs for social cohesion, education and physical activity, and bringing people and our communities together. Department for Culture, Media and Sport research has shown that the sport and physical activity sector contributes £53 billion to our national economy. We must also look at the major social value: the £8 billion of wellbeing value created by grassroots and non-league football and the £43 million saved for our NHS every single year from fans’ involvement in their clubs. Whether it is Hartlepool United’s work with local youth or the thousands of smaller clubs across the country run by volunteers, the Government recognise that every pound invested in non-league football is an investment in the health and happiness of our nation and our communities—and my goodness, don’t we need a bit of that in our communities?

A key pillar of our support for the game is ensuring long-term sustainability through the Football Governance Act 2025, which received Royal Assent in July last year. That historic legislation establishes the Independent Football Regulator, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool mentioned. For the first time, we have a statutory body with the powers to ensure that clubs are run sustainably and to protect the heritage that the fans hold dear—the very lifeblood of the game. Importantly for today’s debate, the regulator’s remit includes the top five tiers of the men’s game, of which Hartlepool and Rochdale are part. That means that clubs in the national league benefit from oversight that demands financial resilience and meaningful fan engagement.

We have also given the regulator backstop powers to intervene in financial distributions. If football is unable to reach an agreement, we want to see a fairer share of the game’s wealth flowing down the pyramid system, ensuring that the prosperity at the very top of the game supports the sustainability of those further down. Non-league football provides the stars—the premier league players—of the future.

The sustainability of non-league football was fundamentally challenged during the covid era and, indeed, post covid. The sport survival package, which was worth £13.4 million in loans, supported 35 non-league clubs when their need was most acute in response to unprecedented circumstances—I know that that has been a huge issue for Hartlepool. We understand that for many clubs, the legacy of that turbulent period remains a challenge. That is why the Department continues

[*Ian Murray*]

to work closely with Sport England, and its loan agent, which regularly engages with borrowers to monitor their financial position.

Physical infrastructure is important and is often a substantial overhead for grassroots community clubs. That is why we are continuing our investment through the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, which is delivering £98 million this year alone for community clubs below step 6 of the national league system. I am pleased that we have recently confirmed that £85 million will be committed for 2026-27 as well, building on the huge success of the grassroots programme. We understand that for the clubs that are climbing the tiers of the national league system, the requirements for stadium infrastructure become more intensive. That is why we work so closely with the Football Foundation, which my hon. Friend mentioned, that also delivers the Premier League Stadium Fund. Although that is the Premier League's own fund, its delivery through the Football Foundation ensures that it is aligned with our shared goals for a sustainable pyramid.

I will touch on the 3UP campaign, which is the main thrust of the debate—maybe we will only need “one up” this season if the Dale end up at the top of the division. The Government recognise the strengthen of feeling on the 3UP campaign. It was a major debating point in both Houses during the passage of the Football Governance Act. However, decisions about the structure of football competitions, including promotion and relegation arrangements, are rightly a matter for the footballing authorities, as my hon. Friend says. Otherwise, if we had the power to do so, I would be standing here announcing an extra three or six points for Heart of Midlothian football club. It is not in the power of Ministers to deal with the footballing authorities in that way.

Mr Brash: I should probably point out that my father was a Hibs fan as a child—I hope that does not act against me in this debate. The Minister mentioned that the Football Governance Act requires meaningful fan engagement. Given that fans are so unanimously behind the 3UP campaign, would he see it as a failure of engagement if we do not see that change coming forward?

Ian Murray: After my hon. Friend's confession about his father being a Hibs supporter, I do not know whether he has gone from being my hon. Friend to just a hon. Gentleman. He is right, and fan involvement in the game was the key driver in the Football Governance Act. One of the key drivers of fan ownership at my own club was to have fan's voices heard. Fans are the lifeblood of the game. Whether it is ticket prices, the colour of the football club, the name or where they play, all those issues are key because they make football what it is and are why we support the clubs that we do. I hope the EFL listens to the fans on this and sees the strength of feeling on what needs to be done.

The EFL—of course, my hon. Friend knows this—is a membership organisation, and therefore vested interests take hold on whether a club may be advantaged or disadvantaged by 3UP and, of course, all the connotations

around that. The EFL and, I hope, its member clubs have heard this, and the fan voice is strong on this campaign. I say from this Dispatch Box that I hope the EFL hears that strength of feeling at its meetings in March.

My hon. Friend mentioned the regulator, and I am pleased that the Independent Football Regulator recently launched its consultation on the terms of reference for its state of the game report. I appreciate him saying that things need to move quickly, but this comes ahead of the report's publication in 2027, which will be a huge milestone for the regulator. The report will provide unparalleled insight into the structural issues facing the game and the wider football ecosystem, informing the regulator's approach and decision making. The debate around restructuring leagues and football has been there since time immemorial, and if we put four football fans in a room to debate football reconstruction, we would get eight different answers for how that should go. These are complex negotiations. There will be financial distribution, organisational and scheduling challenges across multiple leagues, and it is ultimately a matter for the EFL.

I hope I can spend a few minutes talking about the women's game, which is hugely important in this context. As we strengthen the foundation of the men's game, we are equally committed to the continued transformation of women and girls' football. Edinburgh South FC in my constituency has 1,200 young people playing every single weekend, many of them girls. The number of girls who want to play is exploding, and I am incredibly proud of the progress we have seen.

As the major independent review led by Karen Carney rightly noted, we must work to raise the standards across every level of the game, including in non-league and grassroots football. Our investment is already delivering gold-standard provision through the Lionesses futures fund—I think England might have won a tournament somewhere. We provided £30 million to deliver state-of-the-art 3G pitches, dedicated female facilities, proper changing rooms and accessible toilets. We have ensured that this infrastructure is not just built but is accessible to all, with reserved peak-time slots and priority booking for women's teams. These vital learnings are now hardwired into our main facilities programme.

The Government's support for non-league football is multifaceted. It is about financial regulation, modern facilities and sustainability, but mostly it is about social opportunity. I want to thank the thousands of volunteers who keep our non-league clubs running, the tens of thousands of fans who go every week for their pie, their Bovril and their entertainment. They are the unsung heroes of our national game. This Government will continue to work with the Football Association, the Premier League, the EFL and the new independent regulator to ensure that our non-league clubs remain at the heart of our communities for years to come. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 29 January 2026

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Ukraine: Non-recognition of Russian-occupied Territories

1.30 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.

Today is 1,435 days since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It has been nearly 12 years since Russia's invasion of Crimea, which many would say is when the war really began. The same fact stands as it did back in 2022 and back in 2014: we do not recognise the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine as Russian. That is why the policy of non-recognition is as paramount today as it has ever been.

Ukraine is a sovereign state with established borders, including Crimea and the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions. Those borders are recognised by the United Nations and the majority of states worldwide. All the partially occupied regions voted in a nationwide 1991 referendum for Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union. We must preserve the principle of territorial integrity. Ukraine's borders are internationally recognised and any changes achieved by force have no legal validity. That protects a core principle of international law: the prohibition on acquiring territory through military force. The policy of non-recognition prevents the creation of a dangerous precedent that would allow other states to change borders through military aggression, undermining the UN charter and international treaties. Non-recognition matters because resolutions and official statements on non-recognition provide the legal and political foundations for imposing sanctions, internationally isolating the aggressor and holding it accountable for violations of international norms.

Furthermore, maintaining the status of those territories as part of Ukraine protects rights related to citizenship and legal protection, as well as the future processes of de-occupation and restoration of control. Non-recognition of Russia's illegal occupation of Ukrainian territories would send a clear signal to Russia, and other states willing to change borders by force, that there is a price to pay for aggression. It is crucial to remember that the weak international reaction to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 enabled the current wave of Russian aggression, which is much more extensive and violent.

I will address the immensely human side of why non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine is vital, as well as the horrors of occupation for children, civilians and detainees, and the eradication of Ukrainian identity through Russification. I will also address how there are shocking beliefs and disinformation about these atrocities not being true. Finally, I will detail the asks needed to uphold the prospect of non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.

Non-recognition sends a single to the Ukrainian state and army that the international community supports its legitimate self-defence, including attempts to de-occupy all of its territory. Historically, non-recognition of illegal occupation made the reverse of such occupation easier, for instance in the case of the Baltic states' occupation by the Soviet Union. It also sends a signal to our allies that international law matters, a signal to Ukrainian civilians in the occupied territories that the international community cares about their fate, and a signal to Ukrainians who had to flee the occupied territories that they might be able to return.

There are some significantly grave atrocities being committed against Ukrainian civilians in the occupied territories. According to Freedom House, the index of civil and political rights in the Russian-occupied territories is minus 1. For comparison, North Korea's index is 3. The Russian-occupied territories are the least free place in the world. More than 100,000 people in the occupied territories have been killed as of January 2026. If not killed, there are heavy efforts to engineer ideological control. In 2022, the Russian Ministry of Education dictionary instructed teachers on how to "re-educate" Ukrainian children based on Russian "spiritual and moral values".

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on his work on Ukraine and on securing the debate. He is talking about the occupied territories, and I want to raise an issue that we have discovered. In the occupied territory of Alchevsk, there are currently 100,000 people without heating or any form of support, not because of attacks by Ukrainian missiles; it is down to Russia's incompetence and failure to even look after the territories that they have occupied. Does that not show their lack of care for areas they say should be part of Russia? It is another nail in their coffin of lies. They do not have any interest at all in individuals; they just want the territories, and it is an abomination.

Alex Sobel: The right hon. Member is absolutely correct. There is no part of the occupied territories of Ukraine where the standard of living is anywhere near what it was prior to the occupation. People in those territories are being systematically deprived of their livelihoods and there has been a material decline in their standard of living. Obviously, those who object to the occupation have been tortured, mutilated or killed, as Freedom House has evidenced.

I would like to be the first to congratulate and celebrate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) for this week being awarded the Ukrainian Order of Merit by President Zelensky. Since coming to this place, she has dedicated much of her time to working towards the return of Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russia.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for his very kind words. I am pleased that he has touched upon the issue of the stolen children, because there are still many thousands of Ukrainian children who have been abducted from their homes, and of course 1.6 million Ukrainian children are subject to militarisation and indoctrination in the temporarily occupied territories.

This week, Mykola Kuleba, the founder of Save Ukraine, warned that Russia has created a "legal cage" to permanently entrap Ukrainian children in these occupied

[Johanna Baxter]

territories, imposing exit bans on children under the age of 14, putting a limitation on escape routes for those who have been abducted, removing orphans overnight from where they are staying, and imposing processes to systematically erase Ukrainian children's names and identities from their documentation. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to rejecting Russian recognition of Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories, this House must also reject any recognition of the Russification of Ukrainian children and unequivocally condemn Russia's attempt to erase Ukraine's future, one child at a time?

Alex Sobel: I deeply thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. It is absolutely right that the most vulnerable children on this planet are Ukrainian children in the Russian-occupied territories, and Ukrainian children who used to be in the Russian occupied territories but who are now falsely imprisoned in Russia, either in camps or through false adoption by Russian parents, including members of the Russian Government. There is no greater symbol of how monstrous Russia is than its treatment of Ukrainian children.

Ukrainian civilians in the temporarily occupied territories are being abducted or unjustly imprisoned by Russia on a massive scale. At a minimum, several thousand Ukrainian civilians have suffered this mistreatment. Let me guide hon. Members through Russia's systemic abuse of the Ukrainian civilian population in the temporarily occupied areas.

First, there is persecution, including the creation of blacklists and the monitoring of the activities of individuals who are associated with civic activism. Secondly, there are arrests in the temporarily occupied territories, which means detaining individuals expressing views that are deemed inconsistent with Russia's position. Thirdly, there is deportation and forcible transfer, with the use of official and unofficial detention sites in over 30 regions across Russia and Belarus to forcibly transfer detained Ukrainian civilians. Next, there are enforced disappearances. Following deportation, many civilians disappear, and their location and condition remain unknown to their relatives. Finally, there are unfair trials and illegal imprisonment. After some time, often years, civilians are brought to court, where they receive a sentence on fabricated charges, mostly relating to terrorism or espionage, which is straight out of the playbook of Stalin's Soviet Union.

The United Nations has identified more than 100 sites that have been used for these activities since February 2022, located in every occupied Ukrainian province and across Russia and Belarus. Frequently, ad hoc prisons were set up in seized towns, where police stations, Government buildings, basements, schools and industrial sites were used to detain perceived dissidents. Some of these facilities have become notorious. In Donetsk and Luhansk, which have been occupied since 2014, prisons such as Izolyatsia gained a reputation for the use of electroshock torture and beatings. Since 2022, similar filtration camps and makeshift prisons have proliferated across the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv regions.

Today, the Holocaust Memorial Day debate is happening in the main Chamber as we speak. I do not draw parallels with the Holocaust lightly, but the secrecy surrounding these torture camps, in which Ukrainian civilians are persecuted, cannot be overlooked. Ukrainians

have been through the Holodomor, the Holocaust and now, Russian occupation. Ukrainian identity is being continuously eradicated, both physically and mentally.

During Russia's invasion, 664 cultural heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed. Moscow has made it clear that nowhere is immune from missile strikes, even close to NATO territory. Looking outside the occupied territories, at the live targeting of the Lviv region, we have immense fears for the civilian population. Journalist Jen Stout highlights that one of the reasons why Lviv's historic city centre is so unique and was designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 1998 is that it survived both the first and second world wars intact, unlike so many other central European cities.

Haemorrhaging Ukrainian culture through the killing, forcible kidnapping and removals of civilians and children, and the obliteration of their historic landscape is not the only way in which the Russification of temporarily occupied territories is being carried out. Ukrainian teachers from the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions report that after the occupation they were banned from teaching Ukrainian and using the Ukrainian curriculum, and are required to accept the new system. Those who refused faced persecution, threats of violence and detention in the centres that I described. Many people have been forced to go underground or leave their homes to preserve their identity and safety.

Returning to the atrocities being committed against children, it is alarming that there are points of view about how these atrocities are not ongoing. Overcoming that disinformation with the credibility of non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine is essential. We cannot allow Russian misinformation to win.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Ukrainian language education has been banned, cultural heritage sites have been destroyed and children have been transferred to Russia under the guise of evacuation, as has been mentioned. Does my hon. Friend agree that those acts demonstrate that occupation is not merely territorial, but an attempt to erase Ukrainian identity, and that that makes the policy of non-recognition all the more vital?

Alex Sobel: Absolutely; Russification is the central policy of the Kremlin. It is happening today in the occupied territories, and we need to ensure that it ends and does not spread through the rest of Ukraine. That is why the self defence of Ukraine is so important.

Many of the abducted children have lost their parents, who have either been jailed in the detention centres I discussed earlier, or killed by Russian forces. Russian families come to the occupied territories of Ukraine, abduct the children of detained or murdered parents and take them to Russia. Some Members may have heard the interview on the BBC's "Ukraineast" in December about the so-called Russian "children's rights commissioner", who is the subject of an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for the allegedly unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children. She gave an interview in October on Russian talk show in which she openly discussed a child she claimed to have "adopted" from Mariupol. She described how Philip, a young Ukrainian boy, was reluctant to accept a Russian identity. She described how he spends his time—in Moscow, in her home—on Ukrainian websites and singing songs in Ukrainian, but also how she managed to "gradually"

change his mindset to the “way things were”. Those abducted Ukrainian children will consequently be militarised and indoctrinated, and used as troops against their own people.

Those atrocities, along with the disinformation fed to Russian troops about how they are “liberating” Ukrainians by occupying their territories, needs to be called out consistently by the international community. The policy of non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine can help with that process. Temporary occupation, regardless of duration, is illegal and does not confer any territorial rights upon the occupying power. Journalists who have tried to document events have also become victims of torture and repression. Ukrainian journalist Viktoriia Roshchyna was abducted and died in Russian captivity after a prolonged secret detention with signs of violence.

An expert mission report by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe found that the arbitrary deprivation of the liberties of Ukrainian civilians has been a “defining feature” of Russian-occupied territories since 2014. These reports underscore that the perpetration of seven particular crimes against Ukrainian civilians by Russian authorities violate international law and likely amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity. These seven interlocking crimes against humanity, which illustrate what I have spoken about today, are: persecution, illegal detention, deportation or forceable transfer, enforced disappearance, torture and other inhumane acts, sexual violence, and illegal imprisonment. They mutually reinforce one another to disable dissent and consolidate control over areas that Russia has illegally occupied during its war of aggression against Ukraine.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for initiating this important debate and laying before us the scope and scale of the atrocities going on specifically in the occupied areas, as well as in the whole of Ukraine. We have to remember that when—on the blessed day—peace arrives, it will take some time before Ukraine becomes safe. Given the amount of unexploded ordnance, the number of atrocities and the recovery that is required, does he agree that we need to consider options and futures for those Ukrainians to whom we have given shelter in the UK under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, to give them an option for when they return, rather than assuming that peace is the point at which they must return?

Alex Sobel: If we look back to the 1990s, and the UK’s role in Bosnia and Kosovo in particular, that gives us a model. Many of the people who sought refuge here during those wars were able to stay, but now many have gone back—after we de-mined, supported the process of reconciliation and provided mental health support and other things—and are prominent in society in Kosovo and Bosnia. I hope that in this case we can do the same, helping to support and strengthen Ukraine in the future.

I would like to highlight three main asks in addition to the overall policy, which we should retain, of non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. First, we need to work with major British news outlets such as the BBC—including the World Service—Sky News and *The Guardian* to profile civil detainee cases, focusing on personal stories such as those of Serhiy Tsyhipa and Kostiantyn Zinovkin. We must reinforce the global legal consensus. Secondly, we need to support

evidence-sharing initiatives with the ICC and European prosecutors working on war crime cases. Thirdly, we need to deter any attempts to normalise or legitimise aggression. That must be underwritten, of course, by legitimate and firm security guarantees for Ukraine.

