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28 April 2026

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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 28 April 2026

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

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

*The term "Independent" may denote—

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

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

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House of Commons

Tuesday 28 April 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Food Bank Usage: Hornsey and Friern Barnet

1. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking to help reduce the level of food bank usage by families in Hornsey and Friern Barnet constituency. [908874]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): The rise in food banks across Britain is among the most visible signs that, under the last Government, ours was a country in which growth was too low and inequality was too high. This Government are committed to ending the mass dependence on emergency food parcels. We have expanded free school meals to children in all families receiving universal credit, and we have removed the two-child limit to lift around half a million children out of poverty. Britain is now on course for the biggest reduction in child poverty of any Parliament on record, and charities such as Trussell believe that will significantly reduce demand for food banks.

Catherine West: It is indeed a very exciting development to see the bold and vital steps taken to address child poverty, but runaway rental costs are driving hunger and hardship. Building council homes is obviously the right long-term approach, and Haringey council is the second biggest builder of council homes in the whole country. Will the Treasury team now help struggling families by lifting the freeze on local housing allowance so that there is a permanent link between rents and support?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Food bank use has fallen in recent years, but it is still far too high, including in her constituency. It is part of a wider challenge that the cost of essentials places too much pressure on household finances.

The Department for Work and Pensions spends around £37 billion a year on housing support, but in the long run, the answer to high housing costs is to build more homes. That is what we are doing through the £39 billion social and affordable homes programme, but we also need to protect tenants in the here and now, and the Renters' Rights Act 2025 comes into force just next week. Among other things, it will allow tenants to appeal excessive, above-market rents.

Cost of Living: Worsley and Eccles

2. **Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help support people with the cost of living in Worsley and Eccles constituency. [908875]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government are committed to improving living standards for people across the UK. Thanks to decisions I made in the Budget, the energy price cap reduced by £117 a year, on average, in April. We have extended the cut in fuel duty twice, and introduced an anti-profiteering framework to protect working people from unfair price rises during the Iran conflict.

Michael Wheeler: I strongly welcome the steps that the Government have taken to bring down my constituents' energy bills from the start of this month. However, the effects of the war in Iran are now beginning to feed through into higher food prices. Pressures on oil and fertiliser costs are likely to intensify, and I am concerned about increases in the price of my constituents' weekly shop at a time when their budgets are already strained. Will the Chancellor outline what steps the Government have taken to protect my constituents in Worsley and Eccles from rising food prices?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully on behalf of his constituents. The response of this Government during this conflict is, first, to try to de-escalate it. This is not a war that we started, and it is not a war that we joined. Unlike the Conservatives and Reform, we are working to de-escalate, not ramp up, the conflict, and that is the best way to keep prices down. As long as the conflict persists, we will do everything in our power to be both responsive and responsible in the national interest, which is why we are keeping energy bills down and why we have provided £53 million of support for people who need heating oil.

Global Trade: Support for Businesses

3. **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support businesses to trade globally. [908876]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): This Government are backing our brilliant British businesses to trade globally, including through our new trade strategy that expands UK Export Finance's capacity to £80 billion. This Government have secured new trade deals with India, South Korea, the EU and the US to back British businesses globally, delivering improved access to key markets and protecting British jobs.

Jacob Collier: I recently joined Cosy Direct for its second King's Award presentation, this time for international trade. Cosy Direct is an award-winning business in early years education resources, exporting globally and continuing to grow. The Chancellor saw its success, and its goats, at first hand when she visited with me last year. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Pete, Amanda and all the team, and will she say what work she is doing to allow such businesses to expand and export globally?

Lucy Rigby: I warmly congratulate Pete, Amanda and the wider team—and the goats—on their success. In inviting me to do so, my hon. Friend shows that he is indeed a true champion for the businesses in his constituency. The support that this Government are giving to businesses will enable more of our fantastic British companies to export globally and to emulate Cosy Direct's success.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Integrated industrial clusters such as Saltend in my constituency provide fundamental chemicals and other inputs into defence and wider industries right across the country. Yet higher energy costs and global events mean that they are under unprecedented pressure. Will the Minister look at establishing an industrial support fund, so that rather than having an ad hoc approach, such as that seen when supporting Grangemouth, we have something strategic to ensure that we do not lose the industrial base upon which so much of this country depends?

Lucy Rigby: I believe the right hon. Member mentioned the British industrial competitiveness scheme. That is being expanded. He will also be aware of the British industry supercharger package, which provides additional price relief from April 2026 as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The Economic Secretary to the Treasury will know that our financial services industry is a shining example of our international economic might. However, overinterpretation of rules and regulations has led to banks being nervous of taking risks, and that has slowed growth in the City and holds up international trade. For example, overinterpretation of anti-money laundering rules means that foreign inward remittances can take up to two weeks to clear into a UK bank account, while poor classification of risk-rated assets potentially starves businesses of growth debt capital. Will the Economic Secretary please assure the House that this ever-unnecessary tightening of the rules will be addressed in the financial services Bill, due to be announced in the King's Speech?

Lucy Rigby: The hon. Gentleman will not expect me to pre-empt anything that may or may not be announced in the King's Speech. What I will tell him, though, as he already knows, is that this Government are backing our financial services sector to the hilt to ensure that it continues to be the world-leading success that it is.

Defence Industrial Strategy

4. **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the effectiveness of the defence industrial strategy. [908877]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Chancellor and the Defence Secretary meet regularly to discuss defence, including the defence industrial strategy. As part of those discussions, they recently met leaders from the UK financial sector to discuss how private investment can also be leveraged to accelerate defence readiness, building on the commitments made in the defence industrial strategy.

John Milne: In my constituency of Horsham, Chess Dynamics, which is part of Cohort, is a world-leading developer of counter-drone and air defence technology—exactly the capabilities that we need. Yet Chess, like much of the defence industry, has been kept on hold since last year, awaiting clarity on the defence investment plan. Without it, it cannot commission new air defence systems, leaving the next generation of Royal Navy frigates potentially exposed. It needs to know now. Will the Minister agree to meet me and Chess Dynamics to provide certainty on the investment that everyone says we need, but which simply is not happening yet?

James Murray: Investment in defence under this Government is under way—just look at the contracts. Over a thousand have been signed since the general election: I point the hon. Gentleman, and anyone else in the Chamber, to the billion-pound contract for medium helicopters in Yeovil, the half-a-billion pounds invested in state-of-the-art radar systems and the £100 million boost to support submarine-hunting aircraft. This Government are raising investment in defence to the highest sustained level since the cold war and it is at the core of ensuring that we are protecting our nation's security.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to joining the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank to make sure that we are really pushing the investment that we need to see in defence in the current world situation?

James Murray: The UK has already signed up, with Finland and the Netherlands, to the multilateral defence budget, with this Chancellor taking a lead. I know the importance to this Government of security, which is not just something that we can achieve on our own but by working with allies to ensure that we are safer in future. I will add that we on the Government Benches are committed to remaining a core part of NATO, unlike some of the Opposition parties.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Chancellor said,

"National security always comes first",

but she delayed the helicopter contract for our industrial base and we know that she is blocking the defence investment plan. Labour's former Defence Secretary and secretary general of NATO, Lord Robertson, said,

"We cannot defend Britain with an ever-expanding welfare budget."

He is right, so why is the Chancellor failing to grip the benefits bill and invest in our defence?

James Murray: Those on the Opposition Front Bench have some cheek. The hon. Gentleman is sat next to the hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride), who oversaw the biggest increase in welfare spending on record, with a £33 billion increase in welfare spending in the last year of the Conservative Government. This Government are serious about getting people back into

work, while increasing defence investment at the same time to 2.6% of GDP by next April—something the previous Government never managed.

Conflict in the Middle East: Cost of Living

5. **Z e Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the conflict in the middle east on the cost of living. [908878]

8. **Sadik Al-Hassan** (North Somerset) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help mitigate the potential impact of the conflict in the middle east on the economy. [908881]

17. **Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the conflict in the middle east on energy costs. [908891]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): We are monitoring the situation and preparing for every eventuality. The International Monetary Fund expects the UK to be the fastest growing European G7 economy cumulatively over this year and next. A rapid de-escalation of the conflict remains the best way to protect consumers from rising bills. We continue to act on the cost of living, with £117 on average off energy bills from 1 April, £53 million to help with the cost of heating oil, and freezing both rail fares and prescription charges.

Z e Franklin: I thank the Chancellor for her answer. The tensions in the middle east are pushing up energy and food prices, adding further pressure to households who are already struggling due to the cost of living. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister warned this weekend that families face "eight-plus months" of difficulty ahead. With the school holidays approaching in both the May half-term and the summer, many low-income families in my constituency of Guildford are asking how they will get through the summer. When I visited Holy Trinity school in my constituency last week, the children raised concerns too, which shows how deep the anxiety about this conflict is. What concrete support will the Government provide to protect the most vulnerable households from further cost pressures in the months ahead, especially if this conflict continues into the summer holidays?

Rachel Reeves: I welcome the hon. Lady's question. Like her, I regularly see pupils and local teachers in my constituency. As she knows, from this month we have got rid of the two-child limit in universal credit, which is lifting 450,000 children out of poverty. We are also expanding free childcare for children aged between nine months and five years, helping parents in work with the costs of balancing family life with work life. In addition, we have taken £117 off energy bills, we are freezing rail fares and prescription charges, and we are helping people—particularly those in rural areas—with the cost of heating oil.

Sadik Al-Hassan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for her efforts in what are far from ideal circumstances. Attacks on energy infrastructure and the effective closure of the strait of Hormuz are having real consequences here at home. Baker Hughes employs more than 300 people in Nailsea in my constituency of North Somerset and is an essential energy technology provider. It is at the sharp end of this crisis. Can the Chancellor confirm what support the Government are providing to exposed companies like Baker Hughes, to secure energy supplies and rebuild damaged supply chains today, and invest in the infrastructure we will need to protect British consumers tomorrow?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Baker Hughes, an important employer in his constituency, is a good example of how this conflict is affecting businesses and families here at home. As he knows, we have stepped in to defend our Gulf allies who have been attacked, unprovoked, by Iran. We are working with our allies in the Gulf, whom I speak to on a very regular basis, to ensure that we are not only defending them now but helping them to rebuild their infrastructure. Here in Britain, both the supercharger and the British industrial competitiveness scheme are helping businesses with the cost of their energy.

Jess Brown-Fuller: In my constituency, the owner of a haulage business—a vital industry that keeps our economy moving—has reported a 40% increase in the cost of diesel. It is at risk of going bust, while companies like BP are reporting record profits. Given that the impact of the conflict will be felt up to eight months after its conclusion, will the Chancellor please commit to cutting fuel duty, to keep my businesses and my residents on the road?

Rachel Reeves: Fuel duty was never lower at any point under the previous Conservative Government or, indeed, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government. We are keeping under review what happens from September, but it is important to note that in the first three months of this year, revenues from fuel duty were no higher than they were just a year ago.

With regard to the profits of energy companies, that is exactly why we extended the energy profits levy: to ensure that windfall profits could be taxed appropriately. BP and other oil and gas companies play a really important part in our energy mix, and our important British companies are representing our country in the US this week, but it is important that windfall profits are properly taxed, whether that is through the electricity generator levy or the energy profits levy.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I am grateful to the Chancellor for the work she is doing to protect us from the economic impacts of this war. One of my local farmers has been in touch about the impact on red diesel prices, which are up by around 70%, and fertiliser prices, and shared his nervousness about the affordability of going ahead and planting next year's crops. Can the Chancellor outline what more she can do to protect our farmers, our food security and our food prices in light of these global challenges?

Rachel Reeves: When we froze fuel duty and extended that freeze, that also impacted red diesel. As we keep under review what happens to fuel duty, we will do the same for red diesel. I think there are two crucial issues. The first is protecting supply, which is why de-escalating this conflict—not ramping it up, as the Tories and Reform would do—is so important, so that we can reopen the strait of Hormuz. The second is prices and

costs. That is why we have introduced the British industrial competitiveness scheme to help businesses with energy costs and the supercharger. BICS comes in from this year, and the supercharger is extended from this year, to help businesses impacted by this conflict.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Given that national debt is around 95% of GDP and debt interest costs are nearly 4% of GDP, does the Chancellor agree that it would be irresponsible to fund any cost of living support by increasing borrowing? That would further drive up borrowing costs, choke off growth and saddle future generations with totally unfair debt.

Rachel Reeves: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on running his fourth London marathon this week for a cancer charity. I know that cause is dear to his heart. He makes an important point. I understand why people are calling for immediate support, but the previous Government's untargeted support—I understand why the former Chancellor did what he did—cost more than £100 billion in total, I think, and it meant that interest rates, inflation and taxes have ended up being higher than they needed to be. We managed to reduce Government borrowing by £20 billion last year. The budget deficit is below 5% for the first time since 2019. Sticking to fiscal responsibility is not just good for the public purse; it is also good for ordinary families and businesses. I am determined that we do not go back to the high inflation, high interest rates and high taxes that would be the inevitable result if we had an untargeted response to this conflict.

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): Cost of living, cost of living, cost of living—those are the three words that my constituents in South Ribble and the small area of Chorley that I represent contact me about every single week. They do not contact me about the Westminster bubble and process. Will the Chancellor please assure me that she will stay laser-focused on delivering on the cost of living for the constituents of South Ribble and will not allow the noise and disruption from the Opposition to put her off?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for standing up for the people of South Ribble and the issues that matter to them. Since the general election, there have been six cuts in interest rates, which is the best way to help people with the cost of living, especially if they have a mortgage. Before this conflict began, unemployment was falling, the economy was growing, the deficit was coming down and interest rates had gone down six times. I will continue to focus on the cost of living, because that is the thing that matters most to all our constituents.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Australia, Italy, India and more have all slashed fuel duty in response to Trump's idiotic war in Iran. We Liberal Democrats are calling for fuel duty to be cut by 12p per litre here. Last week, the Chancellor claimed that anyone calling for a cut in fuel duty was "economically illiterate", because it would push up inflation. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the current 5p fuel duty cut has led to a 0.2% reduction in the rate of inflation. Does the Chancellor think that the OBR and all these other countries that are helping their citizens are economically illiterate, or does she accept that her Government might be in the wrong and that it is time to act?

Rachel Reeves: Last time she stood up in the Chamber, the hon. Lady said that she wanted a 10p cut in fuel duty; now it is a 12p cut. What she has failed to explain is how on earth she is going to pay for any of those policies. As a former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), has just explained, untargeted support will result in higher inflation, higher interest rates and higher taxes, which would hurt people in St Albans and around the country rather than helping them with the cost of living.

I support what the Liberal Democrats say about opposing the war in Iran—that is our policy—but they appear to be the only people on the planet who think that a war in the middle east is somehow good for the Treasury coffers. I would not be surprised if in their next manifesto they said they would commit themselves to closing the strait of Hormuz for good. It is not good economic policy, and I am afraid that that says a lot about the Liberal Democrats' policies.

Fuel Costs: Support for Motorists

6. **Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): What fiscal steps she is taking to support motorists with fuel costs. [908879]

7. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of fuel duty on the cost of living. [908880]

14. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of fuel duty on the cost of living. [908887]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): The Government have already taken action on fuel affordability at the pump. In last year's Budget they extended the 5p per litre cap for a further five months, and they have also cancelled the increase that would have otherwise taken place in line with inflation at the start of this financial year.

Dave Doogan: If you were a gardener with a Renault Trafic or a builder with a Ford Ranger in Scotland, Mr Speaker, you would be paying over £150 just to fill up at the pump in order to get to work. When Spain and Poland and Germany and France and Italy and Ireland and Australia are all intervening to help their industry and economy, our Chancellor here stands idly by and congratulates herself on the quality of her inaction. We do not want to hear from Anas Sarwar in Scotland, because he promised £300 off our energy bills and they are now £700 higher than the level that he promised in 2024. We want to hear from the Chancellor. What is she going to do about diesel specifically, and when is she going to do it, to keep the grafters of Scotland turning up for work?

Dan Tomlinson: The Scottish National party has had ample opportunity in Scotland to invest in energy, to invest in energy infrastructure and to invest in the changes that we need in our economy to bring down energy bills, and when it comes to fuel duty—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Carry on, Minister.

Dan Tomlinson: When it comes to fuel duty, it is of course worth noting that it is lower today, in cash terms, than it has been in any year since 2009.

Mr Mohindra: If the increase in fuel prices rather than the Chancellor's two disastrous Budgets is to blame for the stagnating economy, why does the Chancellor believe that raising fuel duty further in September will help to reduce the cost of living when in fact it will harm the economy more, and will deliver another direct hit to the pockets of my constituents?

Dan Tomlinson: Before the conflict in Iran started we saw inflation falling, we saw unemployment falling and we saw growth increasing by 0.5% in one month at the start of the year. That showed that our economic plan was the right plan for this country, and it is important that we stick to it rather than returning to the bad old days of the high borrowing and high interest rates that the Conservatives brought us when they had a chance to run the economy.

Wendy Morton: Labour is at war with motorists, and Reform's idea of protesting about fuel prices was revealed at their non-event yesterday—and, indeed, its members are not even here today. Only we on the Conservative Benches are standing up for our motorists and our constituents. Will the Chancellor take this opportunity to help our constituents, our businesses and our motorists, and adopt our plan to extend fuel duty relief—yes or no?

Dan Tomlinson: I agree with the right hon. Member that Reform's rabble yesterday was deeply underwhelming. As for fuel duty, the rate is currently lower than it was at any point under the last Government, or, at least, it was never lower under the last Government than it is now. In real terms, it is lower than it has been at any point since 1993.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The fuel duty freeze is of course very welcome for drivers of petrol and diesel vehicles, but this is the second time in just over four years that petrol and diesel prices have gone through the roof as a result of international oil and gas uncertainty. Is it not time that we gave as much support as possible to those who want to make the transition to electric vehicles? According to Autotrader, the average price of electric vehicles is already lower than that of petrol and diesel vehicles. Will the Government confirm that they are bringing forward plans for greater ability to charge at home and bringing down the cost of electricity as far and as fast as possible, so that more drivers can benefit from long-term lower driving costs?

Dan Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is right to say that we are seeing a continued uptake of electric vehicles—we saw that in March this year. More electric vehicles were purchased in March than in any month in British history, and we can see that take-up is continuing to increase. This Government are increasing and expanding the grants for those who want to buy an electric vehicle, and we are making progress on permitted development rights, so that those who do not have easy access to charging in their driveways can have easy and cheap access to on-street charging.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): Even before the current conflict in the middle east, fuel suppliers in the Merthyr Tydfil part of my constituency were charging an average of 10p per litre more than those in other parts of my constituency and neighbouring towns. Even London fuel prices were cheaper than they were in Merthyr Tydfil, and the situation has not improved since. I have written to suppliers and met some, with limited success, and I have asked the Competition and Markets Authority to look at the matter, which it has so far not done. May I ask the Chancellor to offer whatever assistance she can and to urge fuel providers in Merthyr Tydfil to act fairly? Will she urge the CMA to consider what it can do to ensure fair play for my constituents?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his representations, and for the work that he is undertaking on behalf of his constituents in a rural part of our country. We are making sure that all garages are on the new fuel finder website that the Chancellor has introduced. That should drive up competition and make it easier for the people he represents to compare the cost at the pumps in different garages nearby. It is good to hear that he has been in touch with the CMA; the Chancellor, too, has been in discussion with it about making sure that we have competition in this industry. If I can help him to get a meeting with the CMA, I will happily assist.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Whereas the Conservatives froze fuel duty for 14 years, Labour is planning to increase it by 5p, costing families £150 a year and hauliers £2,000. When the Chancellor was asked to reverse her hike, she said she was

"loath to spend Government money"

to do so. There is no such thing as Government money; there is only taxpayers' money. Rather than increase taxes again, will she actually help households and businesses facing higher prices and scrap this fuel hike?

Dan Tomlinson: We on the Labour Benches are fiscally responsible. We will make sure that we continue to get borrowing down in a sustainable way, as we did over the last financial year, when borrowing fell by £20 billion. Whenever the Conservatives have had the chance, they have borrowed more, which pushes up interest rates for families and means that we have to have higher taxes in the long run. That is not the approach that we will take. The plans that the Conservatives set out in their final Budget before they left office would have seen fuel duty increase every single year. Instead, we have frozen it since we took over.

Government Procurement: British Businesses

9. **Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure Government procurement supports British businesses. [908882]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): We are reforming Government procurement rules so that we can buy more that is made in this country, and we have already changed the rules on steel, shipbuilding, energy infrastructure and artificial intelligence. But I do not just want big companies to be able to get contracts;

I want to help smaller businesses and charities to access Government procurement. The Government are the biggest buyer of goods and services in the economy, and I want more of that money to be spent here in Britain.

Leigh Ingham: I thank the Chancellor for her answer. In Stafford, world-class manufacturers such as GE Vernova are producing the technology that powers our national grid, yet for far too long these British employers have not had money given to them through British Government contracts. I therefore warmly welcome the Government's commitment to reform public sector procurement to grow British industry, British skills and British jobs. Can the Chancellor tell us how this new approach will ensure that Government spending reaches manufacturers and businesses in constituencies like Stafford and towns across our country, so that when the taxpayer spends, Britain builds?

Rachel Reeves: I am slightly disappointed that my hon. Friend did not mention that today is Staffordshire Day; Staffordshire oatcakes are available for Members from both sides of the House in the Tea Room. On the wider issue, we do need to buy, make and sell more in Britain, with more contracts going to firms in Staffordshire—not just for their brilliant oatcakes, but for their ceramics.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Does the Chancellor agree that, post Brexit, Government Departments have much more freedom to buy British? Under the Procurement Act 2023, they can ignore EU directives. Will the Chancellor walk with us into the broad, sunlit uplands of post-Brexit Britain and use the freedoms that we obtained for this country?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Rachel Reeves: Conservative Members cheer, but they did not use any of those freedoms. It is this Government who are doing everything we can to buy, make and sell more in Britain. One of the best ways in which we can grow our economy is to work more closely with our friends, trading partners and neighbours in the European Union—whether through rejoining Erasmus, through playing our full part in Horizon or through a deal for our food and farming sector so that we can export the great stuff that we make here in Britain into the EU as well as to so many other areas. That is why we are determined to rebuild that relationship with the European Union.

Business Property Relief: Family-owned Businesses

10. **Peter Fortune** (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of recent changes to business property relief on levels of investment by family-owned businesses. [908883]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): The reforms to business property relief maintain significant relief for owners of business assets. That is beyond what is available to others and is more generous than at any time under Margaret Thatcher, for example, when the rate of relief was a maximum of 50% on all business assets, including the first £2.5 million. I do not think that Conservative Members would argue that we did not see growth in the private sector while Thatcher was in power.

Peter Fortune: I agree with the Minister, of course, that Margaret Thatcher really was the sunny uplands of this country.

Small and medium-sized enterprises provide the backbone for our economy in Bromley and Biggin Hill. Many of those businesses are still family owned, suffering from the slew of taxation from this Labour Government. Family Business UK's analysis, published just last month, said that 57% of businesses are still suffering from the business property relief that, despite the slight U-turn that the Minister alluded to, is still impacting their business. Does the Minister agree that the best way to growth is to support small businesses and not to tax them out of existence?

Dan Tomlinson: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that while Margaret Thatcher was in power she was taxing such businesses through business property relief more than this Labour Government. We have a fair and balanced approach when it comes to making sure that we can raise revenues from the very largest businesses, including agricultural businesses, so that we can sustainably support the reduction in borrowing that this Government are bringing about.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Hundreds of small family businesses across Cornwall will soon be subject to a significant increase in their property costs as a result of the Valuation Office Agency's decision to reclassify serviced offices, business centres and co-working spaces. Will the Chancellor arrange for me to meet Treasury officials and the VOA to discuss how the impacts of that reclassification may be mitigated?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am aware of the issue that he raises; I have met representatives of the sector in recent weeks to discuss it. It follows changes to case law over recent years, but it is of course an important issue that affects many businesses. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it.

Child Poverty Taskforce

11. **Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): What steps her Department is taking through the child poverty taskforce to help reduce levels of relative poverty. [908884]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government are taking action to tackle child poverty, by removing the two-child limit and by expanding free school meals and breakfast clubs, including the seven breakfast clubs already rolled out in the Dewsbury and Batley constituency. As a result, 550,000 children will be lifted out of poverty in this Parliament: the biggest reduction in child poverty in any Parliament ever.

Iqbal Mohamed: In my constituency, 44.4% of children are living in poverty, according to the latest Government figures. Yet Oxfam reports that just 56 billionaires in the UK now hold more wealth than 27 million people combined in our country, and their wealth rose on average by more than £230 million each last year. Does

the Chancellor accept that child poverty is not inevitable but the result of political choices about who this Government want to protect? Can she explain how the child poverty taskforce can succeed without the Treasury being willing to pursue far more fair and equitable wealth distribution, through closing tax loopholes, taxing wealth and not just income, and preventing—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Chancellor has got the drift.

Rachel Reeves: Child poverty is absolutely not inevitable, which why we are lifting 550,000 children out of poverty. It is always Labour Governments who lift children out of poverty and Tory Governments who put children back into poverty. The numbers the hon. Gentleman refers to are appalling: 44% of children should not be growing up in poverty in Dewsbury and Batley. We have made the changes we have made to lift those children out of poverty and to give all of them a decent start in life.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): One of the worst legacies of the previous Government is that 43% of children growing up in Peterborough are living in poverty. Nearly 10,000 children will be affected by the lifting of the child cap in Peterborough alone. Will the Chancellor assure me that, while we have made huge progress, we will keep a razor-like focus on child poverty as we deal with the cost of living crisis and the fallout from the war in Iran?

Rachel Reeves: The fact that some 10,000 children in one constituency have been lifted out of poverty, by just one of the policy changes we have made to reduce child poverty, shows the difference that this Labour Government are making. Combined with the breakfast clubs, the free school meals, the extension of childcare, the Renters' Rights Act 2025 and the building of new homes, the Government are set to deliver the biggest ever reduction in child poverty in one Parliament.

Cost of Living: Wolverhampton West

12. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help support people with the cost of living in Wolverhampton West constituency. [908885]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): First of all, I offer my deepest condolences following the tragic death of two young children in my hon. Friend's constituency. This will be an incredibly distressing time for the whole community and the thoughts of the whole House are with them.

We recognise that everyday living costs remain too high, which is why we are supporting households with their energy bills, and why we have frozen prescription charges for a second year in a row and rail fares for the first time in 30 years. It is also why we have lifted the national living wage and the national minimum wage, so people on low pay can see their money go further.

Warinder Juss: I thank the Chancellor for her condolences. I was at the site of the tragedy on Sunday laying flowers. It is very upsetting for everyone in my constituency.

One of my favourite places for lunch is the Pomegranate Caf , together with the Central Community Shop, in my constituency. It is a community-based social enterprise partnership founded by the Good Shepherd charity, the Wolves Foundation and the Labour-controlled city of Wolverhampton council. It provides affordable food, and all the profits from the caf are donated to the Good Shepherd's free-to-access services—supporting its work to end homelessness, assist recovery, provide access to services around training and employability, and provide meaningful pathways out of poverty in Wolverhampton. Will the Chancellor please join me in congratulating everyone involved with the Pomegranate Caf —

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I think the Chancellor has got the question.

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the excellent work city of Wolverhampton council is doing to help people with the cost of living, in particular the most vulnerable people in our society. The measures we are taking to reduce child poverty, and to increase the basic state pension and the new state pension, combined with what we are doing with Pride in Place, including in Whitmore Reans and Dunstall Hill in his constituency, will improve outcomes for people in Wolverhampton West and around the country.

Economic Growth in Wales

13. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support economic growth in Wales. [908886]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government are investing in Wales's industrial future and unlocking economic growth, including by providing £2.5 billion for the UK's first small modular reactor in Anglesey to support up to 3,000 jobs and power 3 million homes. We have also recently agreed a new £50 million defence growth deal for Wales. We are backing Welsh freeports and investment zones, and we are connecting people and businesses with at least £445 million-worth of rail infrastructure investment right across Wales.

Catherine Fookes: The people of Magor and Undy have been celebrating the fact that they are getting a new train station, thanks to two Labour Governments working together to deliver it. It is therefore unbelievable that Reform's leader in Wales recently said that nobody wants or needs these new stations. Does the Minister agree that new railway stations are essential for economic growth, and does he think that Reform does not listen to what people in Wales want, or that it just does not care?

James Murray: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that the UK and Welsh Labour Governments' generational commitment to the future of rail in Wales is fantastic for her constituents right across Monmouthshire. It is frankly outrageous to hear Reform's leader in Wales trying to tell people what they want, and even more shocking that Reform has promised to rip up our plan. New railway stations are indeed critical for economic growth, and only Labour will build the rail network that people in Wales need and deserve.

Costs for Commuters

15. **Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce costs for commuters. [908889]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government are acting to ease the cost of living for commuters, including by extending the £3 national bus fare cap to March 2027. We have also frozen regulated rail fares for the first time in 30 years, which will save the average commuter travelling from Worthing to London using an annual season ticket £360 a year.

Dr Cooper: I thank my right hon. Friend for freezing rail fares, which will indeed help to ease the cost of living for many commuters, such as my constituents in Worthing West, many of whom have jobs here in London or in Brighton. Southern has been rated the worst value for money rail operator in a national passenger survey. As we move to nationalisation of our service and finally see the back of Southern rail next month, will the Minister ensure that investment is available for key issues such as reducing overcrowding and improving the reliability and punctuality of our vital south coast services?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is right to make it clear that improving services for passengers is our absolute priority as rail operations come into public ownership. When Southern rail is brought into public ownership, it will be expected to focus relentlessly on improving passenger experience, reliability and punctuality, and it will be held to account for doing so.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): In rural areas like Rutland and Stamford, we are reliant on our cars, so fuel costs are hitting us hard. I have a simple ask that the Chancellor could deliver on now: will she expand the 5p per litre rural fuel duty relief to more areas as soon as possible, particularly Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire, where it is desperately needed?

James Murray: As my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary has already set out many times today on fuel duty, we inherited plans from the previous Government that would have seen fuel costs go up for people across the country. We have extended the 5p cut on fuel duty and extended the freeze, which is an important way of helping people with the cost of living right now.

Retail, Hospitality and Leisure: Business Rates

16. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of changes to business rates announced in the autumn Budget 2025 on the retail, hospitality and leisure sector. [908890]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): The Government have introduced a support package worth £4.3 billion to protect rate payers across the country against the impact of the independently set new property values, whereby properties have been valued for the first time since the pandemic. We have also introduced permanently lower multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties worth nearly £1 billion a year, and this will benefit more than 750,000 high street businesses.

Bradley Thomas: I recently met Chris, the owner of Chapters Hair in Bromsgrove, who told me that current conditions are the most difficult he has faced in 25 years of trading, which he attributes directly to the decisions taken by the Chancellor. Why is it that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government across the board are riding roughshod over what business owners think—the people who know best how to run their businesses—and when will the Government get off their backs and get on their side?

Dan Tomlinson: Under the previous Government, the business rates multiplier—the tax rate—paid by medium-sized businesses and the very largest businesses was exactly the same. We have implemented significant reforms to the way businesses rates work so that the system supports the high street, and the tax rate paid by small high street businesses will now be 33% lower than the rate paid by the largest properties, such as online giants. Of course, the revaluation since the pandemic has had an effect, and that is why we have stepped in to provide support.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): This month, a comprehensive survey by UKHospitality showed that one in seven of our hotels, pubs and restaurants will close as a direct result of the Chancellor's policies. Many of those businesses represent the hopes and dreams, hard work and savings of the people who set them up. Therefore, as I am permitted, rather than having the Minister come to the Dispatch Box, may I ask the Chancellor to come to the Dispatch Box to answer this? If it was not me standing here but one of those people who had founded a business and is now going through the gut-wrenching process of closing it because of her policies, what would she say to them?

Dan Tomlinson: Of course, the Government want to do all we can to support businesses up and down the country—small, medium and large. That is why we are working hard to put the economic stagnation we had over the last 14 years behind us. We are seeing economic growth rising—growing by 0.5% in February; we saw unemployment falling; and we were seeing Government borrowing falling as well. Those are the long-term changes we need to lay the foundations so that businesses can grow, invest and hire more people. It is disappointing that the Conservatives seem to have forgotten what we need to provide stability in our economy.

Topical Questions

T1. [908899] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): We are on the right path with the right economic plan. Unemployment is down, the economy is growing, interest rates have been cut six times, and last year Government borrowing was lower than it was the year before and is set to fall by more than in any other G7 economy.

At the same time, the Government are acting responsibly on the world stage. This is a war that we did not start, we did not enter, and we are working with our international allies to de-escalate. Our focus is on protecting family finances, supporting businesses and taking care with the public purse to improve Britain's economic resilience. That is the right plan for our country.

Cat Smith: I thank the Chancellor for her work to lift the two-child benefit cap, which was cruelly brought in by the Conservative Government. Does she agree that that is not only morally the right thing to do, but economically good news for the 1,690 families in Lancaster and Wyre who will have more money in their pockets to spend in our local economy in Lancashire—unlike the super-rich, who would have just taken it to offshore tax havens?

Rachel Reeves: Just a couple of weeks ago, I hosted an event in Downing Street where I met people who are benefiting from the change in the two-child limit and people who had campaigned for that change. Mums told me that they were going to use the money to pay for their kids to go to after-school clubs with their friends, swimming lessons that they could not afford before, or a new school coat rather than a second-hand one. That is the difference that this money is making to families up and down the country. I am proud to be the Chancellor who has scrapped the two-child limit.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): In response to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) on borrowing, the right hon. Lady suggested that she was following a strict deficit reduction plan. I think she made reference to a reduction in the deficit of £20 billion year on year—but, of course, it is easy to reduce something if you pump it up recklessly in the first place. Could she tell the House how much more borrowing this Government will undertake across this Parliament compared with the plans that she inherited from the last Government?

Rachel Reeves: To start with, let us remember that the plans we inherited from the last Government would have seen fuel duty go up straightaway; the plans that we inherited from the last Government would not have seen £29 billion of investment a year in our NHS; and the plans that we inherited from the last Government would have seen business rates for our high street businesses—our retail, hospitality and leisure businesses—go up straightaway. We did make the decision to change that inheritance because we thought it was the right thing to do, and we still do. The International Monetary Fund confirmed that we have the fastest rate of fiscal consolidation of any country in the G7, and our borrowing as a share of GDP fell to 4.3% in the last financial year and is due to fall in every single year of this Parliament. This is the first time that our deficit has been lower than 5% since 2019.

Sir Mel Stride: The right hon. Lady does not seem to know how much additional borrowing this Government are undertaking compared with the plans of the last Government, so I will tell her: it is one quarter of a trillion pounds of additional borrowing across this Parliament. The truth is that this Chancellor is addicted to borrowing, which means, compared with what otherwise would be the case—she said exactly this, in terms, in the answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash—higher borrowing costs, higher inflation, higher interest rates and more sluggish growth, doesn't it?

Rachel Reeves: What the right hon. Gentleman is basically admitting is that he would have gone ahead with the increases in fuel duty and business rates, and that he would take that money out of our national health service. We made those changes on the mandate that we got at the election, and at the same time we are reducing the budget deficit so that, for the first time in six years, it is now below 5% of GDP. As a result, the Bank of England has cut interest rates six times, helping all our constituents with their mortgages. This is very different from the hikes in mortgages that we saw under the previous Tory Government.

T2. [908900] **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): This weekend, while door-knocking in Woodley, I spoke to a young father of three who, despite working multiple skilled jobs, feared being made homeless because of high and rising costs of rent. Will the Chancellor examine the case for a fixed-term rent freeze in the private rented sector to protect renters like my constituent from rising costs following the invasion of Iran, and to bring inflation down in the wider economy?

Rachel Reeves: As my hon. Friend knows from sitting on the Treasury Committee, this Government have already taken action to reduce the cost of living and to bear down on inflation with the changes around energy prices, fuel duty, prescription charges and rail fares. I will do everything in my power and use every lever we have to bear down on the cost of living, including for people in the private rented sector. That is why we have already introduced the Renters' Rights Act 2025. People who have mortgages have seen cuts in their mortgage rates since we came into office, and we will also do everything we can to help people in the private rented sector too, because we must ensure that this conflict in the middle east does not result in our constituents being poorer.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Business rates bills have been landing on doormats over the last few weeks, and some small businesses in St Albans and beyond tell me that the future looks bleak, with some taking the crushing decision to close their doors. Will the Chancellor please look again at the eye-watering revaluations and release the full 20p discount for small businesses, which the Government legislated to do, to save our high streets?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): On business rates, the hon. Member will know that this Government inherited the plans that were set in train for an independent revaluation of properties to take place for the first time since the pandemic. It would not have been the right thing to do to delay that independent revaluation for those businesses who have seen their rates fall since the pandemic, so we went ahead with it,

and we then put in £4.3 billion of support to limit the increases in bills that businesses would pay. Of course we keep all taxes under review, but we have for the first time put in a differential within the business rates system so that high street businesses face a lower tax rate—a lower multiplier—than the largest online giants.

T4. [908902] **Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): We now know what was going on in the economy before the attack on Iran. Growth was up. Unemployment was down. Borrowing was lower than forecast. The Chancellor took the right decisions and it was working. Does my right hon. Friend agree that families and businesses should know that, when times are tough, it is Trumpflation that is to blame?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. While other parties—specifically Reform and the Conservatives—wanted us to enter this war, we stayed out of it, and are working to de-escalate the conflict and reopen the strait of Hormuz. The economy was growing, interest rates were coming down and inflation was falling. As a result, every month since I have become Chancellor, wages have risen by more than inflation, easing the cost of living pressures that the previous Government oversaw.

T3. [908901] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): At a recent meeting with members of Wantage chamber of commerce, local businesses were united in their concerns about business rates and unconvinced by recent Government tweaks that Ministers have just alluded to. Page 31 of Labour's manifesto states:

"The current business rates system disincentivises investment, creates uncertainty and places an undue burden on our high streets. In England, Labour will replace the business rates system, so we can raise the same revenue but in a fairer"—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topical questions, and I want to get other colleagues in, please.

Dan Tomlinson: I am always happy to take questions on business rates, even months after the decision set out at the Budget, and I thank the hon. Member for reading out the Labour manifesto. We have made significant changes to business rates by introducing the new lower multiplier for high street businesses so that they can pay a lower tax rate than the largest online giants.

T7. [908906] **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): Given that Reform in Worcestershire promised to cut taxes but has instead increased county council tax for Redditch residents by nearly 9%, does the Chancellor agree that at the Redditch borough council elections on 7 May the only way to protect vital local services and keep taxes low is to vote for Redditch Labour candidates?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that although Reform-led Worcestershire council said that it would cut taxes, it has instead put them up. That is why I urge people in Redditch and across the country to vote Labour on 7 May.

T5. [908903] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): More than 1.3 million people use lifetime ISAs to save for their first home. The property cap of £450,000 has been frozen since 2017, despite rising house prices, but those buying their first home over that threshold face a 25% penalty. First-time buyers across London are disproportionately affected. Data from February this year showed that the average price paid by a first-time buyer in London was £463,000. Can the Chancellor tell us how she is ensuring that first-time buyers in London are not unfairly disadvantaged by using this saving scheme?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): The Government are committed to making the aspiration of home ownership a reality for as many people as possible, and we recognise that the LISA is not working for everyone. That is exactly why we have launched a short consultation on the implementation of a new ISA product that will support more first-time buyers.[1] That new product will include the Government bonus being paid at the point the individual makes a withdrawal for a home purchase, therefore removing the need for a withdrawal charge.

T8. [908907] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): The Chancellor will have seen the news this morning that BP's profits have more than doubled, undoubtedly driven by the conflict in the middle east. Does she agree that this shows the value of having a windfall tax at this point in time?

Rachel Reeves: The oil and gas sector will play an important part in our energy mix for many years to come, and we need to support it, as we are doing through tiebacks, for example. But it is important that the energy profits levy remains in place for now, because during this conflict we will be able to capture the profits made in the UK through the windfall tax. The Conservatives and Reform oppose this tax, which would just mean even higher profits for oil and gas companies. As my hon. Friend knows, we are also delinking gas and electricity prices by increasing the electricity generator levy, so that no energy company can make excess profits because of the conflict.

T6. [908905] **Chris Coghlan** (Dorking and Horley) (LD): It has been widely reported in the press that the Chancellor is rightly considering issuing defence bonds. I know that the Chancellor agrees with me on the value of defence research and development. Does she or the Minister agree that defence bonds could be a powerful way to increase R&D and raise economic growth?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): Whatever the purpose, spending funded from bonds issued by the Government adds to the national debt and so must be considered within the fiscal rules. But the hon. Gentleman is right to point to the importance of research and development within the defence industry to support economic growth. I am proud that last year we allocated £400 million for UK defence innovation to foster a world-leading UK defence tech sector.

T9. [908908] **Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): This Labour Government have ensured that, as of this month, workers in Worsley and Eccles and across the country get sick pay from day one, including low-paid workers. As chair of the USDAW parliamentary group, and having campaigned for this, I welcome this so much. Does the Chancellor agree that it is only Labour, with its trade union link, that is on the side of working people?

1.[*Official Report*, 13 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for all his campaigning in this area. I also pay tribute to the trade union USDAW, its former general secretary Paddy Lillis, and its current general secretary Joanne Thomas, for all their work in this area. Strengthening statutory sick pay is part of our commitment to implement our plan to make work pay, ensuring that the safety net of sick pay is available to those who need it from day one.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Leicester South has a home ownership rate of just over 40%—nearly 23 points below the national average—in a city where the average house costs 8.5 times average local earnings. My young constituents work very hard and save responsibly to get on to the housing ladder, yet the tax system offers them absolutely nothing, while incorporated landlords deduct full mortgage interest through a company structure. Canada and Nordic countries are offering targeted tax relief for first-time buyers. Has the Chancellor considered introducing a similar relief here to ensure that young people are supported by the tax system, not left behind?