I want to finish with the words of Artur, whom Jen Stout interviewed in 2022:

“To defend Ukraine, we’re defending all of Europe. The West would be next, they’ll capture your cities. Putin fancies himself an Emperor. If you don’t help us, there’ll be no more peace in your homes. I sacrificed my health at 22 years old, to protect the whole of Europe from Russian madness”.

I thank Dr Kseniya Oksamytna of the University of London; Tanya Mulesa of Justice and Accountability for Ukraine; Dr Jade McGlynn of the Centre for Statecraft and National Security; the Foreign Policy Centre; and the Ukrainian embassy in London for their help with this speech. Moreover, I thank the people of Ukraine, whose resilience ensures that Ukraine stays strong through the biting winters and beaming summers. Slava Ukraini!

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I thank the hon. Gentleman for opening the debate, and remind all Back-Bench colleagues that you should continue to bob, please, if you wish to speak. Given the level of interest, if everyone can confine themselves to about five minutes each, we should get everybody in.

1.48 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve under you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), who is chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine and who has advocated daily for Ukraine ever since the full-scale invasion.

The hon. Gentleman talked about Stalin, and that is a good place to start, because Russia’s attempt to dress up its occupation of Ukrainian territory as legitimate statehood is not new; it is very much from Stalin’s playbook. When Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the red army followed from the east just over two weeks later, and the Soviet authorities staged elections to so-called people’s assemblies in western Ukraine and Belarus. Those elections were rigged and held in an atmosphere of repression, with armed militia forcibly bringing people to the polling stations, so it is little wonder that those assemblies then voted to join the Soviet Union.

However, the fact is that Putin will never truly secure legitimate ownership of Ukrainian territory without the consent of the Ukrainian people, and that is consent they will never give. Max Weber said that

“the basis of every system of authority...is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige”.

Legitimacy is earned not through power or coercion, but through belief. Putin does not have that belief from the Ukrainian people and never will.

That has not stopped the Kremlin trying to manufacture the illusion. In 2023 Putin signed a decree defining residents of occupied areas of eastern Ukraine who refused Russian passports as stateless, exposing them to the threat of deportation. That is coercion dressed up as “choice”; it creates a paper trail designed to support a false narrative that Ukrainians are willingly accepting Russian rules.

[Richard Foord]

That façade also exists in education and social services. In education, Russian occupation authorities claim that students in occupied Ukraine have the choice to continue learning Ukrainian and that most simply do not. The resulting decline in Ukrainian study is then presented as evidence of popular support for Russian control. In social services, the occupied territories are also being weaponised. A clear example is Russia's maternity capital scheme—a state payment to citizens after the birth of a second or third child—which has now been extended into the occupied territories of Ukraine. By making that support conditional on parents and children holding Russian citizenship, the authorities pressure families to accept Russian passports for their newborns.

I would like to say something about the occupied territories in Donetsk, and particularly the fortress belt. Russia is not simply trying to hold territory on a de facto basis; it is trying to turn occupation into a reality even for those parts of Donetsk and Luhansk that it does not occupy and, through peace talks, to achieve on a de jure basis what it has not achieved by military means. It is for the Ukrainian people to determine what their war aims are and, through these peace talks, what, if anything, they are prepared to concede. However, they know the risk in conceding the strategically important fortress belt in the Donetsk oblast, because that roughly 50 km chain of fortified cities has formed the backbone of Ukraine's eastern defences since 2014. Kremlin officials have demanded that Ukraine cede control of that portion of Donetsk as a condition for any ceasefire agreement. That is cynical; as the Institute for the Study of War notes, Ukraine has spent more than a decade reinforcing that line, and I think we can all forecast that conceding it would make life much easier for a further Russian invasion in the future. The institute also says that withdrawing would mean Ukrainian troops moving into less defensible terrain to the west, where any new defensive line would run through open fields and would abandon obstacles such as the Oskil and Siverskyi Donets rivers. Russia would win through diplomacy what it has not been able to win militarily, and Ukraine would be left with a weaker defensive line.

To conclude, non-recognition denies Russia the legitimacy it seeks, and blocks the laundering of conquest through sham votes, coerced passports and captured institutions. For 80 years, our security has rested on the simple principle that borders cannot be changed by force, which dates back all the way to the Westphalia treaty in the 17th century. If we allow that principle to erode now, we do not preserve peace; we invite further war. If we accept occupation, we do not buy stability; we promote permission.

1.52 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for all the work he is doing on Ukraine and for securing this important debate on the non-recognition of the Russian occupied territories, allowing me and other Members of Parliament to state on the record that we utterly condemn Putin's invasion of parts of the sovereign territory of Ukraine.

We must not allow aggressors to get away with the invasion and attempted annexation of another nation's sovereign territory. That is essential if we are to uphold

international law and the rules-based international order. Moreover, weakness, inaction and ceding to Putin will only embolden him, as indeed it already has. Not content with his invasion of Crimea in 2014, he launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The United Nations has repeatedly reaffirmed Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. Russia has absolutely no right to try to assimilate the territories it is occupying into its own administrative systems.

Rather than repeat the excellent points made by colleagues about the legal framework, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) about the appalling kidnapping of Ukrainian children, I will mention some of the other aspects of the dreadful situation facing the citizens of Ukraine. On its last visit, the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine went to Vinnytsia, a city the size of Swansea in central Ukraine, which has welcomed, housed and supported 47,000 Ukrainians displaced from the temporarily occupied territories—47,000 individuals who have had to make agonising decisions about uprooting and leaving their homes, friends, family and work colleagues. Each of them will have their own story and will be worrying day in, day out about what is happening in their home towns, in the temporarily occupied territories, and about what the future holds.

We also met extraordinary business people who had come to Vinnytsia and re-established their businesses. One entrepreneur had relocated his factory there and had had to recruit new workers, while a couple who had a patisserie business were not only setting up new kitchens but establishing a whole new customer base in local cafes. We then visited a displaced university that had moved lock, stock and barrel to Vinnytsia. That was in just one city, and it is replicated across Ukraine, at a time when those cities themselves are under attack from Putin, when their resources are having to be prioritised for the war effort, and when many of their citizens are serving on the frontline. The challenges and pressures are enormous. I mention those displaced populations to remind us of their individual human stories and to highlight the impact of the exodus of talent from their home towns.

We have seen the devastation in the temporarily occupied territories. Buildings have been destroyed, and there has been a lack of water and power. Cities have had their physical infrastructure hollowed out, and have seen the loss of so many of their citizens, both on the frontline and by displacement to other areas of Ukraine and beyond. That has a significant impact on their resilience.

More than that, Ukrainian citizens are subject to Russia's relentless attack on their very identity, being declared by Russia as Russian citizens, with some 3.5 million Russian passports issued and 300,000 people forcibly conscripted into the Russian military forces. Some 664 cultural heritage sites have been damaged or destroyed, and Ukrainian children are being forced to follow the Russian curriculum, with its narrative and worldview. We heard from the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science that it provides online materials, which families have to use clandestinely, to allow their children some access to Ukrainian education.

Ukrainians in the temporarily occupied territories have been subject to the most appalling abuse by the Russian authorities, with over 15,000 detained. There is an horrendous list of arbitrary arrests, appalling detention

conditions, torture, sexual violence, unfair trials and people being detained either in the many detention centres in the temporarily occupied territories or after being deported to Russia. There is specific targeting of those who uphold Ukrainian civic identity, of local officials who will not collaborate with the aggressors and even of those who are just distributing aid. The inhumane and illegal treatment of Ukrainians in the temporarily occupied territories receives little news coverage, and too often does not feature in talks about a ceasefire or peace.

The Minister has taken a sustained interest in all these matters, so I would be grateful if he could tell us what the United Kingdom is doing, and what more we can do, to highlight and tackle these issues. First, we need to raise the plight of civilians and detainees in the temporarily occupied territories as widely as possible, particularly with appropriate international bodies and forums such as the United Nations and the G7. Secondly, we need to support international bodies such as the ICC in getting access and establishing accountability, and provide support for the Ukrainian authorities and NGOs trying to document this situation. Thirdly, we need to impose sanctions on those authorising and carrying out crimes against the civilian population.

As extraordinarily challenging as it is, it is vital that we work persistently with Ukrainian and international allies in raising the plight of those living under occupation and the illegal acts against them, particularly those held in detention. We must stress the accountability of their captors, and seek the location and release of those who are in detention or who have disappeared.

We need to look beyond the present to a time when the temporarily occupied territories come back under Ukrainian control, and prepare for the enormous task of reconstruction. That will not only be a physical task of rebuilding infrastructure, but will—crucially—require the rebuilding of communities.

1.59 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), who has been tireless in raising the issue of our support for Ukraine. I was delighted to hear from him that the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) has received the Order of Merit; it is richly deserved. I was proud to receive it when I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, and I know that the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley was equally proud. It is a great honour.

The hon. Member began his remarks by saying, rightly, that this is day 1,435 of the full-scale war, but he also rightly pointed out that Russia's attack on Ukraine began with the annexation of Crimea 12 years earlier. It was arguably even before that, when Russia made it clear that it believed Crimea was Russian territory and its Parliament voted that Sevastopol was a Russian city. The annexation took place in a flagrant breach of the Budapest memorandum, of which we were a signatory along with Russia and the United States. It was a breach of international law. As I have said before, I think the rather feeble response from the west to the annexation contributed to Russia's belief that it could go further in attacking Donbas.

After the annexation of Crimea, we had the little green men and the separatist movement in Donbas, but we knew—the evidence was overwhelming—that they were not separatists. They were armed, funded and directed by Russia. Indeed, after the horrific shooting down of MH17 on to the territory by separatists, we had intercepts to show they were clearly operating under the command of Russians.

During that time I visited several parts of Ukraine, including those now under occupation. I went to Mariupol, a city on the Black sea. Even then, it was being squeezed by the Russians as a result of the blockade of the Kerch strait to prevent ships from reaching Berdyansk and Mariupol. Since then, Mariupol has been almost completely destroyed, with 75,000 civilians killed in the battle with the Russians. This was an area that Russia claimed wanted to be liberated. It argued that the people were Russian speakers who felt Russian, that their allegiance was to Russia and that they were somehow going to be freed from Nazi oppression in Kyiv. It is the Russian propaganda playbook. It had absolutely no basis in truth, and the fact that so many Russian-speaking citizens in Donbas have been killed in the war proves the cynicism of the Russians.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) talked about the conditions in Donbas. I just had a quick check. This weekend in Donetsk, the temperature will be between minus 11 and minus 18. People can expect to receive water every four days. They are predominantly elderly people, the young people having largely fled, and the conditions there are utterly appalling. What is happening in the occupied territories is horrific, and the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley is absolutely right to raise it.

As well as the ongoing fighting, we know that atrocities are being committed, as mentioned by the hon. Members for Leeds Central and Headingley and for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith). We had a meeting yesterday with Dr Jade McGlynn of the war unit in King's College London, who has done a lot of research about Ukrainians' plight. We heard that an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Ukrainians have been detained or have disappeared. We were told that 92% of those who have been released have reported being tortured, ill-treated and systematically abused, with sexual violence used as a deliberate method of humiliation, initially triggering men but then also women.

I want to put two questions to the Minister, one of which relates to those atrocities. On the statute book, we have sanctions available for deliberate abuse of human rights. There is a list of individuals who have been identified as perpetrators of these abuses. Will the Minister look at extending sanctions to the people carrying out these appalling crimes?

My other question relates to a specific location in the Donbas area: Zaporizhzhia, which has one of the biggest nuclear power plants in Europe. It closed down in September 2022, but there are reports that the Russians intend to reactivate its first reactor. The head of the Ukrainian nuclear energy service has said that that risks “nuclear catastrophe”, that the Russians do not know about the safety systems, they do not have the details of the plant, and that to do so is reckless and potentially incredibly dangerous. We are told that it forms part of the discussions taking place between America and Russia but, given Chernobyl—also a Ukrainian nuclear power

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

plant, and we know what happened there—I should be grateful if the Minister would say anything about that specific issue, or at least raise it.

2.5 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for securing the debate but, most importantly, for his significant commitment to the people of Ukraine and everything he does. It is great to see Members across the House continuing to be united on this issue.

Jesse Jackson once said:

“If you fall behind, run faster. Never give up, never surrender, and rise up against the odds.”

Ukraine has embodied that spirit from the first day of Russia’s illegal invasion. Today, Putin insists that any peace deal must involve Ukraine surrendering territory. His agreement to any draft peace deal can only proceed, he claims, if Kyiv gives up land. Ukraine is right to reject that. Conceding territory would not be peace; it would be capitulation. International law is unambiguous: territory cannot be acquired by force, and the international community has consistently refused to legitimise borders drawn through coercion.

Along with our NATO partners, we maintain a firm policy of non-recognition of Russia’s illegal occupation and attempted annexation of Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Sevastopol, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. The Kremlin may talk about peace, but its actions and continued demands show no willingness to retreat. Ukraine is not about to raise the white flag, and we stand shoulder to shoulder with her citizens. Putin refuses to acknowledge the strength of Ukraine’s fight—its ingenuity, sacrifice, bravery and unshakeable determination—but we refuse to ignore it. The Ukrainians’ resolve in defending what is right has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Beyond politics and principles lies the human reality. In cities such as Mariupol, which has been occupied since 2022, citizens have lived through devastation, forced Russification and the dismantling of Ukrainian civic life. Residents describe it as “hell on earth”. Some 350,000 people fled; many are now refugees trying to build their lives away from home. As the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) said, those who stayed faced unimaginable hardship. Some sheltered in the basements of bombed-out buildings, including 75-year-old Angela, who refused to leave the stray animals she cared for and is living in a damp, windowless, freezing apartment. Others, including Larisa, said the only way to survive was to accept Russian documents. Without a Russian passport, they cannot get medical care, employment or even keep their own home—all while living under constant surveillance. Up to 90% of Mariupol’s buildings were damaged or destroyed, and there is no credible evidence that there has been any meaningful change in the situation there.

When I visited Ukraine last year, I saw the destruction at first hand: shattered buildings, disrupted communities and daily lives reshaped by war. What stood out more, though, was not the physical damage but the unbroken spirit of Ukrainians, whose resolve in the face of aggression is extraordinary, exceptional and enduring. They remain clear: they are Ukrainians, and they will remain Ukrainians.

As we have heard, the forced transfer of Ukrainian children from occupied territories into Russia raises grave concerns. It is a huge, serious humanitarian violation, and those children must be returned. We must stand firm in demanding that. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter), who is no longer in her place, for her outstanding work in continuing to champion this issue, and I congratulate her on her award and recognition this week from President Zelensky.

The road to restoring Ukraine’s territorial integrity will be complex, but the foundations of international law are solid. Sovereignty cannot be overwritten by force, and despite the scale of suffering, there is some hope. The Ukrainians’ resilience, the unwavering support of allies and the strength of international law point to a future in which Ukraine’s territory is restored. We should continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainians until that day comes.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. As hon. Members will see, we have four speakers remaining. I want to start the Front-Bench speeches at about 2.28 pm, so that probably means that Members have about four and a half minutes each, I am afraid.

2.11 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Having listened to all the excellent preceding speeches, I have to say that occasions such as this make me proud to be a Member of the British Parliament. I congratulate everyone who has spoken with such a united voice.

If I may, I will just make some brief elaborations on the opening comments and superb contribution of the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel). He referred in particular to the non-recognition of the Baltic states, and it is worth looking at that a little more closely. The Baltic states were occupied and incorporated into the Soviet Union for approximately half a century; never did this country recognise that. If those of us who saw the Soviet Union at the height of its power in the mid-1980s had been told that one day the Governments in exile of those three absorbed republics would be able to step forward and pick up the torch of democracy owing to the collapse of their overlords, we would have said, “Well, we would love to think that would happen, but do we honestly think it is going to happen in our lifetimes? Probably not.” But it did, and when it did, the implosion was dramatic, unexpected and complete.

[*DAWN BUTLER in the Chair*]

Yet there are some people who regard the break-up—the dissolution—of the Soviet empire as a geopolitical disaster. Hon. Members know to whom I am referring in particular: Vladimir Putin. Given that that is Putin’s attitude, one thing that we can certainly deduce from the present situation is that there is no such thing as a peace deal to be had with Vladimir Putin and his cohorts. The fact is that if there is a deal of any sort—if there is a ceasefire—it is for one reason and one reason only: that Putin feels at the time of such a deal or a ceasefire that he cannot successfully go further. If then there is a cessation of fighting for a while, we can be equally sure that the moment Putin thinks he can go further, he will start all

over again. So there is absolutely nothing to be gained, in terms of good will, or a basis for future relationships or stability, by giving any concessions to Putin whatsoever in terms of land exchanges or recognition of occupation.

Let me turn to another parallel with the 1930s—the fact that Putin made one big error. He signalled by his early occupation of Crimea what his intentions were, but he was not then able to carry them out for quite a few years, in which time the defensive capability of the Ukrainians had massively increased with the surreptitious help, I suspect, of certain western powers, including ourselves. As a result, Ukraine was able to put up a much stronger defence than anybody who was not part of that secret rearmament and training programme would have anticipated.

Sir John Whittingdale: I am listening with great interest to my right hon. Friend's speech. He will remember Operation Orbital, during which the UK provided training and supplies to the Ukrainian armed forces in anticipation of the attack that then followed.

Sir Julian Lewis: Yes, that is entirely the sort of contribution that I have in mind. As a result of that, when Putin was ready to take his next bite, the Ukrainians were able to prevent him, yet many people, including me, thought the most that we could probably do was to offer the Ukrainian Government a Government-in-exile headquarters in London when the whole country was overrun. The whole country was not overrun. Hopefully, the whole country never will be overrun, but those parts of it that have been overrun must never be recognised as belonging to the successors of the Soviet Union—namely the gang around Vladimir Putin, the killer in the Kremlin.

2.16 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for securing this debate and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who made some very powerful points about parallels with the Baltic states that I completely agree with. I think all Members in attendance are absolutely clear that if a state that invades its neighbour and holds territory by force gains political or territorial reward for that, it is not buying peace; it is simply queuing up the next war. Borders should not be changed at the barrel of a gun.

At the same time, it must be said plainly that it is for Ukraine and Ukraine alone to decide what compromises, if any, it is prepared to make. It is not for us, not for allies and not for foreign politicians sitting far away from the frontline. That is why I am deeply concerned by suggestions that Ukraine is being asked to give up Ukrainian-controlled territory in the Donbas as a precondition for peace or even as the price of future security guarantees.

Let us be honest about what that means. My hon. Friend made the point earlier. The frontline in the Donbas is among the most fortified places on earth. It was built at great cost and defended with extraordinary courage. Thousands of Ukrainians have given their lives defending it, and they did not do so lightly or on a whim. One must have solid grounds to do so, and it must come concurrently with solid security guarantees.

History warns us where this road leads. In 1938, Czechoslovakia was forced to hand over the Sudetenland, where most of its defences were, in the name of peace,

and that peace lasted months. By 1939, the country was occupied and its independence was destroyed. Concessions do not bring security; they can sometimes invite catastrophe.

When we talk about security guarantees, let us not overlook the most real and effective guarantee Ukraine has right now: the brave men and women of Ukraine's armed forces. They are the reason why Ukraine still exists as a sovereign state. Their courage, discipline and sacrifice are what stand between freedom and occupation, and any peace must allow those forces to be equipped and manned at a level that deters future attacks.

I worry that parts of the international community are not doing their bit. In my view, the United States Administration has been leaning far too heavily towards accommodating the Kremlin. They are talking tough but failing to use the enormous economic, military and political levers they have to apply real pressure. I thank the Minister for the work he has been doing to make sure that British sanctions and support have been robust for Ukraine.

I am very concerned by data showing that overall military aid to Ukraine actually fell last year, even though countries such as the US, France and Germany stepped up their support. At this stage of the war, any drop in assistance sends the wrong signal. We need to give the Ukrainians everything they need and avoid the drip, drip of capabilities and arms that we have seen since the war began.

Finally, we need to be honest about how Russia has used frozen conflicts to its advantage. Across the post-Soviet space, including Transnistria, Abkhazia and the Donbas, Moscow has deliberately kept territorial disputes unresolved as a way of holding its neighbours in limbo. Those conflicts are not accidents; they are tools used to maintain influence, block stability and make it harder for countries to choose their own future or their own alliances. We should not kid ourselves about what these frozen conflicts really are. They are not peaceful compromises; they are pressure points. They allow aggression to fester, and they show us that peace built by accommodating an aggressor does not resolve the case; it simply locks injustice in place.

If, to stop the bloodshed, we have to accept non-recognition of occupied territories but de facto control by Russia—a frozen conflict—that again is for Ukrainians alone to decide. We must support them in their decision, but ensure that in this country we do not recognise Russian claims for one minute. A just and lasting peace cannot be built on coercion or enforced surrender. It cannot be built by asking the victim to pay the price for the aggressor's crimes. I stand with all my parliamentary colleagues today in standing firm for Ukraine's territorial integrity, its right to choose its own future and a peace that is real and genuinely durable.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): To get the last two speakers in, will Members stick to roughly four minutes or just under?

2.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Ms Butler—it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for his continued focus on doing the right thing by the Ukrainian people. I want to set the scene in relation to

[Jim Shannon]

Russia's campaign of murder, their rape of girls as young as eight and women as old as 80, and their massacres and torture. When the Minister responds, we want to hear that those who have carried out war crimes are made accountable.

I chair the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. I remember when the Russians first attacked Donbas and a number of Baptist pastors went missing. They were never found. They were kidnapped and disappeared. Their churches were destroyed and holy relics stolen and damaged. I wish to say very clearly that I am appalled by Russian aggression towards their neighbours and their determination to take what they want, regardless of the wishes of the Ukrainian people, or indeed of international law.

The hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley rightly spoke about advocating for using frozen Russian assets and the UK aid budget to rebuild critical energy infrastructure. Never was that needed more than it is now. If it was done with Libyan assets, it can be done with Russian assets. It frustrates me no end that we bind ourselves to laws that do nothing but protect the finances of aggressors and criminals. Once someone steps outside the law, we should have the capacity to ensure they do not profit from that country again.

We are all here to support the motion proposed by the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley. We can never recognise the Russian invasion and legitimise it by recognising its diktats. The refusal to recognise Russia's illegal annexations is often framed as a matter of maps and mandates, but it is much more than that. Beneath the ink of international law lies a more urgent reality: the fundamental rights of millions of human beings.

I read an article recently that highlighted that non-recognition is our strongest shield against the erasure of identity. In the occupied territories of Ukraine we are witnessing a systematic campaign of forced passportisation. As documented by the United Nations Human Rights Office, residents are being coerced into abandoning their citizenship just to access basic survival. Without a Russian passport, a mother is denied medical care for her child. An elderly man is stripped of his pension. A worker is barred from his livelihood. That is not governance. It is administrative blackmail and we must never accept that faux governance.

I recently spoke to someone who carries out missionary work in Ukraine. They are from Faith in Action in my constituency and they outlined the despicable treatment of young Ukrainian soldiers. That goes back to my first point about the torture and physical abuses inflicted on young Ukrainian soldiers. Young men are abused in any way we can imagine—and in ways we would not like to imagine. Dirty bandages are deliberately used to cause infections. The types of people attempting to impose governance have no regard to dignity or indeed life. We must continue to remain staunch in our opposition.

We must also remain resolute in support of the Ukrainians and be very clear that we will not legitimise Russia's illegitimate actions now or at any time in the future, whether it be Crimea, the Donbas or wherever. There is no sliding scale of sovereignty. If we concede an inch of the 1991 borders, we concede the entire UN charter. Putin is betting on Ukraine fatigue and western fatigue. He believes that if he holds territory long

enough, the world will eventually blink and accept the new reality. This debate today must prove once again that our Government are not for turning. Let another sanction be added to my name and the names of many others here. We are not going to back down, either individually or collectively.

2.24 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for securing this debate, and for all his work to advance the rights of the Ukrainian people. I also thank all hon. Members here today to debate non-recognition of Russian occupied territory.

It has now been more than 1,400 days since Russia launched a full-scale invasion, which we in this House, in the Government and in this country utterly condemn. Ukraine is a free country and has long enjoyed freedom, democracy and the right to choose its own destiny. It continues to have the sovereign right to decide its own future. We all agree that in attacking Ukraine, President Putin attacked democracy, freedom and the rights of nations across Europe to choose their own path. Put bluntly, we cannot allow that freedom to be snuffed out. I say to the people of Ukraine, who have endured unimaginable hardship for nearly four years, that Bournemouth stands with them and the UK stands with them. We all stand with their families and with their country.

For all the bombs, tanks and missiles that Putin has thrown at Ukraine, he has failed in his central aim: he has not broken the Ukrainian spirit. Theirs is a courage that refuses to be broken. He has not crushed the national will of a people determined to live freely. As we have heard today from hon. Members, that is important, because it means that Ukrainians will never give consent for Russian occupation. Ukraine's future must be shaped by Ukrainians, not imposed by brute force. The Donbas must not be traded away in backroom deals, nor must any other part of Ukrainian territory.

I welcome the fact that our Prime Minister, along with European leaders, has been unequivocal that territorial integrity and borders matter, and that borders should not be redrawn by force. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), Europe learned those lessons the hard way, through devastation and bloodshed, and to forget them would be a grave mistake.

Russia may occupy parts of Ukrainian territory, but occupation is not ownership, control is not consent and this temporary military reality must never become permanent legal recognition. The NATO Secretary-General and leading legal experts have been clear that there is no legal, moral or political case for recognising land seized by force, nor should there be. Recognition would not secure peace in Ukraine, nor would it secure peace around the world. It would reward aggression and invite more of it.

We in this country need to be particularly cognisant of that, because we are repelling Russian cyber-attacks and disinformation every day. Every day, our security services fight against Russian spying and sabotage of our infrastructure. Those threats are, to a great extent, invisible to our public, and there is a sense that we do not want to draw too much attention to them lest we alarm people, but there comes a point when the scale, intensity and persistence of Russian attacks on our way of life need to be made public. One of the ways we can

start to talk about that is by highlighting the threat of allowing Ukraine to in any way have its land ceded to Russia.

In closing, we know that we need a peace that endures, not merely a pause, because we know what Putin would do with a pause. We know what he is already doing while “talk peace” is ringing around capitals in Europe: he is instructing his Russian military to strike hospitals, he is killing civilians and he is leaving millions without power in the depths of a cold, cold winter. If Putin does that while promising peace, imagine what he would do in any pause.

We must strengthen our support for Ukraine and plan for a just peace, but we must also recognise Putin for what he is. We must intensify pressure on those bankrolling his war, including oil trades and the shadow fleet, and speed up the clean energy transition so that this country is no longer insecure and vulnerable to massive fossil fuel price hikes. We must always support Ukraine to defend herself and to exercise the right to choose her future, and because peace in Europe is secured by confronting aggression, we must never yield. We must never allow settlement to be imposed over the heads of the Ukrainian people.

2.28 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) on securing this important debate. I will start by echoing the sentiment expressed by so many hon. and right hon. Members in this debate that any decision on whether to surrender territory is for Ukraine and Ukraine alone. Peace cannot mean carving up a sovereign European state behind closed doors; it cannot mean big powers forcing Ukraine to surrender its land and its people.

We must not accept the principle that borders can be changed by force or by coercion, whether in Ukraine or anywhere else in Europe. It is vital that we stand up for the rules-based international order, even more so because there are those who flaunt it. I do not believe Putin’s vision of peace. I do not believe it is peace at all. It is a pause that will allow Russia to re-group, re-arm and return. We have seen this before in Georgia, Crimea and the Donbas.

Every inch of occupied Ukrainian land matters, whether that be Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia or Kherson. These are sovereign Ukrainian territories occupied illegally under international law. That is why we must finally act on frozen Russian assets. Some £30 billion of Russian assets reside in the UK. Meanwhile, Ukrainian cities are bombed, children are abducted and civilians freeze without power.

In the coming days, temperatures in Kyiv will drop to below minus 20°. Thousands will freeze to death. Russia must be forced to pay for its illegal war of aggression. While our support for Ukraine is unwavering, it cannot be right that British taxpayers pay while oligarchs’ wealth remains untouched. The Liberal Democrats have been consistently clear that the legal and moral case exists, and to delay costs Ukrainian lives.

We in this House discuss the war in Ukraine often, and time and again those debates show that our support for Ukraine is near unanimous. We hear the feelings of those in this House, but the wider public conversation is often missing from those discussions.

Although we are united here, Russia is doing everything it can to divide opinion beyond these walls. It is sowing division through bots, fake accounts and co-ordinated misinformation. It is bribing politicians like Nathan Gill, the former head of Reform in Wales. It is seeking to influence elections, as I saw at first hand during my visit with the Foreign Affairs Committee to Moldova and Romania. It is painting itself as the victim despite being the aggressor, and it is brazenly attempting to rewrite reality in real time. The United States now has a President who openly flirts with the idea of handing Ukrainian land to Russia, and who has repeated Kremlin talking points.

The Minister for the Armed Forces spoke eloquently in the Chamber the other day when he said:

“there may not be a border but there is a frontline.” —[*Official Report*, 14 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 1036.]

I agree, but I would also go further. Each of us is on that frontline electronically: it is our phones, our social media platforms, our Twitter feeds. Wars are not just fought with weapons; they are fought with misinformation and disinformation, with lies dressed up as common sense and comment sections filled up with bots.

I am sure many of us here have been told in person or online that it was NATO or Ukraine that started this war. That is a lie. It is a lie spread by Russia, but it is a lie that gets repeated. We must speak the truth continually and relentlessly. It was Russia that started this illegal war. It is Ukraine that is defending itself.

Here today, we must reaffirm that non-recognition of occupied territories is not a diplomatic theory. It is a line that protects peace in Europe, because non-recognition does not just happen in this House, in No. 10, in conferences or on international stages—it must happen in people’s lives too. It must happen in what they read and in what they share.

Yesterday, the *Financial Times* reported that the Trump Administration have indicated to Ukraine that US security guarantees may be contingent on Kyiv agreeing to cede the Donbas—that Ukraine should withdraw from its own territory as the price of peace. That is an attempt to strong-arm Kyiv into painful concessions that are demanded by Moscow. It is not peace; it is coercion.

Ukraine has been clear: security guarantees must come before any discussion on land. Yet pressure is being applied almost exclusively to Kyiv, not to Moscow. The rules-based international order—the one that many of us learned about in schools and university, and that created stability, prosperity and the possibility of peace—allowed small nations to thrive without fear of invasion. It was imperfect, but it was grounded in rules that we believed applied to everyone.

That order is now being dismantled by messages, tweets and decisions: in the humiliation of President Zelensky in the Oval Office; in the threats to invade Greenland; in random tariffs against allies and enemies alike; in the pausing of weapons to Ukraine; and in the quiet adoption of Russian talking points about territory and responsibility. It should deeply concern us that the US national security strategy was welcomed by the Kremlin as “largely consistent” with Russia’s view.

As Prime Minister Carney said in his powerful speech in Davos, middle powers have been quiet for too long—too submissive, too willing to rely on a hegemon that may no longer share our values. The UK must recognise that

[Edward Morello]

we are moving towards a multilateral world where co-operation between like-minded democracies matters far more than blind reliance on a single power. We may all agree that we must not recognise Russian-occupied territories, and that Ukraine must decide what happens to its territories, but agreement here is not enough if people outside are being convinced that Ukraine does not matter, that borders do not matter and that this war has nothing to do with them.

During a Foreign Affairs Committee session, I asked Nina Jankowicz, the former director of the US disinformation governance board, about Russian interference in UK politics. She was clear: she pointed to the convergence of Russian rhetoric with that of specific voice here in Britain—their narrative echoed, amplified and normalised. We should not be surprised that the person she mentioned had a show on Russian-sponsored TV. We should not be surprised because he has personal ties to an authoritarian Trump Administration who parrot Russian talking points. We should not be surprised because he said Putin was the leader he admired the most. We should not be surprised that neither he, nor any of his party, is here today condemning Russia.

If we allow misinformation to hollow out public support, our foreign policy becomes brittle. If people stop believing that this matters to their children's future, Russia succeeds without firing another shot. Yes, we must act abroad with our allies—those who have consistently and constantly shared our values—with weapons, diplomacy and leadership, but we must also act here at home by taking misinformation seriously, defending truth, protecting our elections, and refusing to allow bots and lies to set the terms of any debate. Ukraine must not be forced to give up territory and we must not recognise Russian-occupied land—not in this House, not in the Government and not online. Russia is trying to divide us and, for Ukraine, we must not let it.

2.36 pm

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): It has been a pleasure to serve under both your chairmanship, Ms Butler, and Sir Jeremy's. This debate is as important now as it was on the very first day of the illegal invasion. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), who is also chair of the APPG on Ukraine, on securing the debate and on his long-standing commitment to the cause. He set out a clear passion for not just ending the conflict, but exposing the horrific atrocities that Russia has committed in Ukraine. He also said that the peace we hopefully secure for Ukraine should be lasting and fair for its people.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), the former chair of the APPG, brought a wealth of experience to the debate and highlighted that we have a trio of Members in the debate who have the Ukrainian Order of Merit, showing the commitment over many years of Members across this House to supporting our allies. For many Members, it is not a new-found interest or cause; it has been of grave concern for a long time. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) gave us a history lesson, and spoke about the lessons that we should learn from history, which I will touch on later. Often, we do not learn the obvious lessons from the pages of our history books.

As pointed out by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello), and others, it is easy to think of the Ukrainian conflict as something that purely happens elsewhere and not in our own country or on our own Facebook and X feeds—that it is not about Russia actively being aggressive to us through cyber-warfare. But addressing the misinformation that exists in our society is equally as important in fighting the conflict.

The Opposition remain steadfast in our commitment to the people of Ukraine and their right to defend its sovereignty, territorial integrity and the freedom and democracy of its citizens. This was an illegal invasion and we are clear that territorial concessions would simply be a reward for Putin. It does not take a degree in military history to know that if we appease a dictator with concessions, they will never be content with small gains—and, by the way, I have a degree in military history, and I know from my studies that if we acquiesce now, Putin will not simply stop with Ukraine or bits of Ukraine. He will come for our other allies in eastern Europe, and he will not be happy until NATO has been torn apart by Russia's territorial ambitions and actions.

Russia's demands have been deliberately excessive, with Russia no doubt intending to paint Ukraine as unreasonable for simply seeking peace in its own territory. As the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), has rightly pointed out, with this statecraft, Mr Putin has his KGB playbook out. We cannot accept that.

The recent trilateral talks once again highlight Ukraine's sincere desire for peace. What is the British Government's assessment of those talks and whether any progress has been made? Does the Minister agree that the onus remains squarely on Putin to prove that he is sincere about wanting an end to this war, in contradiction to some of the things that we have heard today? We all saw the disgraceful attacks on Kyiv that Putin launched against the backdrop of the talks. Any sincere attempt for peace must surely be preceded by an end to the killing of innocent people.

This war has been nothing other than barbaric. Russia has targeted civilians; women and children have been killed in indiscriminate attacks on Ukrainian towns and cities; children have been abducted from their parents; and strikes on energy infrastructure have led to power outages and no heating—while temperatures have hovered around minus 15°C for three weeks. The Ukrainian people are suffering, even in parts of the country where Russia's military has not managed to penetrate.