Lucy Rigby: This Labour Government are committed to enabling more people to realise the dream of home ownership. Mortgages have become more affordable under this Government, thanks to increased economic stability and six interest rate cuts.

BILLS PRESENTED

NEWHAVEN WEST BEACH (PUBLIC ACCESS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

James MacCleary presented a Bill to provide for a right of public access on foot to Newhaven West Beach; to impose duties on the harbour authority in respect of that right, including requirements to open and maintain specified access routes; to provide for exemptions from those duties for reasons of safety or in connection with harbour operations; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 May, and to be printed (Bill 436).

DEFENCE BONDS (PROPOSALS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

James MacCleary presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for the issuing of defence bonds, including for purchase by members of the public; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 May, and to be printed (Bill 437).

Local Area Energy Plans

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

12.36 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to place a duty on local authorities in England to produce and maintain local area energy plans; to make provision about the content of those plans and limitations on that content; and for connected purposes.

I am proud that before coming to this place I worked in the energy sector. At SSE I led large industry change programmes, such as faster switching, and at Northern Powergrid I led the customer engagement workstream for its ED2 business plan. I therefore refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am also proud that, as a councillor, I led bottom-up public engagement on the future of West Burton power station in north Nottinghamshire. I set up a residents' planning group, which over 18 months demonstrated that Bassetlaw would make a fantastic home for the world's first prototype fusion energy plant. Nottinghamshire won that multibillion-pound project, and I believe that the types and quality of community engagement were a key reason behind that outcome. I hope that when I speak in this place about the energy sector and community engagement, I do so from a position of knowledge and understanding.

It is worth stating that there are excellent examples, across the private and public sectors, of taking communities on a journey from being uninformed to becoming knowledgeable, from being nervous to feeling confident, and from being sceptical to being supportive, as a result of good engagement. Sadly, however, that is not the norm for energy projects. I would like it to be, and I believe that it can be, through the universal adoption of local area energy plans.

The Government are advancing one of the largest infrastructure programmes that this country has seen in generations. As part of it, tens of billions of pounds are rightly being spent on energy projects to end our dependency on international fossil fuel markets. At the same time, we are rewiring the energy network in response to changes in how we generate, store and distribute power. Ordinary people can now generate energy and sell power back to the grid, meaning that we operate in a radically different energy landscape. Yet we are doing a lot of that without purposefully engaging communities about new infrastructure.

In contrast with how we plan housing, through local plans with formal regulation consultations, right now there are no meaningful strategic conversation or consultation about energy infrastructure. Yes, individual projects consult about their impacts, but no strategic oversight or decision making is required by local authorities, which, on energy matters, are overwhelmingly reactive rather than proactive. In my view, that has to change if we are to deliver successfully our clean energy mission.

Let me describe more clearly what is happening. Nationally, there is an emerging sense of order: the National Energy System Operator—NESO—is producing regional energy strategic plans for the whole of Great Britain by 2028, which are long overdue; Ofgem is simultaneously mapping the network upgrades needed in every locality; and the clean power 2030 action plan

sets out what we need and, for the first time, where we need it. This means that the strategic framework for the energy sector is being strengthened across the board.

Yet there is still a gap. NESO's regional plans need local inputs to be credible, including demand projections, spatial constraints, sequencing preferences, but there is no meaningful or consistent dialogue taking place with local authorities. Without that, regional planning will either proceed on assumptions that are subsequently contested or stall while fighting objections to top-down diktats.

Even worse, communities with valuable National Grid connections are inundated with projects, some of which are unlikely ever to proceed. I recently hosted a surgery near Ratcliffe-on-Soar, in my Rushcliffe constituency, which hosted a coal-fired power station. One parish councillor told me that he and a small team of volunteers had reviewed over a dozen applications for new grid connections—over a dozen. This level of disorder means host communities cannot see the wood for the trees, and cannot picture how the projects that do go ahead will contribute to a joined-up narrative about local energy generation.

I believe that there is an answer: mandatory local area energy plans. This is not a new idea, as local area energy plans have existed as a methodology since 2018. Dozens of councils have produced them, detailing specific energy system changes, locations and delivery timelines, but they remain voluntary in England. That means the essential transition to green energy is potentially being made without consistent, meaningful local engagement across the country. I do not want to see that.

This Bill proposes that we do four things. First, it would place a duty on every local authority in England to prepare, adopt and maintain a local area energy plan. Secondly, critically, it states that these plans must identify sites capable of meeting energy generation targets set for each area. The Secretary of State would set those targets but communities would help to decide where the infrastructure goes, much like local plans for housing. In so doing, we would spread the load and take people on the journey.

Thirdly, the Bill would make data-sharing by distribution network operators mandatory, meaning that constraint data, reinforcement plans, connection queues and capacity forecasts would be provided in standardised formats. Finally, the Bill would give legal weight to local area energy plans. I believe that energy needs and generation should be a material consideration in planning decisions, and considered as formal evidence in network investment cases assessed by Ofgem.

Let me be clear about what the Bill would not do. It would not allow local area energy plans to contradict national policy statements, and it would not provide a mechanism for blocking infrastructure that has legitimate need. Rather, it recognises that local area energy plans can help to shape where, how and when infrastructure is delivered locally, and bring communities and elected representatives into a very important and consequential conversation. Handled badly, energy projects become a source of major grievance. Handled well, as has happened in Bassetlaw, they become something else: a story about jobs, investment, agency and, ultimately, consent and control.

I believe that this Bill is the only way to genuinely shift the dial away from "this was done to us" to "I had a say"; away from "nobody cares" to "this project was considered and discussed locally"; and away from "why here?" to "I understand why and how we are playing our part."

I do not pretend that this Bill will satisfy everyone. Some people do not want wind turbines or solar farms full stop, and no amount of process should change that. However, in my experience, local opposition is not normally a fundamental objection to renewable energy. Rather, such opposition is about feeling blindsided and lacking control, and about not having a local narrative about which energy projects have been consented to and why, or an understanding about how those projects can contribute to a better, cleaner, local future.

It is estimated that £40 billion could be spent annually on new energy infrastructure between now and 2030. The question is not whether that money should be spent, because it must be spent; the question is: what evidence and voices inform how and where it is spent? The window of opportunity is narrow, because business plans for the next price control period and the regional energy strategic plans will both be finalised by 2028. Getting the local layer right now is therefore essential. That will reduce conflict, prevent delays and limit expensive changes down the line, so I hope the Government will take this matter seriously.

This Bill gives communities a genuine stake in where and how energy infrastructure is delivered. It connects local planning to real investment decisions and ensures that the transition happens with people, not to them, while still making the essential shift to cleaner, greener energy eminently deliverable. I therefore commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That James Naish, Chris Bloore, Maya Ellis, Dr Allison Gardner, Jodie Gosling, Chris Hinchliff, Ms Julie Minns, Perran Moon and Samantha Niblett present the Bill.

James Naish accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 May, and to be printed (Bill 438).

Referral of Prime Minister to Committee of Privileges

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the next item of business, I think it would be helpful to the House if I reminded Members of the decision in question and the procedures for today's debate. The decision before the House today is not whether a contempt has been committed; it is whether to refer the matter to the Privileges Committee. If such a referral is made, it will be for the Committee to report back to this House in due course and make any necessary recommendations.

The debate today may continue until 7 o'clock at the latest, at which time there will need to be a successful closure motion, or the debate will be adjourned to a future date. In recent years, the length of time taken for debates on similar motions has ranged from seven minutes to five hours. Any Members who wish to speak need to stand at the beginning of the debate to ensure that they catch my eye. If the debate becomes very repetitive, we may have to consider whether it would be appropriate to accept an early closure motion.

Finally, Members will be aware of the rules relating to good temper and moderation in parliamentary language. Today's proceedings are on a substantive motion relating to specific responses by the Prime Minister to this House. It is perfectly in order for hon. Members to question the veracity of the responses cited in the motion, and to debate whether or not they were misleading. However, it is not in order to challenge in more general terms the truthfulness of the Prime Minister.

The Leader of the Opposition has tabled a motion for debate on the matter of privilege, which I have agreed should take precedence today. I call her to move the motion.

12.49 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House

(1) notes the Rt hon Member for Holborn and St Pancras's assurances on the floor of the House about "full due process" being followed in the appointment of Peter Mandelson as Ambassador to the United States of America, in particular (but not limited to) answers given on 10 September 2025, 4 February and 22 April 2026, further notes his assertion on 20 April 2026 that he "had made it clear that my position was that the position was subject to developed vetting" and his assertions that "Sir Olly Robbins was absolutely clear that nobody put pressure on him to make this appointment" and that "No pressure existed whatsoever in relation to this case" on 22 April 2026; and

(2) accordingly orders that these matters be referred to the Committee of Privileges to consider whether, in making these and other related statements, the Rt hon Member may have misled the House, and whether such conduct amounts to a contempt of the House, bearing in mind the standards expected of Ministers as set out in the House's own resolution on Ministerial Accountability and the Ministerial Code.

Shall we pick up where we left off last Tuesday, when we had an emergency debate about the Government's accountability to Parliament over Peter Mandelson's appointment as our ambassador to the United States? The very next day at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister read out selective quotes from Sir Olly Robbins' evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, and deliberately left out critical sections to make it seem as if that evidence had exonerated him. The Prime Minister told the House that

"No pressure existed whatsoever in relation to this case."—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 316.]

That is not what the record shows. Let me read Sir Olly Robbins' exact quote:

"Throughout January…my office and the Foreign Secretary's office were under constant pressure. There was an atmosphere of constant chasing".

So how can the Prime Minister tell us that Sir Olly Robbins said "No pressure existed whatsoever"? Everybody heard what Olly Robbins said; we are not here to test whether Members have good hearing. People can look in *Hansard*. As Mr Speaker said, the question today is whether this matter should be referred to the Privileges Committee. It is a question of whether this House and Labour MPs really believe in full due process, and whether Labour MPs have the integrity to refer the Prime Minister to the Privileges Committee, knowing what we all know and can all read in *Hansard.*

The ministerial code is very clear that Ministers who mislead the House must correct the record "at the earliest opportunity". It is very obvious that what the Prime Minister said at the Dispatch Box was not correct—it is clear that full due process was not followed. If Labour MPs allow the Whips to force them to block the consequences of those decisions, it will degrade not just them, but this House. The question is what kind of people they are. Are they people who will live up to the promises they made about standards and the rules mattering, or are they people who abandon their promises in order to be complicit in a cover-up?

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): On 4 February, this House unanimously passed a motion on a Humble Address. It was the opinion of the whole House that all the documents relating to Peter Mandelson's appointment should be made available and published, and that—*[Interruption.]* Wait for the question. The House agreed that those documents that were considered sensitive should go to the Intelligence and Security Committee. The Conservative party accepted an amendment to that effect on 4 February, but it seems that the Leader of the Opposition is not going to wait for the outcome of that process. Why has she moved this motion today?

Mrs Badenoch: That is an excellent question. We asked for the release of documents, and then when the evidence came, showing what the Cabinet Secretary said in November 2024 about what full due process was, it was very clear that those instructions had not been followed. We also know that the latest information about the problems with the security vetting did not come from the Humble Address; it came from a leak to *The Guardian.* Why should we wait for a never-never process that is clearly not happening? In last week's Standing Order No. 24 debate, even members of the Intelligence and Security Committee said that there were delays to the release of the documents.

Labour Members want to pretend that this motion is something that only one party is backing. I remind them that it is a cross-party motion, supported by Members from across this House—by independents, the Lib Dems, the DUP and the SNP. Calling this a stunt is disrespecting this House and disrespecting Mr Speaker. From listening to the media and seeing Labour Members' tweets, it is very obvious that they

have all been told to come to the Chamber today and tell everybody that this motion is a stunt. Why are they acting like sheep? They should be better than that. By the way, we will count how many times in this debate Labour Members stand up and say that this is a stunt. Some people might even be shouting "Bingo!". We are looking forward to it.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I think my right hon. Friend is being a little too harsh on the limited number of Labour MPs present. The entire reputation of the Prime Minister of this country—the leader of their party—is on the line, and they are not turning out for him, because they know that he is now a laughing stock. Having called round their MPs, the Government found that they had to impose a three-line Whip to get them to spare the Prime Minister's blushes. Can my right hon. Friend be a little bit kinder to Labour Members, especially the brave ones who are prepared to come to the Chamber and defend the indefensible?

Mrs Badenoch: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, and I will do my best to be kind. He is right: there are more people in the Chamber today than there were last time, so the Whips have really been working hard over the past seven days. Last week, not a single Labour MP bothered to intervene on me.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) *rose—*

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab) *rose—*

Mrs Badenoch: Oh, we have a second one. I am going to take the intervention from the right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and then I will come to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth).

Gavin Robinson: The Leader of the Opposition is right to highlight the cross-party nature of this motion, and to question why a Whip has been put in place on the motion that is before the House. Does she not agree, and should Labour MPs not consider, that if there is nothing to hide, there is nothing to fear?

Mrs Badenoch: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I completely agree with him, and in fact, I will make that case in due course.

Sam Rushworth: A moment ago, the Leader of the Opposition talked about selective quoting. I am sure that she would not want to selectively quote Sir Olly Robbins herself, so could she tell us what the rest of that quote was? When he talked about pressure, was he talking about pressure to deliver a decision in time for President Trump's inauguration, or was he saying that he felt pressure to materially change what the decision would be? That is quite an important distinction, is it not?

Mrs Badenoch: It is quite important, and if that was the distinction, why did the Prime Minister not say so last week? Why did he say, "No pressure existed whatsoever"? The hon. Gentleman should go and read *Hansard.*

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Are we really suggesting in this debate, in this Chamber, that anyone who does not pass vetting fully and comprehensively, and who is not granted it without hesitation, should be given the most important of our ambassadorships? The Government seem to be suggesting that someone who is borderline—about whom there are any red flags—should be put in that sort of role. Is that not extraordinary?

Mrs Badenoch: It is extraordinary, and the evidence that we have heard from the Foreign Affairs Committee this morning is only making this matter worse for the Prime Minister, so it is very wrong for Labour Members to be talking about a stunt. This is about the integrity of this House. Why is the Privileges Committee a political stunt only when Labour is in the dock? Do Labour MPs still believe that honesty and accountability matter when the person in question is one of their own? Do they believe that Labour Prime Ministers should be held to the exact same standards that they held Conservative Prime Ministers to, or do they believe that there should be an honesty discount because the Prime Minister is Labour? The fact that there are so few Cabinet Ministers sitting on the Front Bench—that the Government have had to dig deep to the bottom of the barrel for junior Ministers to sit there—shows that they are struggling to get support for their position.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs Badenoch: I am going to make some progress. I say gently to Labour MPs—and kindly, as I have been asked to—that if they vote against today's motion, they are admitting that Labour has lower standards, and should be held to a lower standard than everyone else. When they were elected, they promised their constituents integrity and higher standards, and I am sure that most of them meant it at the time. This country is the mother of all Parliaments, and today's vote is about Parliament. It is not about the Labour party; it is about the Prime Minister being held to account. To those who are saying that this is a stunt, I say that it is about whether the Prime Minister is accountable, not just to the Opposition but to Labour MPs and their constituents.

Labour Members may believe that the Prime Minister is telling the truth. As Mr Speaker said, they are not being asked whether the Prime Minister is telling the truth; they are being asked whether the Privileges Committee should investigate whether the Prime Minister told the truth. That is a different thing. The question is whether there is a case to answer that he misled this House and has failed to correct the record.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): The British public are already fed up with politicians—we see that from the low turnout at general elections. We have here a prime example of why the British public have lost confidence in politicians. We are trying to shield the public from the truth and hide it from them. Does the right hon. Member agree that in order to restore that trust, this Prime Minister must be put in front of the Committee?

Mrs Badenoch: I agree that this is a matter of trust with the public. We have to show that we do things properly here. As I was saying, the question is whether

[Mrs Badenoch]

there is a case to answer that the Prime Minister misled this House and failed to correct the record. If there is a credible case that he did, this matter should be referred to the Committee of Privileges—those are the rules of the House.

I will quickly run through the facts to make sure that every Labour MP hears them. The Prime Minister appointed Peter Mandelson before security vetting was granted, in direct contravention of the advice given to him on 11 November 2024 by the then Cabinet Secretary—that is not due process. The Prime Minister's own National Security Adviser described the appointment and due diligence as "weirdly rushed", and the Foreign Office was not asked to feed in—that is not due process. *[Interruption.]* The chair of the Labour party has a lot to say, so I will give way and let her say what she wants to say.

The Minister without Portfolio (Anna Turley): The Cabinet Secretary said that it was due process.

Mrs Badenoch: We have another Minister coming to the Dispatch Box to say something quite different. Simon Case, the then Cabinet Secretary, set out what the full due process was. A note from the Cabinet Secretary a year after the appointment—after Peter Mandelson had been sacked and after I had asked questions at the Dispatch Box—is not an exoneration. It is part of the cover-up.

We have been told by Sir Olly Robbins, the former permanent secretary of the Foreign Office, that the Government showed a "dismissive attitude" to vetting and even argued that Peter Mandelson did not need any vetting—that is not due process. We have been told that No. 10 put "constant pressure" on the Foreign Office to approve the application—that is not due process.

Sir Philip Barton, the former permanent secretary of the Foreign Office, said this morning that he was

"presented with a decision… There was no space for dialogue".

He also confirmed that the normal order is vetting and then announcement, but in this case the announcement was before the vetting—that is not due process.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the Opposition for securing and introducing this motion. Does she agree that there is a very dangerous pattern emerging in the Government's judgment after they bypassed vetting to appoint Lord Mandelson, a man with well-documented security concerns? Is she also concerned about the Government hand-picking an Attorney General whose hands are still warm from defending Gerry Adams against the victims of IRA terror? It is little wonder that the people of this nation, out there in the streets, are worried and concerned. Well done to the Leader of the Opposition for bringing this motion forward.

Mr Speaker: Order. You are straying outside the debate, Mr Shannon, and we must not do that.

Mrs Badenoch: I am concerned about the Prime Minister's judgment on all manner of issues, not just the one we are discussing today.

This morning, we even heard the Prime Minister's former chief of staff say that it should not have been him doing the due diligence, and that what he got back from Mandelson was not the full truth, but the Prime Minister appointed Peter Mandelson anyway—that is Morgan McSweeney saying that it was not full due process.

On several counts, it is clear that full due process was, in fact, not followed in this appointment.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab) *rose—*

Mrs Badenoch: Labour Members should not worry. I will give way because I want them to have every opportunity to make fools of themselves—just be patient.

Even the Prime Minister's current position contains a glaring logical inconsistency. How can he say that full process was followed while, at the same time, firing Sir Olly Robbins for not following process? It would be fantastic if the hon. Gentleman answered that question.

Justin Madders: I will ask the questions of the Leader of the Opposition, as that is how interventions work. Can I also suggest that, if she wants Government Back Benchers to support her motion, she should not be insulting us and calling us sheep? The critical question to which a lot of Back Benchers want to know the answer is: why now? Why, when the Foreign Affairs Committee has not concluded its investigation, has she brought forward this motion now? Is it because there are local elections next week, or is that a coincidence?

Mr Speaker: Order. The decision was made on the letter that was sent to me, not on whether somebody may be meeting somewhere else. It is judged on the merit of that. I do not need to be questioned again.

Mrs Badenoch: I think the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders) would like his ministerial job back, as that is the only explanation for asking that question.

I asked why, if full due process was followed, Sir Olly Robbins was sacked. No answer.

The Privileges Committee is clear that

"misleading intentionally or recklessly, refusing to answer legitimate questions, or failing to correct misleading statements, impedes or frustrates the functioning of the House and is a contempt."

The Prime Minister has not answered legitimate questions on this appointment. Labour Members were all there at PMQs when I asked him about six times whether he spoke to Peter Mandelson before the appointment, and the Prime Minister refused to answer—that is contempt.

This is no longer just about the appointment of Peter Mandelson, or about the convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein. This is about whether or not the Prime Minister should be referred for contempt of Parliament. I do not know if he is in the Chamber, but the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said last week that

"the Prime Minister is a man of the utmost decency who would never, ever lie".—[*Official Report*, 21 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 197.]

If that is the case, Labour Members should welcome this chance to prove it. If they really believe that statement, they would not have to be whipped to block an investigation.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The right hon. Lady will know that I was never a fan of Boris Johnson. Can she confirm that, when there was a similar motion before the House to refer Mr Johnson to the Privileges Committee, his side was not whipped? And can she explain why the Government are whipping their Members on this motion?

Mrs Badenoch: That is an excellent question, and I can confirm that our side was not whipped. I can also confirm that the then Chair of the Privileges Committee was a former acting leader of the Labour party. We trusted this House to do the right thing. Why can they not do the same—why?

The Privileges Committee is mostly made up of Labour MPs. Are Labour Members saying that they do not believe that their own colleagues would give the Prime Minister a fair hearing? If this was just a bad decision for which he has apologised, surely the Privileges Committee will find him not guilty.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister is pursuing a scorched-earth policy? Adviser after civil servant has been chucked under the bus to save his skin, and now it is the turn of his own MPs. If the Prime Minister has not misled the House, the correct path is to go to the Privileges Committee so that he can clear his name.

Mrs Badenoch: I agree with my right hon. Friend that this is a scorched-earth policy: Labour MPs are the earth, and I am afraid to say that they are being scorched.

Let me ask Labour Members this: if the Prime Minister has nothing to hide, why is he whipping them to avoid scrutiny? They are being whipped today to exonerate him before the facts have even been tested. This is not the first time I have had to tell Labour MPs that they are being stitched up. This is a man who has led them up and down so many hills—*[Interruption.]* Oh, the Education Secretary wants to intervene. Would she like to talk about yesterday's U-turn on social media?

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson) *indicated dissent.*

Mrs Badenoch: No, she does not want to—shame! We got our U-turn. Labour Members have to sit there looking embarrassed at every decision they have to row back on. The Prime Minister has led them up and down so many hills. He sends them out to defend the indefensible even this afternoon, and it is a great effort by the Whips, I must say.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Of course, the Leader of the Opposition is right that the Conservatives had a free vote on the partygate scandal. She chose to abstain, which is an absolute disgrace. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Arthur: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The bigger disgrace is that she voted against taking action on Owen Paterson. An utter disgrace—she was whipped.

Mrs Badenoch: I actually feel bad at having to give this explanation. *[Interruption.]* I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness that I am trying to be kind, but there was no vote, so there was no abstention, because not a single one of us voted to block the investigation. That is a clear example—

Dr Arthur *rose—*

Mrs Badenoch: Sit down. No, I will not give way; he has had his chance.

Mr Speaker: Order. If the right hon. Lady gives way, that is fine. You have had one crack at the whip, Dr Arthur. I would not try too many cracks.

Mrs Badenoch: I know that a lot of Labour MPs have not been in this situation before. They are being stitched up. I am trying to be helpful. This man has led them up so many hills and down again, with U-turn after U-turn. I talked about banning social media for children; there was also a U-turn on pensions mandation. This is a Government that do not know what they are doing.

I think it is very valiant of Labour MPs to come out to defend the Prime Minister, despite the fact that he took the Whip away from MPs who wanted to lift the two-child benefit cap—and then did it anyway. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) had the Whip removed for opposing the two-child benefit cap, then the Prime Minister U-turned. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) had the Whip removed for voting against the Prime Minister's welfare reforms, then he ditched the reforms. The hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) had the Whip removed for opposing the family farm tax. The Prime Minister has ditched that, but the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway still does not have the Whip back. This matters, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is about the privileges motion. I know that you are developing a theme, but I think we have run out of theme.

Mrs Badenoch: You are absolutely right, Mr Speaker. I am just asking why this is a whipped vote, when it will still happen anyway. This man has ruined the reputation of the Labour party, he has not been loyal to his own MPs and I do not think they are united.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): When the Prime Minister came in, he said that he wanted to do things differently. He has had not one, but two, opportunities—one in an emergency debate tabled by the Opposition—to come to the House and answer all the questions so he would not need to go to the Privileges Committee. Will my right hon. Friend surmise why he has not come to the House to answer on two occasions?

Mrs Badenoch: That is an excellent question from my hon. Friend. Why has the Prime Minister not come to the House to correct the record at the earliest opportunity on multiple occasions? What is there to hide? We are hearing evidence to Committees that conflicts with what is being said on the Floor of the House. I will be interested, by the way, to hear whether the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, when he responds, will be happy

[Mrs Badenoch]

to repeat the Prime Minister's words at the Dispatch Box that there was no pressure whatsoever. Will he repeat that statement? Let us see how brave he is.

This is absolutely critical: this cannot just be a debate about the Labour party, or a division between those who are in the inner circle and those who are on the outside. Again and again, we have seen the children of the chosen ones—people who had never been in Parliament before—getting all the best jobs. We now have the sacked chief of staff Morgan McSweeney's wife, who is a Whip, telling people to vote for a cover-up. That is not right. *[Interruption.]* She has been notified. I know that Labour Members do not like it, but have I said something that is not true? No. I am speaking the truth. I know it hurts, but someone has to point it out. Those people are hanging everyone else out to dry and I cannot believe that Labour MPs are letting it happen again.

I know that a lot of them are expecting a reshuffle after the May election. Let me tell them: it is not worth it. I say directly to those Labour MPs hoping to be Ministers after 7 May that they will condemn themselves to being sent out on the morning round to repeat things that they know are not true, that they do not believe in and that they know will end in disaster. They will end in disaster, as everything the Prime Minister touches does.

This vote should not be about loyalty to the Prime Minister, but about standards. Why should Labour MPs ruin their reputations to save a man who has never shown loyalty to them? He has shown that he will throw everybody under a bus: Sue Gray, Morgan McSweeney, Sir Chris Wormald, Sir Olly Robbins. Do Labour MPs really think that if this goes wrong he will not throw all of them under a bus? Some are walking around Parliament telling everyone that they are going to be one-term MPs and so it does not matter. It does matter, because when they leave this place no one will remember what their Whips told them to do. People will only remember that they voted for a cover-up. That is what will follow them around like a bad smell until the end of their careers. That is what will be in their Wikipedia entries.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this issue will be resolved in one or two places? It will either be resolved in the court of public opinion or in front of the Privileges Committee. It is actually in the Prime Minister's interests to have it resolved by a cross-party Committee of this House, which would give confidence to the public that the truth had been found, that the case had been made or not, and that they would have confidence going forward. The public will make up their own mind without the Privileges Committee.

Mrs Badenoch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I trust the Privileges Committee to do the right thing, as I always have.

I have some advice for Labour MPs: there is nothing wrong with giving their party leader the benefit of the doubt. As a Minister four years ago, I gave my party—*[Laughter.]* I do not know why they are laughing; I have not got to the punchline yet. Hang on; wait for it! As a Minister four years ago, I gave my party leader the benefit of the doubt, but I trusted the Privileges Committee to do the right thing, even when it was led by a former leader of the Labour party. We did not block the Privileges Committee from looking into things, and the minute that I was asked to go out and say something that was not true, I resigned. None of the Labour Members wants to do that. I will always be able to hold my head up high because I did the right thing.

I do not understand why Labour MPs are quite happy to repeat things that are not true. We have all seen *Hansard*. That is the difference between them and us. When we get things wrong, we put our hands up and say so; they pretend that the wrong thing is actually the right thing. They pretend that the bad thing is actually a good thing because it is Labour MPs who are doing it. That is what they are being whipped to do today. It is the same way the Mandelson appointment happened—they thought that because they were appointing him, it must be a good thing—and that is what is happening again today. They are being whipped to do the wrong thing.

If Labour MPs are telling the entire country that nothing matters except avoiding scrutiny of this Prime Minister, who will not answer questions at the Dispatch Box, they are telling people that the Labour party is not worth voting for. It does not exist. This is not the Labour party of Attlee, Bevan and Wilson. That Labour party no longer exists because they would never do this. They would never vote for someone who had stood at the Dispatch Box less than a week ago and read out doctored statements from the head of the Foreign Office, like the Prime Minister did.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): On the point of reading out statements, I see that the right hon. Lady is enjoying reading out her statement. What I cannot see is the case that she makes about the Privileges Committee, and what she does not think is right about a criminal investigation and the inquiries that are consistently being made about the decision, which we have accepted was wrong. What is wrong with the Foreign Affairs Committee and what is wrong with the processes—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry; you are out of scope.

Mrs Badenoch: Perhaps the hon. Lady should have just taken the Whips' questions instead of messing that one up. She raises an interesting point about the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is looking only at Mandelson and not into the issue of the Prime Minister misleading the House. Let us stop pretending that the Committee is carrying out a massive inquiry. It really is not.

Sam Rushworth: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Are you sure it is a point of order?

Sam Rushworth: I believe so, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Let's hear it.

Sam Rushworth: A moment ago, the Leader of the Opposition described the statement read out by the Prime Minister as "doctored". That is akin to saying that it was dishonest and that he was lying. Is that not unparliamentary language, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: As I suspected, it is not a point of order. You need to read the rule book. This is a substantive motion; it is not the normal debate. It might be helpful if you took some time out, rather than questioning, because you might be on to something, but not today.

Mrs Badenoch: Time and again throughout this debate, I have seen Labour MPs stand up and show that they do not understand what the rules are or what this is about. This is not about the specific statements; it is about whether or not there should be a referral to the Privileges Committee. They are moving the goalposts because they do not want to answer that simple question. They have come up with all sorts of excuses. It is not an excuse to say that there is a war on. The Prime Minister has said repeatedly that we are not in this war. He cannot have it both ways.

At every turn, the Prime Minister has tried to deny the House full transparency over this appointment. The House voted for documents to be released, and yet we discover that documents are not being released. That is a contempt of this Parliament. Labour MPs supported that Humble Address because they knew that we needed to see the truth. Documents from that release show that due process was not followed. The ISC is complaining that the documents are being delayed. We only discovered that there were numerous problems with Mandelson's vetting because of a leak to *The Guardian*. The truth is being covered up. Today's vote is about whether Labour MPs want to be complicit in this cover-up. If they vote against an investigation by the Privileges Committee, they are in this together.

This motion is supported across the House, including by Labour MPs, which is why they have to be whipped to vote against it. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) tweeted last week that he was calling for a referral to the Privileges Committee, before he deleted that tweet. This week he is calling it "a stunt". Why? Who is twisting his arm? Why was it not a stunt last week when he was doing it, but it is a stunt this week when everybody else is doing it?

May I remind those who are mindlessly repeating the lines the Labour Whips have given them that it is also their job to hold the Government to account and uphold the standards of our democracy? Appointing a known national security risk to be ambassador to the United States is a profound failure of government. Do they not think it is important that Prime Ministers tell the truth on a matter of national security, or do they think this is an internal Labour party matter that they can fix themselves? For those who believe that Andy Burnham is coming to rescue them, I just say that if they vote against this investigation, there will be so much contempt for Labour that there is no by-election on this planet that Andy Burnham will be able to win. This is not an internal Labour party matter. Do they believe that when something is wrong, we should look into it? This is about whether they believe that Prime Ministers should not destroy the careers of civil servants to cover up for their own failures.

I know it is very difficult for Labour MPs to walk through the Lobby with Members from other parties, but let me be clear what they are saying if they vote against this motion. Would they rather be on the side of Peter Mandelson, of convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein, of Morgan McSweeney and Matthew Doyle, and of the man who sacked Sir Chris Wormald, Sir Olly Robbins and Sue Gray? Is that what they came into Parliament for? Yesterday we read that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) said that Labour Members should back the Prime Minister so that she can pay off her new kitchen. Do they really want to tell their constituents that they voted against this inquiry because they are more concerned about their own personal finances than probity in public life? That is a shocking statement.

Every MP voting on this motion today will need to examine their conscience. This is not a matter of party loyalty; it is a matter of what each and every one of us believes is right. Labour MPs are being asked to defend a man who has let the country down, who has let Parliament down, and—let's be honest—who has let the Labour party down. I say to Labour MPs: you can defend the Prime Minister today, and there are enough of you to get the vote through, but you will be complicit in a shameful abandoning of promises made to the electorate—promises that every Labour MP stood on. It is up to them what kind of MP they choose to be. They can choose to live up to their promises on standards, to ensure proper scrutiny takes place and allow the Privileges Committee to get to the bottom of this, or they can choose to put party before country. Their vote will define them, and the public are watching.

They say it is a stunt—then let the inquiry expose it. They say there is no evidence of misleading the House—then let the Committee test it. They say the Prime Minister has nothing to hide—then they should not vote to stop the Prime Minister being scrutinised. They do not have to defend this. They can still do the right thing. They can show that Parliament matters—it matters more than any party or any faction. They can vote to enhance Parliament, or they can prove the worst fears of people who think there is one rule for Labour and another rule for everyone else. I commend this motion to the House.

1.24 pm

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): I have watched this whole sorry saga play out for weeks now. Like the public, I feel let down, disappointed and angry. Peter Mandelson should never have been appointed. That was a fundamental failure of judgment. Matthew Doyle should never have been given a peerage. That was also a failure of judgment. I feel the way that today's vote has been handled by the Government smacks once again of being out of touch and disconnected from the public mood. The fact that MPs like me are being whipped into voting against the motion is, in my view, wrong. It has played into the terrible narrative that there is something to hide, and good, decent colleagues will be accused of being complicit in a cover-up.

A number of weeks ago, at a private meeting with my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister, I spoke about how, after a career spent working so closely with victims of child sexual abuse, I could not even begin to express how much it hurts me when people are screaming at me in the street that I am a member of the "paedo protectors party". I also said that prior to this scandal, people criticised the Government's policies and, at times, lack of political narrative, but they are now questioning the Government's moral compass. My comments were leaked, almost immediately, by colleagues who were

[Emma Lewell]

present. My words were later used by the Leader of the Opposition. Recent weeks have seen such abuse intensify and ongoing abuse and threats to my and my staff's safety continue.

Privilege motions, ISC investigations, Committee hearings and process do not come up on the doorstep. What does come up time and again is a general feeling that there is something just not right—that politicians are failing to deliver on their promises. Trust has gone, and it has been replaced by anger. The already fragile fabric of our democracy is eroding further every day that this continues.

This Prime Minister is very careful with his words and does have respect for the office he holds. He does want to change this country for the better, and he truly believes in public service—something that has been sorely lacking from Prime Ministers in recent years—so I cannot understand why the Prime Minister does not refer himself to the Committee, with a clear statement that he is doing so to clear his name. One quick session of the Committee could surely see this matter concluded. Instead, this will now drag on and dominate every headline and interview. It will overshadow and undermine every good policy we make and continue to drag every single one of us down. Whether any Prime Minister misled the House is not a matter for the Foreign Affairs Committee, nor is it a matter for the Intelligence and Security Committee. It is a matter for the Privileges Committee—that is why such a Committee exists.

It may be that Opposition parties are using this motion to box Labour MPs in. I am not angry about that—that is politics; some of us here would do the same. I know one thing for certain today: I will not be voting against this motion. But I want to listen carefully to the rest of this debate, because like everyone, when I came to this House I wanted to do the right thing, and I hope I continue to do that for however long I have left in this place.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Ed Davey, leader of the Liberal Democrats.

1.28 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell), who made a very powerful speech. I think Members on all sides of the House listened to it, and I hope her colleagues on the Government Benches think about it carefully during the debate.

The Prime Minister called this motion a "stunt". That is not why I put my name to it. *[Interruption.]* I was just checking whether they were awake, Mr Speaker. It is funny, though, because "stunt" is exactly the same word Boris Johnson used about the motion that the Prime Minister and I tabled four years ago, referring Boris Johnson to the Privileges Committee. Ironic? Alanis Morissette could probably write a whole album about it. It was not a stunt then, and it is not a stunt today. It is, as the Prime Minister said back then, a motion that

"seeks to defend the simple principle that honesty, integrity and telling the truth matter in our politics."—[*Official Report*, 21 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 352.]

Honesty, integrity, telling the truth—these things matter in our nation's Parliament perhaps more than anywhere else.

When I hear the Prime Minister complain that we have tabled this motion just over a week before important elections, I find myself transported back to that debate four years ago, seven days before crucial local elections. At that time, Conservative MP after Conservative MP made exactly the same bogus argument in defence of Boris Johnson. Although there are differences in the whipping arrangements, I find it hard to take some of the sanctimony from the leader of the Conservative party seriously. She and her Conservative colleagues propped up Boris Johnson back then. She called him a great Prime Minister. Even after the game was up and Johnson was gone, she dismissed the partygate scandal and called it "overblown". It does seem that there is quite a lot of hypocrisy to go around.

I want to try to be consistent, so I looked back in *Hansard* at what I said then, and I was struck that I can use exactly the same words today. I said that

"with families facing the deepest fall in their living standards since the 1950s, with the pain of energy bills and rising food prices compounded by the Government's unfair tax rises, we know that our constituents are facing real hardship. It is not just a cost of living crisis; it is a cost of living emergency. At such a time, the country needs a Government that will be focused on tackling that economic emergency. Crucially, it needs a Government that it can trust".—[*Official Report*, 21 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 372.]

Labour Members agreed with me back then; I hope they will still agree with those words now.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): The right hon. Member has mentioned Boris Johnson a few times, so I just wanted to remind the House that Boris Johnson misled the Foreign Affairs Committee. His words about my constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, meant that she spent six extra years in jail for a crime she did not commit. He had multiple opportunities to apologise, including when he saw Nazanin face to face. Does the right hon. Member think that when someone has made a mistake, especially someone in a position of power, they should apologise?

Ed Davey: Mr Speaker, I can see from your restlessness in the Chair that you do not necessarily want me to go down that particular avenue, but I hope I speak for others when I reflect on how incredibly depressing it is that nothing has really changed.

The British people are facing a cost of living emergency. They need a Government focused on tackling it and a Government they can trust, but instead this is what we have. We have a Prime Minister who promised to be different, who promised to turn the page and who promised, above everything else, change. He has now mired this Government in the same endless cycle of chaos and scandal as the last one. He is a Prime Minister who appointed Peter Mandelson as ambassador to the United States, even though his links to Jeffrey Epstein had been widely reported, even though those reports had been brought directly to the Prime Minister's attention and even though the Cabinet Secretary had advised him that security clearance should be acquired before the choice was confirmed. He is a Prime Minister who, despite all that, still told the House repeatedly that "full due process" was followed. He is a Prime Minister who says that "No pressure existed whatsoever" to appoint

Mandelson, despite all the evidence we have heard to the contrary, as the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) set out in her speech. We have a Prime Minister who desperately claims that he would not have appointed Mandelson if he had known about UK Security Vetting's recommendation.

The Prime Minister said that we would find what he told us to be "incredible", and we do, but that last part is the most incredible of all. Does he really expect us to believe that after all of that—ignoring the clear warnings from the propriety and ethics team, ignoring the advice of his then Cabinet Secretary to get the security vetting done first, and ignoring everything we already knew about Peter Mandelson and announcing his appointment to the world before the vetting had been done—if he had been given the same recommendation as Olly Robbins received that it was a borderline case, he would have cancelled the appointment? Do Members on the Government Benches really believe that is what would have happened? That claim is all that is left of the Prime Minister's case for the defence, and I am afraid that it just does not stand up.

I will finish not with my own words, but with those of another Member four years ago—the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). I know that her words carry a lot of weight on the Labour Benches. She said that

"the only way to get to the bottom of this issue and regain public confidence in our democracy is by respecting the processes that have been created to enshrine the rules of our Parliament. I point out that the process we are following today is in place only because the Prime Minister has failed to do the decent thing and resign. I repeat: honesty, integrity and the truth matter in our politics. Today, MPs across the House have the opportunity to defend those principles and to vote to support our democracy."—[*Official Report*, 21 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 425.]

The right hon. Lady was right back then. That is the opportunity before MPs today, and I urge us all to take it.

1.35 pm

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): Last week in the emergency debate I spoke about the appointment of Peter Mandelson, the approach taken by the Prime Minister as details have become available, and the vetting process overall. Today, I want to address the motion and why I feel it is premature. In doing so, I believe that three principles of this House are key to our considerations today: transparency, due process and proportionality.

A privilege motion is a serious matter and a tool available for Parliament to use in such circumstances. Although a privilege motion is to address such matters, its use also impacts on the integrity of the House and its procedures. Deploying a privilege motion prematurely or in the absence of full and proper grounds has the ability to impact negatively on the integrity of the House.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I refer the hon. Member to the words of Mr Speaker earlier. It is the Speaker who decides whether a privilege motion goes ahead. The hon. Member is criticising Mr Speaker for having allowed it.

Gurinder Singh Josan: My point is about our consideration of the motion. The fact that Mr Speaker made the decision means we are here discussing it. I am putting a case forward about why I think it is premature to vote on the motion today. Just because the Leader of the Opposition and others have decided to table it does not make it right; it is clearly a political and partisan process.

I am clear that any allegations or concerns must be addressed, and it is clear that the Prime Minister is of that view, too. It is why we have the Humble Address, ongoing inquiries by the Foreign Affairs Committee and even an ongoing police investigation. It is right and proper that all allegations are examined thoroughly and that these processes are allowed to run their course. I suggest that while those things are ongoing, the privilege motion is premature.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is giving a powerful speech. He says that all allegations should be investigated properly. With the greatest respect to him, the Foreign Affairs Committee is not looking into whether the Prime Minister misled the House, and neither are the police. There is no process to do that, other than the one that Mr Speaker has allowed to be brought to the House today, which is to refer this matter—whether the Prime Minister has misled this House—to the Privileges Committee to determine. If the hon. Gentleman is to be consistent, he should agree with that and vote for it today.