What assessment have the Government made of the treatment of Ukrainian citizens in areas under Russian control, and what future guarantees will they seek for citizens in the event of peace being agreed? If a peace is reached with military guarantees from Europe, and British troops are sent to help facilitate that peace, what does the Minister expect the rules of engagement to be? How many troops does he envisage we would send? How would rotations work? What are his thoughts on the composition of the force, and would any British soldiers be actively involved in the policing and patrolling of any border or demilitarised zone? Finally, what air and naval assets might be provided as part of a multinational force for Ukraine?

To keep the pressure on Putin to end the war, we must continue to increase sanctions. Throughout the conflict, we have rightly sanctioned assets in the UK and Europe

that could have been used to aid the Russians in their illegal war. Thousands of oligarchs and Russian elites received sanctions, including in 2022 when the regime attempted to construct a phony referendum in four regions of Ukraine. Will the Minister assure us that any attempt by Russia to fabricate legitimacy through a false cloak of democracy will continue to be called out for what it is? Does he have any updates on dialogue with Belgium about efforts to use frozen Russian assets for Ukraine's war effort?

Tom Hayes: The point about democracy and elections is important. The Government have launched an investigation into external influences on our own democracy, particularly financial influences, in the wake of the Old Bailey sentencing Nathan Gill, the elected Reform politician, to 10 and a half years in prison for pushing out Putin's propaganda in the European Parliament. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is unacceptable for any elected British politician to pump out Russian propaganda? Does he agree that it is a particular problem that is unique to Reform? Does he welcome the investigation that the Government have launched?

Mr Snowden: As I said at the start of my remarks, it is very easy to think that this is only happening over in Ukraine and is not something that is happening right here. The sentencing of Nathan Gill should prompt some real reflection by Reform UK on why that activity happened for so long, unchallenged, and why Nathan felt comfortable in that party. That is something that Reform UK should seriously reflect on—and their views.

When we were in government, we led the world in defending Ukraine. We committed to providing £3 billion of military support every year for as long as necessary, and we were one of the leading donors to Ukraine, providing over £12 billion in overall support since 2022. We were often the first mover on vital lethal aid, from Storm Shadow missiles to Challenger 2 main battle tanks. We benefited from cross-party support when we were in government, and it is in that spirit that I stand here today. The Conservatives stand ready to support the Government in doing whatever it takes to help our ally to defeat this monstrous invasion, and to determine and decide its own future.

2.46 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Butler, and indeed it was a pleasure to see Sir Jeremy in the Chair before you. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for all his work on Ukraine, not just in leading this debate, but as envoy and, indeed, in chairing the APPG. I see many friends around the room—steadfast friends of Ukraine through many years, including some whom I have travelled with to Ukraine, where we saw at first hand the barbarity of what Russia has done there.

Given that the subject has been raised, I have to ask: where are Reform Members today? They are Putin's admirers, and Members from across the House have set out their record. I also have to ask: where are the Green party Members? This week, apparently, they were saying that we do not need to spend money on defence. I ask them to tell that to the people of the Baltic countries, or indeed the people of Ukraine, because it is foolish and deeply naive.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Minister mentioned the Baltic states. On Monday, 26 January, the Government published a strategy, in which 14 Baltic and North sea states are involved, to tackle the Russian shadow fleet. Would he reflect on the fact that that is an excellent lever to put pressure on the economy of Russia, so that Russia is less likely to make demands, and end the war? Equally, will he advise us what teeth the new strategy to tackle the shadow fleet will have?

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with what the hon. Gentleman said. Helpfully, I have just come back from the Baltic states; I have been in Lithuania and Latvia for the last two days. It is very clear that in tackling the shadow fleet and Russian aggression, not only against Ukraine, on which we stand in solidarity with one another and with Ukraine, but in defending Europe as key NATO allies, we are working very closely with our Baltic partners.

Members made many important points about the history in relation to this very specific issue. Just yesterday, I was honoured to share with my Latvian counterparts that, of course, Britain did not recognise the occupation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union throughout all that time, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who is a former Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, set out. That was a very important signal, which is hugely recognised and absolutely crucial. Similarly, we do not and we will not recognise Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine; for that reason, they have rightly been described as “temporarily occupied”. Internationally recognised borders cannot be changed by force.

In the Baltic states, I saw the reality of what we are discussing today. Just two days ago, I walked around a former KGB prison in Vilnius, as well as seeing the Holocaust memorial and recognising what we have been recognising today and all this week, but also the brutality of the Soviet regime and of Russian imperialism more generally. I heard tragic historical accounts of poisonings, killings, detentions, show trials, and the murder of priests and others.

This is all from the same playbook, and we know that President Putin and his regime continue to go by it. The Baltic states know that, we know it, Ukraine knows it, and Members were absolutely right to highlight the appalling atrocities against people in the temporarily occupied areas.

Sir John Whittingdale: I, too, have been to the Museum of Occupations in Vilnius. It is a remarkable fact that it is in the building that was occupied by the Gestapo, which was then simply taken over by the KGB, who continued to murder people in the basement. That tells us something about the similarity between the atrocities carried out by the Nazis and those carried out under communism.

Stephen Doughty: I completely and wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Member. It is a very powerful place to visit to see that reality.

Like many colleagues in the House, I have been in Kyiv when the city has been under attack. It is important to recognise the particular brutality of attacks in recent days and the loss of life. There have been attacks on trains, civilians, kindergartens and schools, leaving families

[Stephen Doughty]

not only in the cold but without access to water and without light. As part of our school twinning programme, I spoke just the other day with young children in a school in Kyiv that is twinned with a school here in the UK. Luckily, they had power at that time and could do the link-up, but there had been a major attack nearby. That reality should sit starkly in all our minds.

Of course, there is a proud link between my part of the United Kingdom and the temporarily occupied territories: Cardiff was twinned with Luhansk, and Donetsk was founded by a Welshman. We also have many links with Crimea: Welsh troops fought in the Crimean war, and that is why we have a Sebastopol in the south Wales valleys. These things echo down our history, and we stand with Ukraine today and will continue to do so into the future.

We will stand by Ukraine's side until peace comes, and until those territories are returned. In the meantime, we welcome the continued US-led peace efforts, including last week's trilateral talks. Let us be clear: Ukraine is the one showing its commitment to peace and to agreeing a full, immediate and unconditional ceasefire, and Russia is stalling, repeating maximalist demands and continuing to carry out vicious strikes against Ukraine's civilian population, plunging families into freezing conditions and starving them of necessities.

Next month marks a solemn milestone: four difficult years since the full-scale invasion. Soon after that, it will be 12 years since the occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea. As Members have rightly highlighted, Russia's occupation has always been rooted in repression, including systematic human rights abuses, the suppression of Ukrainian culture, language and independent media, and the deportation and attempts at the Russification of children. Schools have been forced to follow Kremlin curriculums, residents have been pushed to use the rouble and obtain Russian passports, and Russia has attempted to absorb the occupied regions into its legal system. That is not governance; it is despotism, and we should see it for what it is.

The humanitarian situation in the occupied territories is extreme. Medical facilities are overstretched, and often prioritise the Russian military's needs over those of civilians. Civilians face arbitrary detention, deportation and strict movement controls, with independent monitoring simply impossible; I am glad that Members have raised individual cases today. We have spoken many times about the appalling and heinous crime of the forced deportation of Ukrainian children and their attempted indoctrination in so-called patriotism camps with military-style training. We stand with the children of Ukraine and all those seeking to return, identify and trace them. I pay tribute to the cross-party work that has gone on around that, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter), who is not in her place.

We have announced additional support in recent weeks to respond to humanitarian concerns, particularly on energy, including an additional £20 million for energy security and resilience to keep lights on and homes warm when civilians need it most. We will also be expanding our school twinning scheme, building resilience between our peoples, and ensuring that we continue to provide support for reconstruction and the development

of Ukraine's economy. We look to a time when there will hopefully be peace, when Ukraine can be reconstructed and we can get back to a situation where its people are able to thrive independently—and with hope—as Ukrainians in the future.

Accountability has rightly been raised many times today. Just before Christmas, I was proud to sign a treaty in The Hague that established a claims commission for Ukraine, providing a route for accountability and reparation, including for the families of illegally deported children. Last week, registered claims reached 100,000, with more categories to follow. That sends a clear message that violations of international law will not go unanswered, and we will continue to support the commission's work, building on our role chairing the register of damage.

Sanctions were rightly raised, and we continue to increase the economic pressure on Putin. We have sanctioned more than 900 individuals, entities and ships, including 520 oil tankers. We are working with partners to counter the shadow fleet through further sanctions. We will also—although I will not comment on future designations—look at those who have been involved in the commission of atrocities, and of course Members rightly mentioned those who have been involved in the deportation of children. These measures are making a tangible difference: Russian oil revenues are at a four-year low and Russia's economy is in its weakest position since the start of the full-scale invasion.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and positive responses to questions. In a recent debate, I made a point about accountability for those who have committed massacres, persecution, rape and sexual abuse. It is very important that those who think they have got away with it do not get away with it. Is that part of the accountability process?

Stephen Doughty: It absolutely is. We are supporting the Ukrainian authorities with their own domestic accountability processes and through our work with the International Criminal Court, the special tribunal and the claims commission for the damage that Russia has done.

Our work through the coalition of the willing, which was raised by the Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), is unwavering, because Russia's aggression threatens not only Ukraine, but Europe and all of us here in the UK. The coalition of the willing is committed to delivering robust security guarantees. Importantly, the Paris meeting delivered a declaration of intent to deploy a multinational force and a vision for a multi-layered package of security guarantees supported by the United States. For obvious reasons, I will not get into specific operational details; the Opposition have asked us a number of times, but I do not think that would be helpful at this stage. However, Members can be assured that that declaration, as well as the additional support for training and equipping Ukrainian forces so that they can defend their country and deter against future aggression—Interflex, Orbital and other things were mentioned—is crucial.

Many different points were raised, and I will happily come back to Members on specific questions if I have not covered them. We are deeply concerned about the situation at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which was mentioned, and have consistently underlined that

the only way to ensure nuclear safety and security at Zaporizhzhia is for the plant to be returned to Ukraine. We continue to invest a huge amount in military support. We have invested £600 million in drones alone and delivered 65,000 military drones to Ukraine in just six months. We have invested £13 billion in total in military support. Many Members have rightly made it clear that they speak on behalf of their constituents who want to stand with the people of Ukraine. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) made that very clear.

The Government will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. We will continue working with our partners to hold Russia to account. Internationally agreed borders cannot be changed by force. Attempts to impose an Administration on Ukrainian territory will never legitimise any false claims by Russia. We will never waver in our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ukraine will endure and we will be by its side.

2.57 pm

Alex Sobel: We had almost absolute unanimity; I think this is the most unanimous debate that I have taken part in during my time as a Member. Nearly every Member who contributed to it has been to Ukraine, sometimes many times—sometimes, unfortunately, they have had to travel with me. There may be one or two who have not been—I am not sure if the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), has been. I travelled with the Minister when he was the shadow Minister, and I can tell the shadow Minister that he would be treated akin to a Minister if he went to Kyiv. I am sure that it is in his plans to go.

I thank everybody who contributed. I will rattle through them in the time that I have left. I thank the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) for his service in the military. We definitely need

to consider the historical similarities, and particularly the fortress belt. As my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) said, we need to remember the temporarily displaced people. I was with her in Vinnytsia, where we met with the university and with businesses.

My two vice-chairs on the APPG on Ukraine, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), made excellent speeches. The right hon. Member talked about his historical experience of being on the Black sea, the first wave of Russian aggression, the nuclear crisis and the concerns around Zaporizhzhia. My hon. Friend talked about Mariupol, which was the bravest defence in the Ukrainian war.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who often speaks alongside me in these debates, talked about the historical parallels of non-recognition. As I am sure he knows, my mother was from Lithuania and born during that era. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) talked about military aid. We need to ensure that the Ukrainians get sufficient military aid. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) contributes tirelessly to these debates. His work on religious freedom is hugely important. We should remember that non-Orthodox religious sites were attacked and clerics abducted. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) made an important point about NATO. NATO's clear position is non-recognition, and we need to hold the coalition of the willing together in its entirety to ensure that there is no recognition.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of non-recognition of Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine.

River Habitats: Protection and Restoration

3 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of protecting and restoring river habitats.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the Making Space for Water campaigners, whose tireless work in championing our riverways is exactly why we are here today in Westminster Hall. It is a privilege to open today's debate and see it so well attended, as we make the case for practical solutions that will protect our riverways, restore river habitats and boost water quality in all of our rivers and streams.

It is essential that I outline the significant challenge facing both nature and rivers up and down the country. Unfortunately, most of our rivers are in crisis, plagued by pollution from both agriculture and sewage. Subsequently, they are on the brink of ecological collapse. Only a third of UK rivers are in good health, making our rivers some of the most polluted in Europe. Looking closer, 85% of the UK's rivers and streams have been heavily modified, which is stripping away habitats and accelerating a big fall in biodiversity. Yet we all know that our rivers are crucial for both nature and communities. Riverways are a vital source of fresh water. They support wildlife, boost biodiversity and help to regulate the climate locally.

Take my home county of Dorset. Our county is fortunate to play home to one of the world's rarest habitats: chalk streams. The high mineral content and year-round moderate temperatures mean that local chalk streams such as the Stour and Frome are home to a broad array of wildlife and habitats. I am so proud that on the Isle of Purbeck, in my constituency, we hosted the first official wild beaver release in England, some five centuries after they were hunted to extinction.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I commend the hon. Member on securing this debate. On the point about beavers, this week we have had massive flooding in the west country, in Dorset and in Devon. I am hearing from farmers in my patch who agreed to have beavers released into rivers on their farmland that there are complications. Does he agree that cannot be a one-off action, but rather needs sustained engagement from the Government as well as financial support such as the sustainable farming incentive?

Lloyd Hatton: I agree that a co-ordinated approach that works with farmers, landowners and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is required. That extensive work took place in my constituency, and it meant that the release was broadly seen as a success story. We would certainly like to replicate that across the west country and the UK.

To continue the saga of the beaver, their release in Purbeck has been a success story, and I am so pleased that the beavers can call the expansive freshwater and dense woodland at Studland their new home. Of course, that is also a good news story for restoring nature and boosting water quality. Beavers are nature's engineers. By creating wetland habitats, they can help to retain water during floods and release it during droughts. Finally, they also help to filter polluted water and improve its quality further downstream. They play a crucial

role in aiding nature's recovery. However, the mighty beaver cannot and must not act alone. Like many Members present, I am committed to help restore nature across all our riverways, creating the conditions for wildlife and habitats to flourish in our rivers once again.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for bringing this issue to the House; he is absolutely right to do so. The state of the waterways is a growing concern for us in Northern Ireland. Agricultural run-off, outdated waste water systems and storm overflows are putting rivers such as the Lagan, the Bann and the Foyle under pressure, threatening biodiversity and public health. We must improve water quality, tackle agricultural pollution and invest in sustainable water systems to ensure that our rivers and freshwater species are protected for future generations. That can happen through the Minister and the Government, but it can also happen across the regional Administrations. Does the hon. Member feel it is important to address the issue collectively across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Lloyd Hatton: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention; it is almost as if he had an exclusive sneak peek at my remarks.

I will turn to the damaging role of water companies. Sadly, many firms have a sorry track record in protecting rivers and boosting water quality. For far too long, many water companies have profiteered, despite polluting our rivers and streams. Unfortunately, the previous Government did too little, too late to reverse the worrying trend. To name just one shocking example, Wessex Water, my local water company, killed some 2,000 fish in Melksham after a sewage pumping station failure. It was slapped with a fine for the damage on its watch, but by then it was too late, as untreated sewage had leaked into nearby rivers. I am sure we will hear many more horror stories in this debate, with failing water companies found culpable for environmental destruction within our rivers and streams. The days of water companies polluting with impunity and hiding behind weak regulation must end.

That is the mess we are wading through. Looking ahead, I am pleased that the Government are beginning to take all the necessary steps to clean up and better protect our rivers and streams. From the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which finally gave regulators the power to curb water bosses from collecting undeserved bonuses, to the £104 billion secured in investment to start to rebuild water infrastructure across the country, the Government are beginning to get to grips with this scandal.

In Wessex Water's case, Government action led to a £500,000 fine—the second largest ever issued to a water company—for the Melksham sewage failure. It also led to a ban on Wessex Water bosses receiving their undeserved bonuses. The water White Paper, released just last week, further strengthens the regulation of the big water firms. I welcome the Government's commitment to create a single, integrated, tough regulator, which will replace the current patchwork of regulatory bodies and hopefully deliver a more proactive, targeted and rigorous way of holding water companies to account.

We must be honest about the challenges still ahead. Despite new legislation, which I was proud to support, water companies continue to hide behind opaque and complex corporate structures, shielding themselves from

scrutiny while our rivers and streams pay the price. Earlier this month, it emerged in *The Guardian* that the chief executive and the chief finance officer of Wessex Water received some £50,000 in previously undisclosed extra pay from a parent company. Just a few weeks before that, we learned that a former chief executive at Wessex Water had been handed a whopping £170,000 payment, again from a parent company. Both those payments happened in exactly the same year that the firm was correctly banned by the Government from paying undeserved bonuses. From the reports on just how Wessex Water is choosing to operate, we can safely say that something extremely fishy is going on.

If bonuses can simply be rebadged as undisclosed payments from another arm of a large web of companies, the bonus ban is at risk of becoming unenforceable. That weakens public trust, undermines the authority of our regulators and allows those responsible for gross environmental damage to be rewarded for failure. I firmly believe that the Government, working closely with a new, single regulator, must tighten the rules to prevent water companies from exploiting corporate structures to disguise what are clearly bonuses in disguise. Without that, I fear the bonus ban will not change the corporate culture and wrongdoing within these big firms, and water companies will continue to pollute our precious rivers and streams.

Alongside strengthening regulation and ensuring that pollution certainly does not pay, further work must be done to restore wildlife and reduce flood risks along our rivers. Again, I should stress that the Government are taking the necessary action. The recently published environmental improvement plan includes an important target to double wildlife-friendly farms by 2030, and I know that that is welcomed by a huge range of farmers in my constituency of South Dorset. The commitment of £500 million for landscape recovery will hopefully play a vital role in revitalising nature while helping communities better withstand floods.

The recent announcement by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the sustainable farming initiative will go some way to ensuring that farmers and landowners can play their part in protecting rivers and wildlife. However, I remain concerned that gaps remain in the role that nature-based solutions can, and must, play in cleaning up our rivers. That is why I support the Making Space for Water campaign run by the Riverscapes partnership, which is a broad coalition of the Rivers Trust, the National Trust, the Woodland Trust and the Beaver Trust—safe to say, there is a lot of trust in the campaign.

Farmers and landowners are currently standing on the front line of our environmental crisis, and the role that they play, and will play in the future, when it comes to protecting our riverways and enabling nature recovery is absolutely critical. They are seeing, at first hand, the pressures facing our rivers and the threat of flooding all year round. As has previously been remarked on, just this week Storm Chandra brought absolute havoc to my home of Dorset. The heavy rainfall has flooded rivers, left fields waterlogged and livestock areas almost completely unusable, and severely restricted access to farmland. Farmers and landowners are not just experiencing these challenges; they are absolutely critical to solving them. The decisions they make about their land shape the quality of our water, the health of our rivers and the survival of our wildlife.

In my constituency, from Purbeck to Wool to Weymouth, many farmers and landowners are already stepping up, carving out space for nature alongside their nearby rivers and restoring the landscapes that we all depend on. But they cannot carry that burden alone, and it is abundantly clear that they still lack some of the financial support that they need to best protect our riverways. To that end, targeted and simplified financial incentives must be considered, and be given to farmers and landowners to restore and enhance our rivers and streams. That is the key and, I believe, most important ask of the Making Space for Water campaign. With the right support in place, that will allow farmers and landowners to create river buffers and wetlands alongside their land. It would allow them to plant riparian trees and floodplain meadows, and to reintroduce beaver populations, just like they have already done in Purbeck.

If successful, that will all help to create a network of connected, nature-rich river corridors. Clean, functioning river corridors are a good news story for everyone: they help nature to recover and water quality to improve, biodiversity is no longer in freefall and our countryside becomes much more resilient. Where already implemented, healthy river corridors slow down the flow of water and reduce the risk of devastating floods and prolonged droughts. They act as natural infrastructure, storing water when we have too much and releasing it when we have too little.

The benefits go beyond flood protection. Restored river corridors trap pollution before it reaches our waterways. They support farmers, strengthening the resilience of their farmland without undermining food production. If we are truly serious about restoring nature, protecting rivers and boosting water quality, making space for water must be at the heart of the Government's approach.

I know that the Minister is an enthusiastic advocate for our rivers and streams, and has met the team behind the Making Space for Water campaign. Indeed, she spoke proudly at the campaign launch just last year. I hope that today she will take the opportunity to set out what further action her Department can take to protect our riverways. I would welcome any further detail that she can give us on exactly how this Government, alongside a new, tough single regulator, will block failing water company bosses from receiving bonuses through the back door. From conversations, I know that the Minister shares my view that a tough bonus ban is critical to challenging the corporate misbehaviour that is all too present across the water sector. By embracing this important campaign, we can boost water quality, aid nature and biodiversity recovery, and enhance rivers and streams across the country. Indeed, we can make space for water once again.

3.15 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for securing this debate and all colleagues here today. As the Minister is well aware, protecting and restoring river habitats is a subject very close to my heart and the hearts of my constituents in North Herefordshire; I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak about that further today. I thank the organisations behind the Making Space for Water campaign, too.

[Dr Ellie Chowns]

Our rivers must not be seen as drains. They are the veins and arteries for what is the lifeblood of our land and everything that lives on it. They are integral to our collective health, our communities, our environment and our economies. They are essential channels for the circulation of that lifeblood of fresh water. We ignore them and pollute them at our peril. If we make space for water, we get multiple benefits. It helps us to be resilient to flooding, protects us from the risk of drought, helps farmers to deliver food security—crucial for us today—and, of course, helps to boost nature and biodiversity resilience.

I will speak first about flooding. That affects my constituency of North Herefordshire horrendously frequently and it is only going to get worse. I have already spoken numerous times in the House about the fact that climate change is increasing the severity and frequency of flooding incidents. If we make space for water, if we give room to our rivers, we will of course enable ourselves as communities to be more resilient. We saw the devastating effects of the floods last November in Monmouth and Skenfrith, just over the border from my constituency. We know that if we invest in Making Space for Water and looking after our rivers, that will have numerous protective benefits for us all as an economy.

I have seen that in practice myself, on an Environmental Audit Committee visit last year to the Netherlands. People there are really innovative on this issue. They have a huge project called Room for the River, through which they have taken it hugely seriously. They have started by identifying the problem and what the solutions could be, and then ensured that there is public support and Government commitment behind that. I have strongly urged the UK Government to take a similarly strategic approach to managing water and flood resilience in our communities, because this problem is only going to become more and more challenging. It has devastating effects on people's lives.

I turn now to river pollution. One of the first things I did when elected to the House was to set up the all-party parliamentary group on water pollution. That is such a significant issue across the country and especially in my constituency of North Herefordshire. The hon. Member for South Dorset referred to the outrageous pollution caused by sewerage companies and the profiteering that has happened for decades at the expense of the natural environment and, indeed, the pockets of consumers, citizens and bill payers. It is clear to me and to the rest of the Green party that water should be in public hands. This is a natural monopoly. It is a service that should be provided only for the public good.

It is absolutely right that the Government are taking action to tackle the problems caused by the water and sewerage companies. Yet, as I have emphasised previously, if we look only at the water and sewerage companies, we are not looking at half the problem—in fact, more than half the problem, because we know from the Government's own data that agricultural water pollution is an even bigger contributor to water pollution than is sewage. Yet in last week's White Paper, it merited only one page of the 48-page document. That is deeply disappointing. It signals that although the Government talk about cleaning up our rivers, lakes and seas, they are not taking a holistic, joined-up approach to this problem. We cannot deal with these issues in isolation.

Agricultural water pollution is even more of a problem in my constituency; more than 70% of the phosphate pollution, which has had a devastating effect locally, comes from agricultural run-off. That has impacts on nature—in the suffocation of important species such as ranunculus, for example. It has impacts on people, who no longer feel able to swim in the rivers that they have swum in for their entire lives. It has huge impacts on the economy. We have had a planning moratorium in North Herefordshire in the Lugg catchment since October 2019, which has cost the economy at least half a billion pounds. Huge amounts of effort have gone into trying to resolve the issue locally, and I pay tribute to the work of the council and the local citizen scientists, who have done everything they can to address it. However, without proper Government support, local actors are stuck.

People care passionately about this. The citizen scientists in the Wye catchment have done about 50,000 water sample tests since 2020—in just the last five years. That is an amazing piece of work. Farmers are stepping up and doing fantastic work themselves, out of their own pockets and motivation, coming together under the auspices of initiatives such as the Wyescapes project. That brings together 49 farmers throughout the Wye and Lugg catchments to work together on a proposal for a landscape recovery scheme. But they need Government support.

At the minute, we have a White Paper with just one page on agriculture. We have a diffuse water pollution plan on the Wye catchment, published at the end of last year, that says that, even with perfect implementation of all available measures, we will get nowhere close to solving the pollution problem that is totally gumming up our environment, communities and economy in North Herefordshire.

I ask the Minister: what more will she do? It is clear that we urgently need more. We need more support for farmers, we need funding for projects like Wyescapes, and we need a commitment on a proportion of the funding that has been committed to landscape recovery under the revised environmental improvement plan. How much of that will go to river corridors? How much of it will go to projects like Wyescapes? We also need more funding and teeth for the Environment Agency, to make sure that there is a level playing field for all people in the area. Fundamentally, we need a water protection zone for the River Wye. We need the Government to ensure that that option is fully and properly assessed.

Our rivers are the veins and arteries of our communities, economies and environment. They are not drains. They are essential to the health of our environment. We need Government support for citizens and farmers, and everybody else working to protect and restore our river habitats.

3.22 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton)—my Dorset neighbour—for securing this really important debate. This issue matters an awful lot to him, and he represents it perfectly on behalf of his constituents. I note that this is the debut of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, my good friend the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), who is responding to the debate. I am pleased to see her in her place and look forward to hearing what she has to say.

This is a timely debate: in the last day, a severe flood warning has been issued for the lower Stour at Iford Bridge Home Park and across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, due to Storm Chandra. The levels of the River Stour are rising rapidly. I put on the record my thanks to my constituents, who have put up with Storm Chandra and the disruption involved. Many of them have had to be evacuated, and they have been stoical.

My constituents' lives have been made harder, though, because the electrical supply was unsafe at Iford Bridge Home Park, which is what forced evacuations. That was avoidable: the power supply was left unprotected by the owner, Hampshire Mobile Park Home Enterprises Ltd. It was fined over £27,000 last summer for failing to carry out 33 required actions that would, among other things, have improved electrical safety, but it has also failed to do that since. I will be seeking a response from the owner and pressing for answers, because my constituents deserve to feel safe in their own homes—always.

Equally, there needs to be greater maintenance of our rivers. We need to dredge up and get rid of everything that raises the river bed so that, when flooding happens, what washes through streets is not detritus and sewage, which make people's recovery from flooding so much harder. I thank the BCP council's teams, and the Environment Agency, for responding and standing alongside my constituents in that difficult time.

Water quality is uppermost in the minds of my constituents; it comes up often in my surgery appointments, on the doorsteps weekly and in my community visits. It is also particularly on the minds of my school students. Already, this calendar year, I have been to Avonbourne—a fantastic school doing amazing things—to speak with students on a youth enterprise scheme, and to St Walburga's, Malmesbury Park, the Epiphany school and St James' academy. Pretty much every question that I was asked in those classrooms was about the quality of water.

Younger people care passionately about our planet, about its protection and about their right to swim without being washed over by sewage. They want the Government to get this right. At St James' academy, I went into two different classrooms and spoke with the eco-councillors. They talked at great length, with great eloquence and expertise, about what we should be doing, so I wanted to talk a little bit about that in this debate.

I also want to put on the record my thanks to Christchurch Harbour and Marine Society, which has been working with citizen scientists to make sure that Christchurch harbour's water quality can be improved. In so doing, it is setting an example to the young people in the schools I mentioned. The society is calling for a dedicated conservation policy for the harbour. I know that is important, and I know, from testing water quality in that harbour, that much could be done to improve the situation.

I know, too, that those school students are concerned about the situation in the River Stour. That is not surprising, really: as my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset was saying, our rivers have been heavily modified and are not fit for purpose. An estimated 85% of the UK's rivers and streams have been altered from their natural state. Landscapes cannot cope with the pace and the extent of climate impacts such as flooding from storms and heavy rainfall. Indeed, 20% of UK homes and 80% of UK farmers have already felt the negative impacts of those changes in our environment.

On the same front, the UK faces a growing water-scarcity crisis. England alone will need an additional 5 billion litres of water a day by 2050 to support our growing population. We already use 14 billion litres a day, so that is equivalent to 35% of our current consumption. As we just heard from my hon. Friend, we have some of the unhealthiest rivers in Europe, thanks to the inheritance left us by the Conservatives. Only a third of the UK's river stretches are in good ecological health, with many in dire states as a consequence of physical modifications, intermittent agricultural and road run-off, and continuous discharges from sewage treatment.

Lastly, biodiversity across the UK is declining. On average, UK species have fallen by 19% since 1970, and just 3% of England's land is effectively protected and managed for nature. Pollinators, native mammals and freshwater species such as Atlantic salmon or brown trout, which once thrived in our rivers, are on the brink of collapse. Is it any wonder that the younger generation are outraged and want us to act?

And we are acting: this Government got to work quickly. It was a pleasure to sit on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee with my hon. Friend the Minister, where we heard much flim-flam from the Opposition. In spite of that, we managed to crack on with introducing significant measures, be it the banning of executive bonuses if firms fail—[*Interruption.*] I beg your pardon, Ms Butler; the Minister has made me laugh now.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Tom Hayes: I will very happily, at this point, give way.

Sir Ashley Fox: At the risk of delivering more “flim-flam”, I should say that the hon. Member has just told us that it was the Water (Special Measures) Act that announced the ban on company bonuses. Would he concede that that was actually introduced, in regulations, by the last Conservative Government? In fact, his Government have just put a regulation into statute; that did not actually change the law at all.

Tom Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I think that is a perfect example of leading with one's chin; there is a little bit of brass neck involved in that. When we speak with our constituents and with the water sector, they are abundantly clear about the difference that this Labour Government, and these changes in particular, have made.

We just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset about the poor performance of Wessex Water's chief executives; earlier this year, its chief executive and chief financial officer took £50,000 in undisclosed extra payments from the parent company and a former Wessex Water chief executive was handed a huge £170,000 payment—again, from the parent company. I struggle to remember any significant fining of water companies under the Conservatives. Indeed, I have spoken to people from the water sector, and they told me that they felt it was like the wild west. They welcome the fact that we finally have a Government who are getting the situation under control.

I welcome the Minister's work on the Water (Special Measures) Act, which banned executive bonuses at failing firms and introduced “jail if they fail” for executives, automatic penalties for a range of offences, and mandatory

[Tom Hayes]

real-time monitoring. I also welcome the Government's work since, with the commitment to seeing sewage pollution and storm overflow spills reduced by 50% by 2030, as well as 10,000 water quality inspections per year, and with the Environment Agency securing a record £22.1 billion in investment over the next five years. I am particularly pleased to see investment of around £230 million by Wessex Water in my constituency and the wider area, and I have been to both sewage treatment plants to see how the work is going.

I am pleased that we are making progress, and that includes the replacement of Ofwat, which has been failing for a long time, with an independent regulator. However, there is more to do. We need to protect communities from the dangers of flooding and drought through the creation of multi-benefit mosaic habitats. In so doing, we can unlock their full potential for nature recovery, carbon storage and flood mitigation. We need to help farmers to continue delivering our food security, by prioritising the deployment of buffers on marginal agricultural land so that farmers benefit financially and can mitigate impacts on food production. We need to boost biodiversity and nature recovery by enhancing river corridors and making space for rivers to return to their natural function. In so doing, we can boost biodiversity and nature recovery through the creation of new and more connected natural habitats.

We also need to clean up our rivers. In the words of Martin Lines, the chief executive officer of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, healthy and functioning river corridors are

"a practical way to improve water quality, reduce flood risk and restore biodiversity."

He says that farmers

"are part of the solution"—

he is right—and that

"with the right backing, these nature-rich corridors can help futureproof both our land and our livelihoods."

Richard Benwell, the chief executive of Wildlife and Countryside Link, says:

"Carving out space to re-naturalise rivers would bring ecosystems to life, reduce flood risk and bring joy to millions."

In closing, I echo my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset in welcoming the first ever licensed beaver wild release in England, in our beautiful county of Dorset. It is good news for Dorset, it is good news for our country and I feel sure there is more good news to come.

3.32 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Nothing shapes a landscape more than a river. Nothing brings a landscape to life more than a river. If we ask ChatGPT, "What is a river?", it will tell us:

"it is a natural stream of flowing water that moves downhill across land"—

and that tells us precisely why Members of Parliament should never use ChatGPT. A river is life—abundant life. Rivers are not just streams of water; they are amazing ecosystems. Globally, rivers are home to over 140,000 specialist freshwater species.

We think of water as being everywhere, but 99% of the water on this blue planet of ours is unusable by humans. Of the remaining 1%, which comprises freshwater,

almost seven tenths is locked up in ice caps and glaciers, leaving just three tenths of 1% of the water on our planet in lakes, marshes and rivers. It is strange that something so vital to all life on our planet should be so scarce and so vulnerable.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this debate to focus the House's attention on how we can better protect and restore our precious riverine habitats. Others have set out the dire statistics. Sadly, it is true that 87% of rivers outside our national parks do not meet the minimum ecological standards set out in law. Even inside the supposed protection of our national parks, only four out of every 10 riverine systems meet those legal minimum standards.

With a new water Bill, the release of the land use framework and updates to the environmental land management schemes, 2026 is a particularly significant year for the health of our rivers. I welcome the publication of the water White Paper last week and the fact that it commits to implementing many of the recommendations of the Cunliffe review. Chief among those is a commitment to shift the focus of water companies towards pre-pipe solutions for water pollution. The Government say that they

"will ensure legislation, funding streams, and regulatory mechanisms"

to tackle the root causes of pollution, but those must be properly funded and backed up by a regime of thorough monitoring and swift penalty enforcement for infringements.

We politicians have made much of the failures of the water companies over the past few years and the totally disgraceful exploitation of bill payers to line shareholders' pockets while companies fail to address pipe leakage, combined sewers and sewage outflows. Equally, I entirely support the outrage expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for South Dorset and for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) about Wessex Water and its motley leadership crew. However, they are not solely responsible; there is also the agriculture sector, whether that is chicken farms on the River Wye or eutrophication from nitrogen fertiliser run-off. The Government must drive the solutions to river habitat restoration.

ELMS is the key part of that. When it was first launched by the previous Government to replace the EU's agricultural subsidies, the £2.4 billion was to be split into three equal funding pots of £800 million a year. Landscape recovery was one of those pots, but last month's environmental improvement plan set out the new headline commitment of just £500 million for landscape recovery projects. Now, £500 million is a lot less than the £800 million initially promised, but wait: that £500 million is not a year, like the £800 million; it is £500 million over 20 years. That is a paltry £25 million a year, making a total mockery of the idea that the Government are taking landscape recovery seriously.