Gurinder Singh Josan: The right hon. Gentleman should understand that we are here today only because of things that have been determined, whether from the release of papers through the Humble Address or from evidence people have given to the Foreign Affairs Committee. For him to say that those processes have no relevance is wrong; they absolutely have full relevance. My whole case is that we should let those processes complete in their entirety. That is why I believe this motion is premature. Given that those processes are already taking place, this privilege motion is premature. More than that, this motion is a clear attempt to bypass those processes.

Whatever one's view of the substantive issues, there are some points on which we should all agree. The Prime Minister has been forthcoming in addressing the allegations, both in the House and outside. The Prime Minister has apologised from the very outset in the House and outside it, for the decision to appoint Peter Mandelson, and his apologies have been full, wholesome and without equivocation. He has also specifically apologised to the victims of Epstein. The Prime Minister has repeatedly answered questions in the House and outside, and has shown a willingness to be held accountable.

Ayoub Khan: Whatever the merits of the motion, does the hon. Member accept that the party whip should not be exercised so that politicians are constrained and cannot support or oppose a particular motion? Does he agree that that whip should be withdrawn?

Gurinder Singh Josan: I am a humble Back Bencher, and I would not disagree with my Chief Whip in respect of his decisions on how to apply the whip. That is a matter for him.

All the inquiries that I have mentioned are ongoing, and are being robustly pursued. I fear, therefore, that the motion risks setting an unhealthy precedent, namely that unproven allegations alone are sufficient to utilise

[Gurinder Singh Josan]

one of Parliament's most serious procedures. That is not something with which any of us should be comfortable. The naked politicising of this process will not serve Parliament well. My further fear is that while Opposition Members are seeking to utilise this procedure in this way, some of them will already be looking into what other procedures they can use to extend the process in the same partisan fashion.

It is incumbent on all of us to give consideration to due process and proportionality. Diverting from the high standards that voters expect of the House risks damaging confidence in Parliament itself. Substantial parliamentary and other processes are already under way. We should not pre-empt those processes, which is what this motion has the potential to do, but should allow them to be completed. That is in the best interests of Parliament and in the best interests of transparency, due process and proportionality, and that is why I call on Members to vote against the motion.

1.42 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Sometimes the wisdom of the House is crystallised in the comments of us ordinary Back Benchers. That was particularly evident today in the brave speech of the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell) and, indeed, the intervention of the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) on the Leader of the Opposition. Both Members said, in effect, that what we have lived through in the last several months is a tragedy—not just for the House, not just for the Government, not just for the Labour party, but for the trust in government, and in our democracy among ordinary people.

At the risk of expulsion from my own party, I will admit to having hoped after the election that this Prime Minister would succeed, because it was in the interests of the country that he did so, but in some ways even more importantly, it was in the interests of our democracy. There is already extant throughout the western world a corrosion of belief in democracy; that goes on and on, and this will make it worse.

We are here today for a simple reason. Statements made by the Prime Minister in this Chamber are at odds with those provided by the civil service on the material issue of Peter Mandelson. This matters. It is not a stunt. Honesty between Ministers and Parliament is fundamental to our democracy. Without it, scrutiny fails. Without it, accountability fails. Without it, trust fails. The responsibility for absolute honesty rests most heavily on the Prime Minister, so the standard that should be met by the Prime Minister is even higher than that applying to others. Recklessness with the truth from any Minister is unacceptable; from the Prime Minister, it is indefensible.

All political parties have their inherent flaws—and I am not going to spend a whole day talking about mine—but the origins of this situation lie in a stance often taken by Labour MPs, which is that good intentions somehow justify bad decisions. It is a case of saying, "We mean well, so our mistakes do not matter" or, worse, "We mean well, so we should be forgiven for anything", whether it is freebies or wrong appointments or whatever.

That mindset, which I am afraid constitutes a sanctimonious arrogance sustained by a habit of believing their own propaganda, is precisely what led to the appointment of a deeply unsuitable individual as our ambassador to Washington: a man twice dismissed after scandal; a man now under formal investigation by the European Union's anti-fraud office; a man who had an extraordinary relationship with a convicted paedophile; a man driven, above all, by a pursuit of glamour, money and status; a man who turned amorality into an art form—and, in addition to that, a man plainly compromised by over-close relationships with the proxies of both the Russian and the Chinese Governments.

Together, those facts should have made this appointment unthinkable, yet the concerns were brushed aside. The head of the diplomatic service, as we heard this morning in the Foreign Affairs Committee, was not even consulted. Why? Because within the London establishment, a ludicrous self-deception had taken hold—that the peculiarities of the Trump Administration could be countered by the peculiarities of Peter Mandelson.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the previous ambassador, Dame Karen Pierce, was widely—indeed almost universally—respected and felt to have a good relationship with the previous Trump Administration, and there was no reason to believe that she would not have a good relationship with the current Trump Administration?

David Davis: That is entirely true, and in fact, the current Trump Administration made the same point to the Government before the nomination of Peter Mandelson.

That perverse logic led to the most obviously unwise public appointment in modern times, and the implied message, unfortunately, was clear: "Government appointments rest on networks of patronage; great offices of state are perks to be handed out to friends." It is systemic. They even tried to secure an ambassadorial appointment for Lord Doyle, a man so unsuitable that he has even had the Whip withdrawn. Mandelson's unsuitability was evident before vetting began. It would have been surprising had the vetting service not found grounds to reject the appointment. I suspect that No. 10 knew that, and leant on the Foreign Office to ensure that the outcome was secured quickly and without question.

One Member—I cannot remember his name, or see him in the Chamber—tried to suggest earlier that pressure on time was different from pressure on outcome, but when vetting is involved, it is not. My first positive vetting took six months. Now, I know I have unreliable friends, but I have fewer, I think, than Lord Mandelson. It would have taken quite a long time to get to the bottom of all the issues relating to Lord Mandelson. Saying "You've got to do it quickly" is the same as saying "You've got to do it shoddily." Let us not lose sight of that.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, but is it not true that the post of UK ambassador to Washington would be held by someone who would therefore have access to extremely sensitive intelligence, potentially including nuclear co-operation? Surely the

fact that Mandelson had been found to have been working for a Russian company post the invasion of Ukraine should have completely barred him from the appointment, on that ground alone.

David Davis: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. Indeed, it is worse than that, because this post is the nexus of the entire Five Eyes intelligence co-operation. Our service is not like that of the Americans. In the American embassy, the CIA is freestanding; the ambassador does not matter. In our service, the ambassador runs the local secret service element, as it were, so he or she is entirely responsible and has entire access. That is an issue with the Americans in particular, because they are incredibly sensitive about the corruption, or the undermining in any way, of the security of that arrangement, so we could actually have put the whole Five Eyes co-operation arrangement at risk—but my right hon. Friend has led me off on a completely different tangent.

I come back to the general point. Sir Philip Barton was asked this morning about delay, attitude and pressure; when asked at the Foreign Affairs Committee if he recalled "any dismissiveness in No. 10 about the importance" of Mandelson's vetting, Sir Philip—Sir Olly Robbins' predecessor—described No. 10 as "uninterested" in his security clearance. The evidence that Sir Olly Robbins gave was that, throughout January, there was "constant pressure" and an "atmosphere of constant chasing". Yesterday, Ian Collard, the former head of the Foreign Office security team, corroborated Sir Olly Robbins's account. Just this morning, again, Sir Philip Barton repeatedly emphasised that there was pressure to secure Mandelson's vetting clearance within a "very compressed timescale", yet the Prime Minister told this House only a week ago that "no pressure existed whatsoever". If that was the only issue, it would justify being referred to the Committee of Privileges—in order to resolve what the exact truth was—but it was not the only issue. Plainly, if the Foreign Office is right, the Prime Minister is wrong—and, on that timetable, actually, deliberately wrong.

Let us take some other occasions. On 4 February this year, the Prime Minister gave an unambiguous impression, when asked about Epstein's coverage in the security clearance, that he had seen Peter Mandelson's security vetting file, but in April he told the House that on 14 April he

"found out for the first time"

that Mandelson had been granted

"developed vetting clearance, against the specific recommendation of the United Kingdom Security Vetting that developed vetting clearance should be denied."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 23.]

Those two statements are incompatible—again, a free-standing failure of the rules.

What is more, that chaotic clash of opinions reinforces the impression that, far from "following due process", as the Prime Minister has maintained on a number of occasions, No. 10 was effectively making it up as it went along. As we have already heard from the Leader of the Opposition, the then Cabinet Secretary, Simon Case, issued explicit advice on 11 November 2024: secure the

"necessary security clearances…before confirming your choice."

That was reinforced this morning by Sir Philip Barton, who said of the correct process:

"The normal order is vetting and then announcement."

Normal due process was clear, but the Prime Minister did the opposite. Claims that this was normal defy common sense.

For career ambassadors, developed vetting happens for every new post. If someone goes to become the ambassador in Tehran, they are DV-ed. If they then go to become ambassador in Washington, they are DV-ed again—but at that point, the vetting is an update, so it is lower risk. By definition, our ambassadors are, generally speaking, low-risk security personnel anyway. That is plainly not the case for a high-risk figure like Peter Mandelson. Indeed, frankly, it is hard to imagine a higher-risk appointment to a post that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said, is of the utmost sensitivity. To appoint first and vet later is not due process, and it is certainly not prudent. It is a gamble with national security and a risk to our single most important alliance.

There are three instances where the Prime Minister made questionable statements: his insistence that there was no pressure, when there evidently was; the two versions he gave of when he saw the vetting file; and his assertion that due process was followed, when it clearly was at odds with the process described by both the Cabinet Secretary and the permanent secretary for the Foreign Office.

The Prime Minister made a deeply questionable decision. We cannot know for certain whether it was due to cronyism, a misunderstanding of the role or excessive leniency towards a member of his own party—something he would never have tolerated, and quite rightly, from any other party. Whatever the explanation, the conclusion is unavoidable: the decision was wrong. To implement it, established procedures were bent out of shape. The civil service was placed under extreme pressure to deliver outcomes that sat on the margins of propriety. When concerns were raised, they were not confronted but sidestepped. As usual in No. 10, an attempt was made to place the blame on somebody else.

Even in this week's *New Statesman*, which is traditionally a banner carrier for the Prime Minister, there is a quote—I think it is in Tom McTague's article—from a senior Government official who goes on at length against the Prime Minister and ends by saying:

"Ask Chris. Ask Sue. Ask Morgan. Ask Olly. He will say he takes responsibility, but then he makes everyone else pay."

That is what we are looking at.

Rather than addressing concerns directly, the Prime Minister proceeded regardless, and only later sought to justify his decision with answers that were, I am afraid, frequently misleading. As a former Director of Public Prosecutions, he should have known better. What began as a mistake evolved into something more serious. A failure turned into a defence, a problem became a pattern and, ultimately, the situation now looks like a cover-up. But as we have already heard from my Front Benchers and a number of other speakers, today is not about determining guilt; it is about determining whether there is a case to answer. Finding the truth and adjudicating guilt is the task of the Committee of Privileges, which has both the time and the access required to examine the evidence in full.

[David Davis]

Much has been made of Boris Johnson's appearance before the Committee of Privileges, and I am famously a fan of Boris Johnson. When a similar motion was brought to this House on whether the matter should go to that Committee, it was clearly recognised at the time that we were not delivering a verdict, but deciding whether there was a case to be answered. At the time, I made it very plain to our Whips Office that I would not countenance any attempt to block a proper investigation into a House of Commons matter. I was by no means alone; a number of other colleagues made the same argument. As a result, the Government of the day accepted that it was a House of Commons matter. It is improper for the Government to intervene in such a matter to try to guide the House. Accordingly, the motion passed without a Whip, and without a Division. Interestingly, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) thought otherwise.

Dr Arthur: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Davis: In a debate about misleading the House, it makes me wonder when Members of this House accuse others of not voting on a motion that did not lead to a vote, so I will not take an intervention. I will certainly not take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman. He is a noise maker, not a truth issuer.

On the evidence before us today—contradictions, procedural failures and an emerging pattern of conduct—there is plainly a case for referral. Where doubt exists, it should be resolved through proper scrutiny. Where a case exists, it should be tested. This case should go to the Committee of Privileges, and go today.

1.57 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis). He and I rarely agree politically, but we do work together constructively in our constituencies for the betterment of the region.

I start by way of an apology, because last week—I think this was mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition—I accidentally published correspondence between me and you, Mr Speaker. That was my mistake. I respect you, Mr Speaker, and I respect your office, so I apologise sincerely for that mistake, but it was my mistake.

Do I believe that the Prime Minister deliberately misled this House? No, frankly. I have known him a long time, and I think I know him very well. It is fair to say that I describe him as a friend, and I think he has described me as a friend as well. Both him and I are lawyers by trade. In my honest opinion, there is no way that the Prime Minister would come here and deliberately mislead the House. However, there was a very significant difference, in my view, between what the Prime Minister said in answer to the right hon. Lady the Leader of the Opposition in last week's Prime Minister's questions, and Olly Robbins' evidence the previous day. I think I am right in saying that the Prime Minister said there was "no pressure whatsoever", intimating that that was the evidence that Olly Robbins had given to the Foreign Affairs Committee, but I watched every minute of it and that is definitely not the case. I have looked back, and I have checked *Hansard* and the evidence that was given by Olly Robbins.

So I do think that there is a prima facie case for this matter to be investigated and for an inquiry to be conducted by the appropriate Committee of this House. I suspect that is not going to happen, because this debate is being whipped. I do not blame the Government for that—I find it unfortunate, to be honest, but they are not setting any new precedent; there is precedent for whipped scenarios in these situations in the past. But I do think that the Prime Minister would be vindicated.

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman is right that there are some precedents for House business being whipped, but the lesson is that it is a fool's errand—it is normally the start of the end. He is making a fair point and being kind to his Front Benchers, but does he agree that we should learn from precedent and not necessarily repeat it?

Karl Turner: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who is spot on. She leads me to the point raised by the Leader of the Opposition. I made a statement on social media that this motion is a stunt. A stunt is defined as an action designed to capture attention, but it is worse than that, actually. If I was to be cynical, I think the problem is that the motion is designed to capture Labour MPs. That is my concern. If it is said by our political opponents that Labour MPs came here today to block an inquiry of this House into the leader of the Labour party and Prime Minister, every single one of us will be accused by the electorate of trying to help the Prime Minister when he needed to face the music.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has set out a detailed chronology. He has made it abundantly clear that he has not lied and he has not misled this House. In those circumstances, would it not be right to embrace this process and wipe the floor with the critics who have put those things to him? While we are at it, would my hon. Friend agree that the fact that Peter Mandelson had previously made it abundantly clear that his purpose every day was to take action to bring down the then duly elected leader of the Labour party made him wholly and utterly unsuitable for the office of ambassador?

Karl Turner: I was about to say that my hon. Friend is a good man—he used to be my boss in the shadow Transport team, Mr Speaker, and he always tries to help me. I do not want to get into the stuff about Mandelson, as my hon. Friend hopes I will. But while I am speaking about the appointment of Mandelson, I will say this: I think that the Prime Minister appointed Mandelson in the national interest. I think he thought Mandelson would go to Washington, do a job in the national interest and deliver for the country. I think that is why he made the appointment.

When it became clear, following the Bloomberg emails, that the appointment was politically difficult for the Government, the Prime Minister again did the right thing by dismissing Mandelson, very properly. Where I think the Prime Minister went wrong was in the shenanigans between those two points: looking around for an excuse for why it had gone wrong. "Just take it on the chin—deal with it!" That is the advice I would have given him, and that is why I am particularly disappointed.

Colleagues who came in at the last general election might be disappointed in me for having the audacity to stand up and say what I happen to believe is the truth. I am sorry if they are not happy with me, but I am here to represent not my interests but the interests of those who elected me. That is what I will always do; whether it is against the policy of a Tory Government or my own Government, I will do what I think is in the interests of my electorate.

Let me warn colleagues about what will happen if we are seen to go through the Lobby to defeat this process. It is a reasonable process; this is not the shenanigans that the Government have suggested in relation to jury trials. This does not involve a single judge, but a jury of peers—impartial, and made up of more Labour MPs than Tory MPs. The Prime Minister has nothing to fear. He ought to do the right thing. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) has suggested, he should have referred himself. That would have saved us all this messing around—debating the point and trying to justify why the referral is a bad idea or having two Committees running alongside each other. Utter nonsense! Get on with it, let it be dealt with and let us move on.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned my recommendation that the Prime Minister should refer himself. I did that because when someone is under attack like this, they should not run away from the attack; they should face it with confidence. They should argue that if people want to criticise the individual concerned, they should produce the evidence. My hon. Friend knows as well as I do that the Privileges Committee would deal with this matter fairly, and I believe that the Labour party would come out stronger as a result.

Karl Turner: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. I think I said on Twitter that he rarely gets things wrong—I was accused of being wrong for agreeing with what he said. In the time I have known him, my right hon. Friend has rarely, in my opinion, got it wrong. I think he is absolutely spot on.

I am confident and convinced. I know the Prime Minister and know that he is not a liar. I know for a fact that he would not deliberately mislead. I think he would be exonerated. The trouble we now face is accusations from the electorate that we stopped the inquiry from happening in the first place and that the Prime Minister is guilty through the fact that we avoided it. Once we are in that position, we have a big problem, because you cannot prove something that never happened.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

2.7 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I want to speak only briefly. I am not particularly party political. I do not like making personal attacks and I am not calling for the Prime Minister to resign. I am not questioning the appointment of Peter Mandelson—this debate is not about whether that was a good decision. I am sure that at the time there was some logic in appointing him. Obviously, the incoming President was a very political, difficult character, and it was felt that Mandelson had the political skills to deal with him. I understand all that, so I am not making a big issue about whether or not it was right to appoint him.

I was not going to speak in the debate until I heard the very powerful speech made by the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell). It came from somebody who is obviously a loyal member of the Labour party, as is the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who has just spoken. They were not trying to damage their own Government; all they were trying to say, I think, was that when there is an issue such as this, when all sorts of allegations are being thrown across the Floor of the House about whether people lied or not, a Privileges Committee process is one of catharsis. We saw that with Boris Johnson. There was deep upset in the country. Whether that was fair or not, and whether Mr Johnson acted wrongly or not, we know that there was deep upset about partygate. But it was right for the House to decide to have the Privileges Committee inquiry. We knew that, in a way, that drew a line under the whole thing.

I believe the Prime Minister. I am sure that he is an honourable person. It is not for me to say that he deliberately misled the House. But there are many questions that quite reasonable people are asking. One of the most reasonable questions was put by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition: if due process was followed, why was a dedicated civil servant, Sir Olly Robbins, sacked for apparently not following due process? I think many reasonable people feel that what is really monstrously unfair about this matter is that dedicated civil servants were simply trying to carry out the wishes of their political masters and that Sir Olly Robbins has paid a very great price. Our civil service is incredibly loyal to Ministers. They work loyally for Ministers and they try to carry out their wishes. I think many reasonable people feel that the treatment of Sir Olly Robbins has been quite wrong and that he should be reinstated.

But that, in a way, is for another day. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) put it so well: if there is nothing to hide, why worry? These scandals are such a war of words that we almost lose track of what was originally true. It is not the original scandal—if there is indeed a scandal—that is at fault; it is the cover-up or the perceived cover-up. What is the best way to restore public trust in Parliament, in the system and in what the Prime Minister said or did not say? The public are not that interested in all the details. They are probably, like me, quite confused about whether the process was followed, who said what, whether the chief of staff bullied the head of the Foreign Office and so on. Those are all just party political words and the Westminster bubble. What is important is the reputation of this place. The most important thing in this place—we may say wrong things, we may say silly things, we may be party political—is that we must tell the truth. That is all that matters. Nothing else matters in this Parliament.

I am prepared to accept that the Prime Minister, for whatever reason, made this appointment. I am prepared to accept that in his heart of hearts, when he has been standing at that Dispatch Box, he has been telling the truth. Why can we not just have the Privileges Committee—not the Foreign Affairs Committee, which is deciding great issues of foreign affairs—look at that narrow issue? Why can we not just not have a vote at all, as we did on the previous occasion with Boris Johnson? Just do not have a vote, let us all express our point of view and let it go through. Let us have an impartial Committee,

[Sir Edward Leigh]

let us listen to the testimony, and let the Committee and the House of Commons make up their own mind on the truth.

2.12 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): First, it is important that in all of this we are centring Epstein's victims, who have so often been forgotten. Their courageous campaign for justice and accountability continues and we must all do all we can to support it.

I have heard the argument that this is all a distraction from the real issues that we should be discussing. I would like nothing more than for us to be focusing on what the Government have delivered, such as: bringing NHS waiting lists down; raising the minimum wage and lifting children out of poverty; and pushing for even greater ambition. Unfortunately, it is because of serious mistakes made by No. 10, such as appointing Peter Mandelson, that those achievements are being overshadowed.

I also do not doubt that the Conservatives are attempting to use this issue for their own gain ahead of the local elections. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell) said, that is politics—of course our political opponents will try to exploit our weaknesses. Nevertheless, I believe that our constituents do care about the honesty of politicians and that they deserve nothing less than the whole truth on this matter.

This vote is not on whether we in this House believe the Prime Minister misled Parliament or not, but whether we believe there are questions the Prime Minister needs to answer, and that the Privileges Committee should look at the matter and give its assessment. I appreciate that the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry is ongoing—I commend its Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), for her fantastic work—but the purpose of that inquiry is not to look at the Prime Minister's conduct.

I have listened to the Prime Minister's arguments and unfortunately I am yet to be convinced that he has definitively not misled the House, even if inadvertently. I am concerned that, given Sir Olly Robbins' evidence, pressure was put on the Foreign Office regarding Mandelson's appointment. If I remain unconvinced, I am sure there will be a sizeable number of our constituents who are also unconvinced. Why not let the Privileges Committee settle this matter once and for all? As is often said, sunlight is the best disinfectant.

If we are to preserve what little trust still remains in our political system, it is vital that Ministers demonstrate the utmost transparency. And it is vital that we, as MPs, no matter our political allegiance, do not allow the impression that we are in any way attempting to cover things up for the leadership of our parties. That is why I am extremely disappointed that Labour MPs are being whipped to oppose the motion. Votes on House business are not normally whipped, and even Boris Johnson's Government did not whip Conservative MPs to oppose his referral to the Privileges Committee. I am not making any comparison between his behaviour and that of the Prime Minister's, but our Government must be seen to be holding themselves to far higher standards than the mess of sleaze and corruption that Johnson's Government came to represent. I wish that the Prime Minister would refer himself to the Privileges Committee, demonstrating his confidence that he has nothing to hide and preventing entirely the need for a vote.

Colleagues will be aware that the Prime Minister and I have had our political differences—that is to be expected in a broad-church party—but I want to be clear that that has absolutely no bearing on my vote today. I would rather stick to debating those politics, not matters of integrity, so it brings me no pleasure to vote for the motion today. But this is about doing what is right by our constituents, for trust in politics and for the party that I have been a member of for almost half my life.

2.16 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): There has been a common theme in the remarks made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome)—it is a pleasure to follow her—and the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell). I do not really know what wings of the Labour party they are on, or what complexion of Labour they are, but I do know that the three of them are Labour people, and part of the Labour family to their very fingertips. The emotional difficulty that they felt in giving their powerful speeches was certainly tangible to Opposition Members. I hope that their right hon. and hon. Friends felt it, too.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) and one or two others have mentioned, one of the hardest things in this place is when your instincts and your judgment are to go against the herd—against what your family, or the Whip, is telling you to do. Politics is a tribal thing. We stand together or we hang together, so we are told; but it was Lord Nolan, in the principles that he set out some years ago, who reminded us all that the exercise of our judgment as individual Members of Parliament is so important. It was depressing to hear the hon. Member for Smethwick (Gurinder Singh Josan) say, slightly tongue in cheek, "I'm just a humble Back Bencher. It is not for me to say what the whipping should be." We are all capable of forming our own rational judgment, informed by all sorts of imperatives.

One or two Labour Members have prayed in aid, as a reason why the motion should not be carried, the Humble Address. I remind colleagues from across the House, but particularly Government Members, that when we started the debate on the Humble Address motion, Government Members were being whipped to vote it down. It was only when the Government Chief Whip and the Leader of the House—two right hon. Gentlemen for whom I have the highest esteem and regard—and the Paymaster General listened to the debate and read the mood of not the House but Labour Members, that they realised that imposing the Whip was wrong, and that they needed to meet somewhere in the middle. Now, all of this could go away, of course, were the Prime Minister to refer himself.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend and I could never have been described as the greatest fans of Boris Johnson. When the question of his going before the Privileges Committee came forward, the Conservatives decided that the Committee was the right body to decide whether he had misled Parliament. Nobody was calling for his resignation until its report came out; after

that report, this party moved, and he went. Is it not the flip side of the coin that once the Privileges Committee has cleared the Prime Minister, as many Labour MPs believe will happen, his strength will grow? Is it not true that he has nothing to fear?

Simon Hoare: My right hon. Friend has many skills; one that I have just learned of is that he is able to read the left-handed scrawl of my notes, even when he is sitting next to me, because that is the point that I am just about to come to. The hon. Member for South Shields wondered, as have one or two other Members, whether this motion is a trap set by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and Opposition Members. I do not think it is, but if it were, the Government whipping operation today has baited that trap. It is the wrong thing to do. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) suggests, it makes the Prime Minister look uncertain and weak. He is not using a large parliamentary majority in this place to deliver change for the country; instead, he is turning his MPs into a human shield for himself.

I agree with the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East: I think the Prime Minister takes his training and experience as a lawyer very seriously. I think he takes the integrity of politics very seriously. I sometimes think the Prime Minister can be naive in presuming that everybody else takes a similarly elevated view of these things, and I think that can feed into some of his problems. One has to ask: what would the Prime Minister—an experienced lawyer—have to fear from having his name cleared and his reputation strengthened by going through a cross-party, informal process of this House? He would have nothing to fear. He would feel stronger.

We understand that Labour Whips and loyal Ministers have been picking up the telephones, and accidentally on purpose bumping into people in the Lobby and elsewhere, and asking them to vote this motion down. For what it is worth, may I give some thoughts on how I would respond, were a Whip from my party to ask me to do the same?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Keep it clean.

Simon Hoare: Don't worry, Madam Deputy Speaker; I have checked what is parliamentary language and what is not.

The first point I would make is one that has already been made. I was never a fan of Boris Johnson. We first met in the late 1990s; I never got him then, and he never got me, and nothing ever changed, but not even Boris Johnson thought to apply a Whip on a privileges motion. The question I would be asking the Whips, if I was the hon. Member for Smethwick or any other Labour MP, is this: does Labour really want to let Boris Johnson look like the good guy, when it comes to referrals to the Privileges Committee? That is bad politics, as far as the Labour party is concerned.

The second point I would make is that the Privileges Committee can be a fulcrum, the place where this boil is lanced. It will do that dispassionately, and do it well, without fear or favour. That is what it is taught to do. It has done that in the past; it could do so now; and it will doubtless do so in the future. There is nothing to be afraid of. This is not a kangaroo court, or a Committee composed solely of people who really cannot stand the Prime Minister. It is a Committee of this House.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My hon. Friend is, as usual, making an excellent speech. He is talking about the composition of the Privileges Committee. Is it right to say that a majority of its members are Labour Members? The Prime Minister would be asking his own colleagues, among others, to judge him.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is right. The same was true, of course, when the Privileges Committee looked at Boris Johnson's behaviour; the majority of MPs on the Committee were Tory, and the Committee was still able to come to a judgment on the facts and the evidence.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: Would my right hon. Friend forgive me if I do not? A lot of Members want to speak, so I want to make a little progress.

The third compelling point is that Labour Whips and Ministers will have deployed an argument about the local elections, and elections in Wales and Scotland; they will say, "This will not do Labour any good at all." Well, what would give a whole lot more confidence to party canvassers would be the ability to say, if this subject was raised on the doorstep, "My leader has nothing to fear. He has referred himself to the Privileges Committee—or has sought not to hinder a motion that referred him." If Labour Members follow the advice—that might be the gentlest way of describing it—of Government Whips today, they will be creating the largest albatross to hang around their neck in these closing days before polling day. They will be asked, "Why did you vote to cover up for the Prime Minister? Why did you not do the right thing? What has the Prime Minister got to hide? Why is the Prime Minister running scared?". It would be far better to be able to say to the floating voter, or the person havering over where to put their cross, "What confidence my party leader has! The Prime Minister is happy for this to happen. He is absolutely clear in his own mind that his integrity is unimpeachable and his honesty is unquestionable. He has not misled the House." They would be off to the races! But this is another trap that the Labour party seems to be keen to fall into. We are all familiar, I would say to the Whips, with the idea that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Let the Privileges Committee be that sunlight.

I can well remember the whipped vote in the previous Parliament. Thirteen of us Government Members rebelled. It was a hard and tricky vote. We came under pressure during it, and most certainly after it. However, within 24 hours, the position of the Government had changed, and they found themselves pointing in the direction of those of us who had rebelled, rather than those who had been loyal.

This may be a slightly old-fashioned question to ask ourselves, but when we leave this place—either by our own choice, or by the choice of our electorate—we all want, I think, to sit back and ask ourselves: when those crunch votes came, did we do the right and honourable thing? Did we do something that left our soul and spirit feeling peaceful, or in a state of turmoil? Possibly more

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importantly for today and tomorrow, could we, without blushing or crossing our fingers, or trying to find some weasel words, say truthfully why anybody would vote against this motion, if we were asked that in the supermarket queue this weekend, or at the butcher's, the fishmonger's or wherever?

If there is nothing to hide, let that absence of something to hide be shown to the Privileges Committee. The Prime Minister will be strengthened, the integrity of this place enhanced, and the honesty of politics burnished. The referral is the right thing to do. In their hearts, Labour Members know that. They should have the courage of the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull East, for Nottingham East and for South Shields; they will be in jolly good company.

2.30 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): The appointment of Mandelson was a profoundly flawed process; it was also a profoundly flawed choice—it was the wrong choice. I think of the victims of Epstein; I also think of Alistair Darling, who was a fine, committed public servant, and what he would be thinking today.

This afternoon, we are being asked to make several leaps of faith, one of which is to believe that just nine days from local and national elections, we are here not because of a political stunt co-ordinated by the Conservative party but to accept that the Conservatives have turned into a sober, principled set of defenders of parliamentary standards who are not interested in pre-election theatre. Nobody seriously believes that. Even their own press briefings give the game away: a senior Conservative source was reported as saying

"we got the privileges vote. That was the goal"

ahead of the local elections. The goal was not the truth, not the outcome, and not the merits of the case—it was simply to force the spectacle of a vote. That tells us everything we need to know about the intent behind what is happening this afternoon.

It is therefore no surprise that this debate has been widely characterised, even by those observing closely—political correspondents—as a win-win exercise for the Opposition. If they secure an inquiry, they claim vindication; if they lose, they still bank the headlines, the insinuation and the noise. That is not how the House should conduct itself when invoking one of the most serious mechanisms at its disposal.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Smethwick (Gurinder Singh Josan) powerfully pointed out, we are not dealing with a vacuum. Mechanisms are already in train, including the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Humble Address, and last week the Prime Minister answered questions for nearly three hours. That is important.

Referral to the Privileges Committee is not a partisan tool or a device to be deployed because one side sees a political opportunity. It exists for a clear, serious and evidenced prima facie case of misleading the House—cases that go to the heart of ministerial integrity.

Dr Luke Evans: If it is not party political, why is it being whipped?

Tim Roca: Because it is so evident that what the hon. Member is participating in this afternoon is partly political. In fact, he is partaking in a particularly dishonourable act in doing this in such a partisan way.

To carry on with the case that I was making, I do not believe that what has been presented meets the bar that I just mentioned.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Member give way?

Tim Roca: No, I am going to make some progress.

At most, what we are dealing with is an argument about, as I said, a deeply flawed appointment, a deeply flawed process and the judgments around it. Those are matters for political debate, for scrutiny and for challenge across the Chamber, but they are not in themselves grounds for alleging contempt of Parliament. If they were, the Privileges Committee would be constantly in session.

That brings me to the question of consistency. In recent years, the House has had to confront genuinely serious breaches: cases where standards were not just questioned but plainly and repeatedly violated; findings of bullying at the highest levels of government in the last Government; and Ministers in the last Government falling short of the standards expected of them. Most notably, we saw a former Conservative Prime Minister investigated and found to have repeatedly misled the House.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Tim Roca: I will finish this point; I might then give way if I am feeling generous.

That conduct was so grave that it resulted in a damning report, which I think the Leader of the Opposition abstained on, rather than voting in favour of it. Of course, that is quite aside from the fact that it also involved a criminal conviction.

There is no equivalence—none—between those cases and what is before us today. If there was, there would have been a genuine attempt at a cross-party piece of persuasion. Instead, what we got from the Leader of the Opposition was a rambling rollercoaster on Iran, the two-child benefit cap, U-turns and so on. To attempt to draw that comparison is not just wrong but diminishes the seriousness of those findings in the past. It risks turning the Privileges Committee from a guardian of standards into a weapon of convenience. The motion speaks the language of contempt—contempt of Parliament—but actually it reveals something else: the contempt in which the Opposition hold the British people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Let us keep the temperament good.

2.35 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), who has done no harm whatsoever to his case to soon become a junior Whip in the Government—*[Interruption.]* Or a trade envoy, of course. [Hon. Members: "An ambassador!"] I will let hon. Members have their fun soon.

I wish to start on a much more important note, which is to dwell not on what the Prime Minister said when he is accused of having misled the House—I will come to that—but on something that he said at the Dispatch Box a few months beforehand. In response to the Leader of the Opposition, he stood up just there and said that he knew—he knew—that Peter Mandelson had maintained a relationship with the world's most notorious paedophile and child trafficker, Jeffrey Epstein. When he stood up at that Dispatch Box and finally admitted that he knew, that should have been it—that should have been curtains for him. At that moment, Labour Members should have made a moral decision that he was not fit to hold the office of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and First Lord of the Treasury because his judgment was flawed and it was wrong, but they proactively chose to ignore that and to defend him. In the weeks that have passed, all we have seen is even greater scandal engulf this Prime Minister and Labour Members, whether they realise it or not; some appear not to.

We have now received confirmation from the Prime Minister's chief bag carrier that as Parliament returns after the Prorogation that is to come, the second tranche of the Mandelson files will become apparent. Each and every one of the Members opposite will be wedded to the Prime Minister as their leader, despite everything that the public know and everything that the public will come to learn. Let me tell them something, as someone who has sat in this House and watched a little bit of chaos up close: it will come back to haunt them, and it will come back to bite them far sooner than they realise.

All of us in all our political parties go through these moments. I have seen it in my own party in recent years, just as Conservative Members have said they have seen it in theirs. But what we should seek to do in politics is to learn from those mistakes, not to repeat them. I remember sitting outside the Chamber during a contentious vote to which the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) referred, where Conservative Members were whipped to support the indefensible and all chaos broke loose. That was the legacy that the Conservatives built for themselves, and that is why they got hammered at the last election. That is what will befall Labour Members. They cannot outrun Peter Mandelson. They cannot outrun their own Prime Minister and his record.

What Members of this House are being asked to do today is very simple. If they believe that the Prime Minister is innocent of the accusations that are being put to him, all they need to do is accept the premise of taking this to a Committee of their peers in this House—ourselves—to decide whether it is accurate. A confident Labour party and a confident Government would believe their Prime Minister; they would have courage in their convictions and go to that Committee posthaste to clear his name, but they will not do that because they are not acting from a position of strength. They are acting from a position of profound weakness. The public see that and smell it, and all they are going to believe is that there is a cover-up on behalf of each and every one of the Labour Members who traipse through the Lobby behind those who sit on their Front Bench.

Peter Fortune: Referring to the whiff that the public may pick up, does the right hon. Gentleman think that the Prime Minister's concern could be that the Privileges Committee will deliver a result that he might not like?

Stephen Flynn: It is hard at this stage to come to any other conclusion. If Labour Members had confidence in their Prime Minister, they would already be going to the Privileges Committee, irrespective of the views of any of us in this here House.

Notwithstanding the arguments that have been made regarding Olly Robbins, Simon Case and others, or the Prime Minister's decision to throw everyone under the bus bar himself, I do wonder what the public make of all this, at a time when they are—I am sure we can all agree on this—profoundly anxious about the very basics in their life. They are anxious about being able to afford things in the supermarket and about being able to fill up their car because the price of diesel is near two quid, yet when they turn on their TV they see a Labour party that should be acting in their best interests and looking to protect and save their jobs, and to give them hope and opportunity for the future, seeking to defend the indefensible. That breach of trust with the public cannot simply be renewed.

When the Prime Minister first came to the Dispatch Box following the general election, I did as many others did: I congratulated him and wished him well. The phrase that sits most acutely in my mind from that moment was his attempt to convey to the people of these isles that he would tread lightly on their lives. He has done the opposite. He promised to be change, but I am afraid to say that he has delivered more of the same. The public deserve better. The Government can do better, but that will happen only if the Labour Members who are sitting behind their Front Bench find the courage that those on the Front Bench so badly lack.

2.43 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): As others have said, it is important that when we speak in this place we reflect the feelings of those we represent, and I think that if they see anything at all in all of this, they will be thinking about Epstein's victims. As someone who knows more about sexual abuse than I would like to, I want to be absolutely clear, before I make any other remarks, that I think that it was wrong to appoint Peter Mandelson, even knowing what the Prime Minister knew at the time. But I will also say this: the Prime Minister has acknowledged as much. He has acknowledged it at the Dispatch Box, he has acknowledged it to the parliamentary Labour party and he has acknowledged it to Epstein's victims, who he has apologised to on multiple occasions. I speak with ordinary people, like my auntie who voted for Brexit and did not vote Labour at the last election. She told me that she thinks the public are sick and tired of hearing about this, because we are not addressing the bread-and-butter issues of their lives. None the less, this is the motion before the House today.

I also want to say a word about pressure. Many people have alluded to this being a whipped vote. In many ways, I wish it was not, because it would not change the way that I will vote. I intend to vote against the motion before us, and I would do so based on my conscience and how I read this situation. I am a Back Bencher with nothing to lose and nothing greatly to gain from loyalty to the Government. I have looked at the merits of the case, and I think it is really important that we have a robust system of standards in this place,

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and that we do not make a mockery of it. When we have politically motivated charges such as those that have been brought today, it risks making a mockery of the Privileges Committee and the process.

Graham Stuart: What does the hon. Gentleman say to his colleagues, the hon. Members for South Shields (Emma Lewell), for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome)? They do not see this as some politically motivated thing. This is a serious issue. It is a House issue. He has already said that he regrets that the vote is whipped. Surely he needs to see beyond whatever the Whips have told him.

Sam Rushworth: The Whips have not told me very much, but I will address the right hon. Gentleman's question as I make progress in my speech and he will see why I have drawn my conclusions.

The question is this: has the Prime Minister deliberately or recklessly misled the House, sufficient to make a referral to the Privileges Committee? As I said a moment ago, it is important that we treat that question properly, because we should not treat the Committee lightly; we should not mock it. If we made political referrals every time a Member said anything where someone could twist or misconstrue their words, we would always be making referrals.

It seems to me, from listening to the Leader of the Opposition, that there are two principal claims. One is regarding whether due process was followed; the other is regarding pressure. I have been watching the evidence sessions in the Foreign Affairs Committee, as we all have, and I have been listening carefully. We are still awaiting many of the documents, including more than 300 that have been referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee. We are waiting to see what those documents say, but nothing that has come out so far has done anything other than corroborate what the Prime Minister has told us.

Peter Fortune: I just want to make sure that I can follow the hon. Gentleman's logical structure. When he said that the Prime Minister said that there was no pressure whatever, he meant that there was no pressure whatever apart from the various types of pressure—is that right?

Sam Rushworth: I will address that point in just a moment.

First, let us address the point about process. Sir Chris Wormald's letter to the Prime Minister said:

"The evidence I have reviewed leads me to conclude that appropriate processes were followed in both the appointment and withdrawal of the former HMA Washington."

Sir Olly Robbins confirmed that he did not tell the Prime Minister that Mandelson had failed the vetting process, and said:

"You are not supposed to share the findings and reports of UKSV, other than in the exceptional circumstances where doing so allows for the specific mitigation of risk."

Cat Little, who also appeared before the Foreign Affairs Committee, said:

"My view is that due process was followed...because the process as I've outlined to the Committee, is that UKSV make a recommendation, and the Foreign Office make a decision as to whether to grant DV."

All the evidence so far is certainly corroborating that view.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sam Rushworth: I will in a moment. I want to address my colleague's question about pressure.

Clearly there are different types of pressure that can be exerted, and Sir Olly Robbins was clearly talking about the pressure to reach a decision quickly—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members all know what was going on in the decision to appoint Peter Mandelson. We had had a change in Government in the United States. We had no trade deal with the United States, thanks to the legacy that the Conservatives left us. We had a difficult situation that meant that we needed a capable ambassador in post before President Trump's inauguration.

Harriet Cross: Is the hon. Member therefore suggesting that the previous ambassador was not capable?

Sam Rushworth: I am happy to answer that point—*[Interruption.]* If Opposition Members stop chuntering, they will hear the answer, which is no, not at all. It is my personal view, although I am not an expert in these things, that I probably would have appointed an ambassador. I have said I thought the appointment of Peter Mandelson was wrong. I would have probably appointed an ambassador to the United States or left her in post, but that is immaterial to the point I am making. The point I am making is that No. 10 clearly felt time pressure to get somebody in post. There is a difference between feeling a pressure to conclude a process quickly and pressure being exerted on someone to change the decision. If we listen to what Sir Olly Robbins actually said, we will see that.

Peter Fortune: I am genuinely listening to the hon. Member's logical process as he ratiocinates through it. I humbly say that we could set this evidence out in the Privileges Committee. In terms of no pressure whatsoever being exerted—and he is talking about the kinds of pressure exerted that that did not include—could he give examples of the kind of pressures that were not exerted?

Sam Rushworth: We have seen no evidence and, indeed, Sir Olly Robbins made it quite clear that he did not feel pressure to change his mind, that pressure was exerted on him with regard to the decision that he made. There was pressure exerted to make a decision. That is just part and parcel of the normal running of government, particularly when working to a timeline. Let me quote him:

"I walked into a situation"

where there was a

"strong expectation—you will have seen the papers, released…under the Humble Address—coming from No. 10, that he needed to be in post and in America as quickly as humanly possible, the very first formal communication…to my predecessor from the No. 10 private office being that they wanted all this done at pace and Mandelson in post before inauguration."

That does not imply that there was some pressure to appoint him against the evidence that came forward.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Having recognised that, as Sir Philip Barton said this morning, there cannot be any doubt that there was pressure to get this "done as quickly as possible"—that is, to jump through all the hoops, to confirm an announcement that had already been made that Mandelson was appointed as ambassador—*[Interruption.]* That first bit is a quote; the next part of the sentence is my words. It simply stretches the bounds of reason to breaking point to suggest that pressure on timeframe, within the context of an already announced decision where there was no contingency plan, had no impact on pressure on the content of that decision—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Message received—I call Sam Rushworth.

Sam Rushworth: I simply disagree. Pressure to get things done is part and parcel of what we do in government all the time. I am always under pressure and under deadlines. On the central allegation that the Prime Minister somehow pressured them with regard to the decision, I am sorry but the evidence has not pointed to that in any shape or form.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) *rose—*

Dr Chowns *rose—*

Sam Rushworth: I will not take any more interventions, because Madam Deputy Speaker is looking at her watch. The allegation simply has not been substantiated. There is pressure going on at the moment: documents are being released under the Humble Address and evidence is being given before the Foreign Affairs Committee. I have to wonder why the Opposition have not waited until that process has been concluded before writing to the Speaker requesting this motion.

I want to address a couple more points quickly, and I will not take any more interventions. I acknowledge that there are Members on the Government Benches, and indeed some Opposition Members, who have suggested that they are so confident that the Prime Minister has no case to answer that he should just refer himself to the Committee to prove it. I do not think that that is the way we should be using the Committee's time. The onus is on this place to decide whether any evidence has yet come forward that suggests that there is a case to answer, and I do not think that anybody so far has shown any.

People have also referenced the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. I remind the House that at the point he was referred to the Privileges Committee, it was not a case of what happened in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office beyond the Prime Minister's knowledge. This was a case of him saying, "There were no parties in Downing Street," of him then appearing photographed at parties, and there being a Metropolitan police investigation and a criminal conviction. I am simply not going to indulge the Opposition in their games. We all know what this is about. We all know that somewhere in Conservative headquarters right now, graphs are being prepared with our faces on them to try to play some narrative to our voters that we are all part of some big cover-up. When we behave like this, it does a disservice to all of us and to this place, and I am simply not going to play their games today.

2.54 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): The motion does not attribute wrongdoing. It represents a simple choice and a decision: do we as a House support transparency, and do we think that truth in this place still matters? Peter Mandelson's CV reads like an indictment—we all know that—and I do not need to rehearse the litany of appalling and heinous decisions and acts. For me, that leaves no question but that the Prime Minister's judgment was absolutely found wanting in this situation. Given the seriousness of Mandelson's actions and of this appointment, surely every Member of this House wants to know why he was appointed, how he was appointed and whether we and the British people have been given the full story of what happened.

I worked at the Foreign Office as a civil servant. If I, listening and reading every single detail, feel that something does not sit quite right; if I have former colleagues ringing me and saying, "That is not how the process works. It just doesn't make sense—that is not right"; if we then have the Prime Minister saying that he had seen the vetting, "Oh no, I meant I'd seen something else. Sorry, I had not seen the security vetting; I had seen the due diligence. Oh, there was not any pressure put on" when others most clearly think there was pressure put on; and if the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) is genuinely suggesting that there is no such thing as abuse from those who have more power against those who have less, that politicians do not sometimes behave appallingly to civil servants and that, "Oh, we are all busy. It's the same pressure", then I say no. That is why we have specific laws.

Sam Rushworth: Will the hon. Member give way?

Alicia Kearns: Let me finish this point and then I will happily take an intervention.

We have specific laws that when someone senior to you puts you under undue pressure or treats you in a certain way, they have to take far more responsibility, because they have the ability to exercise that responsibility and authority over you which you cannot challenge. If the hon. Gentleman wants to come back and argue that he does not believe that in hierarchies, particularly No. 10 political appointments versus civil servants, there is such an imbalance in power, I will happily have him make that case.

Sam Rushworth: I think the hon. Member knows that I have great affection for her, so I am disappointed in the way she has just made that point. In Sir Olly Robbins's testimony, he said that No. 10 was repeatedly asking, "Has the vetting been completed?" That is inconsistent with the idea that No. 10 regarded the vetting as immaterial to its decision—quite the opposite. It demonstrates to me a No. 10 that felt that this was an important process that had to be followed. There was of course pressure to complete it quickly, but that does not mean that there was pressure to change the outcome. I am sorry but until somebody shows otherwise through evidence, there is no reason we should believe that.

Alicia Kearns: I am sorry but the idea that somebody just chasing an update—"Can I just check where we are with that? We really would like to get it done"—and

[Alicia Kearns]

that there is no concept of any bullying because someone is just asking for something to be done a bit quicker, is a foolhardy suggestion by the hon. Gentleman.

The Prime Minister has come to the House many times, as hon. Members have said, but he has not answered the questions. The Prime Minister himself set the terms. Either he misled the House or he was reckless with the truth, and those are the terms that he set. Multiple people have lost their jobs over this Prime Minister's decision to appoint Mandelson: two civil servants and two political appointments. For a man who said he would never sack his staff because of his own appointments, that is quite something. The Prime Minister's judgment has also shown that he was happy to appoint people to Cabinet who had lied to the police, where he knew full well that they had done that, so there is a pattern.

Olly Robbins lost his job for implementing the wishes of the Prime Minister by the book. Either he followed due process and was sacked for doing so, or there was no due process and he was sacked because there was not. The Prime Minister's position so far is that the former is true; it cannot be both, in which case Olly Robbins should never have been sacked. He did his job under immense pressure and was stripped of the agency to say no. As Mr Speaker set out at the start of the debate, this motion does not attribute guilt to anyone and the vote today is for an investigation by the Privileges Committee. That Committee is chaired by my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), and I want to place on the record my total faith in his probity and professionalism.

Unfortunately, as we have seen in previous approaches and investigations, some people may seek to undermine individuals.

I appreciate that there are a range of views among Labour Members. Some of them seem genuinely to believe the Prime Minister's version of events, while others share the concerns of Conservative Members, even if they are reticent to say so. I point out that at no point in this debate has there been more than nine Labour MPs sat on the Back Benches who were elected before 2024.

I was once a new MP, and I too went through this process. As I have said before, on the Owen Paterson vote, I voted in a way that I deeply regret. I had planned to vote against him, because, in watching the debate from the Government Benches, I was horrified by what I saw. Despite the enormous pressure from people around me, I thought, "Okay, I must do what is right," and I decided to vote with those 13 brave Conservatives who did the right thing. I then went downstairs to breastfeed my daughter, who was very young at the time—she was just turning six months old—but when I came back upstairs there was only one minute remaining following the Division Bells. When I looked at the two voting Lobbies, I could not see those 13 friends who had gone the right way on the vote, so I stood there on my own, absolutely terrified about what to do, and saw everyone else going through the other Lobby. I will never, ever accept feeling that way ever again.

I say to the new intake that there is a reason why no other MPs from previous intakes are on the Labour Benches, and why MPs from previous intakes have said, "If your gut is telling you there's a problem, there's a problem." They have given you their advice. They often tell us how dismissive you are of them, but—*[Interruption.]* Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker—you would never be dismissive of anyone.

There is a reason, and you should take that time—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Again.

Alicia Kearns: Oh my goodness! I can only apologise again for saying "you", Madam Deputy Speaker.

There is a reason why Labour MPs from older intakes have chosen not to come and defend the Prime Minister: they have seen this show before and know what happens. They know that their gut is telling them the right thing to do. I congratulate those of them who have been brave enough to speak out and share their views.

The House will recall that the Government attempted to whip Labour MPs against giving the Intelligence and Security Committee a role in assessing and releasing the Mandelson files, as per the Humble Address. Parliament asserted itself on that day, and we must do so again. A vote against this motion will show loud and clear that Labour Members forgave, followed the party line and ignored their conscience. There is precedent here: in 2022, the House unanimously passed a motion allowing an inquiry into whether the then Prime Minister had misled Parliament. We Conservatives supported that motion—not a single MP blocked it. I know how hard such decisions are because we have been there. I supported the Committee's finding that Boris Johnson had misled the House. My advice to Labour MPs is to listen to your conscience and do what you know is right. Members will thank themselves, as the years pass by, for being free of the weight of regret.

Standards matters should never be whipped. Is any Labour MP willing to stand up and say that the threat of having the Whip removed has not been made? So far, none of them has said that. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, pressure seems to be an issue that we ought to debate more. I would also say to Labour MPs who are considering speaking in this debate that you may find—[Hon. Members: "They may find!"] Labour Members may find that, before the vote this evening, their party changes its mind and they are no longer being whipped. I encourage Labour MPs to reflect on whether that is the record that a Member may wish to have. Whips do change their minds if Members make representations to them. Can you truly say that the whole story is out there?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. May I remind the hon. Lady that much of her speech has been addressed to me, but I am not speaking or voting this afternoon?

Alicia Kearns: I fully accept that. I know better and I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The hon. Lady's speech is based on wisdom, reflecting on her personal experience in previous votes. Does she agree that, no matter which voting Lobby we walk through, the question we must all ask today is whether we can justify our decision to our constituents?

Alicia Kearns: Absolutely. Some Members have suggested that their constituents do not really care about process and whether the truth is told in this Chamber, and that they are not really interested in this privilege motion, but that is most certainly not the case—and that is something that Members will experience in the months to come.

I fear that a future release of files will further contradict the Prime Minister's version of events. We discovered only this morning that Jonathan Powell, the National Security Adviser, was also appointed before being vetted. I asked the Government about his vetting in February, and I was told that national security vetting for the current National Security Adviser was conducted to the usual standard set for developed vetting. Does that sound familiar? Clearly, something went awry and due process was not followed, but this House was told once again that due process was followed. Judgment is revealed not in the exception but in the pattern, and there is a very clear pattern in this situation.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Lady comes to the crux of the debate: was due process followed? The simple fact is that vetting must always come before an appointment, but as we heard in evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee this morning, that did not happen. It is clear that due process was not followed.

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman is completely right. We were told repeatedly and consistently that due process was not followed. I know that it was not because I have been through security clearance. At the first level, before I could hand in my notice at my existing job and join the civil service, I had to wait seven months for security clearance. Then there was developed vetting, for which I had to wait about six months before I could take up a new role. I have also been through STRAP clearance, so I have been through the works. The claim that due process was followed does not sit right with me. Fundamentally, if due process was followed, Olly Robbins did not deserve to be sacked—he must have breached due process if he needed to be sacked.

I will vote in favour of the motion and end my day with a clear conscience, knowing that I voted to give my communities the answers that they deserve. I hope that every Member can say the same. We are asking whether the man leading our country has the judgment that his office necessitates and the required commitment to the truth. At this moment, the country does not believe that that commitment is there, so let us have an inquiry and see if it was.

3.7 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): From the outset, I wish to state my support for the delivery of justice for all the people who were harmed by Jeffrey Epstein and those involved with him who committed such despicable violations and crimes, and who must be held responsible. The people who were exploited should be at the front of all our minds.

It is my opinion that this motion does not come from anything noble or a deep concern for those who were trafficked or abused; nor is it about the protection of democracy or anything of that nature. Of course, the motion is designed to embarrass the Prime Minister and put Labour MPs in an awkward position. Not for the first time, we Labour MPs are in an awkward position, and not for the first time, it is because of the Prime Minister's actions, not those of the Opposition.

The accusations of secrecy and goings-on in this place are serious political issues that mean the world to a whole host of our constituents. Sometimes that relates to the traditions and protocols of this place, which to many people seem archaic, arcane and totally unrelatable to how they lead their daily lives. People are regularly frustrated by Ministers not answering questions at the Dispatch Box, and, equally, by shadow Ministers' amnesia about their own record when in power. People are infuriated watching politicians do the media circuit, slavishly going through the party lines, no matter how illogical they may be. All of it just breeds utter contempt in politics and for politicians. People are sick to the back teeth of it all.

When I am out campaigning and knocking on people's doors, they tell me just how irritated they are with politicians who endlessly try to deflect and defend the most absurd and wrong decisions, just because of the party they represent. Of course, this is not unique to the Labour party—all parties indulge in this. The Conservatives defend their record of austerity that ripped the heart out of communities up and down the United Kingdom. Many in the SNP refuse to take responsibility for failures in housing, education, health, local authorities and vital public services, but credit to the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) for alluding to, with a lightness of touch, some of the travails that his party has experienced.

I just want my Labour Government to be better than that. It really is a low bar that we have been set, but people genuinely think that we are all the same—they see no real difference. To echo other right hon. and hon. Members, I think that the Prime Minister should refer himself to the Privileges Committee. It would say to Parliament—and, more importantly, to our voters across the country—that he knows that he will be proved innocent, that he will be vindicated, that he has got nothing to hide, and, importantly, that transparency and accountability really are at the heart of our democracy.

I say to my colleagues on the Labour Benches that we were elected based on the promise of providing change—an end to the scandals and the cover-ups that people are so disgusted with. Whether it be Tory lockdown parties or trips to castles hundreds of miles away to test eyesight, the SNP abandonment of care homes and the "do not resuscitate" notices placed on patients without their consent during covid, we need to be better than all of that. But truthfully, in our first 20 months in government, the public do not think that we are.

Because of the mistakes, the decline in standards, the secrecy and the lack of accountability, we are paving the way for a hard-line, far-right Government to come next. And let us be under no illusions: that Government would set the country back to the days of mass unemployment, dire poverty and inequality. They would want to create a society that is as intolerant as it is unfair, and it absolutely terrifies me.

In finishing, I say to any colleague who thinks I am wrong: please do have a look at the polls—look at the by-election results that we have had. The Prime Minister said that we would put country before party. Today, with this vote, he has the perfect opportunity to do just that. The Prime Minister needs to stop putting Labour

[Brian Leishman]

MPs in awkward situations. The open and honest thing would be to refer himself to the Committee of Privileges. If he will not do that, then I am afraid that he has left me with no choice: I will have to vote for the motion this afternoon.

3.12 pm

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): At the start of the debate, when Mr Speaker was in the Chair, he reminded the House that this was not a trial of the Prime Minister, but a debate about whether or not an issue should be put to the Privileges Committee; I do think we all need to remember that. He also said that when the debate became repetitive, he might consider taking a closure motion. I am sorely tempted to move one, Madam Deputy Speaker—but not yet.

It saddens me deeply that we are where we are today. It saddens me that the motion has been presented by some Members on the Government Benches as a ruse before the local government elections. This is about something very fundamental to many of us; it is about the truth, the probity and the integrity of this House, and every man and woman who sits in it. I have heard some very courageous speeches from the Government Benches this afternoon, and I applaud each and every one of the people who made them, because I know just how difficult this is.

Mr Johnson has been referred to frequently. I was one of the first—possibly the first—to call publicly for him to resign as Prime Minister. That was not a happy circumstance—I did not enjoy it, as I do not like taking on my own side—but I believed then, as I believe now, that that man was not fit to be Prime Minister. I know that what I did and said was right, as I believe those hon. Members on the Government Benches who have spoken in support of the motion are doing what they believe to be right.

I am horrified to have to believe that House business is being whipped. It should not be. It has been said repetitively that the sensible thing would have been for the Prime Minister to refer himself to the Privileges Committee. If that is not going to happen, we all need to understand that there are people out there who are waiting to see what we do and if we can be trusted—never mind if the Prime Minister can be trusted. Can we be trusted to take the right and proper decision tonight?

Every single one of us is going to get up in the morning and look in the mirror, either to put on make-up or to shave—

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Or both.

Sir Roger Gale: My right hon. Friend reminds me that he said, incorrectly, that the vote on the call for Johnson to resign was not taken until after the Privileges Committee had released its findings. He is quite wrong: that call was made well before it went to the Privileges Committee.

Let me come back to what I was trying to say. Every single one of us has to be able to look in the mirror and live with ourselves. I hope very much that the Government Whips will withdraw the whipping tonight, so that hon. Members can vote according to their conscience. I believe that if that is done, then this matter will be referred, entirely properly, to the Privileges Committee, and then after the King's Speech we can get on with our job and devote our concerns to the cost of living, fuel prices and the manner in which hospitality businesses are being destroyed, and to all the matters that we ought to be discussing today, rather than discussing this. I beg my friends on the Government Benches to do the right thing tonight.

3.17 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): A referral to the Privileges Committee, particularly involving a Prime Minister, should be rare. The bar should be high, because we have so many other processes available to us in this place, and with this issue, many of those processes are already in action. The Foreign Affairs Committee, excellently chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), is taking evidence and will report in due course. The Humble Address from this House has put a process in place to ensure transparency, and the Government are complying with it.

Then there is attendance in this Chamber. I have no doubt that the Prime Minister will continue to make himself available here, as he has done in recent weeks through statements and at Prime Minister's questions, both because it is right and because the processes of this House require it. Let us be honest about the timing. Bringing this motion forward one week before elections is political. I do not criticise that—it is part of the system we operate in—but we should be clear about it.

I have been reflecting this week on the concept of pressure. We have heard from senior civil servants that there was pressure to proceed with the appointment of Peter Mandelson before vetting had concluded. They have not said that the pressure was inappropriate; they have said simply that it existed. For his part, the Prime Minister has been clear: he has said that this was the kind of pressure that exists in any high-performing environment where decisions need to be made and progress needs to happen. That is very different from pressure to do something that you are not comfortable with. I suppose the truth is that my experience of pressure is not the same as the Prime Minister's—a degree of recalibration is required on my part.

I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and we apply pressure to senior civil servants every week. We expect them to account for their decisions, often in difficult circumstances and under public scrutiny. Time and again, I am struck by their professionalism and ability to handle that pressure, and I am equally struck by the Prime Minister's ability to do the same. Whether it is at Prime Minister's questions or in extended sessions such as the one we held last week, when the Prime Minister answered questions for more than two hours, that level of scrutiny is constant and unrelenting.

In my time in this House, I have never known the Prime Minister to act in anything other than good faith. He is focused, serious and determined to deliver in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Is he perfect? Of course not—none of us is. His is an almost impossible job in turbulent times, but that is the nature of government. The public elect a Government and give them time to govern. That requires consistency, judgment and, at times, the ability to change course as circumstances

demand. It does not require abandoning the course entirely at the first sign that another ship looks to be sailing more smoothly.

We are quite clearly in the middle of a storm. It is not a passing squall, but sustained, difficult conditions—economic pressure, global instability and challenges at home that have been building for years. In those circumstances, what matters is not whether the sea is calm, but whether the vessel is seaworthy and whether the person at the helm knows how to navigate. No ship is perfect—there will always be repairs to make, adjustments to take and decisions that, with hindsight, might have been handled differently—but abandoning a ship mid-storm or trying to sink it is a risk. We may find another ship that is sailing in different waters and under different conditions, but let us be honest: the same storm is heading its way. The real question is not whether things are perfect, but whether we have a vessel that can withstand the conditions and a captain who can steer it.

When I look across the Chamber, I do not see credible alternatives ready to take us through what lies ahead. On one side, we have a Conservative approach that too often feels like a ship designed for a different age—a wooden ship that is not equipped for the realities of the world we now live in. It is a vision that looks backward, rather than forward. On the other side, I see the SNP. If it cannot reliably build and run the ferries that connect its own communities, that raises serious questions about its readiness to navigate a much bigger journey. The SNP's is less of a fully equipped vessel and more like something assembled for the appearance of movement, rather than the reality.

Dr Arthur: Does my hon. Friend agree that it appears the SNP does not have a ship right now? It must have—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I think hon. Members will find that this debate is not about the SNP. Perhaps we all ought to confine our remarks to the subject we are actually debating.

Chris Kane: To finish my metaphor—not about the SNP—we must hold steady, make the adjustments needed and focus on getting safely to better conditions. That is the task in front of us, and that is why I will support the Prime Minister to continue doing the job that he was elected to do, keep a steady hand on the tiller and guide the country through challenging times. I urge colleagues to do the same.

In the end, this is about stability, seriousness and leadership, and that is what this country needs. Today's motion feels to me like a distraction from that mission, so I urge colleagues across the Chamber to vote against it.

3.24 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The Prime Minister has called this motion a "stunt" and "pure politics", but he and the Labour MPs rallying around him forget the seriousness of the allegations against him. The allegations regard misleading the House of Commons over statements relating to the appointment of Peter Mandelson as ambassador to the United States—an individual with well-documented links to a convicted sex offender and human trafficker. Swatting away those allegations as a "desperate political stunt" and refusing to let them be investigated properly by the Committee of Privileges is an insult to us all. It is an insult to the public, who were promised transparency and openness by the Prime Minister's Labour Government, and it is an insult to victims and survivors of violence and abuse, who deserve so much better from those who claim to represent them.

Parliament is today being asked a straightforward question: whether serious concerns regarding the Prime Minister should be examined properly and independently. If the Prime Minister insists that he has done nothing wrong, surely the Committee of Privileges will come to the same conclusion. If Labour believes that everything is in order, why has it forced its MPs to vote against the motion? That begs the question: what does the Prime Minister have to hide?

The Prime Minister promised change, and people across Wales gave him a mandate for that change, but what did the public get instead? Misjudgements, incompetence, a lack of transparency at the heart of Government and no real accountability. I put myself forward to become a Member of Parliament because, to be frank, I was fed up of partygate, the betting scandal and the £250,000 that Vaughan Gething accepted in order to fund his leadership campaign. I thought, "We are better than this. as residents and constituents, we are better than that." People deserve a Government who are honest and transparent, and we certainly have not had that in the two years that I have been on these Benches.

The Prime Minister has tried to wash his hands of Mandelson's appointment, hiding behind processes, procedure and the actions of civil servants. He has been destroying decent people's lives only to hobble on for another few weeks. Even if the Prime Minister's loyalists vote this motion down, Labour and the Prime Minister will have shown their true colours. In just over a week, the people of Wales have a chance to give their verdict, and they will.

3.27 pm

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I rise in this debate first and foremost to reiterate, as other colleagues have done, my fullest solidarity with the victims of Epstein. We should always maintain them at the forefront of our minds. Notwithstanding their absence from the motion, I know that many colleagues on both sides of the House have referenced them, and I am sure that we will continue to do so.

I want to be clear that I will vote against this motion, not because I have to be told to, but because the case has absolutely not been made. Given some of the contributions made about shaving or putting on make-up in the morning, and considering and reflecting on the vote that will be cast tonight, I will have no compunction whatsoever and absolutely no doubt in my mind when I go through the Lobby that I will have made the right decision. I do not need insinuations to the contrary impugning my integrity.

Ayoub Khan *rose—*

Mr Barros-Curtis: Before I explain why I am making that case and that decision, I will happily give way.

Ayoub Khan: Of course, every Member is entitled to make their decision, and to vote in either Lobby, but they have to justify that to the electorate. Given that, does the hon. Member believe that a three-line Whip is necessary?

Mr Barros-Curtis: That is an irrelevant point. I have already said that regardless of the position of the party, I do not need to be told how I will vote on this motion, because the case has not been made out. *[Interruption.]* If people will stop chuntering, I will respond to the individuals who have said that we will have to look in the mirror tomorrow. I have no doubt that every decision we make in this place, whether on this motion, on amendments or on legislation, is made with integrity, and with the best interests of our constituents in mind, so reminding me or my colleagues of that today suggests more about the person making the statement than it does about me and the decision I have made.

As I have said, I will vote against the motion, because I do not believe that the case has been made out. In my time as a solicitor, I have seen many witness statements and particulars of claim, and the case that the Leader of the Opposition laid out today was one of the most appallingly made-out cases I have seen in my professional lifetime.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Barros-Curtis: If the right hon. Gentleman will wait to hear why I think that, I will happily give way in a moment. As has been said, the motion cuts across existing procedures that everyone in this House unanimously agreed, supported and initiated just a few weeks ago. As I have stated and will go on to explain, it lacks any credibility or evidential basis.

Graham Stuart *indicated dissent.*

Mr Barros-Curtis: The right hon. Gentleman can chunter some more, but maybe he should listen to what I say about the basis on which I reached my decision, and then I will happily give way.

Before I turn to the lack of evidence to make out this case, I want to mention—as others have—the integrity of the Prime Minister. I have known him for a number of years, and I know that he is a man of integrity. I know that he will act without fear or favour, and will always be the hardest critic of himself. He has rightly apologised for the poor and incorrect decision to appoint Peter Mandelson. He has done it in this House, he has done it to the country, and most importantly, he has done it to the victims of Epstein.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Barros-Curtis: The right hon. Gentleman is very eager. I will give way.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is being most generous with his time, but we have not really heard the case yet. Labour colleagues will be in a similar position to the hon. Gentleman. They know the Prime Minister—they have known him for years—and will be sure of his integrity or otherwise. Why does he think that a three-line Whip should be imposed on Labour Members? Even the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), who spoke for the Prime Minister's cause, could see that that was not a good idea, but the hon. Gentleman does not seem to see it. As a good lawyer, maybe he will be able to share that argument with the House.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's patronising tone, but I will simply say that I do not need to be told how to vote on this motion, because I do not believe that the case has been made out, as I will explain now, if I can make some progress.

I underline my point by reiterating what the Speaker said earlier, and what I said to him when he was in the Chair: of course, the question we are considering is not about the application that was put before him. He has rightly made a decision, as he was required to once the application came before him, but I am clear that those who submitted that application to him were engaged in a nakedly political stunt. That is not just because of the nature of the motion before us, but because of the shapeshifting of the Opposition party leaders on this issue since *The Guardian* broke the story on 16 April.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Is it not the reality that this is about a Leader of the Opposition who called for us to join the US in the war in Iran, and who called the Prime Minister a liar when the evidence has shown that there is absolutely no basis for it? Is this not just the Leader of the Opposition once again shooting from the hip?

Mr Barros-Curtis: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Even if his intervention was perhaps slightly askew from the point I am about to make, it goes to the question of consistency on this issue and many others.

As I said, the Opposition party leaders have been shapeshifting on this issue. The Leader of the Opposition and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), rather than waiting for the evidence, had already made up their minds two weeks ago. On 17 April, the day after the story broke in *The Guardian,* the Lib Dems put out a press release stating that

"Starmer must be investigated by Privileges Committee over…the decision to overrule Mandelson's failed security vetting",

but that was found wanting, because the evidence showed otherwise. That was proven when the Prime Minister came to the Chamber at the earliest opportunity, on Monday 20 April, and laid the evidence before this House. Sir Olly Robbins backed that up in his evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 21 April.

Harriet Cross: The hon. Member mentioned the *Guardian* story on 16 April. The Prime Minister found out about this on 14 April, so the earliest opportunity would have been 15 April at Prime Minister's questions, would it not?

Mr Barros-Curtis: The Prime Minister addressed that question when it was put to him in this House a number of times over the following days. He said that he was trying to secure the answers to the questions that he asked on that evening, and the officials were not able to answer, so as he has said, and as colleagues have made clear, including Cabinet colleagues, he came back to this House at the earliest opportunity to update it, as is right.

I go back to the timeline of the Opposition's shapeshifting. On Friday 17 April, the Leader of the Opposition went on national radio and television to say:

"It is completely preposterous for us to believe that civil servants would have cleared a political appointee who had failed security vetting."

She also said that the Prime Minister is "taking us for fools," and she called for him to go. As other colleagues have elaborated—I will not dwell on this—that standard was not consistently applied to the proven liar Boris Johnson, so we see the shapeshifting of the Opposition parties on that point.

The motion before us dwells on two aspects: due process and, of course, the question of pressure. On due process, I will explain why I do not think the case is made out. I note that the motion does not criticise the process, which, as this debate has played out over recent weeks, has been shown to be seriously deficient and lacking. That has necessitated reviews and changes, at the Prime Minister's order, and some of that has been elaborated on in today's debate. Indeed, the motion makes assertions, without actual evidence, that have not withstood further testimony from key officials to the Foreign Affairs Committee. We know that the Prime Minister was not told about UK Security Vetting's recommendation not to grant clearance to Peter Mandelson for many weeks, and Sir Chris Wormald has confirmed that due process was followed, so I do not accept that the case has been made out.

When we turn to the question of there being no pressure, the Leader of the Opposition made great play of her selective quotes. I have the *Hansard* before me for Prime Minister's questions of 22 April, and it is quite clear:

"Let me deal with this directly, particularly this question of pressure in relation to the decision to appoint Peter Mandelson and to put him in place."—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 316.]

The Prime Minister was clearly referring to the parts of Sir Olly's evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 21 April on the specific point about whether or not pressure was brought to bear on the outcome of the vetting process. That was also the gist of the Leader of the Opposition's preceding question to the Prime Minister. It is also notable that just today, Sir Philip Barton substantiated the position that there are two different types of pressure, and while there was pressure to get on with making a decision, which the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton alluded to, Sir Philip went on to say that he was

"not aware of any pressure on the substance"

of the vetting decision, which is what this motion goes to.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude by expressing solidarity with my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell), who spoke with great power. She and I spoke about some of these issues before I had the privilege of coming to this place, and of course I offer my support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland said in his excellent speech, it is clear from the tone of some in this debate that this is not about the substance of the issue; it is about trying to exploit the situation for partisan political gain. There is no doubt in my mind that certain political opponents will seek to make the lives of my hon. Friends and others difficult, just as they have on other serious issues, for example by impugning our decisions on grooming gangs and targeting us on social media, which means we become subject to death threats. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields said, that makes it much worse for her in her constituency. Indeed, the Tory Front Benchers were nodding when my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland talked about this earlier. As I said, they probably already have their digital media attacks ready, in which they will define us as voting to cover up. *[Interruption.]* They confirm it again; that belies their intent.

There is no doubt in my mind that it was a mistake to appoint Peter Mandelson, and the Prime Minister has taken responsibility for that, but as the quality of certain contributions today suggests, and as I explained in setting out my reason for not supporting the motion, it is clear to me that the motion, rather than seeking to uphold standards, risks undermining them. We should get on with the business of Government, and we should get on with tackling the issues that our constituents are most concerned about, as the Leader of the Opposition said. We should focus on the job in hand. For all those reasons, I will not support the motion today.

3.39 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I am mindful of Mr Speaker's advice about repetition. I will keep my remarks short and to the point. We have had a number of speeches in which Labour Members have debated whether the threshold for referring this matter to the Privileges Committee has been met. If we look at the evidence, there are clearly some very concerning issues arising from the documents that have been released into the public domain, and from what has been said on the Floor of this House and what has not.

Let us take the advice given by Simon Case in November 2024, when he was Cabinet Secretary. It is clear from that document, which was released following the Humble Address motion, that the Prime Minister was advised that if he wanted to make a political appointment, vetting should be done before the appointment was made. We now know that did not happen. We can also take the letter that Chris Wormald, as Cabinet Secretary, sent to the Prime Minister in September 2025, asserting that the process that was followed was in line with the advice given by Simon Case to the Prime Minister. That is important, because the Prime Minister has referred back to that letter as a reason to accept that due process was followed, yet that letter seems, on the face of it, to be inaccurate. We in this House need to investigate that.

We then come to the Prime Minister's answer at Prime Minister's questions on 22 April, in which he replaced the word "that" with "any"; he implied that there had not been "any" pressure, instead of saying "that pressure". When that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) at Cabinet Office questions last Thursday, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster asserted on the Floor of the House:

"I think the difference between the words 'that' and 'any' is not of material relevance".—[*Official Report*, 23 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 420.]

Anyone with a basic grasp of English, having heard the testimony of Olly Robbins and the Prime Minister's answer, would clearly say that the Prime Minister has tried, at least in my view, to misrepresent what Mr Robbins told the Foreign Affairs Committee. That, too, is an extremely powerful reason why this matter needs to be referred.

[Charlie Dewhirst]

I come to the matter of the unanswered questions, or the evidence that we do not have. I refer again to Simon Case's advice to the Prime Minister back in 2024. What was released following the Humble Address motion is just Mr Case's evidence; the box for the Prime Minister's comments remains blank. Are we expected to believe that the Prime Minister did not respond to the advice given to him by the Cabinet Secretary, or has that advice been withheld from this House? I think that question needs to be answered.

There are other matters, such as the evidence regarding Peter Mandelson that the Prime Minister did see; he confirmed to the House at Prime Minister's questions that he did see some of it, regarding Jeffrey Epstein. However, he has refused to say whether he was aware of Mr Mandelson's business links, particularly with Russia, and his directorship of Sistema, even after Russia invaded Ukraine. Then there is the matter of documents of which the Government are unwilling to confirm even the existence, such as Mr Mandelson's declaration of interests. We have asked repeatedly whether that document exists—we are not asking whether it will be published in full at this point—and we have not received answers.

Then today we find Morgan McSweeney giving evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee and confirming that the first meeting regarding the potential appointment of Mr Mandelson as ambassador to the United States took place in December. The Cabinet Office has said that it has no record of the meeting. Were there no minutes taken of that meeting? If not, why not? Or have those minutes somehow vanished? All those are very good reasons why this matter needs to be referred.

Graham Stuart: On the allegation that the Prime Minister may have misled this House, he has told the House that all due process was followed. We were told by Morgan McSweeney this morning that the decision to appoint Peter Mandelson was made in a meeting for which there are absolutely no records and notes, despite extensive searches. At the beginning of this process, the Government failed on due process, yet the Prime Minister has repeatedly told us that due process was followed. That alone would be cause to allow the Privileges Committee to investigate. Labour Members need to look deep into their consciences before they vote against the motion.

Charlie Dewhirst: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. It is absolutely astonishing that the decision to appoint an individual to the most important ambassadorial role that we can offer took place in a meeting of which there now appears to be no record.

We have three clear issues: a discrepancy in the documents that have been published; an inaccurate recollection of events in response to questions in this House, whether inadvertent or deliberate; and a failure to provide full transparency in relation to this sorry saga. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said, the Prime Minister is losing in the court of public opinion, and therefore the best route for him now is to refer himself to the Privileges Committee to make his case and perhaps clear his name. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, it is not always the cock-up—and we know in this case that the decision to appoint Peter Mandelson was a cock-up—that brings you down but the conspiracy.

3.44 pm

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Before I start, let me pay tribute to the victims of Jeffrey Epstein, because their views have been heard far too little in these debates.

Let me address some of the quite patronising comments made to Back-Bench Labour MPs today. Nobody has asked me to speak today, and nobody has put any pressure on me. In fact, colleagues on the Government Benches know that I have my own mind and will express it as I see fit.

At a moment of genuine challenge for families across the country, when households are concerned about rising prices, instability abroad and pressure on living standards, the Opposition have tabled a motion that is ultimately more concerned with political point scoring than practical solutions. That is deeply regrettable, because the British public expect and deserve better than Westminster at its most performative. They expect seriousness, and they rightly expect scrutiny where scrutiny is due, but they also expect Parliament to focus on the issues that shape their daily lives: the bills landing on their doormats, the cost of food in the supermarkets, the price of fuel at the pumps and the strength of the economy in uncertain times.

Let me be absolutely clear: Peter Mandelson should never have been appointed as our ambassador. The Prime Minister has recognised that, and he has apologised for that. He did so properly, repeatedly, with transparency and accountability, and with respect to the victims of Jeffrey Epstein. That was the right course of action, and I would not have expected anything less from the Prime Minister, because I have known him for many years. I worked with him as he sought to rid our party of the stain of antisemitism, which has now infected others. I have seen him stand up to Putin when others have taken bribes from his allies.

Given that the processes of transparency are in place and under way, it has to be asked: why are the Opposition parties working to ride roughshod over investigation processes that they all agreed to? We heard the answer earlier in the debate: it is for social media clicks and cheap headlines ahead of significant elections. The fact is that the Government have agreed to and are complying with the Humble Address to allow scrutiny of the Mandelson appointment in this place and to allow us to see the facts and the advice that was available to the Prime Minister at the time Mandelson was appointed. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is chairing a Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry to which key figures involved in the Mandelson appointment have rightly been summoned, and the Prime Minister has come to this House repeatedly to answer questions about that appointment.

As has been expressed by others, politically motivated use of the Privileges Committee procedures risks undermining those procedures. It is clear that the circumstances the Opposition hoped would come to light and might bring down a successful Labour Government have been nothing more than conspiracy.

First, they said that the Prime Minister must have known that UK Security Vetting's recommendation was to reject vetting for Peter Mandelson, yet Olly Robbins confirmed to the Select Committee last week that he had chosen not to share that crucial information with the Prime Minister. They were wrong. They said that the Prime Minister was wrong to say that due process was followed, yet Chris Wormald has confirmed in a letter to the Prime Minister that the process was followed. In his own words, he said:

> "The evidence I have reviewed leads me to conclude that appropriate processes were followed in both the appointment and withdrawal"

of the former ambassador to Washington. Again, they were wrong. How could the Prime Minister have made any other assessment than that due process was followed, when that was spelled out to him in black and white by his own officials? Those are not rumours or talking points; they are facts, and facts matter in this place.

Many good colleagues on the Government Benches and, indeed, some on the Opposition Benches know deep down that the No. 1 issue facing our constituents is the cost of living fallout from Trump's war in Iran—a war that was egged on by parties on the Opposition Benches. We know that, because that is what voters have been telling every one of us when we have been out on the doors in the lead-up to the elections in May. They are worried about their bills, the prices at the pump and the prices in the supermarkets. While some in this House want to engage in political stunts, this very afternoon the Prime Minister is convening a committee on the response to the conflict in the middle east and on how we support the British economy, our services and, most importantly, our constituents.

What is clear is that only one party is focused on the job of delivering for the British people, and it is the one that the country voted for in the last election. It is galling that the Conservative party, after 14 years of chaos, scandal and economic recklessness, now wants to lecture anyone else on standards in public life. It is the party that gave us partygate, revolving-door Prime Ministers, cronyism, collapsing public services and Liz Truss's catastrophic experiment that sent mortgages soaring and punished working families for the Conservatives' failures. Meanwhile, the Conservatives collude with the SNP—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I have made the point previously, but please will Members confine themselves to debating the issue at hand and not get into fighting the local election campaign?

Johanna Baxter: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Those are the issues we could have been debating today, but instead we are debating a political stunt. This Government are standing up for the British people, showing leadership in our support for Ukraine, bringing our national rail services back into public ownership and delivering our historic Employment Rights Act 2025, among many other things. When I vote this afternoon, I do so knowing full well that I was elected to serve on the priorities that matter to the people of Paisley and Renfrewshire South: their bills, their security and their welfare. I will vote to ensure that we have a Government who continue to focus on those priorities.

3.52 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The motion to refer the Prime Minister to the Privileges Committee revolves around two words. Pressure is the first. The other, which is vital, is process. Of course, the Prime Minister is the master of process. He bangs on about it all the time. He is the king of process here in the Commons. He says that "full due process" was followed, yet we have already heard from other hon. Members that Sir Simon Case, the then Cabinet Secretary, gave the Prime Minister due process in November 2024. Sir Simon said that the vetting and due diligence should be carried out before confirming the choice of ambassador. The Prime Minister chose to avoid that due process.

There is a second key element of due process that has not been properly teased out so far this afternoon, and it relates to the timing of the decision on vetting through January 2025. If full due process was being followed, the security authorities and the vetting authorities should have been allowed to take whatever time they deemed necessary to make their judgment. With Mandelson—goodness me—there was a lot to go through to check that clearance. We have heard from a number of senior civil servants that they were not allowed to carry out full due process and to take as long as they determined was necessary, even if that took them beyond the inauguration of the President of the United States—no, no.

I shall move on to the second work, which is whether any pressure whatsoever was applied. We have heard from not one, not two, but three separate senior civil servants that the pressure was not on the decision itself, but on the speed of the decision, because the decision had already been taken by due process not being followed. We have heard Sir Olly Robbins confirm that pressure was felt to get on with the decision; we heard yesterday from Ian Collard that pressure was applied for that decision to be made; and we have, of course, heard from Sir Philip Barton that—again—the pressure was to "get on with it." There was "no space" in the decision. In other words, due process was not followed.

Dr Arthur: Did we not hear last week, in the Foreign Affairs Committee, that while there was pressure, it had no impact on the decision? It was a marginal decision, and it was felt that that the risks could be managed. I feel that the hon. Gentleman is missing that part out in his story.

Richard Tice: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but let me remind him what the Prime Minister said during Prime Minister's questions just last week: "No pressure existed whatsoever". "Whatsoever" is the critical word, and that is the flaw in the hon. Gentleman's argument.

We now know that not only did the Prime Minister inadvertently mislead the House with regard to "full due process", but he has misled the House a second time with regard to whether or not any pressure existed "whatsoever". The evidence is in; while this is a Prime Minister who prides himself on process, anecdotally it seems that that is a culture that does not exist around him or perhaps within him. For example, we now know that those in the Cabinet Office questioned whether there should be any vetting at all. In other words, they did not want full due process. We now know, too, that in respect of the decision on whether to retain Sir Olly Robbins or fire him, full due process was not followed.

[Richard Tice]

As for the issue of whether or not a decision to refer any Member of the House to the Privileges Committee should be whipped, precedent clearly shows that it should not. I would argue that precedent is a process, and that in this instance, the process of not whipping a vote of this kind is not being followed. I therefore urge all Members to ignore the whipping, to follow their conscience, and to follow the evidence. The evidence is in: the Prime Minister inadvertently misled the House of Commons.