Will the Minister therefore publish the evidence and modelling showing how the combined ELMS offer will add up to deliver the Government's environmental objectives and legal commitments on water? Can she direct me towards evidence that demonstrates that £500 million for landscape recovery is sufficient to deliver the Government's environmental objectives and legal commitments, in terms of both our 30 by 30 commitments and our longer-term EIP and Environment Act 2021 targets?

Will the forthcoming water reform Bill go further than the water White Paper and put nature-based solutions at the core of tackling water pollution, including actions to prioritise and fund catchment-based measures at scale? Will the Government consider embedding an overarching commitment, within the Environment Act delivery plans, to create a national river corridor network that prioritises the restoration of river habitats, along the lines proposed by the Making Space for Water campaign? Finally, when will the Government deliver on their commitment to update the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 so that protected landscapes are given stronger powers and clear duties to drive nature recovery, including river habitat restoration?

The water Bill must embed the use of nature-based solutions in a way that has not happened so far. The water White Paper's comments on exploring the use of green bonds to help investment in nature-based solutions is therefore welcome, but we cannot simply leave it to private investment to get us to where we need to be. The Government should empower the new super-regulator's chief engineer to direct companies to prioritise and scale up nature-based solutions, mandating, wherever possible, a change from grey infrastructure to green. The ministerial directions to Ofwat and Natural England during the transition phase should pave the way for that—[*Interruption.*] Excuse me.

Lloyd Hatton: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: I would be very grateful to my hon. Friend if he intervened.

Lloyd Hatton: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent speech about the importance of cross-society working between Government, regulatory bodies and the stewards of our riverways and countryside. Does he agree that, unless we have that collaborative approach, we are unlikely to see the change we both so desperately want in order to restore the health of our riverways and allow nature recovery to take root in environments across the country?

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—I did not know his constituency was the manufacturer of Benlylin. It has certainly worked on my cough on this occasion, so I thank him very much.

Nature-based solutions are the cost-efficient, multi-benefit, long-term solution. They recognise that enabling nature to thrive is the best way to restore our rivers, our wetlands and our riparian habitats. I particularly want to single out the work of the West Cumbria Rivers Trust and the West Lakeland farmers group. With their work on the Rivers Irt and Bleng, they have shown that the shade offered by restored riparian woodland brings river temperatures down to safe levels for threatened native species such as Atlantic salmon and brown trout. That shows how the health of a river is about not simply what toxins are put into it, but the whole natural ecosystem and how it is managed. Riparian woodlands also stabilise riverbanks, reduce erosion, and control sediment and nutrient input from adjacent land. Looking at the whole ecosystem, not just the river itself, is so important.

I commend the Making Space for Water campaign, which provides an evidence-driven framework for river restoration, and I urge the Government to support it

fully—indeed, I know they do. The Rivers Trust, National Trust, Woodland Trust and Beaver Trust are all calling for support to create a network of connected nature-rich river corridors that include river buffers, river wiggling, beaver reintroduction, which has been mentioned, and wetland restoration.

It has been my privilege to canoe down some of the most wonderful rivers in the world. My great desire, before I shuffle off this mortal coil, is to canoe down all the great rivers of the world. I have done the Amazon, the Mississippi and the Congo, but there are so many more to do. Rivers are an incredible joy in life; we really must understand them, promote them and restore them, and we must ensure that we give them health—because they give us life.

3.43 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on his well-made speech opening the debate.

The state of our rivers is a near-perfect metaphor for how badly we have got our priorities wrong as a society. Through a combination of carelessness, greed and wilful neglect, we have managed to poison and exhaust one of the essential elements of life. Not a single one of England's rivers, which quite literally shape our country, is in good overall health. All of them are polluted with toxic chemicals.

Clean waterways teeming with life—places that can refresh body, mind and soul—should be the absolute right of every English citizen. As it stands, we have squandered the vast natural wealth of our rivers and streams. In doing so, we have robbed the future generations of our nation of the best part of their inheritance. Restoring our rivers and streams is, above all, a question of changing what we mean by growth.

Experiencing the glories of nature is one of the joys that make life worth living. That is what we should be focusing our efforts on—not on abstract GDP figures that mean next to nothing to anyone outside the imagination of the Office for Budget Responsibility. Instead of more chemicals, more concrete, more consumption, we will do far more to improve the wellbeing of all of our citizens from every background by returning to them the burst of mayflies at the start of summer, the chance

“To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping”,

as Rupert Brooke once did, without worrying what filth we might be swallowing; or even just the chance to mess about in boats in the streams that once flowed fully, but now have been choked to a pitiful dribble. A more potent symbol of national decline would be hard to invent.

All the polling shows that the public are overwhelmingly in favour of decisive action to restore nature in this country. The inspirational efforts of groups across North East Hertfordshire such as RevIvel, the Friends of the Rib and Quin, and the River Beane Restoration Association prove the grassroots passion for seeing our rivers and especially our chalk streams restored.

My party, the Labour party, should know this deep in its heart. Since the first inception of our movement, the demand of politics by the people for the people has always been to protect the natural world and to open it up to all so that ordinary working-class citizens can

[Chris Hinchliff]

enjoy it, too. When politicians constantly attack the very nature that our voters love and the Office for Environmental Protection has to investigate the Government for their utter failure to deliver the statutory targets for rivers to be in good condition by next year—set out in laws that we politicians passed—it is little surprise that faith in politics is so miserably low.

When we make promises to restore nature, we must never again fail to honour our words with action. If that means the Treasury has to adapt its plans, so be it. I will be explicit on this point. I know some people believe that putting more and more power in the hands of profiteering developers will somehow magically resolve stagnant productivity, but our model of speculative house building, combined with the legal obligation for water companies to supply water to new developments, is increasingly incompatible with healthy rivers in many parts of the country. There are environmental limits on the amount of water we can use without wrecking our freshwater systems, but currently we are just pretending that they do not exist. The over-abstraction from the aquifers that feed our precious chalk streams is a clear case in point.

In a country as wet as ours, it should take a true organising genius to produce water shortages, yet a combination of planning, deregulation and a profit-motivated private market has contrived to do just that. It is time for a “chalk streams first” approach that protects them from over-abstraction and for long overdue recognition that genuine, sustainable development means accepting that environmental boundaries cannot be compromised. The truth is, if we measure economic success by the genuine improvement of our constituents’ lives and by the provision of good, meaningful work for all, the restoration of our rivers is in fact a huge opportunity.

My plea to the Minister today is simple: go back to colleagues in the Treasury and tell them about the missing half of the clean jobs revolution. Tell them about the huge expansion in the number of ecologists and conservation experts we need to monitor the health of our rivers and advise our local authorities and hard-working farmers. Tell them about the thousands of skilled jobs needed to re-wiggle our rivers, and tell them to create and maintain riparian buffers such as carr woodland and floodplain meadows around all our waterways. Tell them about the jobs and vast increases in natural capital that could be created across every part of the country by restoring the small waters like ponds and headwater streams, and integrating those crucial areas at the top of river systems into the water framework directive. And tell them about the national mobilisation needed to prevent the next river pollution scandal from the highway run-off filling our rivers with a nightmarish cocktail of microplastics, heavy metals and herbicides.

There are thousands of unpermitted and in many cases barely monitored highway outfalls across the country that must be urgently investigated, maintained and upgraded if we are genuinely to improve the health of our rivers. Collectively, those are tasks that would not just upskill and employ thousands of people, but would immeasurably enrich our nation by restoring our streams and rivers as the crown jewels of England’s countryside that they always ought to have been.

Dawn Butler (in the Chair): I hear congratulations are in order for the debut of the Lib Dem spokesperson, Rachel Gilmour.

3.49 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Thank you, Ms Butler. It is a pleasure to serve under you. I thank the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) for his kind words. I should start by declaring a couple of interests: before I came to Parliament I was head of strategy for the Environment Agency, specialising in water flooding and the water framework directive. Before that, I was the director of communications for the National Farmers’ Union—the first woman to sit on their board in 100 years. Despite my nerves about my first outing, I feel calmly confident that I have got a grip on things.

I congratulate my colleague from the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton), on securing the debate. I was particularly interested in his comments about the beavers on the Isle of Purbeck, because we have had similar issues in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Ian Roome). I was touched to hear the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) talk about the rivers of this country being like veins in a body, echoed by the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner). The edifying and incisive observations in the debate show that this is clearly a matter close to all our hearts, whatever political party we come from—although it matters to a couple of us more than others.

Across the country, we are witnessing storms of increasing frequency and ferocity, and it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the devastating flooding that has swept across my part of the world in the south-west in recent days. Events that were once expected every 300 years and then once every 100 years now seem to strike with alarming regularity. Our rivers, which are among Britain’s most precious wildlife habitats, are bearing the brunt of environmental decline. According to the Rivers Trust, and it is not the first time this has been mentioned, not a single English river is in “good chemical health” and only 15% are considered to be in good ecological condition. That is a sobering reality. Freshwater ecosystems are collapsing and this country now has some of the unhealthiest rivers in Europe. The species that depend on the waterways, from fish to invertebrates to birds, are struggling to survive. Our rivers desperately need a reprieve.

England is home to 85% of the world’s chalk streams: rare, crystal-clear, ecologically distinctive waterways found almost nowhere else on earth. Part of the challenge lies in the withdrawal of the Environment Agency from stewardship of many of our rivers. For years, maintenance of watercourses has been inadequate; now, with the EA stepping back for whatever reason in further parts of the country, including my own, the burden of looking after the waterways has become heavier still.

We must recognise that farmers are on the frontline of environmental challenges and that the relationship between land and water has changed significantly and dramatically over the past century, encapsulated in the European water framework directive, which is not a complicated piece of legislation. That is why my party consistently emphasises the vital role of farmers as

custodians of the natural world. They work tirelessly to reduce run-off and protect habitats, but they need support. Agricultural run-off, slurry, fertilisers and other such chemical cocktails continue to enter our waterways. That has patently been exacerbated, given the recent devastation caused by Storm Chandra in which huge swathes of the west country were submerged, washing pollutants into rivers and compounding the ecological damage.

It will come as a surprise to no one that blame must be laid at the feet of water and sewage companies and their conduct. I had a meeting with South West Water on Monday, and it was obvious that their obscene greed and incompetence had inflicted immense harm on river habitats across the country and, indeed on my constituents in Bampton. Grotesque quantities of sewage have been allowed to spew into British waterways and there have been discharges on an industrial scale, with catastrophic consequences for aquatic life. It is an absolute insult; heads, I fear, must roll. The Liberal Democrats are sadly disappointed by the Government's water White Paper, as it falls short of the promise to bring about fundamental regulatory reform. We believe that the current model of private ownership has utterly failed. Frankly, only a complete overhaul will do.

The Liberal Democrats would introduce a system in which water companies are mutually owned by customers and run professionally in the public interest. We also call on the Government to finally end the scandalous sewage cover-up by forcing those crooked water companies to publish the volume of dumped sewage and not just the duration of spills. After all, sunlight is the best disinfectant. The Government's plans—I am really sad about this because I am usually on side—do not cut the mustard. The decision to abolish Ofwat is welcome, but it is only the first step. We will continue to press the Government to establish a new, robust regulator, with real teeth and real accountability, as a matter of urgency.

Turning to other causes of harm, water abstraction has risen sharply, reducing river flows and placing ecosystems under severe stress. Many rivers now run perilously low, especially during dry periods. Moreover, centuries of physical modification—straightening, damming, embanking, diverting and disconnecting—has fundamentally altered the natural character of our rivers. Those changes have inevitably disrupted fish migratory patterns, fragmented habitat connectivity and in turn diminished resilience to climate change. A river that cannot move, meander or naturally flood is a river that simply cannot thrive. Restoration efforts should focus on allowing our rivers to re-wiggle—I love that word, which means to return to their natural meanders—reconnecting them with flood plains, and rebuilding the diverse physical habitats that sustain life. In many cases, the best thing that we can do is to step back and let mother nature take her course—in essence, to rewild herself. That would include removing barriers such as weirs and small dams to aid fish passages, creating riffles, pools, wetlands and woody debris to enhance biodiversity, establishing nature-rich corridors along river banks and expanding natural flood management systems.

Interventions such as these are not just environmentally beneficial; there is a major economic element to this. Healthy waterways provide essential services to all our systems. They are our lifeblood.

3.57 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this debate; it is a welcome opportunity to talk about the importance of our rivers and the vital need to protect and restore them. He is right to say that we need to improve the health of our rivers.

This has been a good debate. I enjoyed the contribution of the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns). She is correct to describe our rivers and streams as the “veins and arteries” of our environment. I noted she said that she wants water companies to be taken into public ownership, but she did not say how she would pay for it. I am left wondering if it is Green policy to confiscate those assets from the shareholders, or to pay compensation. If it is to pay compensation, how much and who pays for it? Dare I say, that is an error that the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), also fell into. She said that she was in favour of a radical policy, but did not explain how she intended to pay for it.

I enjoyed the contribution of the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes). I agree with him on the need for more dredging of our rivers. It is unacceptable that the Environment Agency has withdrawn from main river maintenance. The hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) described rivers as amazing ecosystems, and I agree with him. I also agree that when water companies break the law, they should be punished swiftly and severely. The hon. Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) described the beauty of the countryside as one of the joys of life. I am with him on that, even though he and I may not agree on many other things.

I congratulate my Somerset constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead, on leading for her party in this debate. She said that farmers are “custodians of the natural world”, and I agree. Next time she speaks on water, I hope that she will give us the price tag for her party's policy of renationalising the water industry.

The River Parrett flows through my constituency. It is rather too high for comfort at the moment. Some of my constituents are watching the water level with concern. I sincerely hope that their homes are not flooded over the next few days. The Parrett hosts an abundance of species, from heron to eels—anyone who is lucky may even see an otter. It is also important for the wider ecosystem, including roe deer, which we are fortunate enough to enjoy having in Somerset.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to support a local campaign in my constituency to save the Pawlett Hams in the first weeks after I was elected to Parliament. Pawlett Hams is a beautiful natural habitat, bounded on three sides by the Parrett, which impacts that environment. I was pleased that that campaign was successful in defeating EDF Energy's proposal to create an unwanted saltmarsh there. I raise this because I understand the importance and beauty of our rivers, and I know how passionate many of our constituents are about preserving and protecting them.

The previous Government started the process of improving the health of our rivers, but there is much more to be done. Their plan for water introduced the

[*Sir Ashley Fox*]

water restoration fund, which channelled environmental fines and penalties into projects that improve the water environment. The Environment Act 2021 introduced legally binding targets to reduce the length of rivers polluted by harmful metals from abandoned mines, to reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment pollution from agriculture in the water environment by at least 40%, and to reduce phosphorus loadings from treated waste water by 80%. We also substantially increased the monitoring of water quality. When Labour left power in 2010, only 7% of storm overflows were being monitored; today, that figure stands at 100%. It is thanks to that progress that we now understand the scale of the problem.

In terms of their ecological health, only 15% of our rivers enjoy “good” status. That is not good enough. There are various reasons for pollution, including sewage treatment works, waste water, storm overflows, agricultural pollution, and urban and transport run-off. Invasive species are also threatening native animals. Between 1960 and 2019, the number of non-native freshwater species more than doubled, from 21 to 46. I invite the Minister to comment in her response on what work the Government are doing to support the restoration of wetland or freshwater species, which have experienced a decline. Despite their promises to fix the water system, the Government’s recent water White Paper was surprisingly slim. That is disappointing, given the detailed and thorough examination of the sector by Sir Jon Cunliffe’s independent review.

The Government have said that their transition plan will be published this year. When she responds, can the Minister guarantee that it will actually be published this year, and that it will be published when Parliament is sitting, not on the last day before a substantial recess—or, in fact, during a recess? Will she also acknowledge that, for all her Government’s talk about improving water quality, the Water (Special Measures) Act, which they passed last year, consisted of regulations already announced by the previous Conservative Government that they repackaged as a statute.

Tom Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Based on the start of his speech, he is clearly a dedicated environmentalist and conservationist. He represents Bridgwater, which is covered by Wessex Water, whose former CEO, Colin Skellett, got £12.6 million in pay and bonuses across a decade, with those bonuses totalling £3.4 million. Over a decade of Conservative rule, executives of the nine largest English and Welsh water and sewage companies got £112 million in pay and bonuses. If the Conservatives provided regulations, why did they let water bosses line their own pockets and allow them to pump out filth?

Sir Ashley Fox: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I do not think it is for the Government to regulate the salaries of the private sector. It was the Conservative Government that introduced the necessary regulations that enabled those water companies that were failing to be prevented from paying dividends and bonuses. He might argue that we came to that a bit late, and I might agree with him. However, he should acknowledge that we were the ones who took that action, and it is those regulations that form the basis of the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025.

I want to take this opportunity to ask the Minister about our canals. Members may have seen the recent incident involving the collapse of a canal embankment in Shropshire. Two narrowboats were left at the bottom of a trench in the canal bed, with a third left hanging over the edge. Many other boats were left grounded. I understand that the cause of the breach is still being investigated, but what assessment has the Minister made of the age and structure of the UK’s canal network, and the impact that have on the natural environment? Is she satisfied that the current funding is adequate?

To conclude, Britain’s rivers and waterways are an integral part of our environment. It is important that we improve their quality, and we will scrutinise the Government to ensure that they keep the promises they made at the election.

4.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure, Ms Butler, to serve under your chairwomanship in Westminster Hall for the first time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for securing this debate and for all the passion, care and interest that he has consistently shown in this issue. I share his excitement about the wild beaver release. I was quite jealous that my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), the Minister for nature, got to be there at the beaver release and I could not—I could not wangle an invite—but it was an incredible moment to see and truly exciting.