3.57 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Appointing Peter Mandelson was wrong, and, as with any debate on this subject, we should start by acknowledging the suffering of Jeffrey Epstein's victims. They have my full solidarity.

However, I have listened closely to what has been said by Opposition Members during the debate, and I think we need to call their behaviour what it is: political game playing of the lowest order. Politics is a circus for the Opposition. They thrive on the use of politics as a soap opera, because it is all they know. That is why the public grew so heartily sick of them, and it is precisely why so many of their former colleagues no longer sit on their Benches. Just weeks ago, their leader showed a catastrophic failure of leadership in calling for this country to rush to war. When she spoke then, she had no underlying strategy, and she did not focus on what was right for the country. Clearly she has learned nothing from that. Her cynicism becomes clear now, when we peel back the rhetoric and expose the lack of substance behind her arguments.

Peter Mandelson was dismissed last September, and rightly so. The Prime Minister has already acknowledged that his appointment was a mistake. Senior civil servants, including Olly Robbins, Chris Wormald and Cat Little, have all made it clear that due process was followed in that appointment. Olly Robbins has said that no one from No. 10 ever spoke to him or messaged him to apply pressure, and Philip Barton has today confirmed that there was no pressure on the substance of the vetting.

I want to deal directly with the sequence of vetting. I have been through developed vetting. I have been through security vetting numerous times, and it is completely standard procedure to make offers of jobs contingent on passing security. On this point, as on other points, there is simply no case to answer.

Dr Chowns: Will the hon. Member give way?

David Pinto-Duschinsky: No, I will make some progress.

What is more, this Government are undertaking an extensive release of documents in the interests of transparency and out of respect for this House. Ministers have updated us on the progress with the Humble Address. On top of that, the Foreign Affairs Committee is holding hearings. Alongside that, the Government have already strengthened the processes around national security vetting and senior appointments. So I ask again: what is the real substance here? We are not uncovering new facts. In fact, the Conservatives' argument has changed time and again, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) so eloquently pointed out. What we are seeing is lots of throwing mud in the hope that some of it will stick. The Conservatives are speaking not in the public interest, but in service of political opportunism.

Ayoub Khan: Will the hon. Member give way?

David Pinto-Duschinsky: No.

The Conservatives are demeaning and diminishing an important parliamentary process. Our disciplinary processes are serious, and they should not be used for political point scoring. A Committee of Privileges investigation would not bring further clarity; it would only create a long, costly and wholly unnecessary duplication of processes that are either completed or already under way. It is a distraction, and I guess that is why the Conservatives want it. It is a stunt, and that is why I will vote against it.

Under the previous Government, this House was treated with contempt. Standards were bent and procedures were torn apart to protect those in power, with the support of many Conservative Members. We are entitled to ask: why do they raise this matter now? Well, it is because there is an election in a few days' time, but it is also because they fundamentally cannot accept the change that this Government are delivering. They cannot accept that we are investing in public services that they ran into the ground.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am going to make this point again: we are debating privilege, not the Government's record and actions.

David Pinto-Duschinsky: I will wind up.

We were elected with a mandate to deliver change, and that is exactly what we will do. The Conservative party is trying to distract from that fact, but it will not work.

4.2 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I echo the voices of MPs from across the House, particularly the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell), in asking why the Prime Minister does not refer himself to the Committee of Privileges. If the Prime Minister has nothing to hide, why is he whipping his MPs against a House motion?

As you know full well, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Committee of Privileges and the Committee on Standards are there to judge us and our conduct in this House. We sign a code of conduct when we become MPs, and those two Committees are the Select Committees that judge our conduct in the House. The Foreign Affairs Committee and others hold the Government to account, but those two Committees are the only ones that hold MPs to account. Why has the Prime Minister not taken the leadership that he has demanded of others time and again, and not referred himself to the Committee of Privileges? He has demanded that others resign for far more trivial matters. He has demanded that others be referred to the Committee of Privileges or the Committee on Standards, but why have the rules changed for him?

We could spend another afternoon laboriously analysing who did what, and when—another week of the Prime Minister telling us what he did not know and was not

responsible for, and that the buck stops anywhere but here. This is from a man who has made a career of standing on the moral high ground and damning others for behaviour that he is now demonstrating. He has demanded that others do the honourable thing—something that we now see he is clearly incapable of doing himself. Instead, he has chosen this painful spectacle and is clinging on until those sitting behind him or beside him inevitably dispense with his tarnished services, which we all know they will do soon. I note that many are absent from the Front Bench—on full-time leadership manoeuvres as we speak, perhaps.

I do not wish to condemn the Prime Minister further, only to offer my genuine sympathy on a basic human level for the embarrassment and shame that he must be feeling underneath the veneer of virtue that he has spent decades cultivating and that is now crumbling to dust with his every word—his every defection, his every desperate excuse. What goes around, comes around. For the Prime Minister, it has come around, right here, right now. It is an intensely sad and embarrassing sight. For that, he does not deserve my condemnation—only pity.

4.5 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): In advocating for the motion, the Leader of the Opposition—*[Interruption.]* She is just returning to her place; I knew she was waiting for me. Her essential argument, I believe, was that we in this House had not spent enough time debating this issue, and that perhaps just one more Committee would be the answer.

Before we began our debate today, there had been five statements and two debates: more than 13 hours of debate in the House of Commons. That is my count of how long we have been discussing the Mandelson issue. That is a conservative estimate—small c—because it cannot account for Prime Minister's questions and all the other ministerial questions. It is also, of course, distinct from the important hearings being held by the Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as those of the Intelligence and Security Committee, as it forensically carries out its work in compliance with the Humble Address and the release of all papers relating to Mandelson's appointment as ambassador to the United States.

I do not think that the British public believe that just one more Committee is the answer, but I want to set out why I think we are at an important juncture and to look at three actions that the Government have taken: the apology from the Prime Minister, the action taken across Government Departments and the ongoing scrutiny still being applied to this case. The Prime Minister has offered repeated and unconditional apologies from the Dispatch Box and when he has been asked questions by the media, including to the victims of Epstein. He has made clear that this was an error of judgment. A message of contrition has been heard by people in this House and across the country. We all make mistakes; that is not in dispute. Let us turn next to the action that has been taken and continues to take place across Government.

More than 300 documents have already been released to the Intelligence and Security Committee, in full compliance with the Humble Address. That is really important. I was part of the debate—a good debate in this House—about giving the Intelligence and Security Committee oversight of the process. At the time, the Opposition said that that was an important thing to do and there was consensus across the House.

Dr Luke Evans: I also took part in that debate. The hon. Gentleman will remember and the record will show that the decision was suddenly made during the debate. The Government were going to vote against the Humble Address; the decision was made only because Members on both sides, particularly those on the Intelligence and Security Committee, put themselves forward and said that there was that option. We were having the debate in the first place because the Opposition compelled the Government to submit the papers. The hon. Gentleman cannot say that the decision was just put out there by his side.

Andrew Lewin: I remember the debate vividly. Members from both sides made the case. I said in my remarks that that was an example of the House at its best, because we came to a good decision to involve the ISC. I raise the issue again today because I was fascinated by what the Leader of the Opposition said. She characterised that Committee as a "never-never" Committee earlier today, as if it would never come to the answer. All of a sudden it seems that it is politically convenient for the Opposition to lose faith in the ISC, although they were advocating for it for so long.

More action has been taken, and that is important. Vetting has been discussed extensively today. The process in place under the last Government and at the start of this Government has gone: it has already been changed by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister. In future, all vetting will now be completed before appointments. That is absolutely the right change.

Graham Stuart: It is quite clear, from the advice given by Simon Case in November 2024, that that was the situation. We only found out that there was not the alternative process because the documents were forced into the open. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that Chris Wormald's letter, which suggested that everything had been done properly, contradicts the direct advice given by the then Cabinet Secretary that the vetting should be done first? It is not compatible; it is illogical. Surely, the hon. Gentleman, who is giving the least embarrassing speech on behalf of the Government so far—congratulations to him on that—can see that?

Andrew Lewin: The right hon. Gentleman is very kind; I will see him on the cricket pitch in a week's time. There is a serious point, in that there are a number of very senior civil servants, who I will come to, who have given evidence on that and have said that process was followed. That leads neatly to my next point about the importance of ongoing scrutiny—the scrutiny that is being conducted by the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I want to pick up on that point. We have heard a lot of evidence today. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is clear that there were so many inconsistencies and so much confusion about the process that the Prime Minister was absolutely right to build back trust in that process and make the decisions he has made?

Andrew Lewin: I appreciate my hon. Friend's intervention. The Prime Minister was right and the House was right to accept the Humble Address, involve the Intelligence and Security Committee, and give the Foreign Affairs Committee all the scope it needs to ask questions of the key actors in the process. Just to remind the House, in the past few weeks and days we have heard evidence in public from Cat Little, Sir Olly Robbins, Morgan McSweeney and from the Prime Minister himself, repeatedly, from the Dispatch Box. The Prime Minister and the Government are not hiding; they are putting everything in the sunlight, as an hon. Member suggested earlier.

This is a deeply serious issue for the House and for the country. I want again to associate myself with everyone who has spoken today about the pain that is continually being felt by the victims of Jeffrey Epstein every time this issue is raised. Our thoughts are with all of them.

The Prime Minister has apologised unconditionally. He has acted and the Government have acted, and scrutiny from two Committees is still ongoing. The judgment before us is not whether scrutiny should happen—it most clearly and evidently is happening—but whether we should support a conveniently timed motion from the Leader of the Opposition to refer the issue to one more Committee. I am afraid I do not believe that that is the answer, and I would trust the judgment of this Prime Minister over that of the Leader of the Opposition every day of the week.

4.12 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I want to put two things on record at the outset. The Labour party does not stand for election in Northern Ireland. We do not have elections next week or the week after, so everything I am about to say has got absolutely nothing to do with a so-called political stunt, and everything to do with the integrity of this House. By the way, I find patronising the idea that we should not be discussing these things because the Government of the day want to get on with discussing the cost of living. I have had two car bombs at the edges of my constituency in the past five weeks, so believe me there are much bigger things that I would prefer to be talking about. However, it is incumbent on everybody in this House to ensure that everything we are doing is completely above board.

Last week, I said that I did not know why Mandelson was appointed. The Prime Minister said it was a mistake, but here is what I do not understand: everything about Mandelson that would have been a cause for concern was open-source material—it was out there. Peter Mandelson would not have survived the vetting for a kids' football club, and rightly so. Yet we are expected to believe, by those on the Labour Benches, that "There is nothing to see here, we are going to do some process here and there; it's a bit of a hoo-hah," as if there has been a bit of opprobrium around the appointment of a local rotary club. This is the Government of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland; and we need to make sure that everything that is done here has the trust and confidence of the people we were sent here to represent.

Something I am really passionate about is people being able to get on in life. The social mobility figures for the UK are declining steeply, which should be a concern for us all. But don't worry about that—it seems to be "jobs for the boys", going great guns over the road in Labour. Instead of a meritocracy, it is a chumocracy. That is the nub of this: we cannot get answers as to why this was done.

Today, I am asking: will the real Prime Minister please stand up? Please stand up. Is it the man who wanted to tread lightly on our lives? Is it the man who promised a decade of national renewal? Is it the man who said he was going to do things by the book and better? Because in my nearly two years here, I have not seen that.

I commend the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell) for her heartfelt words. This should not be about party politics—it should be about doing the right thing. I am here as the one Member of my party in Westminster, so I am aware that I am speaking from a place of privilege myself. But believe you me: there is a stink here, and the public smell it. If we are serious about getting better in terms of making our constituents' lives better and proving that this place can deliver, every single person here today has a choice—make the right one.

4.16 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): May I start by saying that I take serious exception to the remarks made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who I see is just about to leave the Chamber? She complained about us spending an afternoon talking "laboriously" about process. It is process that is on the face of the motion that the Leader of the Opposition has brought to the Chamber today, and that is what we are debating. That is because of the hon. Lady's party. I am more than happy to spend an afternoon talking about process, because that is what we are here to do.

I speak in this debate on privileges with a unique perspective—one garnered from almost 15 years of experience working in a highly regulated sector, with responsibility for managing financial crime and reputational risk at two FTSE 100 firms, accountable for decisions made in managing conflicts of interest, promoting ethical codes of practice, training staff on when to do the right thing, testing the effectiveness of whistleblowing regimes and completing enhanced due diligence on individuals who posed heightened risk. That experience was gathered in the UK, the US, India, the UAE and elsewhere. I also speak as a recently departed member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who sat in Portcullis House only in November and quizzed Sir Chris Wormald, the former Cabinet Secretary, and Sir Olly Robbins, the former permanent under-secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, when they gave oral evidence to the Committee in the light of the sacking of Peter Mandelson as UK ambassador to Washington.

Let me say first that my thoughts are with the victims of Jeffrey Epstein's terrible crimes. Nothing we say or do today can take away from the unimaginable hurt and pain that that man caused and continues to cause for victims, survivors, and their friends and families. Today and all days, we must remember them and do all that we can to support them in their continued fight for justice.

Secondly, I will confine my remarks to the specifics of the proposed referral to the Privileges Committee in the motion today. Mandelson's appointment, what was recorded in the proprietary and ethics team's due diligence report, and the UK Security Vetting process have all been

debated on numerous occasions in this place already, and there remain live reviews under way that I do not want to preclude in any way.

Thirdly, the Prime Minister has rightly recognised that appointing Mandelson as ambassador to Washington was a mistake. Mandelson's behaviour has been contemptible, and we are in no doubt on the Government Benches that he should never have been appointed. It was a mistake for which the PM has faced significant opprobrium, and there have been consequences for him—let us not forget that.

The honest truth is that we are all fallible. The PM made an error of judgment. For that, he rightly apologised in the House last Monday and sought forgiveness. As I will set out, to suggest that he has in any way misled the House is a political fabrication anchored not in truth but in a smokescreen of political mendacity that supposes a cock-up somehow equates to a conspiracy.

The Opposition moved a motion to have the Prime Minister referred to the Privileges Committee—something that has not happened since Boris Johnson's referral back in the early part of 2022. That case and the matters being debated today are like chalk and cheese. Johnson was referred to the Privileges Committee for the most egregious of lockdown breaches: partying in No. 10, in breach of the rules, while we all made daily sacrifices to contain the virus; denying that he had breached the rules; and then doubling down on his denials.

Reading back through the Committee's 108-page final report from 2023 gave me flashbacks, especially in recalling that Johnson misled the House on no fewer than six occasions, that he misled the Privileges Committee, that he breached confidence, that he impugned the Committee and undermined the democratic processes of the House and—perhaps most importantly—that he was complicit in a campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee. I mention all that not to advance a political argument but rather to warn Conservative colleagues that the country has not forgotten what took place the last time the Privileges Committee convened to consider a PM's conduct, and to advise them to take heed of that history.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking wisely of the time when Boris Johnson was before the Privileges Committee. Does he believe the House should remember that that Prime Minister lost an anti-corruption champion, who resigned over the issue? Conservative Members would be well placed to remember what happened when the Privileges Committee found misdeeds and wrongdoing on the part of that Prime Minister.

Phil Brickell: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. He is a noble campaigner on cleaning up the House and the public sector more broadly.

The Opposition's motion supposes that the PM may have misled the House due to statements he gave in this place about due process and about pressure. This is a complex topic. Given the forensic demolition of the motion by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) with reference to pressure, I will focus my remarks on due process.

Before I speak more pointedly to process, as flagged by the Opposition, let me say this: I have no special access to information and I have not spoken to any of the individuals concerned regarding Mandelson in any way, shape or form since the Humble Address. I offer only my analysis based on the documents we have been given and statements made to the House by the Prime Minister and others when giving evidence before Parliament.

I speak as a Member of the House who is determined to drive up standards in public life, to improve the integrity of our system of government and to work constructively with Members of all political persuasions to improve the standing of politics as a force for good in the country at large. That is why only last week I met the Ethics and Integrity Commission to give formal input into that body's workstream to tighten rules about financial disclosures, lobbying and the operation of the business appointment rules as they relate to Ministers and senior civil servants. But first, let us consider ongoing proceedings.

On 4 February, the House passed a Humble Address relating to the appointment of Peter Mandelson as His Majesty's ambassador to Washington DC. It directed Government to

"lay before this House all papers relating to Lord Mandelson's appointment…including but not confined to the Cabinet Office due diligence which was passed to Number 10, the Conflict of Interest Form Lord Mandelson provided to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office…material the FCDO and the Cabinet Office provided to UK Security Vetting"

as well as, among others,

"all information on Lord Mandelson provided to the Prime Minister prior to his assurance to this House on 10 September 2025 that 'full due process was followed during this appointment'".

Subject to agreed redactions for national security and international relations purposes as agreed with the Intelligence and Security Committee, the first volume of material was published by the Cabinet Office on 11 March.

Last Tuesday, the Foreign Affairs Committee took evidence from Sir Olly Robbins, the former permanent under-secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. On Thursday, the Committee heard from Catherine Little, the civil service chief operating officer and permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office. Earlier today, the Committee heard from Sir Philip Barton, the previous permanent under-secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, as well as from Morgan McSweeney, the former chief of staff at 10 Downing Street. There is also a separate live police investigation being undertaken by the Met into Mandelson, which the Cabinet Office will be keen to avoid prejudicing. It will require a delicate balancing of information to ensure that detectives are able to conduct their vital work without it being in any way overshadowed by ongoing parliamentary inquiries.

This brings me to the reasoning for today's debate brought by the official Opposition. The first limb is due process. To the best of my ability, my understanding is that the Opposition contend that due process was not followed, first, because UK security vetting took place after Mandelson's appointment and, secondly, because his vetting decision was not escalated for discussion with No. 10 or the Cabinet Office.

[Phil Brickell]

On the sequencing of events, let me set the record straight as I see it. When the Cabinet Office published its first volume of material after the Humble Address, it included a file note dated 11 November 2024 and marked:

"Official Sensitive—Personal and Staffing. Advice to the Prime Minister, Options for His Majesty's Ambassador Washington."

In that note, written to the PM by Simon Case, the Cabinet Secretary at the time, it is laid out in very clear language that one option was a political appointment, as was undertaken when Ed Llewellyn was appointed as HM Ambassador Paris by David Cameron in 2016 and as HM Ambassador Rome by Boris Johnson in 2022, for which there was a clear process to go through. To quote Lord Case in that note to the PM:

"If this is the route you wish to take you should give us the name of the person you would like to appoint and we will develop a plan for them to acquire the necessary security clearances and do due diligence on any potential Conflicts of Interest or other issues of which you should be aware before confirming your choice. A letter is then needed from the Foreign Secretary to the PUS to FCDO formalising the decision to make a political appointment."

That was in November 2024.

Simon Case's note was followed up by another note dated 11 December 2024 from the PM's principal private secretary, Nin Pandit, noting that due diligence had been sought from the propriety and ethics team in the Cabinet Office on Mandelson—checks which were conducted by PET on 4 December 2024. After that, the PM's chief of staff discussed Mandelson's relationship with Epstein and noted that the PM's director of communications was satisfied with Mandelson's responses to questions about contact. Importantly, this was before further information came to light in September of last year, when it was identified that those responses were not truthful.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Phil Brickell: I am going to make some progress, if that is okay—*[Interruption.]* I am in the flow of things and I am not halfway through yet, so I have a long way to go.

The PM's PPS flagged that the relationship between Mandelson and Epstein would be gone over with the Prime Minister by his private office, and the principal private secretary noted that after a decision to proceed was made, only then would a decision be made as to when to make any appointment and announce it, and when the new ambassador would take up post, subject to a letter from the Foreign Secretary to the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, followed by approval by the King and then agr ment being obtained from the US Administration.

Correspondence from No. 10 to the permanent under-secretary at the FCDO, and from the FCDO PUS at the time, Sir Philip Barton, to the King's private secretary, was disclosed in the first volume of material published following the Humble Address, which testifies to this sequence of events having taken place. On 20 December 2024, the private secretary to the permanent under-secretary at the FCDO emailed Mandelson congratulating him on his appointment and noting his onboarding, including regarding his "clearance", which the head of the US and Canada Department of the FCDO noted on 23 December 2024 was an important "first step".

When Sir Olly Robbins came before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 3 November last year, he said in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson):

"as is normally the case with external appointments to my Department and the wider civil service, the appointment was made subject to obtaining security clearance."

Moreover, Sir Olly confirmed in that very session:

"we also went through the standard UK national security vetting process for DV… I am absolutely confident that UKSV undertook the process in precisely its standard way, doing all the checks it would expect to do, and we had ample time to assess and decide on the basis of its work."

In reference to the remarks by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), it was worth noting for the record that it was confirmed to the Foreign Affairs Committee that the high-risk concerns in SV were not Epstein-related.

Sorcha Eastwood: Does that make it better?

Phil Brickell: I am correcting the hon. Member on the points mentioned here; I am not here to talk about the process—we will come on to that shortly.

Chris Wormald, the former Cabinet Secretary, noted at the same session on 3 November that

"the normal thing is for the security clearance to happen after appointment but before the person signs a contract"

—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) mentioned—and

"takes up post. If we are recruiting a permanent secretary or similar from outside the civil service, that is normally what would happen: the security clearance process would happen after the announcement of the appointment but before the person takes up post, and the appointment would be subject to the security clearance being granted."

Mandelson was issued an FCDO employment contract with a start date of 3 February 2025. Section 17 of that contract, entitled "Security Clearance", was explicit:

"You must obtain the required level of security clearance as soon as possible and maintain the required level of security clearance throughout your employment."

Dated 30 January 2025, Mandelson's offer of fixed-term employment with the FCDO confirmed his

"security clearance has been confirmed by Vetting Unit and is valid until 29 January 2030."

I will not be selective in referring to evidence given to this House that favours one view or another, so let me be clear: Olly Robbins mentioned in his letter of 21 April to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that the then Cabinet Secretary at the time of Mandelson's appointment being proposed, Simon Case, recommended—the operative word—in November 2024 that vetting should have been completed before an announcement was made. But in the very same letter of 21 April, Robbins was also explicit in confirming that:

"When the Prime Minister informed the House that the proper process had been followed in respect of NSV, he was correct."

Moreover, on the topic of vetting, Robbins stood by the letter he wrote with the Foreign Secretary to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 16 September 2025, in which he confirmed:

"Ministers…are not informed of any findings other than the final outcome."

He went on to state in his letter on 21 April:

"This position reflected long-standing practice and guidance, and correctly constrained our ability to share information beyond the vetting process then or later."

He noted that the FCDO

"completed DV to the normal high standard";

that he, Robbins, met the director for the estates, security and network directorate and was briefed orally that Mandelson was

"a 'borderline' case, leaning towards recommending that clearance be denied";

that the highest risks "could be managed and mitigated", as recommended by ESND; and that UKSV acknowledged that the FCDO may wish to grant clearance. Robbins also confirmed that UK Security Vetting

"did not 'fail' Mandelson and FCDO did not 'overrule' their decision";

that a risk-based decision was arrived at by the FCDO, taking into account the feedback from UKSV as a result of the full vetting process having been gone through; and that

"DV clearance is a risk judgement."

Sir Olly was clear in his evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee recently that no direct communication took place between anyone in No. 10 and himself, that the interaction between UK Security Vetting and the Foreign Office was "entirely standard", and that clearance was granted subject to mitigations agreed following an FCDO security department assessment that could address the highest risks associated with Mandelson.

Take the remarks from Cat Little, civil service chief operating officer and permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office, in her oral evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee. She was clear in her remarks last week:

"My view is that due process was followed, and if I might explain why I believe that, it is because the process, as I have outlined to the Committee, is that UKSV makes a recommendation and the Foreign Office makes a decision as to whether to grant DV. That is the process, and that is the process that is agreed with the Foreign Office."

Furthermore, Cat Little was clear about vetting in her oral evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee:

"I do have access to a number of emails that have been disclosed recently to me… What I can see is that there is a senior official from the Government Security Group who goes back to the Foreign Office security team and advises two things: one, that this is a decision for the Foreign Office, and two, that they would advise that developed vetting is sought."

She went on to say that

"the Prime Minister did not know about the UKSV conclusion, and he did not know which specific risks were identified at the time of appointment."

Only this morning, former Foreign Office permanent secretary Sir Philip Barton told the Committee that he was confident that the appropriate process was carried out.

Those are not my comments, but those of senior civil servants—a former Cabinet Secretary, two former permanent under-secretaries of the FCDO and the current permanent under-secretary at the Cabinet Office—and they all stand in direct contract with the motion before the House. They are all of the view that proper process was followed. I know whose words I would rather believe. Their remarks chime with those of the Prime Minister, who said:

"for a direct ministerial appointment, it was usual for security vetting to happen after the appointment but before the individual starting in post."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 24.]

Opposition Members might object to the process—they would be right to do so—but it was set out at the time of the appointment, and it was followed by the Cabinet Office, the FCDO, UKSV and, ultimately, the Prime Minister. As the Minister ultimately accountable for the decision, the Prime Minister has rightly changed the process so that appointments can be confirmed only once vetting has been completed. He has rightly appointed Sir Adrian Fulford to lead a review of security vetting to ensure consistency across Government in the way decision makers are informed of concerns ahead of appointments.

The Prime Minister has rightly set up the Ethics and Integrity Commission and tasked it with improving processes around lobbying, the revolving door between Government and the private sector, and financial transparency. I commend him for those steps and for his commitment to introducing as soon as possible legislation allowing for the removal of disgraced peers—that is the right thing to do. I trust that the legislation will obtain support from across this House.

Only yesterday, the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister confirmed that

"the Cabinet Office will have passed to the ISC all the material it has processed as part of the Humble Address and judged to be prejudicial to national security or international relations. This has amounted to over 300 individual documents. It includes a number that are relevant to the processes of Peter Mandelson's security vetting, too."—[*Official Report*, 27 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 588.]

We expect the second tranche of documents under the ambit of the Humble Address to be published after Parliament returns following Prorogation.

As mentioned in yesterday's ministerial statement on progress on the Humble Address, outstanding documents are either with the Government awaiting publication, with the ISC, or with the Metropolitan police, given the ongoing criminal investigation into Mandelson. The last time a Prime Minister's conduct was referred to the Privileges Committee was during the covid pandemic. Boris Johnson was under investigation by the Metropolitan police for repeatedly partying in No. 10 during lockdown. He then misled the House by saying that rules had been followed when they had not. The police had issued fixed penalty notices for breaches of covid-19 regulations.

I have mentioned the Cabinet Office's vital ongoing work to review the documents within the remit of the Humble Address, the Intelligence and Security Committee's work to review proposed redactions, the Foreign Affairs Committee's public evidence sessions, and the wholly separate police investigation. My question to the Leader of the Opposition is: why bring this motion now? Why bring this motion when we have not had the full disclosure of the documents within the ambit of the Humble Address, including the private messages, WhatsApps, and the additional minutes and file notes that were not published in volume one back in March. Why duplicate the work that is already being undertaken by the Cabinet Office and the ISC under the Humble Address? Why not wait until after Prorogation, when the full documentary evidence is available, to determine whether a Privileges Committee referral is warranted? Why not wait until all

[Phil Brickell]

relevant witnesses have given evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee? We are only just digesting the evidence given today.

The Leader of the Opposition makes much of due process in her motion. My retort is simple: due process ought also to be followed in getting to the truth. Let all the documents be released, and then let this House determine the facts of the matter. The cynic in me would say that today's privileges motion is nothing but a bare-faced political stunt by the Conservative party, which, with just over a week to go until the local elections, is clutching at straws. It politicises the important review process that is under way across Government and Westminster. Hard-working and dedicated civil servants are working alongside Ministers to ensure that the Humble Address is fulfilled as quickly as possible. My first obligation is to this country above all else. I owe it to my constituents to outline my rationale and my way of thinking, as I have done. I will vote with the Government today.

4.39 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I am not quite sure how to follow that speech, but I hope that the Whips were listening to that job application by the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell).

In the history of Leaders of the Opposition in this place, no one was quicker to demand investigations, no one was more willing to take a pious, high-and-mighty view, no one was faster to demand resignations and no one talked more about accountability than the current Prime Minister. He claimed to the whole country that he was a man of morals, principles and high character. In opposition, he portrayed himself as the moral arbiter and the font of all things just. Now that he is in power, with the threat of an investigation hanging over him, his true self has been revealed.

There was much evidence of the Prime Minister's failings prior to the Peter Mandelson affair, but this scandal has truly exposed him for all that he is and is not. In the Prime Minister's efforts to reject and supress an investigation into this torrid affair, he has renounced all those claims he made to be a man of morals, principles, conviction, honour and all the other similar words he lifted from the dictionary without really understanding their meaning.

It is apparent that, in opposition, the Prime Minister said what he thought needed to be said, not what he meant. The litany of broken promises over which he has presided since assuming office are a system, not a bug, because this Prime Minister did not come into office with a plan, a vision or anything he would stick by. He told the country what he thought they wanted to hear, with no intention of keeping his word or delivering. In the Peter Mandelson scandal, he is showing who he really is: a Prime Minister with no substance.

If the House believes that this sounds like a partisan political attack, let us not forget that it was this very scandal that provoked the Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar, to call for the Prime Minister to go. It is the handling of this scandal that caused Scottish Labour to lose all faith in the Prime Minister's judgment and his leadership. I notice that Scottish Labour MPs are conveniently looking at their phones at this moment.

At the very least, the Prime Minister could have come forward and admitted all he got wrong here, and thrown open every document so that the public got the transparency they deserve. Then, as some small consolation for his failings, there would be some accountability. Yet today he still refuses even to deliver that. He rejects further investigation and he gives the distinct appearance of someone afraid of scrutiny, running scared of what may yet come out, and unable to accept the scale of the mistakes made during this scandal.

If this position does not change, then it is up to Labour Back Benchers to show what they stand for. Will they let a Prime Minister of this political colour or any other blatantly disregard accountability and transparency? Will they let a Prime Minister refuse the scrutiny that the public expect when a scandal like this occurs? Will they let a Prime Minister get away with such a grotesque error of judgment as appointing Peter Mandelson? It is their choice today. Labour MPs have the opportunity to show that they are not all of the same lot as the Prime Minister. They can demonstrate that they meant some of the lofty promises they were elected on, or they can continue to back a Prime Minister who has lost his way and lost the country.

If an investigation happens or not, this scandal has already told the public everything they need to know about this Prime Minister. Even if they cannot see it and even if the parliamentary Labour party do not accept it for many months to come, it is over. Refusing investigations, as he is trying to do today, only confirms what is already apparent: the Prime Minister is not who he claimed to be in opposition, the principles he claimed to hold are gone, his commitment to accountability was a nonsense, the morals he espoused were a con trick and the piety was all pretend.

The Prime Minister's promise to the British people was "change", and change is what they want now. They want a change of position today, which should not be hard, given the example that this Government have set during their short term in office. What is one more U-turn among dozens? The British people want a change in the culture at the heart of this Government, so that they do not have to meekly go along with the Prime Minister's appointment of people like Peter Mandelson.

The people of this country have now had a good look at the Prime Minister, and they no longer see what they thought they did when he was in opposition. Even the Prime Minister must now look back at his own words and wonder, "Who was that?" His record has not lived up to his rhetoric, the standards that he claimed to hold, or the promises that he made to the British people. If the Prime Minister today whips his MPs to vote against an inquiry, he may survive in office a little while longer, but it will not change what he has done, or stop the British public demanding change.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): My constituency neighbour is giving a speech full of hyperbole. The motion is about a specific question, yet he treats this as if it were a referendum on the Prime Minister. Does he agree that that is simply not what we are voting on tonight?

John Lamont: If this motion is passed by the House, it will allow an investigation into the integrity of the Prime Minister and the decisions that he has made, and it is Labour MPs and the Prime Minister who are blocking that investigation. We are grateful to Mr Speaker for allowing this motion to be debated today. He has decided that it meets the standard required to be debated, and it is for MPs like the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), my constituency neighbour, to decide whether they will stand with their constituents and not block this investigation. We all want answers. If the Prime Minister has nothing to hide, he should have no fear of this investigation.

I will happily support the motion to allow this investigation to proceed. I congratulate the hon. Members for South Shields (Emma Lewell), for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), and for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) on their very brave decision to defy the Labour Whip and support this motion.

I remember being a Government MP and sitting in the far corner of the Chamber, having just voted for the Owen Paterson motion. I never felt so dirty or disappointed in myself as when I made the decision to vote in that way. I was following the Whip and my party colleagues at the time. We thought it was the right thing to do, but it was the wrong thing to do; my gut told me that, but I was just not brave enough to make that decision. A few months later, a similar moment arose, and I had to decide whether to follow the Whip or follow my conscience. I followed my conscience and resigned; I did the right thing, and I have never regretted it. My call to Labour MPs who are mulling over this decision is: do what your gut is telling you to do. Follow your conscience, and do the right thing. This investigation will provide the answers that we all want. If the Prime Minister has nothing to hide, he has nothing to fear.

4.47 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the fact that I cannot promise as learned and long a speech as that given by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell). *[Interruption.]* Even in such a heated and highly controversial debate, I have managed to gain cross-party consensus. My day has not been wasted.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak. I am perhaps not so pleased that I am speaking in this particular debate, but the opportunity to speak in this place and represent the people of my constituency is an honour every single day. I hope that Members from across the House will recognise that I do my best to avoid being too party political. In fact, I gave a whole speech in which the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) was not able to intervene on me, because I avoided being party political; I appreciate that the challenge is on again. I do my best to avoid being too party political, except when it comes to education policy, but I declare an interest there.

I have actively engaged in this matter, and have contributed when the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister has attended this House to speak on the subject of the Humble Address, as he has done a number of times. I see he is not here; he has slipped out while I am giving my speech. I have represented to him my genuine concerns about the vetting process, and I would ask him to refer to that in his winding-up speech, if he were here. I have expressed my genuine concern about the impact of Peter Mandelson's appointment on the victims of Jeffrey Epstein.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to put on record my deepest respect for the Speaker's Office, and for you personally. As you will be aware, I find you just a little bit terrifying. [Hon. Members: "Quite right."] More cross-party agreement. I absolutely respect Mr Speaker's decision to allow this debate. I will admit that I was reluctant to speak in it, not because I lack faith in the Prime Minister—that faith remains firm—and not, to mention an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis), because I genuinely worry about my security and that of my family, although I have to put on record that I do; Members from across the House who have supported me in that matter will know what I am talking about.

On a lighter note, I was reluctant to speak in this debate because I could not work out how I was going to make reference to Harlow in it. [Hon. Members: "But you have."] Twice. Then I realised that that was the point; I come to this place to talk about my constituents. Take my constituent, friend and former work colleague Jamie, who works six days a week, and has nothing left with which to enjoy himself or treat his family, including his two-year-old son. I want to be talking about how this Government help people like Jamie. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker—again, terrified. I want to be talking about how we in this House can make a difference to Jamie and tackle the cost of living crisis.

I want to gently respond to those on both sides of the House who have implied that those who do not agree with them are somehow selling their soul. I respectfully disagree. As Members know, I was a teacher before I came to this place, and I came to this place because I was angry with the former Member for Surrey Heath. I frankly disagreed with some of the decisions he made about education, but what really struck me when I came here was that Opposition Members are not the horrible, terrible, horned beasts that I was led to believe they were—some of them, maybe. [Hon. Members: "Horny?"] Did I say that? I meant horned. I feel like I am going to have to make a point of order and apologise in a minute.

Opposition Members genuinely believe in what they are voting for. I saw that the other day during the debate on the Pension Schemes Bill, in the discussion about mitigation. I disagreed with what Opposition Members said, but I respected their right to disagree, and I think it is important that in any debate—including this one—we can agree to disagree.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I realise that the hon. Member is struggling to read his own handwriting, but does he have anything at all to say about the Prime Minister's conduct in appointing Peter Mandelson?

Chris Vince: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution, I think. I am sorry that he is offended by my handwriting, but there are probably more important things to discuss.

Simon Hoare: A moment ago, while the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister had popped out of the Chamber, the hon. Gentleman was saying something

[Simon Hoare]

rather nice and complimentary about him. I just wanted to give him the opportunity to repeat it, now that he is back.

Chris Vince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for a far better intervention. The comment I made about the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister while he had popped out was that, as he is aware, I have contributed many times when he has spoken about the Humble Address, and have asked him a number of questions about the vetting process, as well as the impact that this ongoing issue obviously has—

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Trade envoy to Harlow, right there.

Chris Vince: Trade envoy to Harlow, did you say?

I asked the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister about the impact that this ongoing issue has on the victims of Jeffrey Epstein. I think it is really important that we recognise that, and I ask him to comment on it in his wind-up.

The point that I wish to make, and I hope it is taken on its merits, is that I absolutely appreciate that the Labour Members who have spoken in support of the motion did so because they believe that it is right. However, do not assume that those of us who are not speaking in support of the motion believe the same. The majority of Members, whatever political party they represent, vote in the Lobby for what they genuinely believe is the right thing to do, for whatever reason. I reject the concept that that is not the case. Opposition Members should trust me when I say that it would be far easier for me to join them in the Lobby this afternoon, but I do not believe that is the right thing to do.

4.55 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Having listened to this debate, I fear that the Labour Back Benchers who do not support the motion are being too pessimistic. They see a referral to the Privileges Committee as a threat or something to fear, which is the wrong approach. A referral to the Privileges Committee should be seen by Labour MPs as an opportunity for the Prime Minister to prove, as he says he believes, that he has done nothing wrong and has not misled the House; and an opportunity for the Government, who have summoned all their Back Benchers here today, demanding and expecting that they will give the Prime Minister their confidence, to show that the loyalty the Prime Minister expects of them is justified.

Labour Back Benchers should be in no doubt that, as we have heard multiple times today, the manner in which this vote is being managed by the Labour Whips is not usual for a privilege motion. In whipping them to vote to save him from appearing before the Privileges Committee, and from having to explain himself, the Prime Minister is once again not following normal process.

We have heard many speeches from Opposition Members about the allegations, our belief that the Prime Minister has misled the House, and our belief that normal due process has not been followed, although the Prime Minister has repeatedly said that it has. Labour Members must not forget that at the heart of this saga is the catastrophic lack of judgment shown by the Prime Minister in hiring the twice-fired known friend of a convicted paedophile, who, as the Prime Minister knew, retained, even after the annexation of Crimea, an exec role at Sistema, a company with Russian defence interests. That is the level of judgment and the calibre of decision making that the Prime Minister has been trying to justify, and that is what has led to the claim that he has been misleading the House, which we are discussing today.

The decision that Labour MPs face today is whether to support the Prime Minister's version of events. We have seen too many times throughout this saga that it has been the Prime Minister's version of events versus that of others. By asserting that he has not misled the House, the Prime Minister is effectively saying that Sir Olly Robbins and Sir Philip Barton have misled the Foreign Affairs Committee. Is that really what Labour MPs are comfortable supporting?

Sir Olly Robbins said that No. 10 put pressure on the Foreign Office to expedite Mandelson's vetting, and the Prime Minister insists that this did not happen. Sir Philip Barton said today at the Foreign Affairs Committee that the usual process for appointing an ambassador would be vetting first and then the announcement, not the announcement and then the vetting, as happened in the case of Mandelson's appointment.

Sam Rushworth: I think the hon. Lady may be inadvertently misquoting the Prime Minister, but if I am wrong, I invite her to quote exactly what the Prime Minister said about pressure to expedite the process. My recollection is that the Prime Minister said that there was no pressure to change the decision, not expedite the process.

Harriet Cross: That is a very welcome intervention. My recollection, and that of most Opposition Members, is that the Prime Minister said there was no pressure whatsoever. That is not what was said at the Foreign Affairs Committee. Both those things cannot be right. Are Labour MPs saying that the Prime Minister is right, or are they saying that Sir Olly Robbins misled the Foreign Affairs Committee? Both those things cannot be right. They need to choose who they agree with and which of those is correct. They cannot both be correct.

Joe Robertson: I have a suggestion for this disagreement that is going on in the House: why do we not refer it to the Privileges Committee?

Harriet Cross: Genius! My hon. Friend is full of great ideas. That is the calibre that we expect of him.

On misleading the House, the Prime Minister said that no one in No. 10 was aware that there had been any concerns about Mandelson's vetting before the revelation was made a few weeks ago, despite it being reported in *The Independent* in September last year. On that very point, I submitted a named day question to the Cabinet Office last week, which was due to be answered yesterday. It simply asked whether *The Independent* is one of the newspapers to which the current or any previous director of communications, press secretary or anyone else at No. 10 has a subscription. The named day deadline has passed; the answer has not been received.

That was a simple question. Why has it not been answered? It would be very easy to find the answer. Maybe no one at No. 10 had a subscription to *The Independent*, but if they did, it would be difficult to hold the line that no one at No. 10 had any indication until just a few weeks ago that there had been any issues with Mandelson's vetting. If the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister would like to intervene now and shed light on either the delay or the answer to that question, I will happily take the intervention.

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones) *indicated dissent.*

Harriet Cross: That says all we need to know.

I hope that Labour Back Benchers and, indeed, Ministers see today as the opportunity it is for the Prime Minister. By voting for the motion, they will give the Prime Minister an opportunity to present his case to the Privileges Committee, an opportunity to prove his side of the story and an opportunity—if, as he said, he did not mislead the House—to be exonerated on that claim. I leave MPs with this final thought. If, as he claims, the Prime Minister has done nothing wrong, why has he whipped the entire Labour party, some of them back from across the country—some of whom we have not seen for weeks in this place—to vote to prevent him from having to give evidence to the Privileges Committee?