I agree with so much of what my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset said about how protecting and restoring our river habitats is one of the most urgent environmental challenges we face. I loved the imagery given by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) about seeing rivers as the lifeblood and living veins of our country. That is a wonderful, poetic way of explaining why they matter so much. I completely agree that they are not drains; they are places that are full of nature and full of life—but I would say that, of course, living near the River Humber. I know how important rivers are.

However, communities see the problems that rivers face every day, through reduced water quality, declining biodiversity and rivers that are no longer the thriving ecosystems that they should be. Rivers are under pressure from multiple sources, as has been mentioned, including business activity, agriculture, waste water treatment, urban development, recreation, transport and, of course, the growing impacts of climate change, which have quite rightly been mentioned. These combined pressures have directly contributed to declining water quality and the loss of freshwater biodiversity across many catchments.

That is why we are committed to delivering the most ambitious programme of water reform in decades, including by strengthening regulation, which will definitely be done. Indeed, I can assure the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), the Opposition spokesman, that he will definitely see the transition plan, not just this year but, I can even say, early this year.

In addition to strengthening regulation, we will improve oversight of the water system and ensure action across every source of pollution. That is all set out in the White Paper, which was published earlier this month. As has been mentioned, among key measures, we are

establishing a single empowered regulator for the entire water industry, backed by a chief engineer—it is astounding that the water industry did not have a chief engineer before, but it has one now—to drive long-term planning, improve performance and, importantly, prevent problems before they occur.

We have also committed to delivering an enhanced, better, joined-up regional water planning function, to help to identify lower-cost and high-impact solutions to improve water quality and supply, considering opportunities across the sectors. It was really interesting that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West talked about catchment measures, looking at the entire river basin, and looking at how it is all interconnected. That is exactly my vision for the regional water planning function: to look at all the different impacts on that water body.

I could not agree more about how important nature-based solutions are and what they can deliver. We have already had a change-around in how we address flooding, through the change in the flood funding formula—I would really like us to embrace that—but we have to be honest: if we are embracing nature-based solutions, we are also embracing an element of risk. They do not carry the same certainty as adding chemicals to something, which makes it possible to predict a certain outcome. Nature is not like that, but nature is powerful, and I want to see it used more.

It was really interesting to listen to so many Members talk about the way that rivers have been engineered. I visited a beautiful chalk stream not too far from where I live, to see how it was done. These rivers were straightened, as has been said, and this is our industrial heritage. Many were straightened to power the mills that ground corn, or for navigation, and that is why they wanted to create straight channels. Let me say to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) that I love the word “rewiggling”—it is a great word. When we look at where we can rewiggle them, the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) was right that they can hold more water when they are rewiggled. They can literally create more space and protect more communities.

On that point, I thank all the emergency services and everybody who has been involved in the response to Storm Chandra. My sympathy and support goes out to everyone who has been impacted. The latest update that I have had from the team is that the overall flood risk remains at “medium”. That means that rivers impact is probable in parts of south-west England today. I really hope that does not result in properties being flooded, although I accept that the impact on the farming community has already been huge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) always makes me smile. I love the fact that he is constantly championing his constituency and wants to protect and look after the people there who have faced such awful flooding, and he is quite right to call out poor behaviour wherever he sees it. I liked hearing about all the different schools. I love an eco-council group—they are just fantastic. Any Member who ever feels slightly jaded by politics—which, of course, would never, ever happen—should go and spend time with primary children. They will come away feeling so uplifted, because primary children are so passionate and they care so greatly, so good on all of them. I ask my hon. Friend to pass on my congratulations; I hope that they continue to challenge us, as we take all our work forward.

As we have mentioned, we are also accelerating nature-based solutions, looking at where we can restore wetlands, reconnect floodplains and improve river corridors—that came up a lot, and quite rightly so: how do we make river corridors to create healthier, more resilient catchments? That work is happening alongside the reform of regulatory powers, cracking down on poor performance, improving transparency and ensuring that the polluter pays.

For the first time, our river systems will be managed in a fully integrated way, ensuring that every sector, including agriculture, plays its part in restoring the health of our waterways—I also welcome the hon. Member for Bridgwater to his place. That work builds on some of the work we have done through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. Our revised environmental improvement plan has been mentioned, and that has ambitious Environment Act biodiversity targets, including to

“restore or create more than 500,000 hectares...of wildlife-rich habitat outside protected sites by 2042”.

Creating and restoring river habitats and wetlands will be vital to achieving that.

I really enjoyed the launch of Making Space for Water, which I thought was a fantastic event. There was so much passion and willingness to collaborate in that room. Making Space for Water calls for incentives for land managers to help to create nature-friendly river corridors through the ELM scheme, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West mentioned—I will get him a response from the Minister for farming on some of the more specific details.

Through those schemes, we include specific actions in the sustainable farming initiative, which pays farmers for establishing and managing buffer strips beside watercourses. We also agree with Making Space for Water that it is important to reconnect rivers to floodplains, restoring natural processes and enhancing biodiversity. There are two pilot rounds in the landscape recovery scheme that we are looking at, and we have provided 56 projects with development grants to support farmers, landowners and environmental organisations in developing strategies for long-term nature recovery. Collectively, these projects aim to restore 600 km of rivers, helping to reconnect rivers to their floodplains.

The hon. Member for North Herefordshire speaks with passion and knowledge about agriculture pollution. She is quite right that it is one of the most significant contributors to pollution in our rivers, affecting over 40% of our water bodies. Agriculture pollution, including nitrogen, nutrients and soil or sediment run-off, has a profound impact on the health of freshwater environments and the biodiversity that depends on them. Under the Environment Act, we have set a clear long-term target to reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment from agriculture entering the water environment by 40% by 2038.

There are various means by which we want to achieve that. We committed in the White Paper to simplifying and improving the regulatory framework for agriculture, developing a single robust, England-wide regulation and, where necessary, strengthening standards. We are doubling funding for the Environment Agency’s farm inspection and enforcement team, enabling at least 6,000 inspections a year by 2029, and we are strengthening local advice through our catchment-sensitive farming, as well as through the new £30 million farmer collaboration fund, which we announced earlier this month at the Oxford farming conference.

[Emma Hardy]

Just this week—in fact, just yesterday; I am losing track of which day is which—I held a roundtable with farming representatives, not just the NFU but people from different farming sectors, alongside environmental organisations and water company representatives, to talk about the problem of agricultural pollution. The reason I wanted everyone in the same room is not just that I wanted everyone to hear the message I was giving, but that I wanted everybody to hear from everybody else: the water companies could hear from the environmentalists and the farmers; the farmers could hear from the environmentalists; and the environmentalists could hear from the farmers. Everyone could gain an understanding of one another's points of view and how we are going to work on this together.

During that meeting, I announced that we had launched the consultation on reform of how sewage sludge is regulated in agriculture. The consultation document, which went live this week, looks at the option of an environmental permitting regime, as recommended by the Independent Water Commission. That group of people has been working together on the issue of agriculture pollution. We brought together different stakeholders, and there was much consensus and much willingness to tackle the issue. It is far better that we try to do something collectively; farmers, environmentalists and water companies working together is the best way to tackle this. That work continues.

Dr Chowns: I thank the Minister very much for the update, and I agree that working together is important. I have written to the Minister to request a meeting between her, me and other MPs across the parties—Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem—in the Wye catchment. In that spirit of working together, will she commit to having that meeting soon?

Emma Hardy: I have seen the hon. Lady's letter. I will get told off by officials for saying this, but I am basically looking at whether I can come back to the Wye and do something there with everybody. If not, we can do something in Parliament. I went to the Wye last year, and we announced our £1 million research fund to look at what is happening in the Wye. It would be quite nice to go back and see what has been happening. It is on my radar, and I will get her a proper answer in writing.

As Making Space for Water highlights, it is crucial to connect river habitats at the catchment scale. I emphasise the importance of catchment partnerships to improving water quality and restoring natural processes. The partnerships are well established and effective in co-ordinating local collaboration and delivering projects with multiple benefits. They include the Dorset Catchment Partnerships, which is leading work on the River Wey and other Dorset rivers to improve water quality, reduce run-off and restore natural flows.

This is why, earlier this month, we announced that we are investing £29 million from water company fines into local projects that clean up our environment, including doubling our funding for catchment partnerships, providing them with an extra £1.7 million per year over the next two years. As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) said, it is essential that we support and pay tribute to the growing number of grassroots organisations and the work they do to

protect our natural environment. Doubling funding for catchment partnerships should help them to continue to do that work.

That is part of the Government's commitment to giving communities greater influence over water environment planning and decision making. Fundamentally, communities know their water areas the best. Through our increased funding, we expect to support more than 100 projects that will improve 450 km of rivers, restore 650 acres of natural habitats and plant 100,000 new trees. The additional funding is expected to attract at least a further £11 million from private sector investment, resulting in even greater benefit for local communities in all hon. Members' constituencies.

Restoring chalk streams—another of my favourites—is a core ambition of our water reforms. We are home to 85% of the world's chalk streams. As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead, said, we are one of the only places that has so many of them. They are home to some of our rarest, and keystone, species, such as the Atlantic salmon. As the Making Space for Water campaign rightly highlights, protecting keystone species is key to healthy rivers and streams. I could say so much more, but I am conscious that I have been talking for 14 minutes, so I will move on.

Chris Hinchliff: I am afraid the Minister has slightly walked into this. Previously in this Chamber, I extended an invitation to her to come and visit RevIvel in my constituency. That is a campaign to restore the Ivel chalk stream. It has a pilot project looking at taking the Chalk Streams First approach, which would potentially restore that aquifer, and not just help the Ivel but see the return of chalk streams that have completely ceased to flow. It would be really exciting to talk to my hon. Friend about that and some of the challenges that people are experiencing with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs water restoration fund. I just put that back on her agenda.

Emma Hardy: I did walk into that, didn't I? I thank my hon. Friend. If he wants to send that through to me, I will of course take a serious look at it. I am very keen to be getting out and about when it is a bit less wet—but rain should be what I am used to.

Restoring the health of our rivers is fundamental to safeguarding nature, supporting resilient communities and securing our water environment for generations to come. The Labour Government are committed to delivering the most comprehensive programme of reform ever undertaken. It involves strengthening regulation, boosting enforcement, investing in innovation, supporting local partnerships and empowering farmers, land managers and water companies to play their part. From national action on agricultural pollution and chalk stream protections, to ambitious local projects in South Dorset, we are driving real, long-term improvements. Together, those measures demonstrate our unwavering commitment to cleaner water, thriving habitats and a healthier natural environment across England.

4.22 pm

Lloyd Hatton: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their thoughtful and constructive contributions in today's debate, and particularly the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns) for outlining eloquently the really quite damaging and concerning impact of

agricultural run-off. That issue does not get the spotlight that it needs. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), who sadly cannot be with us at the moment, for highlighting the urgent need to pass on to the next generation healthier rivers and cleaner water than that which we have inherited, and for calling time on some of the severe shortcomings of Wessex Water. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for emphasising the need to protect our riverways with essential collaboration between Government, regulatory bodies, farmers, landowners and environmentalists. I really welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), who made a doughty and strong argument in defence of our unique chalk streams. That is our unique environmental inheritance in this country. We must ensure that we protect it.

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), for vividly illustrating the sorry track record of so many of the big water companies, including South West Water. Perhaps rather interestingly, I enjoyed some of the political gymnastics on display today from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox). It was some light relief on a Thursday afternoon. In all seriousness, I think it is really important that we work on a cross-party basis in realising that the culture

around bonuses—not pay, bonuses—for water bosses got totally out of control over a number of years. This Government have taken some important steps to tackle that, but there is definitely work to do to be more effective and I hope there is cross-party support for that.

Finally, I thank the Minister responsible for water for her comments. There was plenty there to welcome, including a reaffirmation of the Government's commitment to engaging with the Making Space for Water campaign, and a pledge to continue the work with farmers and landowners to have a truly joined-up approach to tackling agricultural run-off. I welcome the commitment to ensuring that polluters always pay for the projects that go so far in cleaning up our rivers and streams. I was equally happy to hear a defence of our chalk streams and their revival. Success here is surely critical to restoring nature and boosting biodiversity in our chalk streams across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of protecting and restoring river habitats.

4.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 29 January 2026

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Capacity Market Units: Consultation on Location Changes

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I am tabling this statement to inform members of the publication of a consultation response relating to the capacity market titled “Government response to consultation on proposal regarding locational changes of capacity market units”. It sets out the Government’s intention to amend the rules that allows for notification of a change of address in the CM to prevent new build capacity market units and DSR CMUs from changing address between prequalification and delivery. This change will apply to all future CM agreements starting from prequalification 2026.

The Government recognise that the ability to change components is necessary for DSR CMUs. It is worth noting that only five change of address requests have been made by DSR units under the rule being changed through this consultation, and the rules will still have options for DSR CMUs to change component addresses after these changes have been made. Unproven DSR can notify component addresses ahead of the delivery year through rule 8.3.3a and proven DSR can reallocate components within the delivery year under rule 8.3.4.

Since its introduction in 2014, the CM has secured reliable capacity for when there is greater demand for electricity in Great Britain. This capacity is acquired through competitive annual auctions held four years and one year ahead of their respective delivery years. The Government regularly amend the framework underpinning the capacity market before auction cycles to ensure it is fit for purpose, cost-effective and meets broader strategic objectives such as clean power by 2030.

The Government intend to introduce these changes for the 2027 auctions coming into force for prequalification in summer of 2026. This will give participants clarity and certainty ahead of their entrance into prequalification and allow them to adapt to the changes the Government have made.

[HCWS1288]

JUSTICE

Prison Capacity: Annual Statement

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): Today, I am publishing the second annual statement on prison capacity. This marks the second annual statement delivering the Government commitment to transparency and accountability in the criminal justice system.

This annual statement sets out updated prison population projections and supply forecasts. It shows that, when the impact of sentencing reforms is factored in, supply is expected to keep pace with demand in the central scenario. This is a significant step forward, but there is no single quick fix. The prison estate remains under

pressure, and we will continue to take bold action to protect the public and restore confidence in the criminal justice system.

This Government inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse. At one point in 2024, fewer than 100 places remained in the adult male estate. Had prisons overflowed, courts would have been forced to suspend trials, the police to halt arrests and public safety put at risk. That was the legacy of years of neglect, during which only 500 net places were added to the estate in over 14 years.

That is why we acted decisively. In December 2024, we published the 10-year prison capacity strategy, setting out plans for the largest expansion of the prison estate since the Victorian era. We committed up to £7 billion between 2024 to 2025 and 2029 to 2030 to deliver 14,000 new prison places by 2031. This year’s statement shows the significant progress we have made. We have already delivered over 2,900 places and around 5,000 more are under construction, meaning we are on track to meet our target.

However, prison building alone is not enough. Without further action, the prison population is projected to rise by an average of 3,000 annually, outpacing supply even with our build programme.

That is why we launched the independent sentencing review and will deliver reforms through the Sentencing Act 2026. These reforms—including a presumption to suspend short custodial sentences, the extension of suspended sentence orders, an earned progression model, tougher community-based sentences, changes to recall and remand, and earlier removal of foreign national offenders—are expected to reduce the prison population by around 7,500 places by 2028, while keeping the public safe and improving outcomes for victims.

The Probation Service is central to the safe and effective operation of the criminal justice system, to the delivery of the Sentencing Act 2026 and managing demand on the prison estate. The statement therefore outlines key information of probation capacity, including caseloads and workforce. It also sets out progress to date and the steps being taken to strengthen probation capacity over the coming years. This includes investment of up to £700 million in probation and community services by 2028 to 2029, continued recruitment, and ongoing digital transformation to free up capacity and improve performance.

The new Sentencing Act 2026 places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament and publish an annual report on prison capacity. This fulfils a promise made in the previous annual statement to commit to making publication a statutory requirement, to ensure future decisions on prison demand and supply are evidence based and transparent. These steps mark a turning point: increasing capacity, strengthening accountability, and building a safer, fairer system for the long term.

[HCWS1291]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Lanarkshire AI Growth Zone and AI Opportunities Action Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): Today I am updating the House on a number of developments:

the designation of Lanarkshire as the UK's newest AI growth zone, the establishment of the AI and the Future of Work programme, the expansion of the AI upskilling programme, and progress on delivery of the "AI Opportunities Action Plan", one year on from its publication.

Lanarkshire AI growth zone

The Government are today designating Lanarkshire as the latest AI growth zone, marking a major step in our modern industrial strategy and strengthening Scotland's position in the UK's growing AI economy.

The Lanarkshire site will be delivered by UK company DataVita, in partnership with CoreWeave. It will support more than 3,400 jobs over the coming years and will crowd in £8.2 billion in private investment, with a further £540 million committed over 15 years to support the local community. This will fund skills and training packages, after school coding and digital clubs, and support for local charities and food banks.

The 9,000 acre site will be one of the most advanced AI campuses in the world, drawing on on site renewable energy to power up to 500MW of compute and exploring how excess heat generated by data centre cooling could support nearby facilities such as University Hospital Monklands, Scotland's first fully digital and net zero hospital.

Lanarkshire becomes the fifth AI growth zone announced since the launch of the action plan, joining Oxfordshire, north Wales, south Wales and the north-east. AI growth zones are expected to support up to 15,000 jobs and at least £28 billion in private investment.

Establishment of the AI and the Future of Work programme and expansion of the AI upskilling programme

The Government are establishing a comprehensive AI and the Future of Work programme to ensure the UK is prepared to benefit from and adapt to the profound changes AI will bring to jobs, workers and the labour market. This includes launching a new cross Government AI and the Future of Work Unit and appointing an independent expert panel drawn from industry, academia, civil society and trade unions to guide this work.