5.2 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I usually come to this House to represent the people of Hinckley and Bosworth, and occasionally other people across the nation, by raising and debating pertinent issues. Today, however, my speech is aimed at Labour Back Benchers, because at the end of the day, regardless of what is said here, it is their decision. When there are 400 of them, it is they who will decide what happens in this debate. I therefore gently highlight two points: the standards that have been set, and doubt.

The Prime Minister has set very clear standards since he has been in Parliament. It reminds me of the famous fable of the fox and the stork. Those familiar with it will know that the fox invites the stork in to have dinner. The fox serves soup but mischievously does so on a flat plate and, of course, the stork cannot eat it. The stork, not losing its temper, reciprocates and invites the fox back to have soup at its house. When the stork serves the soup, it serves it in a long, thin glass. Of course, the fox cannot get to it and loses its temper. The moral of the story is to treat others as you wish to be treated.

The process that the Prime Minister is going through is due process by the standard he himself set, happening in retort to himself. We only have to look at some of the tweets that he put out. In January 2022, he said:

"The Prime Minister is a national distraction.

Millions of people are struggling to pay the bills, but Boris Johnson and his government are spending the whole time mopping up their own rule-breaking, sleaze and deceit.

He's got to go."

He followed that up by saying to Boris Johnson at the Dispatch Box:

"There are only two possible explanations. Either the Prime Minister is trashing the ministerial code, or he is claiming he was repeatedly lied to by his own advisers and did not know what was going on in his…own office. Come off it!"—[*Official Report*, 30 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 807.]

That is the standard he set himself before he became Prime Minister. Is he following that standard? We only have to look at his actions since he was elected to see that he is not. He gave a donor a pass to No. 10, he took suits, he took glasses, he appointed a donor as the football regulator and, of course, he was the MP who took the most freebies in the last Parliament—more than even the three or four below him in the list combined. He set his own standard but he does not seem to meet it.

That fits with the way in which the Prime Minister came into Parliament. He talked about change, but he changed his promises. He said he would do things differently, and this is where I agree. When it came to the standards debate, the last Government said that it was House business and did not whip it. This Government have made a change: they are whipping it. The question is why.

That leads me on to my next point. I have talked about standards, and now I will talk about doubt. I have heard today that some Labour MPs have no doubt in their mind about the Prime Minister, but I have equally heard that other Labour MPs do. That is really important. If they have no doubt, that is fine—they can vote against the motion. They will have to explain to their constituents the decision they make and why, and they will have to live with that. That is what an MP does, and it is what an MP should do. But the Prime Minister himself clearly has doubts about his Back Benchers, because he is whipping the vote tonight. If he was so confident that so many of them would come to the conclusion that there was nothing to see here, he would not need to whip it.

We know the real reason: there are so many unanswered questions. Labour MPs might say there is no chink of doubt and that no question is unanswered, but how can they explain the inconsistencies from civil servants? Why has it taken months to get this sorted? Why has it required Humble Addresses and emergency debates, yet we are still having these debates nine months on? Why were comments in the PM's box notes left empty? I do not believe that Labour MPs will show the same lack of curiosity that the Prime Minister showed when appointing Peter Mandelson, because they know they have a duty to their constituents to make sure they get it right.

How do I know all this? Because my party has been here before. Many of us on the Conservative Benches are the remnants of what our party had to go through—we have seen it. I have spoken before about the sword of hypocrisy, which cuts both ways, but as we learned, it is the infection that gets you. Here we are, nine months on since I made that speech, and the infection is turning into sepsis. The patient is in real trouble.

Labour MPs could learn from the Opposition, or they will share the same fate. The Conservative party is effectively a mirror to the Labour party that Labour Members did not ask for but would be wise to study. If they do not believe me, maybe they will listen to the Prime Minister, who closed his speech back in the debate on 21 April 2022 by saying:

"if we do not pass this motion and take this opportunity to restate the principles, we are all complicit in allowing the standards to slip. We are all complicit in allowing the public to think that we are all the same, that nobody tells the truth and that there are alternative sets of facts."—[*Official Report*, 21 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 355.]

[Dr Luke Evans]

That is what Labour MPs have to wrestle with, so I hope they listen to the words the Prime Minister said back then.

5.9 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I will aim to be brief and to the point. I pay tribute to the moving, powerful and thoughtful speech by the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell) at the beginning of the debate. I do not underestimate the bravery that it takes to stand up and speak out, and I really welcome and value all Labour colleagues who resist the Whip with courage today. What is at stake today is trust, honesty and integrity—those issues go to the core of what our politics should be about—and the behaviour of a Prime Minister who promised to restore honesty and integrity to government. I agree with the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), who said powerfully that our constituents do care about honesty, truth, trust and integrity.

It is well known that I have many criticisms of the Prime Minister and this Government, as do constituents across the country. Yes, he has repeatedly shown poor judgment. Yes, he has betrayed the hopes of those who voted for real change in 2024. Yes, I am deeply frustrated that we are having to spend so much time debating these issues, when our constituents face pressing daily concerns and a cost of living crisis to which we should be giving more attention. Yes, I think the Prime Minister should resign. However, that is not what we are here to discuss today. Our decision is not even on whether the Prime Minister misled the House, still less to judge whether it was an intentional or reckless misleading—our decision today is whether the Prime Minister has a case to answer on whether he may have misled the House, and it is absolutely clear that he does.

Looking at the detail of the motion, it cites three quotes from the Prime Minister's own words. The first is his assurance about "full due process" being followed in the appointment of Peter Mandelson. Just this morning, we heard yet more evidence from Sir Philip Barton, the primary civil servant in the Foreign Office at the time. He was categorical that the normal process is that vetting comes first and appointment comes later, but it was the opposite way round in this case. The Prime Minister, as the motion says, made it clear that his position was that Mandelson's position was "subject to developed vetting", and that,

"No pressure existed whatsoever in relation to this case."—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 316.]

That is clearly not a tenable position.

Some colleagues on the Government Benches are asking us to believe, although it is perfectly clear that considerable pressure was put on the timescale—within the context of the already announced appointment of Peter Mandelson, within the context of there being no contingency plan if the vetting process failed him, and within the context that it would have been a complete foreign affairs crisis for that vetting process to have failed him—that there was still no pressure whatsoever on the process.

Sam Rushworth: Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Chowns: The hon. Gentleman has said a lot today, and there are others still waiting to speak.

It is clear that there is a case to answer here. The decision we have to make is not whether we are definitively certain that the Prime Minister misled the House, but whether we feel that there is a case to be answered, and therefore whether this matter should be referred to the body that is in existence to deal with these issues: the Privileges Committee. As many Members have commented, the Prime Minister could and should refer himself to that Committee. It would clearly save a great deal of heartache within the Labour party. If he will not do that, all of us—whatever our party—owe it to our consciences and to our constituents to refer him to the Privileges Committee and to vote for this motion.

5.14 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this very important debate. I am going to add a perspective from someone who has never been in the Whips Office, but who has witnessed the dark arts of the Whips during his time in this place.

I can see that what is happening today is that the Prime Minister has been persuaded by his Whips to issue a demand that all his troops should support him in voting down this motion, the consequence of which is that he will be even more unpopular, the results for Labour in the local elections will be even worse, and as a result it will be easier for the Labour party and its Whips to scapegoat the Prime Minister for their failures. It will then be easier for them to change their leader, which is what a lot of them are yearning to be able to do. If the Prime Minister referred himself to the Privileges Committee or the motion were not being contested, the Prime Minister, as many of my right hon. and hon. Friends have pointed out, would have the opportunity to go before the Committee and explain himself, and even if some of the allegations were proved to be true, in my view the penalty would not be that severe.

I remember that, at the time of the 1997 general election, Margaret Thatcher came down to support me in Christchurch. On the same day, one of our colleagues, who was standing in another constituency, had been condemned by the then Standards Committee for having been in breach of the rules of the House, so the first question that the former Prime Minister had to contend with when she arrived in Christchurch was "What do you think of Neil Hamilton?" She had what I thought was the perfect answer. She said, "Nobody's perfect." Obviously, when someone has answered a question in that way it is very hard to put in any supplementaries, and despite their best efforts the press were not able to get any further, so they had to start talking about the prospects of the Conservatives winning back the Christchurch constituency in the election.

I think that if this matter were referred to the Privileges Committee, ultimately the effect would be that someone would say, "Well, nobody's perfect. They have a Prime Minister who uses words such as 'whatsoever' to exaggerate a situation." When we look up "whatsoever" in a dictionary, we see that it is really intended to reinforce the strength of a proposition: "There was no pressure—whatsoever".

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Christopher Chope: No, I will not give way; I think we need to make progress.

The effect of using the word "whatsoever", I think, was that the Prime Minister probably inadvertently misled himself. I am being generous, but what I am really saying to Labour Members is: "Watch out. You are probably working very well together to bring down the downfall of this Prime Minister." My constituents would be delighted if there was a general election and a chance to change the Government, but the last thing they want is to get rid of this Prime Minister and be faced with another Prime Minister from the Labour party who they think will be far worse, even though they might be more effective.

That is my contribution to this evening's debate. It is a small contribution, but I hope it may influence the way in which some Labour Members choose to vote.

5.18 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The Prime Minister came to this very Dispatch Box and said that "No pressure existed whatsoever" in relation to the Mandelson case. I recall Her late Majesty famously saying, "Recollections may vary", but even from the Prime Minister I think that that is stretching the phrase, given the evidence that we have from Olly Robbins and others.

I was recently reading "Black Box Thinking", a book by Matthew Syed. At its heart, it is about the importance of learning from failure, and using that to improve. In some respects, I think the Prime Minister believes that he has done all that is necessary by changing the process for appointments, but the Prime Minister is really missing the point. The issue is what has—or, rather, has not—been done, and whether what the Prime Minister told the House was misleading and whether it amounts to a contempt of the House, bearing in mind the standards expected of Ministers in relation to ministerial accountability and in the ministerial code. This is not just an innocent mistake. The phrase "the cover-up is worse that the crime" really resonates with me at this moment, although I think the crime is equally heinous.

I notice that the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) is not in his place. He has probably tired himself out, so I say to him that brevity is the soul of wit. In spite of his protestations, due process was not followed, despite the Prime Minister stating otherwise to the House. The security vetting was not carried out before Mandelson's appointment, and the Foreign Office had to act at pace to confirm the appointment. Pressure was applied so that there would be an appointment before the presidential inauguration, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhirst) said earlier, no minutes or records were kept of a key meeting in December 2024. We have a drip-feed of constant information; eventually, like a dam, it will burst. We are waiting for this to come out.

On the crime itself, it is really a question of judgment. Alarm bells should have been ringing. We in this House all knew about the Prince of Darkness. I was 10 years old when he was first dismissed. I was 13 years old when he was dismissed for his links with the Hinduja case. I grew up knowing Peter Mandelson's background. Then we found out about his links with Russia and China, which are a national security risk—let alone his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. All this was brushed aside in a rush to appoint this man as our ambassador.

I am sorely disappointed that Labour Members will be whipped to allow the Prime Minister not to go before the Privileges Committee. If he has no case to answer, he has absolutely nothing to hide. The prosecutor is only prepared to ask questions; he is not prepared to answer any. I am sorry that some Labour MPs have had to come before us and say they are scared about what will happen to them for speaking out. That is not what we should be aiming for in this House.

Today's privilege motion is about the House and its reputation. The Prime Minister has a duty to answer questions, and the Privileges Committee is the perfect mechanism by which to bring certainty on the procedure and on what has been said to the House. This House has a long and distinguished history. Using the Privileges Committee is part of preserving that history and the respect that people have for the mother of all Parliaments, and it is above party allegiances. The Prime Minister would save his MPs if only he would refer himself to the Committee.

5.22 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. As many colleagues on the Opposition Benches have said, it brings a sense of d j vu. I have a rather horrible chill up my spine when I remember being on the Government Benches and being pushed by the Whips to vote for certain things.

As has already been said, we have a Prime Minister who promised to do things differently. He promised change, higher standards and transparency, and he is the ultimate arbiter and keeper of the ministerial code. Politics is often about a certain amount of deflection, but he seems to go beyond all precedent in not answering questions. He drives Mr Speaker up the wall—to the point that they have altercations in the Chamber. That is the backdrop. We have a Prime Minister who promised that he would be particularly transparent and bring forward a duty of candour law, but that was dropped. He promised higher standards, yet does not live up to it.

The hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger), who is the new trade envoy to the Republic of Korea, is in the Chamber, and it is fabulous to see that loyalty can be rewarded. I say to him, "Well done!" If Members back the Government, even when they should not, there can be a reward for them. But, as colleagues on this side of the Chamber have said, if Members do not vote with their conscience or do the right thing when their gut tells them to, they will regret it.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham Stuart: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment.

There is a particular change today, because we have a three-line Whip on a House matter. Members have spoken on behalf of the Government line. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth), who is in his place, said that he did not think the three-line Whip was a good idea, and others did not want to talk about it, but who was the three-line Whip for? Perhaps

[Graham Stuart]

the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister can tell us. Labour Members have told us that they will always vote with their conscience and do the right thing, yet after the Whips had phoned round, it was decided that they must impose a three-line Whip.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who has never been a Whip and does not have much fondness for them, has put the ghastly deed at their door. As a former Whip, I tend to think that it is more likely that the Whips did their job, giving a nuanced but properly informed answer. Then No. 10—sitting in the bunker, panicking, their only job to make sure that the Prime Minister is not replaced—said, "No, unless you can give us 100% support." "There is no such thing as 100%," the Chief Whip would reply. "No, no—then we insist that a three-line Whip is imposed." And that happened.

John Slinger *rose—*

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab) *rose—*

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady, who is a brilliant tennis player and a great partner, will forgive me if I give way to the hon. Member for Rugby, whom I referenced and should therefore allow to come in.

John Slinger: I like the right hon. Gentleman a great deal and thank him for his kind words. The moment has somewhat passed, but he was implying that the Prime Minister is avoiding answering questions. *[Interruption.]* If Members will listen: this is the Prime Minister who came before the House last Monday and answered questions from right hon. and hon. Members for two and a half hours.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about transparency, but we are talking about a Prime Minister who led a Government who are releasing all the documents to this House and the public. He can talk all he likes about transparency and answering questions, but I have just demonstrated that both those things have been achieved already.

Graham Stuart: As so often, the hon. Gentleman does two things brilliantly: he reinforces his merit with the Whips when it comes to a future position, yet makes our case for us. The Prime Minister was dragged before the House. It is not just me—Mr Speaker was falling out with him and he is a former Labour MP. This is the frustration of a whole nation at a man who promised that he would be open and transparent but who cannot, ever, just give a straightforward answer. It has got to the point where if he was asked whether he would like mash or new potatoes, he would start talking to his wife about pork chops. He just cannot answer the question.

I say to the hon. Member for Rugby that when the Prime Minister was dragged here—this is the issue today—he misled this House. We have gone over that; Members will be deeply relieved to hear that I will not go over it again. But he said that due process had been followed. We have evidence today: Morgan McSweeney said he did the interview. He is an old pal of Mandelson's—the man pushing for his appointment. He is the guy who asked Mandelson the questions. Then, whoa—"Let's review the answers that McSweeney got and get Lord Doyle"—another pal of them both—"to provide the independent review." That is what the Prime Minister presided over, all to deliver what McSweeney also made clear today was absolutely the Prime Minister's decision.

The Prime Minister made the decision. He got his mates in this crony boys' club to sit around, review each other and put Mandelson into place. Then he came here—this is the point—and said that due process was followed. Due process was not followed. Only because of the Humble Address have we found out that the Cabinet Secretary's official advice to the Prime Minister was that vetting must be done before the announcement of a political appointee—and again, the Government had to give way halfway through the debate as they could see the direction it was going in. That advice was not in the public domain when Chris Wormald, who will have to answer for his own judgments, came out and said that all due process had been followed. But anyone who could read the advice and see what happened can clearly see that it was not followed. Chris Wormald's letter was false and wrong. I do not see how it can be squared as the great defence of the Prime Minister. We have had no answers to that point.

We have so many questions—even before we get to last week, when, as the hon. Member for Rugby said, the Prime Minister was here. Under questioning from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, who does a brilliant job of keeping her temper while he evades and seeks not to answer, the Prime Minister said that there had been no pressure whatsoever. That is clearly not true, given that Olly Robbins repeatedly said how much pressure there was.

There are plenty of reasons to believe that the Prime Minister, who said that he was going to set a higher standard, has misled this House. That is all we need; as Mr Speaker said, we are not judge and jury today when it comes to whether he actually misled the House. That is why we have the Privileges Committee to look at the matter. It is dominated by Labour MPs, but such is the lack of confidence in No. 10—perhaps in the Whips Office and certainly in the Cabinet—that not only does the Prime Minister not trust the Labour MPs on the Privileges Committee; he does not even trust all the other Labour Members, who are being dragooned by a three-line Whip into voting for something, when no such Whip should ever have been applied.

5.29 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I want to start with a clumsy metaphor. If one is in public office, having anything to do with Peter Mandelson is akin to filling the world's smallest hot water bottle with the world's largest kettle, while dressed only in shorts and flip-flops. The question is not whether one will get burned, but how badly—and will it be fatally so?

One of the falsehoods that the Prime Minister has sought repeatedly to advance is that it was a mistake to appoint Peter Mandelson. It was no such thing; it was a debt to be repaid. He had to appoint Peter Mandelson to that job. It was a deal he made with the devil. It was a high-stakes political game of Russian roulette. The Prime Minister pulled the trigger when the bullet was in the chamber and it went off at the heart of his Government. Now that they have got through the noise of the bang, they are all suffering from some sort of collective cognitive

dissonance where they cannot see what a preposterous defence the Prime Minister and the Labour party have mounted.

I will frame the rest of what I have to say around honesty, integrity and respect. On honesty, the Prime Minister's version of events is inconsistent with the evidence in greater or lesser part than that which has been proffered by officials—that much is clear. That in itself is enough to seek recourse to the Privileges Committee. The Prime Minister's evidence consistently sought to omit that this was a catastrophe of his own making, for the reasons I have set out, in so far as it was political payback. These are the detriments and de-merits against the Prime Minister on the honesty front, but I cannot be the arbiter of that.

On integrity, the Prime Minister made this happen, as we have discussed—it is his mess—but he has inflicted substantial damage on politics across these islands. Many of us are campaigning in elections at the minute. Most of us realise that people do not care which party we are in when they have lost trust in politics; it is a plague on all our houses, and that plague is now substantially more fatal because of the actions of the Prime Minister. Does somebody want to intervene on me? No, I did not think so. The Prime Minister was but one of five actors involved in this debacle. The other four have all lost their jobs, while the Prime Minister, for the time being, has kept his.

I will touch briefly on the whipping scenario. I will not go over what others have said already—although, that the Government have whipped the vote reveals how deeply questionable is the conviction of Back Benchers in their Prime Minister; and conversely, how questionable is the Prime Minister's conviction in his Back Benchers. However, to be clear, notwithstanding the very brave speeches by the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell) and others, I am prepared to believe that there are Labour MPs who will vote against the motion tonight in good conscience, on the basis of the evidence as they see it, and that is fine. The problem they face is that they have been whipped to do so, whether that is their position or not, and they should be absolutely furious about that. But I cannot be the arbiter of that.

On respect, the Prime Minister says that the appointment was a mistake. No, he must take responsibility. Officials and spads have all had to walk the walk while he remains in post, looking increasingly like a cuckoo waiting for his successor to arrive. On respect, the most important thing is that when the Prime Minister stands there and says that he is sorry to the victims of Epstein, what he should continue to say is, "When I appointed Mandelson to the pinnacle of United Kingdom diplomatic appointments over in Washington, I did so in the knowledge that he was a sympathiser, close friend and confidante of the world's most prolific paedophile, and I still appointed him—I just did not know how much of a friend and confidante he was of the world's most prolific paedophile." That is no defence. I know that, and I am surprised that the former Director of Public Prosecutions does not know that that is the shallowest of all defences.

Many Labour Members have talked about how often the Prime Minister has been in this Chamber fielding questions, and how many hours he has spent doing so, but very few of those questions have actually been answered and, with the exception of the Leader of the Opposition, nobody has the right to reply on the questions about the appointment of Peter Mandelson that the Prime Minister serially does not answer. Recourse to the Privileges Committee is what we need here. I cannot be the arbiter of all the things I have covered, and neither can anyone else here, but the Privileges Committee can.

5.35 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker,

> "Why does the Prime Minister think everybody else's actions have consequences except his own?"—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 155.]

That is a question the country would like an answer to. It is, given the appearance of several recently defenestrated senior civil servants, a prescient question. But it is not my question—it is the Prime Minister's own question from 2022. How hollow those words must feel now. The testimonies from Sir Oliver Robbins last week, and from his predecessor, Sir Philip Barton, and the Prime Minister's former chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, this morning—all casualties trailing in the wake of a Prime Minister who will stop at nothing to save his own skin—have torpedoed what last vestiges of credibility the Prime Minister is desperately clinging on to.

The Prime Minister set the conditions for Peter Mandelson to be the UK ambassador to the United States with a devil-may-care attitude with regard to the consequences. The public announcement of his appointment in December 2024, His Majesty the King being informed and the agr ment with the United States being secured all before vetting had taken place ensured that the appointment was a fait accompli.

Peter Mandelson then being granted access to the FCDO building and higher-classification briefings before he was granted developed vetting reveals a shockingly lax approach to our national security, but it is not without precedent. We saw much of the same laissez-faire attitude with a previous ministerial appointment: that of the Prime Minister's special envoy to the British Indian Ocean Territory, Jonathan Powell. A similar pattern was followed, with access to the FCDO granted and access to classified documents, use of unsecured email for communications and question marks over potential foreign influence all confirmed to have taken place prior to his developed vetting within the last few hours by Morgan McSweeney. That was six months prior to the Mandelson farrago. As I said at PMQs last week, playing fast and loose with national security is a key characteristic of the Prime Minister's chumocracy.

The question of Mandelson's security clearance itself poses a host of further questions. When Peter Mandelson commenced his role, he had already been given developed vetting, although UKSV had highlighted concerns—that is now well established. But if full due process was followed, why was Olly Robbins sacked?

On 4 February, less than a week before Mandelson started his role, the appointments and interchange officer of the FCDO informed him via email that the role required STRAP-level clearance in addition to DV and that a new STRAP application would need to be made. Sir Oliver Robbins confirmed that it was clear to him that Mandelson had received STRAP clearance from the STRAP authorities. During the urgent question in the Chamber on 16 March, I asked the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister what level of security clearance Mandelson had been granted, notwithstanding the minutiae

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

of whether developed vetting is a clearance level and STRAP is a role-specific access. The reply I received from the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra)—somewhat conveniently one hour after *The Guardian* broke its story—stated only that Mandelson had developed vetting upon commencement of his role on 10 February. So when was his STRAP application made, and when was it granted? When I asked the Prime Minister last week, despite his legendary forensic eye for detail, he had no idea. Did the intelligence services also have access to the UKSV vetting report?

The wider question is this: what assessment did the US intelligence services make of Peter Mandelson? Did he pass vetting by the US Department of State? As the nexus for all Five Eyes intelligence and US-UK eyes-only intelligence coming from the United States, was Mandelson granted access to all the available intelligence in order to discharge all his responsibilities as ambassador? Would the US, for example, have given him visibility of TK-level imagery?

What assessment have the Government made of the damage this debacle has done to the UK's relationship with the United States? It is surely no coincidence that the special relationship has soured at the same time that this fiasco has unravelled, quite apart from the other faux pas that the Government have made in recent weeks.

Even more damning in Sir Olly Robbins' testimony was the Prime Minister's dogged determination to reward the now Lord Doyle:

> "I was under strict instruction not to discuss that with the then Foreign Secretary, which was uncomfortable… I found it very hard to think how I would explain to the office what the credentials of Matthew were to be in an important head of mission role, when I was in danger of making very senior, very experienced diplomats leave the office."

The fact is that the Prime Minister put pressure on the FCDO to give Lord Doyle a head of mission role in the diplomatic service in March last year despite his complete lack of qualification for the role. That same individual later had the Labour Whip removed owing to his relationship with Sean Morton, a man subsequently convicted of possessing indecent images of children. The Prime Minister deliberately directed that information to be withheld from the then Foreign Secretary; I suspect that is not the first time he has done that.

Those two men with proximity to convicted paedophiles were both Labour peers and both key figures in the Starmer project—the Government's cronyism is second only to their nepotism. Given what we know about the role that Peter Mandelson played in the last reshuffle, what confidence can the general public have that Ministers who owe their careers to him will vote honestly in the coming vote? It is not on the Opposition side of the House that we have to worry about whether Peter Mandelson paid for anybody's wedding.

The laissez-faire attitude to Peter Mandelson's appointment has illustrated the nonchalance, arrogance and incompetence of the Government under this milquetoast premiership. There is a key question that we come back to once again: why does the Prime Minister think everybody's actions have consequences except his own? The public must be assured that there has been an investigation into whether the Prime Minister misled the House. The Privileges Committee must investigate the Prime Minister. Labour MPs must vote for the motion, for transparency and truth, not the defence of a Prime Minister who does not deserve their blinkered loyalty.

5.40 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): May I first extend my thoughts and prayers to the victims of Epstein? I commend the bold and courageous contributions of Labour Members who will be voting for the motion.

I was elected as an independent Member of Parliament to represent the people of Birmingham Perry Barr without fear and without favour. I was sent here without a party Whip—without shackles or controls, or indeed hidden notes given to me behind closed doors. I was sent here to exercise my judgment, my discretion and my conscience at the behest of my constituents, and that is exactly what I do each and every day.

The truth is that the British public feel deeply, profoundly disenfranchised. Too many people no longer trust politicians. Too many believe that we say one thing and do another. Too many feel that there is one rule for those in power and another for everyone else. We cannot simply dismiss that sentiment; we must confront it. Honesty matters. Integrity matters. Credibility matters. Above all, transparency matters. Without those fundamental elements, public confidence does not just weaken; it disappears. And once it is gone, it is incredibly difficult to rebuild. I therefore ask colleagues across the House—especially Labour colleagues—what message do we send today if we refuse even to allow a Committee to examine the facts? What are we saying to the public if we block scrutiny before it has even begun?

The motion is not a verdict, a judgment or a declaration of guilt; it is a fair, established parliamentary process to examine evidence, to determine the facts and to allow the truth to emerge. Yet we are told that Labour Members are under a three-line Whip. For those outside the Chamber who may not know, that means they are being instructed and compelled to vote against the motion—to vote against even allowing the question to be examined. Let us be honest about what that looks like.

If an individual votes to prevent the investigation, they are not defending due process, but denying it; they are not upholding transparency, but obstructing it; they are not strengthening public trust, but further eroding it. To the British people, it will look like they are shielding, blocking and protecting the powerful from scrutiny. That is precisely the perception that we should all be fighting against, not reinforcing.

If we expect the public to follow the rules, to respect the law and to have faith in our institutions, we must hold ourselves to the same, if not higher, standards. We cannot ask for trust while refusing accountability, we cannot demand integrity while avoiding scrutiny and we cannot rebuild confidence by closing ranks.

This is a moment that calls for courage—not partisan courage, but moral courage; the courage to say, "Let the process take its course"; the courage to say that no one is above scrutiny; and the courage to put principle above party. As an independent Member, I answer only to my constituents and to my conscience. I am confident that every Labour Member will listen to their conscience.

My conscience tells me that supporting this motion is the right thing to do, not because of politics, but because of principles, and not because of personalities, but because of the standards that we owe to the British public.

I urge colleagues across this House, particularly those under instructions today, to reflect carefully on the message that their vote will send. Will it be a message of openness or a message of obstruction? Will it be a message of accountability or a message of avoidance? The public are watching and they will draw their own conclusions. If we are serious about restoring trust in politics, we must be serious about transparency. If we are serious about integrity, we must be serious about scrutiny. If we are serious about public confidence, we must allow the truth to be examined, wherever that truth leads. For that reason, I support the motion. The Prime Minister is willing to put each and every Labour Member of Parliament at risk at the next general election, but he will not risk going in front of the Privileges Committee.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Alex Burghart.

5.46 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): This has been a long and sometimes interesting debate. We have had some revelations. I was interested to hear the speech by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey). I am sure we are all delighted to hear that the Liberal Democrats are now opposed to sanctimony. I was also interested to hear from the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), that he is not particularly political. I welcome the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister back to his place. I congratulate him on the fact that, on the "Today" programme this morning, he was being lauded as the Prime Minister's right-hand man. I hope that he will be not made too anxious by what has happened to all the Prime Minister's other right-hand men.

The motion before us is very simple. It is about starting a process that will take what has been discussed in this House and put it in the hands of a Committee of our peers, who will get to adjudicate, because there is no agreement on these points. That process has long existed in this House to resolve issues such as these. We are doing this for a reason. It is simply because—*[Interruption.]* Yeah, okay. Come on. We are doing this for a reason. It is because Members of all parties have reason to believe that the Prime Minister may have misled this House.

Those Labour MPs who said sanctimoniously, to the horror of the Liberal Democrats, that this was some sort of political stunt—*[Interruption.]* Okay. All right. Do they think that the hon. Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell) was part of a political stunt when she said that "good, decent colleagues will be accused of being complicit in a cover-up", or when she said that this was "a matter for the Privileges Committee"? Was she part of a political stunt? Was it all about the local elections for her? The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) explained that she had no Labour opponent and did not have any local elections; was she part of a political stunt? When the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who is not in his place, said that he does not believe that the House was misled by the Prime Minister, but does think that the Prime Minister should be referred to the Committee, was he part of a political stunt? This claim falls away at the first hurdle.

Labour's objection to the motion is political, because the Labour party knows that the Prime Minister may well be in the wrong and is scared of referring him. That is the only reason why the Government needed to put in place a hard three-line Whip and started twisting arms. Do they really believe that the hon. Members for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman), for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), who is absent and has tweeted that if she was here she

"would be voting for the motion",

were part of a political stunt? No. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) said at the start of the debate, if the Government have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear from the Privileges Committee.

A number of Labour MPs have objected, saying that they think the Prime Minister is innocent, and they are perfectly entitled to make that case. We think that case is wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) elegantly pointed out, that is why we need the Privileges Committee to adjudicate. A number of Labour MPs thought that the Prime Minister should have referred himself; indeed, he should have. It would have been the simplest way of moving on this whole process without any further need for the House to agonise over it. As for those Labour MPs who said how sad it was that they could not debate all the other things that they wanted to debate today, they could have done so if the Prime Minister had referred himself.

This ground has been well trodden this afternoon, but I will make the case again briefly. It rests on two points: full due process, and pressure. We know because of the Humble Address—and only because of it, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) eloquently said—that the then Cabinet Secretary, Simon Case, set out in November 2024 what full due process looked like: the Prime Minister's appointee had to have security clearance before he was appointed, and he had to declare his interests before he was appointed. So far, the Government, despite being asked on many occasions whether Peter Mandelson filled in a conflict of interest document, have been unable to tell us. They did not release it following the Humble Address, and have not even been able to tell us whether such a document exists.

On the security clearance aspect of the case, we know that process was not followed. We know that the Prime Minister immediately went ahead and made the appointment anyway, despite being told by the Cabinet Secretary that he should not.

There are plenty of other reasons why we know that full due process was not followed. It does not require any great experience of government to know that full due process does not involve reading a due diligence document by the Cabinet Office that says that Peter Mandelson was a director of a Russian company during the Russian invasion of Crimea, and then thinking, "Well, we just need security clearance later." That is obviously not full due process.

[Alex Burghart]

It is obviously not full due process to ask Peter Mandelson's Labour Together friends to complete the clearance process for him. It is not due process to not keep any records of meetings, calls or decisions in a way that is clearly in violation of all the guidance given to civil servants. In no way was that full due process, although people have nobly tried to make the case that Wormald, the later Cabinet Secretary, said that all that was done was fine. Let us remind the House that Wormald's letter to the Prime Minister was written on 16 September. By that time, the Prime Minister had already told the House that

"full due process was followed"—[*Official Report*, 10 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 859.]

The system was trying to defend a position that the Prime Minister had already made very clear in the House repeatedly. At that moment in time, on 10 December when he told my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition that full due process was followed, the last piece of advice given to him by a Cabinet Secretary was from Simon Case. He knew that he had not followed full due process.

On the point about pressure, it is very clear that the Prime Minister mis-spoke, at the very least, in the House last Wednesday. He said that Sir Olly Robbins

"went on to say:

'I…have complete confidence that…recommendations to me and the discussion we had and the decision we made were rigorously independent of'

any 'pressure.'"—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 316.]

But what Sir Olly actually said to the Foreign Affairs Committee was,

"I also have complete confidence that their recommendations to me and the discussion we had and the decision we made were rigorously independent of that pressure."

There is a difference between no pressure and there being pressure.

Sir Olly made it clear throughout his testimony that he and his office were put under pressure, so when the Prime Minister said,

"Sir Olly was absolutely clear that nobody put pressure on him to make this appointment",—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 316.]

that was manifestly false. What Sir Olly actually said was:

"Throughout January, honestly, my office and the Foreign Secretary's office were under constant pressure… While I think the Department felt under pressure, we were proud of the fact that we had not bowed to that pressure."

He also said that he found an

"atmosphere where this was not just, 'Please get this done quickly,' but, 'And get it done.'"

That was—*[Interruption.]* Well, it deserves to be said loudly, because it is important.

The Prime Minister appears to have misled the House and not corrected the record. Ministers sometimes make mistakes, but as everyone knows, under the ministerial code, they must come and correct the record at the earliest available opportunity. The earliest available opportunity was Thursday. We could probably have squeezed that to include Monday, but it is now Tuesday, and the Prime Minister is still pretending that he has done nothing wrong, even though what happened is here in black and white, for everyone to read.

There is clearly a case to answer. I have sympathy for all those Labour MPs who have spoken in this debate and have deep concerns and grievances about this. I also have a great deal of sympathy for those who feel the same way but have not spoken. The Prime Minister's failure to self-refer, as several Labour MPs have suggested he should, has put them in this position. They are being whipped to support something that they know is wrong. They are being whipped to support something that they know their constituents will hate. They are being whipped to defend the Labour Together machine, which has brought such shame on the Labour party. *[Interruption.]* You can get angry, but you have all taken money from them! Well, not all Labour Members, to be fair—some of them have called for an investigation of Labour Together, and rightly so. They are being whipped by a Prime Minister who will lead them over the edge of the cliff, if they let him.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) said powerfully, in politics, it is important to be able to look at oneself in the mirror at the end of the day. I know that many Labour MPs will struggle to do that after going through the Lobby tonight, but they need not vote against the motion. They all know where this ends. It ends with the Prime Minister not fighting the next general election. It ends with them having to justify what they have done. It ends with them having only what is left of their reputation.

5.57 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): May I begin by saying that the hon. Member's speech—not least the beginning, when he visibly enjoyed his jokes more than the rest of the House—shows that, for the Conservative party, this is purely a joking matter? The Government take this seriously, however, so I will speak to the substance and the motivations behind the motion. Before I do so, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I thank in particular hon. Friends and Members who reminded us, as they should, that the victims of Jeffrey Epstein suffered the most hideous abuse and will be reminded of that every single time this matter is debated. The Prime Minister has apologised to them and expressed his ongoing regret for having appointed Peter Mandelson, which he knows is at the heart of this matter.

The Prime Minister, and indeed the whole Government, recognise the importance of transparency in respect of Peter Mandelson's appointment and dismissal as ambassador. That is why this is my eighth appearance at the Dispatch Box to provide updates on these issues, and why the Government welcome this opportunity to debate the substance of the motion before us. I also acknowledge the diligence of this House's Select Committees. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and the members of her Foreign Affairs Committee for their important work. Members from across the House will have heard the evidence from a number of officials, and from the Prime Minister's former chief of staff, as part of that ongoing work. I also thank the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), as well as the members of the Intelligence and Security Committee, for their support in providing additional layers of transparency and accountability as the Government comply with the Humble Address.

Sir Julian Lewis: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Darren Jones: I will not—*[Interruption.]* I will happily give way in due course, but I want to turn to the substance of the motion first.

In recent weeks, some have accused the Prime Minister of dishonesty, saying that there was no way that Foreign Office officials would have given Peter Mandelson clearance against the vetting agency's recommendation, let alone without checking with the Prime Minister himself. The Leader of the Opposition herself on BBC Radio 4 said, "He knew", and that

"I know he is lying".

However, the testimony provided by Sir Olly Robbins has disproved those accusations without further question. So rather than focus on the issues affecting our constituents and the country most, what do Opposition Members do? They try to shift the goalposts, and they have tried again and again to make their arguments fit.

Today alone, we have heard Opposition Members bounce from one accusation to another in a desperate search for something that will stick. We have been subjected to the ranting incoherence of the Leader of the Opposition while she was in search of something that she could use to justify today's politically motivated spectacle—*[Interruption.]*

Mrs Badenoch: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Darren Jones: I think we have heard enough of the ranting incoherence of the Leader of the Opposition.

Let us take the specific allegations in turn. First, as to whether the Prime Minister was correct when he said "full due process" was followed, yesterday the Government deposited a letter from the then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Chris Wormald, in the Library of the House. In that letter, it is clear that he was specifically asked by the Prime Minister to review whether due process was followed in the appointment, and he confirmed that it was.

Last week, the former permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Olly Robbins, stated to the Foreign Affairs Committee that his Department followed that process. We have also heard the Cabinet Office permanent secretary's evidence, which covered this issue in great detail. Catherine Little stated unequivocally that "due process was followed" in relation to Peter Mandelson's vetting.

Sir Julian Lewis: I thank the Minister for giving way. Would not "full due process" have required the vetting to be completed before announcing the appointment, as was advised by the then Cabinet Secretary and then ignored or overruled by the Prime Minister personally?

Darren Jones: The right hon. Gentleman should listen to my speech. I have just said that Catherine Little, Sir Chris Wormald and Sir Olly Robbins all agree on the point that due process was followed. When the Prime Minister received new information about the UKSV process this month, he immediately asked for the full facts to be established and he then come to this House on 20 April.

On the statement that Peter Mandelson's appointment was "subject to developed vetting", the Prime Minister has always been clear that this appointment was in line with the processes at the time. I understand that there have been some questions about this process, but to be clear, as Sir Olly Robbins told the Foreign Affairs Committee in November:

"As is normally the case with external appointments to my Department…the appointment was made subject to obtaining security clearance."

As Sir Chris Wormald told the same Committee:

"The normal thing is for the security clearance to happen after appointment but before the person signs a contract and takes up post."

And as the former Cabinet Secretary said in his letter to the Prime Minister, having conducted a review into the process,

"the vetting process was complete before the previous HMA Washington took up post on 10 February 2025, and it is more usual for security vetting to happen after appointment."

Ayoub Khan: The Minister clearly believes that the Prime Minister has a defensible position, so will he support the withdrawal of the whipping of Labour Back Benchers?

Darren Jones: I am not going to answer silly questions.

Next, on the question of pressure—*[Interruption.]* Many hon. Members have asked questions today about a general pressure, a specific pressure or a variety of different pressures, so they may want to listen to the answer. It is important to be clear about this, because there is pressure to get stuff done every day across every area of government, as we work hard to deliver for the British people. The Leader of the Opposition and other Members who have previously served in government will no doubt recall that from their time in office, but there is clearly a difference between asking for progress updates and putting pressure on officials to predetermine an outcome or not to follow a proper process. That was not the case in this scenario.

Dr Chowns: Is it due process to make a public announcement of an appointment before vetting is completed? Is it not the case that having made a public announcement, the Government created pressure on the process?

Darren Jones: I am trying my best, but I have answered both those questions already from the Dispatch Box. I refer the hon. Lady to my comments.

Mrs Badenoch: Will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister give way?

Darren Jones: I will finish this section, then I will come to the right hon. Lady.

Sir Philip Barton told the Foreign Affairs Committee this morning that

"during my tenure, I was not aware of any pressure on the substance of the Mandelson DV case."

Mrs Badenoch: I asked the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister just one question in my speech. Will he repeat on the Floor of the House the exact words that the Prime Minister used at PMQs, in front of all of us: that no pressure "whatsoever" was put on the Foreign Office?

Darren Jones: That is an important question, because it goes to the very heart of the motion before the House today. [Hon. Members: "Answer it!"] I am going to—rest your horses. It is important to place the Prime Minister's words in the right context. When the Prime Minister—[Hon. Members: "Ah!"] The Opposition do not want to listen to the answer—again, they do not like the facts—but I am going to try my best. They should pay attention.

To answer the right hon. Lady's question directly, when the Prime Minister said that there was no pressure "whatsoever", he was specifically responding to the allegation that there was pressure that Peter Mandelson should not be vetted at all and that he should be sent to Washington regardless of the vetting outcome. Again, Sir Olly Robbins told MPs that it was

"never put to me that way",

and the Prime Minister made the comment immediately after quoting the evidence provided to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Regrettably—we see this again today, time after time—the Opposition are just trying to expand their interpretation of the Prime Minister's words in bad faith, because their previous claim that the Prime Minister must have known about Peter Mandelson's clearance has fallen apart in front of their eyes, and now they are grasping at straws. That matters, because as the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) argued, the processes in this House and the work of the Privileges Committee are important and integral to our constitution, but there must be appropriate thresholds for these investigations.

Stephen Flynn *rose—*

Darren Jones: These investigations cannot be done every week off the back of PMQs on an interpretation of the wording of the Prime Minister. Instead, they must be done on very significant cases that warrant the work of the Privileges Committee. That is why it is important to contrast the allegations and accusations of the Opposition parties, as many Members of the House have done today, with the seriousness of the situation when Boris Johnson was referred to the Privileges Committee in the last Parliament.

This is an important precedent. In those circumstances, Boris Johnson knowingly told this House that there were no parties in Downing Street during covid lockdowns, only for it to emerge that he had personally been at five of them and received a police fine for attending them. That is the nature of lying to this House, which he was proven to have done in the work of the Privileges Committee. It is not about the interpretation of a question and answer at Prime Minister's questions.

This all begs the question: if there is no substance to the allegations in the motion today, what is it that is driving the behaviour of Opposition parties? That question goes to the very basis of the motion before us. I have to ask: what is it precisely about this Labour Government giving rights and powers to workers, renters and the disadvantaged that they do not like? What is it about this Labour Government standing against unearned wealth and people who use their privilege to extract value from the system, rather than adding to it, that they do not like? What is it about a Labour Government raising taxes on private jets and non-doms to raise money for our state schools, our NHS and our police and to lift children out of poverty after years of neglect by the Conservative party that the Opposition parties do not want to hear? We all know why—because they are on the side of the vested interests, and we are on the side of the British people.

To be fair to the House, this is not just an accusation that I am levelling at the Conservatives, because they are not the only ones playing games with today's motion. The SNP, too, is desperate to distract from its record in power. What is it trying to distract from today? It is 10,000 kids in Scotland without a home to call their own, a Scottish NHS in decline, and the shameful ferries fiasco.

Stephen Flynn: I thank the right hon. Member for belatedly giving way. I do not know if he has noticed, but this afternoon, polling was released outlining that 61% of people on these isles believe that there should be an inquiry in the terms laid out in the motion. Just 20% of the public agree with the Minister's position. Why is he once again on the wrong side of public opinion?

Darren Jones: I notice that the right hon. Member has nothing to say to those kids, to those patients waiting in the NHS, or to the line of other people waiting for his Government to perform.

Just for me to complete going around the House, the so-called Green party is desperate to distract from Labour's clean energy mission, from its opposition to clean nuclear power, and from its quibbling over new solar farms that—I literally could not make this up—it thinks are too big. Get real!

Dr Chowns *rose—*

Darren Jones: We are in an energy bills crisis and a climate emergency, and this Labour party is going to pull out the stops to serve the British people. While the Opposition parties play—

Dr Chowns *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. In fairness to the right hon. Member, he has given way once already. The hon. Lady cannot stand while he is speaking; she can indicate that she wishes to intervene, but she cannot continue to hang loose like she is trying to summon a taxi.

Darren Jones: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I, for one, am rather enjoying myself, but I think the public might want to listen to the debate in the House today.

While the Opposition parties are playing games—as we can hear from their chuntering, their joking and their shouting—this Labour Government are doing the work that matters. I have been asked, "Where is the Prime Minister?" This afternoon, the Prime Minister has been chairing the middle east response committee, bringing together the Government to mitigate the impact of the war in the middle east. In contrast, the Opposition parties want to distract from the fact that after years of ordinary people facing pressures from the cost of living and feeling like hard work is not rewarded like it used to be, the Conservatives and their friends in Reform wanted the UK to go to war in the middle east, making it harder for families up and down the country—distraction, distraction, distraction.

In contrast, this Government are investing in new rail, roads and nuclear reactors, new scanners for our hospitals and free breakfast clubs for our kids. It is this Labour Government who have saved British Steel and who are investing in sovereign AI, renewing our high streets and delivering home-grown energy. This is relevant, Mr Speaker, because it goes to the motivation behind today's motion.

This Labour Government are doing the hard work of building a better Britain, a Britain that gives people hope for a better future. All these Opposition parties want to tear that down—they want to tear down this Labour Government and the labour movement. *[Interruption.]* They agree, because like our forefathers before us, we have stood up to the power of vested interests, and we will do so again. When the Opposition parties come to the Chamber to try to tear down this labour movement and our project for the British people, I say to them all, "Not today—not on our watch. We will not let it happen."

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 223, Noes 335.

Division No. 512] [6.13 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Begum, Apsana
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Si n
Bhatti, Saqib *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Cartlidge, James
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Denyer, Carla
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Doogan, Dave
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Eastwood, Colum
Eastwood, Sorcha
Farron, Tim
Flynn, rh Stephen
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Hanna, Claire
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Myer, Luke
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Osborne, Kate
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Hannah
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Turner, Karl
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Whittome, Nadia
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wishart, Pete *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Ayes:
Harriet Cross and Gregory Stafford

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Downie, Graeme
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Dan
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Chris
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Miliband, rh Ed
Minns, Ms Julie
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan

Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Deirdre Costigan and Nesil Caliskan

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: A Member of Parliament has complained to me, as has another Member. When Members are shouting "shame" at others who are voting, it is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. I hope that the people concerned will apologise to those Members they shouted at.

Sir Julian Lewis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Out of 190 questions for written answer that I have put down in this Session, which is coming to its close, all but one have been answered. The exception is one that I mentioned on the Floor of the House yesterday during the statement by the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister. He responded:

"I always ensure that I honour parliamentary questions in a timely fashion."—[*Official Report*, 27 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 598.]

The last day for answering this question is today, and it so far has not been answered, so I wonder if I might give the Chief Secretary the opportunity to answer it now. It is this:

"To ask the Prime Minister who first suggested to him that Peter Mandelson should be appointed as Ambassador to the United States."

Darren Jones *rose—*

Mr Speaker: We are not going to carry on the debate, but the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister is desperate to answer.

Darren Jones: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. First, may I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman? I would have cleared parliamentary questions, but I have been in the House all afternoon. To answer his specific question, I refer him to the evidence given today to the Foreign Affairs Committee by Mr Morgan McSweeney, who confirmed that the first person to recommend Peter Mandelson to become ambassador was Peter Mandelson.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that when an MP visits another MP's constituency, the custom and practice is that they should give that MP due notice. The Leader of the Opposition came to my constituency but did not inform me that she would be there. I seek your advice on how best to resolve this.[1]

Mr Speaker: The good thing is that the Member has told me about it. I say to Members—whether they are Ministers, shadow Ministers, leaders or whoever—the courtesy is to the inform the Member whose constituency is being visited, unless it is a private visit. Can everybody please take that on board, especially as we are coming up to the election? The fever is already with us, so please adhere to what I believe is good practice.

1.[*Official Report*, 28 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 870.] (Correction)

Pension Schemes Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that the Government have tabled a new motion in relation to the Lords message and have withdrawn the motion that they tabled this morning. The new amendment paper is available in the Vote Office and online, and was issued at 5.55 pm. It includes a note indicating:

"A motion relating to Lords Reason 88X has been withdrawn and a new motion has been tabled."

I can confirm that nothing in the Lords message engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 40

CERTAIN SCHEMES PROVIDING MONEY PURCHASE BENEFITS: SCALE AND ASSET ALLOCATION

6.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): I beg to move,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments 15 to 24, 27, 30 to 34, 36, 38 to 42, 83 and 88, insists on its amendments 88C, 88E to 88P, 88R, 88S and 88W to the words restored to the Bill by that disagreement, does not insist on its amendments 88A, 88T, 88U and 88V to the words so restored to the Bill, but proposes further amendments (a) to (j) to the words so restored to the Bill.

It is obviously disappointing to see that not every Member in this Chamber wishes to stay for a detailed discussion of the Pension Schemes Bill, but it is not the biggest disappointment ever. It is good to see our regular engagers on this Bill in their place. I thank in particular those Members for helpful discussions on the Bill in recent days.

I do not intend to detain the House for long. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] That is the reaction we are always looking for. Members will be aware that there is one outstanding issue between this House and the other place when it comes to the Bill, and it relates to the reserve power on asset allocation. Today the Government return to their previous amendments on this issue. They spell out the intended purpose of the reserve power to underpin the industry's own commitments in the Mansion House accord and to rule out other uses, such as a focus on any specific asset or asset class.

We are also bringing forward a final set of changes that aim to do justice to the points made in this House and the other place, while retaining the original policy intent. They have three elements. First, there is a new requirement on regulators—in this case, the Pensions Regulator and the Financial Conduct Authority—to make an assessment of barriers to the delivery of private asset investment, including the extent to which those barriers reflect the collective action problem, which we have discussed extensively in our exchanges on the Bill. That assessment would be required to be incorporated into the ex-ante report that the Secretary of State must produce before any use of the reserve power that the Bill provides for.

Importantly, our amendments also place on the Government a duty to have regard to this regulatory assessment before any use of the power. That will ensure that a Secretary of State behaving reasonably—as they are required to do—must place weight on the assessment of the regulators on this matter. It was always the Government's intention to evaluate progress against the Mansion House accord commitments in terms of the broad direction of travel over a substantial period of time, rather than looking at short-term movements in private asset exposure. To reinforce that, we propose to add to the Bill that the power cannot be exercised any earlier than 2028.

Our second set of changes builds on the savers' interest test to reinforce the central role of trustees and providers. Our amendments in lieu would change the bar required to engage the savers' interest test. Rather than having to demonstrate that meeting the asset allocation requirements would be likely to cause material financial detriment, a scheme would instead have to show that meeting the requirements is

"likely not to be in the best interests of members".

That reflects language regularly used when considering trustees' duties. In addition, we have more tightly specified the regulators' role, confining it to ensuring that the trustee or provider's own assessment of what is in the best interests of members is "reasonable", rather than replacing that assessment with their own.

Thirdly, our amendments address worries about the differential treatment of particular investment vehicles by allowing for consideration of direct or indirect holdings in the six asset classes named in the Mansion House accord.

I remind the House that the Bill has its roots in much work that was under way for some time in Government, but also in the commitment in the Labour party manifesto to ensure that workplace pension schemes take advantage of scale and invest in a wider range of productive assets. That is why one of the first things that the Government did on taking office was to launch a comprehensive review of pensions investment. That review found clear evidence that the defined-contribution pensions market is operating with an excessively narrow focus on costs, to the detriment of saver outcomes. That is where the reserve power comes from. It exists because the review found—and the industry itself has told us this, publicly and privately—that competitive pressure focused on cost minimisation is the single biggest barrier to diversifying in savers' long-term interests.

However, things can of course change over time, and a range of other factors may come into play. We have discussed them with, in particular, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier). The changes that we propose today address directly that worry and others. They require regulators to assess whether these competitive pressures remain a material barrier to more diverse private asset investment before any use of the power, and they put trustees' or providers' own assessments of savers' best interests centre stage.

On that basis, I commend the Government's position to the House.

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

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Let me begin by welcoming the Minister back to his place—we missed him last night, and it is good to see him back in the Chamber.

Throughout our many debates, we have broadly agreed on the policy intent behind most of the Bill, but as I have said time and again, agreement on the principles of a Bill is not the same as offering the Minister unqualified support for every measure in it, particularly the power contained in clause 40, the power of mandation—or the reserve power, as the Chief Secretary calls it—which enables Ministers to instruct pension funds where to invest. When the Bill was first introduced, that mandation power was truly breathtaking in its scope. It was extraordinary—an unconstrained power that would have allowed the Secretary of State access to 100% of at least £400 billion-worth of auto-enrolment default pension funds. It would have allowed Ministers to direct their investment in whatever way they saw fit.

What happened the moment that became clear to people? Members sitting opposite and, indeed, behind me—not least those in Reform UK—were already queuing up with pet projects and struggling sectors. They thought that savers' money should be used for net zero schemes, steel and renationalising water. They were not proposing those measures on the grounds of the return on investment for savers, and the income that they would generate for people's later life; that much is obvious. But we said no—no to politicians having that power, no to Ministers directing pension savings into their pet projects, and no to overriding the interests of savers in favour of politicians desperate for access to capital.

I was clear from the outset that the power was dangerous and had no place in the Bill. After sustained pressure from the industry, from the other place and from this side of the House, the Government have, very slowly, been forced to row back. They have rowed back from a power grab that threatened trust in auto-enrolment pensions and risked damaging savers' retirement incomes. Let us be clear about what those concessions amount to. First, on allocation limits, the original Bill contained no cap whatsoever on how much of a saver's pension could be mandated into specified assets. Now, after pressure, the Government have imposed hard limits. No more than 10% of a default fund may be directed into qualifying assets, and no more than 5% may be directed specifically into UK assets. That is a major retreat from the original proposal.

Secondly, on sunset and single-use restrictions, the Government have brought forward the expiry date of the reserve power to 2032, if unused. They will repeal the whole regime by 2035 unless it is renewed by fresh primary legislation, and have limited the core mandation power so that it can be exercised only once—another retreat. Thirdly, the scope has been narrowed. Mandation can now apply only to the main default auto-enrolment fund, not the entire pension scheme or every pot—again, another retreat.

Today we have had further concessions. The Government now accept that before this power can be exercised, regulators must conduct an independent assessment of whether a genuine collective action problem exists—whereby no one wants to be the first mover—and whether that problem is inhibiting investment in private markets. We have been consistent in our view that mandation is not the right solution, but we accept that requiring independent assessment before the power can be exercised is a safeguard against ministerial overreach, and I appreciate the Pensions Minister's assurances from the Dispatch Box on the weight of evidence required. The Government have also accepted that the reserve power cannot be used before 2028—again, another retreat.

The Government have further strengthened the savers' interest test following yesterday's amendment. Schemes will no longer have to prove that compliance would likely cause "material financial detriment". Instead, they need only demonstrate that compliance is likely not to be in the best interests of members, thereby aligning the test with trustees' existing fiduciary duties. That matters, because fiduciary duty is sacrosanct and must be protected. Nothing is more important in a modern pension system than the duty to act solely in the best interests of savers. That duty is the foundation on which trust in our pension system rests. This amendment means that in a conflict between mandation and fiduciary duty, fiduciary duty wins—again, another important retreat. Finally, the Government have agreed to remove discrimination between investment vehicles by clarifying that both direct and indirect holdings in the relevant asset classes count towards compliance—the final retreat.

Every one of those changes tells the same story: the Government introduced a power that was too broad, too vague and too dangerous. Step by step, and under pressure, they have been forced to narrow it, constrain it and hedge it with safeguards. Why? Because the original power was indefensible, and because the Government knew that the concerns were real. The work that we have done has obliterated the Government's original proposal. As it stands now, the mandation power looks nothing like how it was first imagined. What began as a sweeping ministerial power grab has been stripped back, pared down and boxed in on all sides. Only now, after our intervention, has it become at least palatable. It is a vestige of its former overmighty self—a shrivelled husk.

Let me be clear: we do not believe that the Government should direct private capital, or that Ministers should interfere in investment decisions that are properly left to trustees and markets. Here we have Labour doing what it always does: thinking that the Government are the answer, with the state going where it has no place to go. When the Conservatives return to government, we will remove mandation from the statute book entirely, because at the heart of this policy lies a dangerous assumption that Ministers in Whitehall know better than trustees, fund managers and markets on how to invest the public's pension savings. I have yet to meet anyone who wants a politician managing their pension, and pensions belong to the people who earn them, not Government Ministers. It is as simple as that.

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

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have opposed mandation from day one, and we have continued to oppose it throughout the passage of this Bill. The challenge is that once we cross the Rubicon, we change the dynamics of pensions significantly. Crucially, people need to have confidence that contributing to pensions is a good way of saving for their retirement. If we undermine that through Government interference, it will reduce people's confidence in saving for their pensions. That would be a complete reversal of what this Bill is all about, because it is mostly about making sure that our pension system is fit for the future and fit to serve those who are looking to have a good retirement. That is to be

[Steve Darling]

celebrated, and the vast majority of this Bill is to be welcomed. However, although the Liberal Democrats welcome the significant concessions—those steps in the right direction—the Rubicon has still been crossed. We continue to have grave concerns.

6.45 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point about crossing the Rubicon, given that the Government are taking mandation powers to interfere in people's savings and assets. We are talking about pension funds here, but once that Rubicon is crossed, there is no reason why the Government would not feel that they could start mandating how investment trusts or other types of savings schemes invest. This issue is not just about pensions; it is about the fundamental relationship between the state and private individuals.

Steve Darling: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point; I am sure that the Minister will reflect on it when winding up. The Liberal Democrats continue to oppose mandation, and we plan to vote against the motion tonight.

Torsten Bell: I thank hon. Members for their contributions, and the shadow Secretary of State for her kind words.

I will be brief. The Government have continued to insist on the inclusion of the reserve power in the Bill in all rounds of discussions in this place because we have not heard a convincing alternative approach to solving the collective action problem that we have discussed. However, we have heard convincing arguments about how this part of the Bill can be strengthened, and we have acted on each of them. That is why the amended power is necessary but also constrained. It is capped, time limited, single-use, sunsetted and subject to a savers' interest test that has been materially strengthened, as the shadow Secretary of State laid out.

The elected House has now been clear on many occasions, and has had large majorities. Given that, it is clear that this is the time to resolve the issue and get the Bill passed; that is what the industry and the groups supporting workers and pensioners have repeatedly called for. The Government have not only listened to the arguments from the Opposition and those in the other place, but acted on them. The elected House has also made its position overwhelmingly plain. Given both those points, both of which are important, it is clearly time for the unelected House to bring to an end attempts to frustrate the clearly expressed will of this Chamber. With that entirely reasonable expectation, I commend the Government's amendments and the Bill to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 335, Noes 158.

Division No. 513] [6.47 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doogan, Dave
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Flynn, rh Stephen
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gethins, Stephen
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike

Kaur, Satvir
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Chris
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leadbitter, Graham
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Logan, Seamus
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McMahon, Jim
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Miliband, rh Ed
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Swann, Robin
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Wishart, Pete *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Deirdre Costigan and Nesil Caliskan

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Cartlidge, James
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Farron, Tim
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus

Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Noes:
Katie Lam and Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Orders Nos. 15 and 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting,

(i) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to

(a) the Motion in the name of Dan Tomlinson relating to Income Tax,

(b) the Motion in the name of Sir Stephen Timms relating to Retained EU Law Reform,

(c) the Motion in the name of Secretary Emma Reynolds relating to Energy,

(d) the Motions in the name of Lucy Rigby relating to Financial Services and Markets,

(e) the Motion in the name of Secretary Shabana Mahmood relating to Retained EU Law Reform,

(f) the Motion in the name of Secretary Shabana Mahmood relating to Immigration and Asylum,

(g) the Motion in the name of Matthew Pennycook relating to Land,

(h) the Motion in the name of Martin McCluskey relating to Electricity,

(i) the Motion in the name of Secretary David Lammy relating to Tribunals and Inquiries, and

(j) the Motion in the name of Dan Tomlinson relating to Excise,

(ii) the Motion in the name of Sir Alan Campbell relating to Business of the House (Today) may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply. *—(Mark Ferguson.)*

Question agreed to.

English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before we consider the Lords message, I inform the House that the Government have tabled a new motion in relation to Lords reason 123J and withdrawn the motions they tabled this morning relating to that motion. The motion relating to Lords reason 155J is unchanged.

The new amendment paper is available in the Vote Office and online. It was issued at 6.30 pm and includes a note indicating when it was issued, that it replaces an earlier version, and that the motion relating to Lords reason 123J has been withdrawn and a new motion has been tabled.

After Clause 37

BROWNFIELD LAND PRIORITY

7.2 pm

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

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments 89B and 89C but proposes amendment (a) in lieu of those amendments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the following Government motions:

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments 36, 90 and 155, insists on its amendments 155A to 155F and 155H to the words so restored to the Bill by that disagreement with Amendment 155, and proposes amendment (a) to the words so restored to the Bill by that disagreement.

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments 85 and 86, 97 to 116, 120, 121 and 123, insists on its amendments 123C to 123H and 123J to 123K in lieu, and proposes amendments (a) to (e) in lieu.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I am pleased to speak once again on the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. I thank Members from across the House for their constructive engagement in getting the Bill to this point. This Bill matters because, if we are to transform our economy, drive up living standards and deliver better public services in every community, a fundamental change is needed in the way that the country is run. This landmark Bill will deliver just that. It represents the biggest transfer of power out of Whitehall to our regions and communities in a generation.

I am glad that we have found a way forward on several of the issues that we most recently discussed—namely, the role of strategic authorities and mayors in rural affairs, agents of change in the planning system, and the role of town and parish councils in neighbourhood governance. We have listened carefully to the concerns raised in both Houses on the remaining issues: the ministerial power of direction in schedule 1, the prioritisation of development on brownfield land, and the models of governance in local authorities. That is why the Government have today tabled three amendments, which I will now outline.

On the question of the ministerial power of direction in the Bill, I remind the House that ensuring that every part of England can benefit from devolution remains a key objective of this Government. I repeat for the record that we on this side of the House believe strongly that the Government have a duty to drive economic growth, unlock investment and deliver better outcomes for our communities. To deny communities that opportunity would be to hold them back. That is why we originally put in place a backstop power of direction for the Secretary of State to use in exceptional circumstances—I emphasise "exceptional circumstances"—but to be clear, the approach that we are taking in practice is to work with local leaders to forge enduring local partnerships and strong local institutions with their consent.

However, we have heard the concerns and strength of feeling from some noble peers about the scope of the powers previously included in schedule 1. To that end, and in the interests of not delaying the progress of the Bill and of showing that communities can benefit from the powers that we all wish to see enacted at the earliest opportunity, the Government are content to remove all powers in schedule 1 that would allow the Secretary of State to direct the establishment of a strategic authority, whether mayoral or non-mayoral, or to provide directly for a mayor of an existing non-mayoral strategic authority.

In addition, I am happy to commit that the Government will not seek to use the remaining power to direct the addition of a local government area to an existing strategic authority for a period of four years following Royal Assent. It will then remain subject to all the same safeguards that have been discussed at length. As I have said consistently throughout the passage of the Bill, our policy and our practice are very clear. We are working with local leaders and we will continue to work with them to develop devolution proposals that command broad support across their area. That collaborative approach will always be our clear preference. The concessions I am making here today put that commitment beyond any doubt.

I shall turn now to the issue of brownfield land. The Government consider Lords amendments 89B and 89C to be unworkable. They would undermine effective plan making, constrain proper consideration of local circumstances and introduce inconsistency between spatial development strategies prepared by mayors and strategic authorities and those prepared by other authorities. As I have previously said, national policy remains the most effective route through which planning reform can be pursued, and it is the right place to set clear expectations about where development should take place.

Where concerns have been expressed about the effectiveness of existing policy, it remains too early to assess the full impact of the recent and proposed changes to national planning policy. However, in recognition of the strength of feeling expressed about inappropriately located development and to further reinforce a brownfield-first approach, the Government have tabled their own amendment. This would set a requirement in primary legislation for the Secretary of State to use existing regulation-making powers to ensure that strategic planning authorities have regard to the desirability of prioritising development on land that has been previously developed.

This will put consideration of brownfield land on the same legal footing as other highly important issues that are also on the face of the legislation, such as promoting sustainable development and the impact on health and health inequalities. It will ensure that the prioritisation of brownfield land is front and centre when strategic planning authorities are producing a spatial development strategy and considering how to meet the growth needs of their area. The drafting of our amendment is consistent with national policy, making it clear that prioritising development on brownfield land is an overall objective and clearly desirable. Enshrining this requirement in legislation will elevate its importance and further solidify the Government's clear commitment to a brownfield-first approach.

I now turn to the matter of local authority governance. As hon. Members will know, the Government have set a clear default position. Councils that are currently operating the committee system and are not otherwise protected should be required to move to the leader and cabinet model within one year of the relevant Bill provisions coming into force. That remains the Government's firm expectation. However, we have heard concerns expressed in the other place and in this House that requiring a council to move to the leader and cabinet model within a year could create challenges for some councils, their members and officers—for example, where an authority has submitted a proposal for a boundary change or merger in response to the Secretary of State's new power to invite such proposals.

The Government amendment we are bringing forward today responds to those concerns. It allows the Secretary of State to extend the one-year transition period for non-protected councils by a further year in certain circumstances. This provides flexibility where a council is already on a clear path to dissolution, so that it is not required to undertake a significant governance change that may have little practical benefit. This does not change the Government's wider policy on local authority governance reform, but it does provide a proportionate and pragmatic safeguard in response to the points that have been raised over the pace of change.

To conclude, the Bill has undoubtedly been improved as a result of the scrutiny in ping-pong so far, and I thank the noble Lords and this place for their contribution in helping us with that. We are pleased to be able to offer concessions on brownfield land, local authority governance and the ministerial power of direction. I urge the House to support the Government's position and accept these concessions.

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

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I put on the record my thanks to the Minister and colleagues in her Department for the constructive spirit in which they have approached the negotiations around the Bill. It remains the official Opposition's view that the Bill's overall direction of travel is a centralising one: it brings into effect many new powers for the Secretary of State to direct the work of local authorities and, in particular, the new mayors and the strategic responsibilities that they undertake will all be subject to a degree of direct influence from Whitehall. However, it clearly is in the interests of all parties represented in the House to seek to reach agreement on those points that have remained in contention. I know that I share the Minister's sense of delight at once again being here at the Dispatch Box discussing Lords amendments.

[David Simmonds]

Let me briefly address the Lords amendments in turn. The Minister set out clearly the Government's agreement to step back from some of the directions which were included in the original legislation. That is one example of where the Opposition felt there was centralising power within the legislation. However, the Government have been constructive in the way they have approached that and have recognised that there is a degree of justification around that backstop power to avoid a situation where the whole country is covered by combined authorities but some councils are left outside of those boundaries. I know that many Members have expressed concern in the debates, both in Bill Committee and in the Chamber, at the impact that that would have, particularly on opportunities for economic development.

Let me turn to the brownfield amendment. Opposition Members have been resolute from the outset in saying that whatever new arrangements the Government are determined to implement, we need to ensure that local communities can continue to stand up for and protect the green spaces they cherish, whether those are greenfield sites used for agriculture, or greenfield and green-belt sites used for leisure to provide that buffer around our cities and suburbs.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that we continue to protect those greenfield sites, as we do in my constituency and, indeed, as Conservative councils do across the country? Does he agree that it is sad that the Reform candidate for the Mayor of London disagrees and wants to build over some of our precious green-belt land?

David Simmonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on in what he says. Members across the Chamber have been surprised to hear Reform say that it wishes to tear up London's green belt as part of the local election campaign. I am grateful to the Minister and her colleagues for recognising, in the fine tradition of many Labour councils, that we need to ensure that there are sufficient provisions in the legislation to ensure the protection of those vital green spaces for future generations.

I am especially grateful to the Minister for making what may seem like a fairly technical change, but as she has just told us from the Dispatch Box, it establishes for the first time, after five rounds of ping-pong, a clear hierarchy in the legislation that sets out that the new mayors, in their spatial development strategies, will need to prioritise brownfield land for development. Many Members across the House expressed concerns when we debated local government reorganisation just a few weeks ago about the impact of housing targets being displaced. That will be more effectively managed under the amendments that have been agreed across the House tonight. That is a distinct step forward from all our perspectives.

Finally, I will briefly touch on local authority governance. We recognise that there is a difference of opinion. It is the Opposition's view that local authorities should be able to set up their structure of governance in a way that reflects their local circumstances. Although our strong view is that the leader and cabinet model is the most efficient and effective way to do that, people taking decisions with which we may disagree is the essence of local democracy. The Government's agreement to pause the use of that requirement means that there will be a period in which local authorities can reflect on their governance arrangements and consult if they wish to do so, and the normal cycle of local elections can take place—of course, there will also be a parliamentary election.

I think we all know that the matter of local government reorganisation never entirely stops; it merely starts again at a different point in each parliamentary cycle, so there will be further opportunities to reflect on it, but in the context of the Bill, about which we still have significant concerns, those agreements reflect progress in a direction that makes us much more comfortable. For those reasons, we do not propose to divide the House.

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

7.15 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I will be brief, as most of the arguments have already been well stated.

We acknowledge the Minister's argument yesterday that this Bill represents a step forward, not the final destination, and that consistency is needed to make the system function, but it is important that, in seeking that consistency, we do not lose the very flexibility that makes devolution truly meaningful. We remain supportive of our Liberal Democrat colleagues in the Lords and their efforts to strengthen the Bill. I place on record our continued backing for a number of those amendments.

Lords amendment 36 addresses our central point. It is not devolution to mandate a single model of governance from the centre. Local areas must retain the ability to choose what works for them. I thank the Minister for concessions that she has made in relation to Liberal Democrat amendments; we are grateful that the Government have taken note of the importance of communities having the right to choose their own governance, and ensured that choice is better protected.

We have already seen why flexibility for local authorities matters. In Sheffield, the council moved away from the leader and cabinet model to a committee system following real concerns about transparency, accountability and council overreach. That change was driven locally by councillors responding to their communities. As my noble Friend Lord Mohammed of Tinsley set out in the other place, the consequences of concentration of power in a small executive can be profound. In Sheffield, decisions to fell thousands of healthy street trees were driven through by a small group without the scrutiny of a wider number. In Sheffield, there is now a plaque that says:

> "In recognition of the courageous campaigners who saved thousands of street trees from wrongful felling by Sheffield City Council, and as a reminder to all that such failures of leadership must never happen again."

That is a stark warning of what can go wrong when power and authority are too concentrated in the hands of too few.

The Liberal Democrats will continue to challenge the Government on this matter, because we are a party that believes in real community representation and local

governance decided by local people. We will always fight to ensure that communities have a genuine say in how their areas are run, and that decisions are not handed down from Whitehall. If consistency comes at the cost of local voices, we are not strengthening devolution; we are narrowing it.

Let me turn to Lords amendment 98. The Liberal Democrats believe that placing limits on powers over structural changes is vital if local democracy is to have genuine autonomy. I thank the Minister for what she said about that. Likewise, we have sought to remove powers that would allow Ministers to direct the creation or expansion of combined authorities, including the imposition of mayors, without meaningful local consent. Members on both sides of the House agree that meaningful devolution cannot mean structures delivered and sent from Whitehall with limited local input. If local government is to have real autonomy, consent must be meaningful and Parliament must retain its proper role. We will continue to work constructively with the Government on that.

On Lords amendments 89B and 89C, we strongly support the prioritisation of brownfield development. The Liberal Democrats are grateful to the Government for listening to calls for better protection of greenfield land, and for taking steps through the Bill to encourage the prioritisation of brownfield. That will help to ensure that development is happening in the right places, on land that needs to be developed on, and in consultation with the communities that surround it. This is not about opposing growth; it is about delivering that growth sustainably and making the best use of land that has been developed before.

Although I accept the Minister's argument that some flexibility is needed to meet housing demand, if it results in greenfield and green spaces becoming the default, we will have failed and got the balance fundamentally wrong. Green spaces are essential to community wellbeing. They support mental and physical health, provide space for recreation and contribute to the identity of local places. Once lost, they cannot be replaced. If brownfield land is not properly prioritised, development pressure will fall on those spaces. We therefore welcome this step in the right direction by the Minister, but we will continue to ask the Government to go further on prioritising brownfield.

When taken together, the three amendments do not frustrate the Bill, but improve it. They move it closer to what devolution should be—rooted in local consent and accountable to local communities. We are glad that the Government have taken heed of the priorities that the Liberal Democrats have put forward, and we will continue to work constructively to ensure decisions are made with local people and not done to them.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank hon. Members for their continued engagement and their insightful debate on these issues. In the remaining time, I will respond to some of the particular points that have been made.

I want to put on record my thanks to Opposition Members for the constructive way in which they have approached the debate, so that we can progress the Bill. The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) and I will continue to disagree on whether this is a centralising Bill or a radical shift in power. I still fundamentally believe that the Bill marks a huge step in transferring power outside Whitehall, but, candidly, we will demonstrate that through our actions and through the impact of Bill. What drives us is the impact that this will have in our communities, and we have strong measures that will help us to ensure that we are putting communities in the driving seat so that they can shape their place.

I hear the points made by the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) on local government governance. The example of Sheffield is one that many of my hon. Friends have advocated for on behalf of their communities, which is why we made the original concession. We think that we have found the right balance. We are clear that if we are to empower local authorities in the way that we want to, they need strong governance in order to make decisions for their communities that will impact on those communities. The reason we are trying to support the shift in governance arrangements is to ensure that we have enduring local authorities that can fundamentally deliver. We think that we have achieved that in the concessions that we have made.

Throughout the passage of the Bill, I have found it hugely heartening that there is a clear point of consensus across the House that if we are to deliver change in our communities, we must push power out into our communities, into the hands of local leaders, into our neighbourhoods and to people who know their patch best. I hope this Bill represents the start of a journey that will fundamentally change the way that Government works and how we, in this place, serve the communities that we are here to represent; where the principle of devolution by default, underpinned by a clear framework, is locked in; where local leaders are empowered to drive economic change and improvements in living standard across their patch; and where communities are put in the driving seat and given powers to shape the places in which they live and work.

I have been clear throughout the passage of the Bill that this legislation represents the floor, not the summit, of our ambition for devolution. I look forward to working with my hon. Friends on the Government Benches and with hon. Members from across the House as we build on the provisions in the Bill.

Finally, I would like to thank my brilliant team of officials who have worked on the Bill—Hannah, Caragh, Guy, Jenna-Marie, Alice, John, Rachel and Wendy—as well as my private office team—Molly, Simon and Lucy—who have all done an absolutely heroic job in taking a mammoth Bill through the House. With that, I commend the Government motions to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 59

LOCAL AUTHORITY GOVERNANCE AND EXECUTIVES

Resolved,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments 36, 90 and 155, insists on its amendments 155A to 155F and 155H to the words so restored to the Bill by that disagreement with Amendment 155, and proposes amendment (a) to the words so restored to the Bill by that disagreement.—*(Miatta Fahnbulleh.)*

Clause 92

COMMENCEMENT

Resolved,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their Amendments 85 and 86, 97 to 116, 120, 121 and 123, insists on its amendments 123C to 123H and 123J to 123K in lieu, and proposes further amendments (a) to (e) in lieu.—*(Miatta Fahnbulleh.)*

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last week, I tabled a written question to the Foreign Secretary, asking whether Jonathan Powell was subject to scrutiny vetting before or after he was appointed as the Prime Minister's special envoy on the Chagos negotiations. I have not yet received a response. Given that Morgan McSweeney appeared to tell the Foreign Affairs Committee this morning that the vetting process began only after Powell was later appointed as National Security Adviser, how can I secure an official answer from the Foreign Office to this basic question before Parliament prorogues?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I know the hon. Member is diligent in getting answers on behalf of his constituents and will no doubt explore every avenue to get that answer. I say to Members on the Treasury Bench that it is only appropriate that Back-Bench MPs are able to get responses in due time on behalf of their constituents—no doubt that they have heard that. The hon. Member has got his words on the record.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 5 to 9 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INCOME TAX

That the draft Major Sporting Events (Income Tax Exemption) (Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 23 February, be approved.

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Chemicals (Health and Safety) (Amendment, Consequential and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 24 February, be approved.

ENERGY

That the draft Conservation of Habitats and Species (Offshore Wind) (Amendment etc.) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 26 February, be approved.

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Capital Requirements Regulation (Market Risk Transitional Provision) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 4 March, be approved.

That the draft Credit Institutions and Investment Firms (Miscellaneous Definitions) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 4 March, be approved.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Asylum Seekers (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 5 March, be approved.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

The House divided: Ayes 308, Noes 81.

Division No. 514] [7.28 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa

Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McMahon, Jim
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Miliband, rh Ed
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nesil Caliskan and Deirdre Costigan

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Aquarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Begum, Apsana
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Si n
Blackman, Kirsty
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Dean, Bobby *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Denyer, Carla
Dillon, Mr Lee
Doogan, Dave
Dyke, Sarah
Farron, Tim
Flynn, rh Stephen
Forster, Mr Will
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Hobhouse, Wera
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jones, Clive
Khan, Ayoub
Lake, Ben
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mathew, Brian
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Murray, Susan
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Ramsay, Adrian
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Hannah
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Voaden, Caroline
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*
Wrigley, Martin

Tellers for the Noes:
Charlie Maynard and Tessa Munt

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM

That the draft Immigration and Asylum (Provision of Accommodation to Failed Asylum-Seekers) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 5 March, be approved.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 28.

Division No. 515] [7.41 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allister, Jim
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Glindon, Mary
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Lockhart, Carla
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McMahon, Jim
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Miliband, rh Ed
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, Lucy
Robertson, Dave
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair

Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Swann, Robin
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nesil Caliskan and Deirdre Costigan

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Begum, Apsana
Berry, Si n
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Davies, Ann
Denyer, Carla
Doogan, Dave
Flynn, rh Stephen
George, Andrew
Gethins, Stephen
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Khan, Ayoub
Lake, Ben
Law, Chris
Logan, Seamus
McDonnell, rh John
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
Mohamed, Iqbal
O'Hara, Brendan
Ramsay, Adrian
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Spencer, Hannah
Sultana, Zarah
Whittome, Nadia
Wishart, Pete *(Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Kirsty Blackman and Graham Leadbitter

Question accordingly agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 12 to 15 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LAND

That the draft Provision of Information (Contractual Control) (Registered Land) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 9 March, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Warm Home Discount (Scotland) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 17 March, be approved.

TRIBUNALS AND INQUIRIES

That the draft First-tier Tribunal (Property Chamber) Fees (Amendment) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 19 March, be approved.

EXCISE

That the Vaping Duty Stamps (Requirements, Reviews and Appeals) Regulations 2026 (SI, 2026, No. 338), dated 23 March 2026, a copy of which was laid before this House on 25 March, be approved.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting,

(a) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Sir Alan Campbell relating to

(i) Select Committee Statements,

(ii) Backbench Business Committee,

(iii) Consequential amendments arising from the Backbench Business Committee motion,

(iv) Backbench Business Committee: Election of Chair and nomination of members in the 2026-27 Session, and

(v) Select Committee chair elections

not later than 90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on those Motions may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.

(b) the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Messages from the Lords shall have been received and disposed of, and any Committee to draw up Reasons which has been appointed at this day's sitting has reported.—(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

Select Committees

7.53 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): I beg to move,

That Standing Order No. 22D (Select committee statements) be amended in paragraph (3), by leaving out "5 sitting days" and inserting "10 sitting days".

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Motion 18—*Backbench Business Committee—*

That, from the start of the next Session, the following changes be made to Public Business Standing Orders:

(1) Standing Order No. 122D (Election of Chair of Backbench Business Committee) shall be amended by:

(i) leaving out sub-paragraphs (1)(a) and (1)(b) and inserting:

(a) The election of the chair of the Backbench Business Committee shall take place at the start of the Parliament on the day of the ballots for election of select committee chairs under Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs).

(b) Nominations of candidates shall be in writing and shall be received by the Clerk of the House by 5.00 pm on the day before the ballot, and the Speaker shall have power to vary these timings.

(ii) leaving out sub-paragraph (1)(g) and inserting:

(g) Arrangements for the election shall follow those set out in paragraphs (9) to (14) of Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) as if those paragraphs applied to chairs elected under this order.

(2) Standing Order No. 152J (Backbench Business Committee) shall be amended:

(i) by adding after paragraph (2):

( ) Unless the House otherwise orders, each Member nominated to the committee shall continue to be a member of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

(ii) by leaving out in paragraph (3) "remainder of the Session" and inserting "remainder of the Parliament".

Motion 19—*Consequential amendments arising from the Backbench Business Committee motion—*

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall be amended by leaving out in paragraph (6) "paragraph (9) of Standing Order No. 152J" and inserting "paragraph (10) of Standing Order No. 152J"; and

(2) Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates) shall be amended by leaving out in paragraph (1) "paragraph (9) of Standing Order No. 152J" and inserting "paragraph (10) of Standing Order No. 152J".

Motion 20—*Backbench Business Committee: Election of Chair and nomination of members in the 2026-27 Session—*

That at the beginning of the next Session:

(i) the election of the chair of the Backbench Business Committee shall take place on a day and at times to be determined by the Speaker, in accordance with paragraphs (1)(b) to (1)(g) of Standing Order No. 122D, and such a day may be fewer than 10 days after the State Opening of Parliament; and

(ii) the Committee of Selection shall table a motion relating to the membership of the Backbench Business Committee after the election of the chair has taken place.

Motion 21—*Select Committee chair elections—*

That this House notes the Procedure Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2024–26 (HC 535), and endorses paragraphs 109-111 and 114-115 of that Report and the following Rules for Select Committee Chair elections:

Select committee chairs are central figures in carrying out the House's scrutiny function and are vitally important roles in our parliamentary democracy, with significant responsibilities and weight both within and outside the House. Members of Parliament and the public have the right to expect that the elections for these posts will be conducted fairly and in a way that safeguards and enhances the reputation of the House.

Members seeking to stand in elections held under Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) or No. 122D (Election of Chair of Backbench Business Committee) should follow the requirements set down in these Rules. To demonstrate their commitment to the Rules, they should signify that they have read and will abide by these Rules as part of their supporting statement when submitting their nomination form. Members engaging in campaigning activity before officially submitting their nomination should equally ensure that they act within these Rules.

By standing for election as a candidate for a select committee chair position, all candidates agree to the following restrictions on their campaigning activities:

1. The production and distribution of any printed campaign material, other than the booklet of candidate statements produced by the House Administration, is prohibited.

2. The use of mass electronic communications, such as mass emails, calendar invitations or messages, or unsolicited addition to groups on any messaging platform, for campaigning purposes, is prohibited.

3. Respect for colleagues' protected time for constituency activities and private life is paramount. Any campaign activity outside the working week (Monday to Friday) and reasonable business hours (8am to 8pm) is prohibited, including any campaign activity when the House is in recess.

4. Campaigning activities in the immediate vicinity of the polling place on the day of the election are prohibited.

Candidates and prospective candidates can expect the electorate to take a dim view of any breach of the provisions of these Rules and of the damage done to the reputation of the House by any such breach.

Sir Alan Campbell: I have brought forward a number of motions today to facilitate implementation of recent recommendations of the Backbench Business Committee and the Procedure Committee. I thank both Committees for their recent reports on these matters, and I will briefly speak about the motions. Members should note that the explanatory notes are also available in the Vote Office.

First, I will deal with Select Committee statements. Currently, a Select Committee statement must be made within five sitting days of publication of the report or announcement of the inquiry. The Backbench Business Committee recommended in its 15th anniversary report that Select Committee statements under Standing Order No. 22D should instead be allowed to take place 10 sitting days after publication of the report or announcement of an inquiry. Select Committee statements have increased in popularity in recent years, and the Government agreed with the Committee in its recommendation. The motion therefore asks the House to amend the Standing Order to enact that change.