Building on last year's commitment to provide free AI training for all workers, the Government are expanding their national upskilling programme—delivered with major industry and now public sector partners—to equip 10 million workers with AI skills by 2030, up from the original 7.5 million ambition.

This forms part of a wider effort to ensure that AI-driven transformation delivers opportunities, supports economic growth, and helps workers and communities benefit from technological change.

AI opportunities action plan—delivery update

AI growth zones were a core commitment of the AI opportunities action plan, which the Government published a year ago to ensure the UK leads in shaping the AI revolution.

One year on, we have moved decisively from ambition to delivery. We have now met 38 of the action plan's 50 commitments, and today we are publishing our one-year-on update. Per the action plan, we have focused on three goals: laying the foundations to enable AI, changing lives for the better, and securing our future.

Laying the foundations.

We have designated five AI growth zones, accelerating data centre build out. We have expanded national compute capacity, with Isambard AI switched on in Bristol and committed to procure to increase the supercomputer capacity at the University of Cambridge—already home to the DAWN supercomputer—sixfold by spring 2026. We have also begun the biggest AI skills drive in a generation: over 1 million AI training courses have already been delivered in just the last six months.

Changing Lives.

AI is already delivering practical benefits for citizens. AI-assisted diagnostics are supporting one third of NHS chest X-rays, improving detection and treatment times. We have announced trials of AI tutoring tools to support learning and reduce teacher workload.

Securing our Future.

UK AI companies raised more than £6 billion last year, and there are now over 185 UK tech unicorns valued at over \$1 billion. The Government have now established the Sovereign AI Unit, backed by up to £500 million, to invest in UK AI companies and support them to become world-leading in critical parts of the AI value chain.

There is much more to do to seize the opportunities of AI. Over the coming year we will continue to bring AI growth zones from designation to delivery, operationalising the Sovereign AI Unit—backed by up to £500 million in funding—and equip millions of workers with the skills they need for the AI age.

But our achievements over the last year show what is possible when ambition meets delivery. If we sustain this pace, Britain will continue not just adapt to technological change, but to shape it in the public interest.

[HCWS1289]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme Levy 2025-26

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): The Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (Levy) Regulations 2014 require active employers' liability insurers to pay an annual levy, based on their relative market share, for the purpose of meeting the costs of the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme. This is in line with the insurance industry's commitment to fund a scheme of last resort for persons diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma who have been unable to trace their employer or their employer's insurer.

Today I can announce that the total amount of the levy to be charged for 2025-26, the 12th year of the DMPS, is £24 million. The amount will be payable by active insurers by the end of March 2026.

Individual active insurers will be notified in writing of their share of the levy, together with how the amount was calculated and the payment arrangements. Insurers should be aware that it is a legal requirement to pay the levy within the set timescales.

I am pleased that the DMPS has seen 11 successful years of operation, assisting many hundreds of people who have been diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma. The 11th annual report for the scheme, along with the annual statistics were published on 27 November 2025

and is available on gov.uk. I hope that Members of both Houses will welcome this announcement and give the DMPS their continued support.

[HCWS1287]

Jobs Guarantee

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden):

Every young person deserves a fair chance to succeed. When given the right support and opportunities, they will grasp them. But for too long young people have not had access to the opportunities and support they deserve. Nearly a million young people are not in education, employment or training, locking them out of meaningful work, denying employers the workforce of the future and holding back economic growth.

At autumn Budget 2025, we announced an £820 million funding package to overhaul support and give a generation of young people a bright future through the youth guarantee. This investment will break down barriers to opportunity and ensure every young person can access the support they need to earn or learn.

Today I am pleased to announce the launch of the jobs guarantee grant application window for phase one, a central element of the expanded youth guarantee.

The jobs guarantee will provide every eligible 18 to 21-year-old who has been claiming universal credit and looking for work for 18 months a guaranteed, fully subsidised six-month paid job. This will include wraparound employability and in-work support to help participants succeed in their roles. The aim is to support young people in taking that crucial first step into sustained

employment. Once fully rolled out, the programme is expected to support around 55,000 young people over the next three years, contributing to the Government long-term ambition to increase employment and reduce long-term youth unemployment.

We know that young people need support quickly and that is why we will begin the delivery of phase one from spring 2026 with over 1,000 job starts across six areas with some of the highest need: Birmingham & Solihull, East Midlands, Greater Manchester, Hertfordshire & Essex, Central & East Scotland, South-west & South-east Wales. This will be followed by a national roll-out of the jobs guarantee across Great Britain, later in 2026.

The application process for this stage of the jobs guarantee grant will be open from today until 28 February. Details can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobs-guarantee>

The Department for Work and Pensions will award grants to selected delivery organisations in the six defined geographic areas. Successful applicants will administer the grant on behalf of DWP, bringing their experience of the local labour market to source suitable jobs and match young people to roles. They will also use their expertise to provide ongoing support to young people while they are on the scheme.

I would also like to thank the more than 60 employers who have already committed to providing jobs for participants of the scheme, including E.ON, JD Sports, Tesco and TUI. Once delivery partners are in place, they will work with employers to help secure these employment opportunities, with support from DWP for those large employers with a national footprint.

[HCWS1290]

Petition

Thursday 29 January 2026

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Quality on the River Yare

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Norfolk,

Declares that the water quality on the River Yare is deeply concerning, putting wildlife and people at risk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to clean up British waterways, call upon Anglian Water to uphold the highest possible water quality levels, and for the Environment Agency to provide residents with the information they need so they can enjoy the River Yare all year round.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ben Goldsborough, *Official Report*, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 1020.]

[P003056]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

We want to assure you that cleaning up our rivers, lakes and seas is a top Government priority. The unacceptable destruction of our waterways should never have happened. We now have record levels of illegal sewage dumping in our rivers, lakes and seas. This is completely unacceptable.

Within days of coming to office, we ringfenced money earmarked for investment in water infrastructure, so it cannot be diverted for bonuses or dividends. Where this money is not spent, it will be returned to customers.

Our landmark Water (Special Measures) Act became law in February. This gives stronger powers to the water industry regulators, so they can better hold water companies to account. It gives Ofwat new powers to ban unfair bonuses when water company executives fail to meet high standards. It introduces stricter penalties, including imprisonment, where water company employees obstruct investigations by environmental regulators, and it enables the regulator to impose automatic and severe fines for wrongdoing.

We have expanded powers so the environmental regulators can recover costs for a wider range of enforcement, and introduced mandatory monitoring of emergency overflows. Water companies must now publish annual pollution incident reduction plans and implementation reports to outline progress.

But we went even further by announcing the independent commission. Sir Jon Cunliffe is currently undertaking the biggest review of the water sector since privatisation to ensure we can attract the major investment needed to clean up our waterways and boost water supplies. The commission concluded its eight-week public call for evidence on 23 April, receiving over 50,000 responses. The commission plans to publish an interim report in the coming weeks, focused on five key themes:

1. strategic direction, 2. legislative framework, 3. regulatory reform, 4. company structures, ownership, governance and management and 5. infrastructure and asset health. The commission is due to provide its final report to Government in the summer.

In addition to the Government’s measures, Ofwat has announced £104 billion of private sector investment in the water sector over the next five years. This will build and upgrade water infrastructure in every region of the country, cutting sewage spills, improving water quality and giving us a reliable future water supply. It will create tens of thousands of jobs around the country, help us build 1.5 million homes, support major infrastructure projects and power new industries. This is regional economic growth in action—the cornerstone of our plan for change.

The current status of water quality in the River Yare, e.g. latest monitoring data or classification.

The table below summarises the water quality monitoring that is being done on the River Yare for the monitoring year April 2025 to March 2026.

All the Environment Agency’s monitoring data is available on the online water quality archive, which can be accessed here:

<https://engageenvironmentagency.uk/engagementhq.com/data-publications-water>

To search for an individual site, add the “point code” into the “Sampling point name or ID” field but prefix with AN—i.e. YAR003 becomes AN-YAR003.

Summary of Environment Agency water quality (chemistry) monitoring in the River Yare April 2025 to March 2026

				Monitoring reason and monitoring summary			
Point code	Point name	NGR	Frequency	Agency Chemical strategy monitoring	Locally commissioned issues monitoring	Oslo Paris convention monitoring	Monitoring for water company periodic reviews
				PBT substances, i.e. metals, pesticides, solvents, PFOS etc	Nutrients (nitrogen and phosphate), phys chem (temperature, pH, conductivity, dissolved oxygen)	Phys chem, nutrients, metals, PCBs	Nutrients (nitrogen and phosphate), phys chem (temperature, pH, conductivity, dissolved oxygen)
YAR003	Blackwater River US Shipdham	TF94822OG562	Monthly (12 times/year)				X
YAR110	R.Yare Earlham bridge	TGI890008200	Monthly (12 times/year)			X	X

Summary of Environment Agency water quality (chemistry) monitoring in the River Yare April 2025 to March 2026

Point code	Point name	NGR	Frequency	Monitoring reason and monitoring summary			
				Agency Chemical strategy monitoring	Locally commissioned issues monitoring	Oslo Paris convention monitoring	Monitoring for water company periodic reviews
				PBT substances, i.e. metals, pesticides, solvents, PFOS etc	Nutrients (nitrogen and phosphate), phys chem (temperature, pH, conductivity, dissolved oxygen)	Phys chem, nutrients, metals, PCBs	Nutrients (nitrogen and phosphate), phys chem (temperature, pH, conductivity, dissolved oxygen)
YAR120	R.Yare Cringleford old bridge	TG1998505957	Monthly (12 times/year)		X		
YAR180	R.Yare Trowse Mill	TG2430006800	Monthly (12 times/year)		X		
YAR200	R.Yare Bramerton woods end	TG2910006200	Monthly (12 times/year)		X		
YAR230	R.Yare Buckenham Ferry	TG3500004400	Monthly (12 times/year)	X		X	X
YAR230	R.Yare Buckenham Ferry	TG3500004400	Quarterly (4 times/year)	X	X		

River Yare WFD classification

The latest classification information available is the 2022 classification, which can be viewed on the catchment data explorer here:

<https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning/OperationalCatchment/3553>

An overview of any known sources of pollution.

See below.

A summary of recent or ongoing interventions to improve water quality in the River Yare. In addition, could you please confirm if and how this type of information is shared with local residents.

There are numerous pressures on the River Yare and potential sources of pollution along its length. The Environment Agency is involved in many interventions and actions to improve the river, ranging from natural flood management to farm visits to regulatory inspections of water company assets. The Environment Agency would be happy to provide further details of these in relation to any specific area. Please contact Graham Verrier, the Environment Agency's East Anglia area director, if you would like further information:

Areamanagercorrespondence.eastanglia@environment-agency.gov.uk

Details of the catchment and the pressures on the various stretches or waterbodies can be viewed here:

<https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning/OperationalCatchment/3553>

The Environment Agency carries out monitoring for water quality, ecology and fisheries at various points along the river. Sampling takes place according to environmental need within a co-ordinated monitoring programme, with some sites being sampled regularly for long-term monitoring programmes, and others determined by environmental risk. The data from these is available here:

<https://engageenvironmentagency.uk/engagementthq.com/data-publications-water>

In addition, locations that are designated as bathing waters are specifically monitored between May and September

for microbiological parameters to indicate the site's suitability as bathing water. There are no designated bathing waters in this location.

The Environment Agency is significantly increasing its regulation of water companies nationally, and at a local level, it has established four new water industry compliance teams, and one water industry enforcement team focusing on Anglian Water. The Environment Agency has completed over 730 compliance inspections of Anglian Water's wastewater assets for the year up to 31 March 2025, which is more than in the previous four years combined. For this year, 2025-26, the Environment Agency intends to double this number again to over 1,600. In the River Yare catchment, the Environment Agency has completed 30 compliance inspections in the last 12 months.

The Environment Agency has a water environment improvement fund and chalk partnership fund, which it can use to fund projects where it works in partnership to improve the water environment. See appendix 1 below for details of such projects.

Appendix 1: Supplemental information

We are currently working on the following projects in the Yare catchment with partners:

Yare Catchment Ambition:

Project summary:

Environmentally minded landowners in the Yare catchment are keen to work with Norfolk Rivers Trust and the Environment Agency to improve the river and habitats on their land. NRT have been working in 2024-25 to scope out sites for potential river restoration in the Yare catchment, undertake topographic surveys and prepare concept designs. This project aims make a difference at the catchment scale, ensuring the improvements are bigger, better and more joined up. In 2025-26 we will undertake detailed design and potentially implement restoration at one frontrunner site, if additional funding is secured.

Project Benefits:

The benefits are:

Restoring priority chalk stream habitat to benefit the characteristic aquatic plants and invertebrates, e.g. creating areas with different flow types and areas for marginal plants.

Creation of ponds and scrapes, as part of some stretches of river restoration. Connection to the river will mean that they are an ideal habitat for fish fry.

Improving connection between the river and its floodplain, particularly in areas that have previously been extensively modified, will help sediments to settle out and improve water quality.

Providing an element of natural flood management and alleviating high/low flow pressures.

*River Tas: Chalky Water:**Project summary:*

The River Tas is a tributary of the Yare, in Norfolk. Both are considered to be chalk streams due to the amount of baseflow from the chalk aquifer. However, they flow over mixed geology. The Tas catchment contains some rare examples of lowland valley fen and other priority habitats, as well as a small population of native crayfish.

Organisations working in the River Tas catchment have come together to develop a common vision and fund a strategy for the catchment that will identify opportunities for river restoration, natural flood management, restoring biodiversity and landscape connectivity.

One of the key drivers is that there are concerns around water-dependant habitats drying out, and we do not have an up-to-date understanding of the hydrology of these sites; the last surveys were done in the 1970s. It is thought that over-deepened watercourses and drainage ditches are a key pressure on this group of four fens within South Norfolk. All four valley fens are within the Tas catchment and have peat-based soils with interesting fauna and flora. They are all designated as special sites of scientific interest, and Flordon Common is a special area of conservation.

Also, properties and land were seriously affected by flooding in December 2020, with about 20 properties flooded. Engagement with landowners and communities in the area has helped to find landowners willing to

undertake natural flood management interventions to hold water back and reduce the probability of flooding in future. This could complement the water resources pressures, if superficial drainage in and around the protected sites could be reduced.

We will also work to restore habitats for pollinators and create ponds and hedgerows to connect up and create stepping stones for priority habitats in the catchment.

Project Benefits:

The funding would help the partners and landowners to work together more collaboratively and achieve more for the environment—bigger, better, more joined up. The key benefits are improved hydrology—more flow for the chalk stream, higher water table in fens—reduced flood risk to properties, restored chalk stream river habitat, improved water quality and landscape connectivity for biodiversity.

We also recently completed this project:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/river-yare-receives-282000-for-creation-of-floodplain-wetlands>

*Yare Farming and Floodplains**Project background:*

The project works directly with landowners to enable them to make improvements to the hydromorphology of the floodplains to hold water on the floodplain and create biodiversity benefits.

Project benefits:

The project will reduce drainage by controlling the water level in ditches, making the floodplain wetter. This will recreate linear open water features and allow a transition from wet to drier habitats, boosting biodiversity and niches for different species. It will create a better connection between the river and floodplain. It will hold and store water locally, then slowly release it supporting summer flows. The catchments we are working in are all chalk streams. Restoring a more natural function in the headwaters will have the biggest benefits for flow in the chalk streams. Improving floodplain connectivity will benefit natural processes at the site and local river reaches, buffering river flows—high and low—increasing infiltration and groundwater recharge, and allowing silt and sand to settle out during high flows.

Written Corrections

Thursday 29 January 2026

Ministerial Corrections

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill

The following extract is from Second Reading of the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill on 6 January 2026.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right to mention the impact on supply chains. In the west midlands, we recently had the cyber-attack on Jaguar Land Rover. That had a significant impact not just on that company, but on the supply chain, which has its roots right through the west midlands. That essential part of our economy was brought to a grinding halt by a cyber-attack. Will he confirm that this Bill will help prevent such instances from happening in the future?

Ian Murray:... I should say to my hon. Friend, and I will come to it later, that Jaguar Land Rover and other private organisations are not in the scope of this Bill. [Official Report, 6 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 174.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Digital Government and Data, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray):

Ian Murray:... I should say to my hon. Friend, and I will come to it later, that Jaguar Land Rover and **certain other** private organisations are not in the scope of this Bill.

The following extract is from the Second Reading debate on the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill on 6 January 2026.

Kanishka Narayan: With the exception of data centres, reportable incidents that affect operators of essential services would need to have affected the operation of significant network and information systems right across the entity, and to have a significant national security impact. [Official Report, 6 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 227.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan):

Kanishka Narayan: With the exception of data centres, reportable incidents that affect operators of essential services would need to have affected the **operation of network and information systems**, and to have a **significant impact**.

Other Correction

GEORGE FREEMAN

Flooding

The following extract is from the debate on flooding on 28 January 2026.

George Freeman: I welcome the comprehensive spending review funding announcement of £2.6 billion for flood and coastal erosion management to protect 65,000 homes. The insurance sector tells us that 18 million homes will be at risk—one in four—over the next 10 to 15 years, and flooding is costing £66 billion a year to the economy. [Official Report, 28 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 905.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman):

George Freeman:... The insurance sector tells us that **1.8 million** homes will be at risk over the next 10 to 15 years, and flooding is costing **£6 billion** a year to the economy.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 29 January 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	1027	BUSINESS AND TRADE—continued	
Arms Export Licences: Israel	1035	Industrial Energy Costs	1027
Business Operating Costs.....	1042	Modern Industrial Strategy	1043
Economic Growth: Coastal Communities	1030	Single Worker Status.....	1041
Economic Growth: Morecambe and Lunesdale	1039	Support for Pubs: Fylde	1028
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