Let me now turn to the motions relating to the operation of the Backbench Business Committee. Both that Committee, in its 15th anniversary report, and the Procedure Committee, in its report on elections in the House of Commons, proposed that the members and Chair of the Backbench Business Committee should be elected in line with those of all other elected Select Committees, namely for the whole Parliament rather than for each Session. While the Backbench Business Committee does have unique powers in scheduling business on the Floor of the House, the Government recognise that its operation is well established, and that its reappointment at the beginning of each Session can cause delays in the scheduling of Backbench Business. The Government have therefore accepted that recommendation,

and the relevant motions contain proposals to make the change ahead of the next Session, with a few consequential changes.

The Government propose, as far as is possible, alignment of nomination periods and ballot timings for the Backbench Business Committee with those of other Select Committee Chairs. No other arrangements relating to the election of the Backbench Business Committee Chair—for example, signature requirements for candidates or parties eligible to stand for the position—have been amended. However, as the current Chair and members have been appointed only on a sessional basis, the Committee is still required to be re-elected at the beginning of the next Session to allow the Chair and members to be appointed for the remainder of this Parliament. As ever, the Government will endeavour to ensure that the Committee can be re-established in good time in the new parliamentary Session. A further motion has been tabled that sets out the arrangements for the election of the Chair and the appointment of Committee members at the beginning of the next Session to ensure clarity in the arrangements for setting up the Committee in the transition Session.

The final motion relates to the election of Select Committee Chairs, and follows the recent report from the Procedure Committee. Its inquiry recommended that rules be adopted for Select Committee Chair elections to limit campaigning activity and the time during which campaigning can take place. Paragraphs 109 to 111 and 114 to 115 of the Committee's report explain how the rules should be adhered to. The Government accept the Committee's recommendation, and the motion asks the House to endorse the rules.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the Procedure Committee for their consideration of these matters and look forward to continuing to work with them across a number of areas, both as Leader of the House of Commons and as Chair of the Modernisation Committee. I hope that Members will support the motions, and I commend them to the House.

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

7.27 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I echo the words of the Leader of the House, and thank the Backbench Business Committee and the Procedure Committee for contributing to these motions, which are broadly very sensible.

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

7.27 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow a former member of the Procedure Committee. I thank the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for all that she did in contributing to the work of the Committee, which came to the clear and consensual view that the elections of Select Committee Chairs at the beginning of this Session somewhat resembled a silly season with excessive campaigning. Newer Members of Parliament who may not even have expected to be in the House found it very overwhelming. We were able to take that information and put together a sensible set of rules creating a level playing field for all candidates, while respecting the right of Members to open their office doors without falling over a pile of leaflets, which was one of the problems that were fed back to the Committee last time.

I hope that we will be able to make the change in the arrangements for the election of the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee to align it with the election of other Select Committee Chairs, thus showing that it is a Select Committee just like other Select Committees. I thank the Leader of the House for accepting the Committee's findings in full, and I look forward to supporting them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

7.59 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for listening to the Backbench Business Committee and the Procedure Committee, and for bringing forward these long-overdue amendments.

The Backbench Business Committee was inaugurated when I was first elected to this House in 2010, and the Government of the day refused to listen to those of us on the Back Benches who said, "Why does the Chair have to be elected every Session?" Unfortunately, what had happened was that—to put it politely—members of the awkward squad managed to get elected to the Committee and caused the Government of the day immense problems. However, I suspect that the current Government see that they have power through the parliamentary Labour party to control their Members who sit on the Backbench Business Committee, and elect them appropriately.

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

Bob Blackman: I regard the hon. Gentleman as my hon. Friend, and he sits on the Committee.

Chris Vince: I just want to put on the record my thanks to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for his able chairing of the Committee throughout my time on it. I think he would agree that we have had some really good and useful debates in this Chamber and Westminster Hall because of the work of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman: I thank all members of the Backbench Business Committee for the excellent work they have done over the last year and a half in bringing forward debates and ensuring that Members of all parties get the opportunity to debate the issues that they want to debate, rather than what the Government want to debate. We know that that can sometimes be embarrassing for the Government, but it is the will of the Committee. It has been a pleasure to oversee that work. We have made reforms so that Members who come in front of our Committee now face questioning from all members of the Committee—not just one or two, which was the case in previous years. That has been an important reform.

I will point out the consequences of the changes that the Leader of the House is putting forward. Requests for Select Committee statements come to the Backbench Business Committee on a regular basis. Because of pressure on Chamber time, we have had to push some of them into Westminster Hall, which limits the amount

[Bob Blackman]

of time given to debates in Westminster Hall. The changes will give the Committee flexibility on when it allocates Select Committee statements in the House, and I think that will be to the benefit of all Select Committees. It is something we recommended, and I warmly welcome it.

The other issue is the election of the Committee. In the next Session, it is likely that there will be at least one day, and possibly more days, when the Government will have to put on general debates in the Chamber that have not been committed by the Backbench Business Committee, because we will not have been reconstituted in time. I have written to the Leader of the House with a list of debates that Members want to debate, so I hope he can choose from some of those to make sure that the will of Back Benchers is heard and that those who have been waiting for some time get an opportunity.

The Backbench Business Committee is being brought in line with other Select Committees, so the Chairman and the Committee will be elected at the beginning of a Parliament and serve the duration of that Parliament, unless the parties decide to remove members of the Committee. The Chairman will serve for the duration of the Parliament, which is once again a sensible and good move. Of course, I hope that Members will see the wisdom of re-electing me as Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee when we return after the state opening of Parliament, but that is for another day.

I welcome the Procedure Committee changing the rules on how lobbying and the process of elections for Select Committee Chairmen take place at the beginning of a Parliament. We are all used to fighting each other in the election, then suddenly arriving back in Parliament and being greeted as long-lost friends when somebody is standing to be elected as a Select Committee Chairman. That is reasonable, but what has not been reasonable is the deluge of papers and other lobbying that has taken place—particularly through the use of the email system—on behalf of candidates. I think that most of us got fed up with that a long time ago, so this is a very sensible reform.

In closing, I thank the Leader of the House for listening to what we had to say, for acting on it, as we asked him to do, and for bringing forward these motions, albeit literally at the last minute before Prorogation. The changes are welcome none the less.

8.4 pm

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank all Members for their contribution to today's debate. I thank the shadow Minister for her kind words; I agree that the changes are eminently sensible.

The Chair of the Procedure Committee does a fantastic job. We work closely with her Committee and the Modernisation Committee. I thank her and all Procedure Committee members for their important work. I welcome the changes to campaigning. I think that Members will be relieved to know that, once we are into the campaigning season, there will be limits to what campaigning can be done. I thank the Procedure Committee Chair for that; it is eminently sensible.

The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee asked why different rules applied to his Committee, and suggested that it might have been because of the awkward squad on his side of the House. I could not possibly comment on that, but I remember those days. Given the good job that he does, things now are less awkward and more respected. I said to him that I would bring forward these motions, and I have. As for his final remarks, it is better late than never, I suppose.

I thank the hon. Gentleman and his Committee for their important work; again, it works closely with the Modernisation Committee. We will take forward a piece of work on how we spend our time in this Chamber. We can learn lessons from people such as the hon. Gentleman and the experience that he brings.

To finish, I want to clear that in the changes that we make, including to Backbench Business Committee time and petitions, I want to be seen as a champion of the rights of Back Benchers. It is really important that they should have the opportunity to have their voices heard. Long may that continue. I hope that Members will support the motions today, and I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That, from the start of the next Session, the following changes be made to Public Business Standing Orders:

(1) Standing Order No. 122D (Election of Chair of Backbench Business Committee) shall be amended by:

(i) leaving out sub-paragraphs (1)(a) and (1)(b) and inserting:

(a) The election of the chair of the Backbench Business Committee shall take place at the start of the Parliament on the day of the ballots for election of select committee chairs under Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs).

(b) Nominations of candidates shall be in writing and shall be received by the Clerk of the House by 5.00 pm on the day before the ballot, and the Speaker shall have power to vary these timings.

(ii) leaving out sub-paragraph (1)(g) and inserting:

(g) Arrangements for the election shall follow those set out in paragraphs (9) to (14) of Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) as if those paragraphs applied to chairs elected under this order.

(2) Standing Order No. 152J (Backbench Business Committee) shall be amended:

(i) by adding after paragraph (2):

( ) Unless the House otherwise orders, each Member nominated to the committee shall continue to be a member of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

(ii) by leaving out in paragraph (3) "remainder of the Session" and inserting "remainder of the Parliament".—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS ARISING FROM THE BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE MOTION

Ordered,

(1) Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business) shall be amended by leaving out in paragraph (6) "paragraph (9) of Standing Order No. 152J" and inserting "paragraph (10) of Standing Order No. 152J"; and

(2) Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates) shall be amended by leaving out in paragraph (1) "paragraph (9) of Standing Order No. 152J" and inserting "paragraph (10) of Standing Order No. 152J".—*(Sir Alan Campbell.)*

BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE: ELECTION OF CHAIR AND NOMINATION OF MEMBERS IN THE 2026-27 SESSION

Ordered,

That at the beginning of the next Session:

(i) the election of the chair of the Backbench Business Committee shall take place on a day and at times to be determined by the Speaker, in accordance with paragraphs (1)(b) to (1)(g) of Standing Order No. 122D, and such a day may be fewer than 10 days after the State Opening of Parliament; and

(ii) the Committee of Selection shall table a motion relating to the membership of the Backbench Business Committee after the election of the chair has taken place.—*(Sir Alan Campbell.)*

SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIR ELECTIONS

Resolved,

That this House notes the Procedure Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2024–26 (HC 535), and endorses paragraphs 109-111 and 114-115 of that Report and the following Rules for Select Committee Chair elections:

Select committee chairs are central figures in carrying out the House's scrutiny function and are vitally important roles in our parliamentary democracy, with significant responsibilities and weight both within and outside the House. Members of Parliament and the public have the right to expect that the elections for these posts will be conducted fairly and in a way that safeguards and enhances the reputation of the House.

Members seeking to stand in elections held under Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) or No. 122D (Election of Chair of Backbench Business Committee) should follow the requirements set down in these Rules. To demonstrate their commitment to the Rules, they should signify that they have read and will abide by these Rules as part of their supporting statement when submitting their nomination form. Members engaging in campaigning activity before officially submitting their nomination should equally ensure that they act within these Rules.

By standing for election as a candidate for a select committee chair position, all candidates agree to the following restrictions on their campaigning activities:

1. The production and distribution of any printed campaign material, other than the booklet of candidate statements produced by the House Administration, is prohibited.
2. The use of mass electronic communications, such as mass emails, calendar invitations or messages, or unsolicited addition to groups on any messaging platform, for campaigning purposes, is prohibited.
3. Respect for colleagues' protected time for constituency activities and private life is paramount. Any campaign activity outside the working week (Monday to Friday) and reasonable business hours (8am to 8pm) is prohibited, including any campaign activity when the House is in recess.
4. Campaigning activities in the immediate vicinity of the polling place on the day of the election are prohibited.

Candidates and prospective candidates can expect the electorate to take a dim view of any breach of the provisions of these Rules and of the damage done to the reputation of the House by any such breach.—*(Sir Alan Campbell.)*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): The House will now suspend pending the arrival of Lords messages. I will cause the Division bells to ring five minutes before the sitting resumes.

8.8 pm

Sitting suspended (Order, this day).

On resuming—

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Following my earlier point of order, I received an email from Conservative party headquarters. It contained a picture of an email that the Conservatives say that they sent to me ahead of the Leader of the Opposition's visit to my constituency. Although I have never seen that email, and we have seen no evidence of it in my inbox, I feel that I should give them the benefit of the doubt about it having been sent. I have suggested that the Conservative party uses parliamentary email addresses in future to ensure that emails get to the correct people at the correct time. [*Official Report*, 28 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 838.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. She will know that that is not a matter for the Chair, but she has put that correction on the record.

PETITIONS

Use of Shops for Illegal Activities

9.41 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I present a petition on behalf of residents of my constituency of Southgate and Wood Green who are concerned about illegal activities in shops on local high streets. It has been well documented in both national and local media that shops are being used for illegal activities, including in my constituency, and that is causing harm to the local community. Residents have expressed to me their concerns that the local authority has limited power to tackle the illegality, and that efforts to do so are not always co-ordinated with the police.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to provide greater enforcement powers for local authorities to crack down on shops being used for illegal activities, to support the work of trading standards officers and specialist financial investigators, and to enable a framework for greater communication between trading standards officers and the police.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Southgate and Wood Green,

Declares that there needs to be an increased and coordinated effort to crack down on shops being used for illegal activities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to provide greater enforcement powers for local authorities to crack down on shops being used for illegal activities, to support the work of trading standards officers and specialist financial investigators, and to enable a framework for greater communication between trading standards officers and the police.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003193]

Compensation Following South East Water Outages

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of 116 constituents from East Grinstead, Uckfield and the villages, and a further 87 online signatories. My constituents suffered unprecedented and unacceptable water outages in January. Although nothing will compensate them for a week without running water, there has at least been recompense for householders. That is not the case for local businesses,

[Mims Davies]

however, which have lost thousands of pounds in trade and income. I and the East Grinstead Business Association are clear that more must be done for our small businesses in the town and the affected villages.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of East Grinstead, Uckfield and the villages,

Declares that recent South East Water outages have had a particular impact on businesses in the constituency of East Grinstead, Uckfield and the villages; further declares that compensation offered to date is not adequate; and further declares that compensation can be paid to landlords in cases where landlords pay the water bill, but this does not reflect the end impact on businesses themselves of water outages.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take action to ensure that water companies are obliged to pay adequate compensation directly to affected businesses following outages such as the South East Water outage recently experienced in the constituency of East Grinstead and Uckfield.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003195]

Newcastle-under-Lyme Green Belt

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The people of Audley in Newcastle-under-Lyme are proud of their green spaces, and in this week of Staffordshire Day, they want to say no to the release of the land south-east of the M6 from its green belt status for development. The petition

"further declares that this proposed change of use would be significantly detrimental, particularly to the Parish of Audley… and further declares that the proposed development would result in poor air quality, noise, litter, loss of habitat and illumination for up to twenty-four hours a day, as well as severely impacting the views across the Cheshire plains and North Staffordshire, and having a devastating impact on the local community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council not to permit land south east of Junction 16 to be considered for release from its green belt status for development.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme,

Declares that the land to the south east of Junction 16 of the M6 should not be released from its green belt status for development; further declares that this proposed change of use would be significantly detrimental, particularly to the Parish of Audley; further declares that the business rates income from any development would go to Newcastle Borough Council and thus be of limited benefit to Audley Parish residents, wildlife, local businesses and farming communities; further declares that the proposed employment site would represent a loss of 6% of the parish (of which all is green belt), before considering the impact of further green belt land being needed for housing, and that this would have a devastating impact on the rural character of the conservation area in the parish; further declares that there is no evidence to suggest that there are major problems with employment within the borough, and that the location of the proposed development at Junction 16 means that the jobs would be more accessible to those travelling in from further afield than to residents of the borough; further declares that the proposed development would put increased pressure on the A500/M6 roundabout and therefore subtract from the peaceful environment of rural lanes nearby for walking, horse riding, cycling and other activities; further declares that the village infrastructure would not support a large increase in vehicles on the road for access to the site, and that there is no guarantee that HGVs would not travel through the villages; and further declares that the proposed development would result in poor air quality, noise, litter, loss of habitat and illumination for up to twenty-four hours a day, as well as severely impacting the views across the Cheshire plains and North Staffordshire, and having a devastating impact on the local community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council not to permit land south east of Junction 16 to be considered for release from its green belt status for development.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003196]

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mark Ferguson.)*

9.45 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I am speaking about this subject tonight because over the past six years, I have been contacted by hundreds of families in Ashfield who have raised serious concerns about the impact that houses in multiple occupation are having on my community. Anyone can set up an HMO overnight, with no qualifications, no training and no checks. All they need is a few thousand pounds in the bank and a mortgage. They can buy a cheap terraced house somewhere in the midlands, in the north, or in a place like Ashfield, and turn it into an HMO. This leads to thousands of unscrupulous investors living thousands away from places like Ashfield buying up properties there and filling them with people who, quite frankly, I do not want living in my community—people who are criminals, people who are thieving of a night, people who are creating antisocial behaviour. They are filling our streets full of wrong'uns. Then the local politicians, the police and the councillors sit there scratching their head, asking themselves why crime is on the up in the area.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that local authorities like the Liberal Democrat-controlled Three Rivers district council in my constituency should be issuing, for instance, article 4 directions to protect our areas from a proliferation of HMOs?

Lee Anderson: I do agree with the use of article 4 to put HMOs through the planning process. I have forced my local council to do that, but unfortunately it is doing it only in certain areas. I would like to see it being done throughout the constituency.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree with me, and indeed with the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), that the Conservative-run council in Newcastle-under-Lyme should also be applying article 4, sooner rather than later?

Lee Anderson: I think it is a matter for local councils to decide. In my constituency, HMOs are a big problem, and I am glad that my council has used article 4 in some areas, although I would like to see it rolled out to the whole constituency.

We have druggies, criminals and other wrong'uns living—sometimes six in one small house—in streets that were once considered good places to live. The decent folk who can afford to leave those streets are leaving, in their droves, but the problem is that the investors—the landlords—then buy up their houses and turn them into HMOs. Other decent people, however, cannot afford to move, and have to stay and put up with a life of misery.

The problem is becoming worse and worse. Labour Front Benchers, and indeed Back Benchers, bang on about emptying the hotels that are full of illegal migrants, and no one wants a hotel full of illegal migrants in their area. Nobody wants young, fighting-age males—400 of them sometimes—from backward cultures that treat our women as second-class citizens roaming our streets, but the hotels are now being emptied. Where are these young men going to go? I will tell you where they are going to go: they are going to go into an HMO on a street near people in this Chamber; near my family, near my friends, near my neighbours. We have had enough of this. We have enough of our own home-grown nuisances in this country without importing even more to live in HMOs.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the proliferation of these houses in multiple occupation is leading to whole streets being transformed and communities being torn apart, with no sense of engagement from those occupying these HMOs, and it is leading to rubbish, mess, destitution, disruption and utter chaos in streets and whole communities?

Lee Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend, and I will put what I think he is trying to say more succinctly: the proliferation of these HMOs is turning some of our areas into ghettos.

I have seen in Ashfield that, because of HMOs being filled with young men, some young girls are frightened to walk the same streets. They have even changed their route to school. That is unacceptable. It is not right that, in 2026, young British girls are having to change the way they walk to school. It is not fair on our citizens. As I said, the illegal migrants who have been dispersed among our communities in HMOs are mostly young men from backward cultures. Some have medieval views towards our women and girls. Women and girls tell me they are more afraid now to walk our streets than they have ever been. Nobody deserves that.

To make matters even worse, this Government—and, to be fair, the previous Government—have allowed Serco to hoover up HMOs on seven-year deals and fill them full of illegal migrants, which means it is now even more difficult for British people to find accommodation. This has also led to a huge increase in rents in places like Ashfield. The increase in HMOs in places like Ashfield has meant that people who were born and bred there are becoming homeless in our own town. That is an absolute disgrace. Normal, hard-working people in Ashfield are being made homeless by companies and landlords seeking more profit as their homes are converted into HMOs.

In Ashfield, there are supposedly 110 asylum seekers living in this sort of accommodation at the taxpayer's expense. It is shameful that we have had nurses kicked out of their HMO—nurses who work at my local hospital; the same hospital where I was born—to be replaced by illegal migrants, because Serco has taken over the contract. We are supposed to be here in this place to make people's lives better, but we are making them worse.

There is a solution to all of this, because HMOs should not be a problem; it is the management of them that is the problem. I recently spoke to Richard Purseglove in my constituency, who runs Purseglove Property. He has housed thousands of people over the past 15 years in HMOs with zero antisocial incidents. He told me that, done properly, HMOs are convenient, affordable housing for nurses, key workers and single professionals. I agree with him: HMOs can be a good thing for people in need of housing—I think we all know that. The problem is that there is no regulation of HMO management.

[Lee Anderson]

HMO management is different from a standard let. When we let six unrelated people—normally men—live together with no checks in place, what could possibly go wrong? Well, there is plenty going wrong, and it is making the lives of my constituents a living hell. HMO owners cannot do Disclosure and Barring Service checks. They cannot use Clare's law. They can ask potential tenants difficult questions, but the applicants have no obligation to answer truthfully.

What could we do to make HMOs in our communities more acceptable? Well, we could legislate, for one thing: introducing licensing for HMO managers and owners; and qualifications, training and accountability. Landlords and managers must also be held accountable for managing their properties, as well as for disruptive behaviour. That should be a condition of any licence granted.

We need vigorous background checks on all tenants. There should be a separate licensing agreement or a tier for agents housing higher-risk people—people with mental health problems, vulnerable adults and so on. There should be access for licensed HMO managers to proper safeguarding tools—as I said before, DBS checks and access to Clare's law. There should be a statutory limit on how many HMOs can open up in one particular area. My last ask for the Minister is to stop placing illegal migrants in HMOs. Detain and deport for the sake of our young women and girls.

9.55 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing this important debate. I also thank those other hon. Members who have made contributions.

I appreciate fully the concerns that the hon. Member for Ashfield raises about houses in multiple occupation. HMOs can play an important role in the housing market, providing relatively low-cost accommodation for rent. However, it is right that local planning authorities can act, where appropriate, to minimise any negative impacts that such houses may have on local communities.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of points concerning the interaction between HMOs and the planning system. Larger HMOs always require an application to the local planning authority for planning permission. However, national permitted development rights allow for existing homes to change use to a small HMO for up to six people without the need for a planning application. Such smaller HMOs are also able to change back to a standard family home under similar rights.

We do recognise that the free operation of the national permitted development rights is not always suitable for all areas. That is why, where there is sufficient evidence of the need to protect local amenity or the wellbeing of an area, local planning authorities can remove permitted development rights in a specific area by means of introducing an article 4 direction, following consultation with the affected local community.

Mr Mohindra: I am well-versed with the Minister through our work on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. Will he consider looking at reducing the threshold from six individuals to four? I am finding in Three Rivers that several of the homes are probably inappropriate for six distinct individuals but may be appropriate for four. Unless the evidence threshold is there for an article 4 direction, I have communities that will be impacted significantly, unless we are able to change something here.

Matthew Pennycook: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point. I will come on to say how we are keeping regulation under review, but I note the point he makes.

Once an article 4 direction is in place, any change of use to either a large or small HMO requires an application for planning permission. All such applications are considered by the relevant local planning authority, in line with the development plan for the area and in consultation with the local community. A clear and up-to-date local plan policy for HMOs can support assessment of future applications. I know the struggle of the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) with his local authority to get an up-to-date local plan in place.

Whether any given local planning authority chooses to consult on introducing an article 4 direction to remove the national permitted development rights that I have referenced is ultimately a decision for it to take. It is not something that the Government seek to influence in any part of the country. We do not believe that the process is costly or burdensome, and approximately 75 councils have put in place article 4 directions for HMOs in parts of their authority area—although I note that Ashfield district council has no article 4 directions in place for small HMOs. The hon. Member for Ashfield may wish to take that up with his local authority.

In addition, the Government recently consulted on a new national planning policy framework. That consultation includes proposals relating to article 4 direction policy, proposing a more flexible approach so that local planning authorities can remove national permitted development rights where it is necessary to protect the amenity or wellbeing of an area—for instance, where there is an over-concentration of small HMOs. We are currently analysing the feedback received and will publish our response in due course.

Turning to HMO licensing, it is, of course, crucial that HMOs are safe and well managed. That is why all HMOs are subject to management regulations. Those regulations place duties on managers of HMOs—typically, the landlords—to take safety measures, supply and maintain gas and electricity, and maintain common parts, fixtures and fittings.

In addition, all local planning authorities must license HMOs with five or more people from two or more households who share facilities, such as a kitchen or bathroom. Local planning authorities also have the power to require HMOs to be licensed where three or more people from two or more households are sharing facilities. This means that most HMOs can be licensed where necessary.

Local planning authorities can also impose licence conditions to ensure that landlords effectively manage HMOs. For example, a local authority may require a landlord to put in place measures to prevent or reduce antisocial behaviour by occupants or visitors. Local planning authorities have robust powers to tackle landlords

who breach HMO regulations, including the ability to issue civil penalties of up to £40,000 for offences committed from 1 May, rent repayment orders and, for the worst offenders, banning orders.

The Government want to ensure that councils have the capacity to take action where needed. That is why we have provided £18.2 million in 2025-26, and £41.1 million in 2026-27, to support the new enforcement responsibilities that local authorities are taking on under the Renters' Rights Act 2025. We plan to establish a sustainable funding system for enforcement in the private rented sector over the long term, based on future database fee revenues.

It is obviously not the responsibility of my Department, but the hon. Member for Ashfield raised the issue of asylum accommodation, so let me briefly set out the Government's position. Under the previous Conservative Government, asylum decision making ground to a halt and hotel use spiralled to around 400 sites, costing £9 million a day at its peak. This Labour Government are determined to end the use of hotels for asylum seekers as quickly as possible in this Parliament, but we intend to do so in an orderly fashion.

Lee Anderson: What would the Minister advise me or my local authority to do to stop HMOs kicking out working people in Ashfield and putting in illegal migrants?

Matthew Pennycook: I have heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns. They are on the record, and I will pass them on to the relevant Ministers in the Home Office. The Home Office is working in collaboration with other Government Departments to deliver accommodation across a range of sites, including larger, more basic accommodation, and the action we have taken to date means that the number of hotels is down to 190—around half of what it was under the previous Government. We want to find the right balance, and dispersed accommodation, including HMOs, is an important tool that local authorities can use to accommodate those seeking refuge as their claims are assessed. The Home Office will continue to work closely with my Department to explore a model of asylum accommodation that achieves value for money and supports asylum system reform, and the Government will provide further detail in due course.

Local planning authorities already have powers to limit the proliferation of HMOs. They already benefit from, or can deploy, licensing powers to ensure that HMOs are safe and well managed, and they have robust powers to ensure that landlords of HMOs comply with all relevant regulations. If local planning authorities are struggling to apply these powers effectively or feel that they are lacking, I want to know. To the point made by hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), we will keep the regulation of HMOs under review. I know that this is a concern to a number of Members across the House, and I am more than willing to continue to engage with Members on both sides on this important policy area.

Question put and agreed to.

10.2 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 April 2026

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke *in the Chair*]

Park Home Owners

9.30 am

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for park home owners.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I want to acknowledge the turnout, which is pretty impressive, given that we were voting so late last night. I hope it demonstrates to the Minister how passionate people are about this topic.

I am proud to represent six park home sites. In Rushcliffe, as in many constituencies represented here, mobile home sites can be found everywhere. They can be found on the edge of more urban areas, such as the Bassingfield Lane, Carlight Gardens and Greenacres sites near West Bridgford; in smaller village or town settings, such as Radcliffe Park in Radcliffe-on-Trent; and in idyllic rural settings, such as the Tollerton Park site near Tollerton village, or the Langar Woods site near Langar. As those who can count will realise, those are all six park home sites in my constituency.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Speaking of idyllic rural areas, there is none more so than my constituency of Henley and Thame. The average house price is more than half a million pounds, so park homes offer an affordable alternative, yet the 10% charge when people come to sell the homes makes it really difficult. Does the hon. Member agree that it is a good thing that the Government have launched a review, but that more detail is required on the timeline?

James Naish: Absolutely. I am sure that we will talk a lot about the 10% sales commission, but the hon. Member is right to raise it early on. I am pleased that the Minister leading on the reforms is here. I am sure that he will be listening closely to what Members have to say today.

Wherever they are located, mobile home sites are great places to live. They are radically different from the stereotypes of so-called trailer parks from the 1970s and ’80s. Among other things, they offer independence, security and supportive communities. Over the past 21 months, I have been fortunate to work with people from all six Rushcliffe sites on issues related to living in a mobile home. When I applied for this debate, I told the Backbench Business Committee that one thing I have tried to do as a Member of Parliament is to find a couple of policy areas in which small changes can make a big difference to a large number of people. I believe that park or mobile homes are one of those areas.

An estimated 160,000 people live in mobile homes in England alone. In effect, that is two whole constituencies of people, or the equivalent of the population of Northampton, Norwich or Reading. However, because of the geographical dispersion of mobile home sites around the country and the lack of critical mass—on average there are fewer than 100 residents per site—mobile home residents are talked about only sporadically. When they are talked about, warm words are rarely followed by action. I am determined that this Parliament will change that for good. To that end, I welcome the fact that in March this Government opened a call for evidence, which closes on Friday 29 May, on the 10% commission charge on park home sales. That is a significant step forward. I hope that today’s debate will ensure that the voices of park and mobile home residents are amplified and heard clearly by Ministers and civil servants as that work continues.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Park home owners across my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages have contacted me about the deeply unfair 10% commission charge. It is a levy that has not been changed in almost 45 years, and it falls hardest on the older residents, who make up about 80% of park home owners, so I was delighted to see the Government announce the long overdue review in March. Does my hon. Friend agree that after years of neglect by previous Governments, park home owners deserve real, meaningful reform that finally gives them the financial security that they need?

James Naish: Yes, and I will talk about that in a moment. There has been cross-party consensus on the need to make changes, but it will fall to this Government to make them. I am pleased that in advance of this debate, we saw that move from the Government, and I trust that there will be proper, meaningful change in due course.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I hear repeatedly from park home residents in my constituency that they do not understand what the 10% charge is actually paying for. They feel that they have very little leverage and are stuck in a system that they cannot challenge. Does the hon. Member agree that any review must go beyond another round of evidence gathering? This time, park home residents will expect real change.

James Naish: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I will talk later about the different reasons that have been given for the 10% commission, which demonstrate in and of themselves that nobody is sure what it is for. It is a hangover from a past era.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I have had the pleasure of visiting Stonehill Woods Park in my constituency, a wonderful park homes community where I heard residents’ huge frustrations about the regulation of park homes, particularly the 10% sales commission. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should look carefully at all the evidence provided as part of the consultation, and at whether the 10% commission can be reduced or scrapped entirely?

James Naish: I trust that the Minister and his team will do exactly that. This is not just about the 10% sales commission; there are broader issues impacting park home residents. I will come on to those matters shortly.

[James Naish]

Let me say two important things. First, mobile homes can be a very good housing option. They typically offer people a smaller, more manageable home in an attractive, close-knit community. The quality of mobile homes has improved considerably over recent years; the sites are often now home to a diverse mix of individuals and families, just like any other location.

Secondly, and critically, for most people park homes are not a second home or a luxury purchase; they are their only home. They therefore represent security, independence and a lifetime of savings, just like the bricks-and-mortar properties that most of us inhabit. That is precisely why protections for mobile home owners matter. We are talking about 160,000 ordinary people living ordinary lives in 100,000 increasingly ordinary properties, but they are underpinned by out-of-date legislation and perceptions. Rightly, the Government are looking at major commonhold, leasehold and fleecehold reforms to end the feudal leasehold system and the injustice of unfair maintenance costs, but as part of those wider changes, park and mobile home owners must not be forgotten. I hope that today's debate will make sure that they are not.

On mobile homes, MPs from parties of all colours have talked over the years about mis-selling, poor maintenance, weak enforcement, opaque utility charges, disputes over pitch fees, sale blocking and the 10% commission charge when a home is sold. Most concerningly, MPs have often alluded to the imbalance of power between mobile home residents and site owners.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I have been contacted by residents of the Harden and Bingley Park on Goit Stock Lane in Harden. They feel trapped in their relationship with the site owner, which they have said does nothing. On the 10% commission, they want to give the whole of their estate to their family as an inheritance. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that residents feed their views into the consultation, and that we make sure that the deal between park home owners and residents is fair and proportionate?

James Naish: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The consultation is being run for a reason. I encourage anyone watching the debate or emailing their MPs about it to go further and engage with the consultation, because I am sure that the Minister is looking forward to review those responses.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this valuable debate. I have a good number of park home sites in my constituency. Not only do they suffer the 10% commission, poor maintenance levels and high service charges, but they have atrocious service on the utilities that they have to buy through the park home owner. Some years ago, one site collectively was charged £100,000 for a water leak, which was £1,000 a home. I got that refunded from South West Water. The same site recently had blocked drains over a weekend, so people could not flush their toilets, and their Calor gas system was deemed unfit for use, so they had no heating. Is that an acceptable way to run a site? Does the hon. Member agree that residents need better enforcement and support, and not just from the site owner?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds, let me say that this is an exceptionally well-subscribed debate. The Front Benchers' wind-ups will start at 10.30 am, so I ask that interventions be short and sharp.

James Naish: Thank you, Sir Alec. I will press on, but the hon. Member is absolutely right and has touched on some issues that I will talk about. I congratulate him on ensuring his residents got their money back.

Most concerning, and often alluded to by MPs, is the imbalance of power. A park home resident may own the home they live in, but they are not in control of the land beneath or around it, and they often have a very limited say in related decisions. When the same person or entity controls the site, the pitch, the rules, the maintenance, potentially the utilities, and the conditions under which the home is sold, it is understandable that residents feel exposed.

That can and must change. It needs only relatively minor adjustments to legislation. I trust that the Minister and his team will prioritise that in the next parliamentary Session, given the tangible difference that can be made to the lives of 160,000 people up and down the country.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Naish: I will press on and see where we get to. I will not go into detail about many key issues facing park and mobile home owners—I am sure colleagues will touch on them, as they have already started to—but I want to mention, up front, some key items that are common across all sites.

The first is maintenance and site standards. Site residents frequently report poor upkeep, damaged roads, drainage issues and neglected communal areas, despite continuing to pay high fees directly to the site owners. One of my six park home sites has repeatedly raised issues about poor waste disposal, leading to rats on site, and intermittent issues with water and heating quality. Such issues raise fundamental questions about transparency and accountability in how residents' money is used.

Secondly, there is the transparency of pitch fees and charges. While preparing for the debate, I was made aware of several threats of eviction for non-payment of pitch fees and charges, some of which have been legitimately contested by residents. More than once, the management of mobile home sites has been described as the wild west. It is clear that stronger protections are needed to prevent unscrupulous practices.

Thirdly, the word "enforcement" has already been mentioned. In one case, a constituent of mine was chased for six years by a management company to pay for drain clearance that was not her responsibility. Although rights exist, and local authorities have powers, many residents feel unsupported when issues arise. They may be passed between councils, tribunals and advice services. They may fear repercussions for complaining. That creates an enforcement gap between legal rights and the ability to exercise them, particularly for vulnerable residents.

Fourthly, transparency over utilities has been raised with me by constituents at one of my weekly surgeries. Where residents receive electricity, gas or water via the

site owner, it can be difficult to understand billing, fairness and eligibility for support. Residents need clear, enforceable rights to transparent billing, fair pricing and clarity on the Government's engagement with Ofgem's work on resale pricing.

Finally, there is the 10% sales commission, which has been raised several times today. For residents, that is a direct loss of equity, often at the moment when they need their money most, potentially to move closer to family, move into more suitable accommodation or fund care costs. The charge is poorly understood, insufficiently transparent and increasingly disproportionate, as the value of park homes has risen. In 1983, a park home sold for £12,000 would have generated a commission of £1,200, about 14% of an average salary at the time. In 2026, a park home sold for £160,000 would generate a commission of £16,000, about 42% of the current average salary. The commission is still 10%, but the cash value has grown substantially.

I recognise that site owners argue that the commission forms part of their business model and helps to support investment in sites. However, there are already routes for that to be done transparently. For example, under the framework in the Mobile Homes Act 2013, improvements to a park can be reflected in pitch fee reviews, which involve a proper process and residents being consulted. What residents primarily object to is effectively being charged twice by site owners: once through pitch fees and other charges, and again through a 10% deduction from the value of their home when they sell.

The inequity is reflected in the ever-changing justifications for the commission. Depending on who people speak to, it has been linked to road maintenance costs, the offsetting of pitch fees, the maintenance of site viability and/or the modernisation of infrastructure. No wonder residents are sceptical about how and where the proceeds are spent.

This debate is ultimately about fairness. It is about whether residents can enjoy the home that they have bought on the terms on which they bought it. It is about whether people can understand their bills, challenge unfair charges and sell their homes freely. It is about whether the law is meaningful in practice, not just on paper, and whether a 10% commission charge introduced decades ago remains fair and proportionate today.

I hope that the Minister will respond to several points. First, will the Government consider stronger protections at the point of sale, so that buyers are clear about the legal status of a site and their ongoing obligations before they purchase? Secondly, will Ministers review whether local authorities have the resources, expertise and duties needed to consistently enforce site standards? Thirdly, will the Government work with Ofgem to ensure transparent and fair utility charging for residents who receive energy or other utilities through site owners? Finally, will the Minister confirm today that, following the call for evidence, the Government are prepared to consider real reform to the current commission arrangements?

Park or mobile home residents are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for basic fairness, transparency and security in the homes that they have bought. Many have worked hard their whole life, invested their savings and chosen park home living because they believed that it would suit them and offer peace of mind. Like all of us, they deserve a fair system that protects them when things go wrong. I look forward to hearing hon. Members' contributions and the Minister's response to Members across the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): Order. As 17 Members have indicated a wish to speak, I will set an immediate three-minute limit.

9.48 am

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing such an important debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who is here beside me, is unable to speak in the debate, but I want to put on the record how important park homes are in her constituency. It is important to raise that.

Let us say that a couple of relatively modest means want to move to a park home. They will probably look first at Shropshire, a beautiful county where we have 39 outstanding park home sites. I do not want to downplay the rest of Shropshire, but obviously they will choose South Shropshire, the most beautiful constituency in the country. They purchase a park home, but as we know, circumstances change: they can plan for the next five or 10 years, but something could happen in a matter of months that means they have to resell that park home. The current 10% commission on sales means that, if they have to move within the next six or 12 months, they will lose that 10%, which they will have to pay out of the sale price. In no other housing market in the UK would we expect—unless there is a significant rise or a crash during that time—to move because of personal circumstances and lose 10%.

I have spoken to park home owners in Hollins Park and Highley Park Homes who feel that that traps them into their park homes and that they are unable to get out. The information is available when they set out to purchase, but if their circumstances change, that causes an issue. This blatantly discriminates against park home owners compared with owners in the rest of the UK housing market.

People argue that commission is based on the value of the land as a form of stamp duty, but sellers do not pay stamp duty; buyers do. There is also a taper mechanism for stamp duty in the UK, which is not the case with commission. On top of that, park home owners pay pitch fees as well as site fees. I have met various site owners and know that some look after their park homes excellently, such as in Homelands Park in Chorley, but other sites have unsurfaced roads and huge problems. In 2002, a study reported that commission makes up only 17% of site owners' income. I am aware that they need a viable business model, but it should not be the commission model that comes on the back of my park home owners.

This problem has been raised across the many sites in South Shropshire. Park home residents deserve a far better deal than they get. I want the Minister to look seriously at the position of park home owners in South Shropshire, to ensure that they get a fair deal and to get this commission scrapped, because it does not work. It is an outdated model and I would love to see it go.

9.51 am

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on securing this important debate. Many of the issues he raised in his excellent speech affect a number of my constituents. My constituency is home to several park home sites, including Caddington Park on Skimpot lane, Hillcrest Park in Caddington, Brickhill Park in Pepperstock, Brookfield Park in Totternhoe, Whipsnade park homes, Woodside park homes and some others. I have had the opportunity to meet and correspond with many residents from those communities.

With about 80% of park home owners aged over 65, park homes can appear to be an attractive and affordable option for retirement. However, there are long-standing concerns about the regulation of the sector. I will touch on two issues that have repeatedly been raised with me: the 10% sales commission and rising pitch fees.

The 10% commission is one of the most contentious issues in the sector.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Rachel Hopkins: I will carry on, I am afraid. When residents sell their homes, they have to pay up to 10% of the sale price to the site owner. That can amount to tens of thousands of pounds, with little clarity about what the payment covers. One constituent recently told me that their home could sell for £280,000, resulting in a £28,000 payment to the site owner "for doing nothing," in her words. The commission has real consequences for park home residents, effectively acting as a deduction from the owner's wealth and limiting how much they can reinvest in a new home, use for care or rely on as financial security. Most park home owners are retirees who bought their homes outright using savings or proceeds from selling a traditional house, and they often rely on that capital later in life to fund care, to relocate or for other essential needs.

Alongside that commission, residents must also pay ongoing pitch fees for the land their homes sit on. Fees are typically reviewed annually, and often rise with inflation. That may sound reasonable, but those increases compound over time, especially for those on fixed incomes. Although pitch fees are intended to cover maintenance and site services, residents frequently express concerns about transparency and value for money. Another of my constituents living in a park home wrote to me last year and told me that her pitch fee was more than £200 per month. She stated that

"this should cover maintenance to the site, but in our case the owner does not do any maintenance, resulting in a roadway that is not fit for purpose."

Overall, the current park home financial structure raises serious questions about fairness, transparency and long-term sustainability. I welcome the Minister's action in recent months to launch a renewed call for evidence on the rationale for a commission payment on the sale of a park home, and to publish the responses from the previous research report. I look forward to receiving further updates on the Government's plans to address this issue following the conclusion of the consultation on 29 May. I hope that that will bring long overdue reform for my constituents.

9.54 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for bringing to the Chamber this vital debate on a matter that strikes at the very heart of many of my constituents, and indeed of many people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as it concerns retirement and peace of mind. It is good to see the Minister in his place, and I wish him well in his role. As always, I have asks of him, and will come to those in my conclusion.

In Ballyhalbert and Cloughey in my constituency, we have two park home sites. I have had a long working relationship with them and the group association over the years. The residents in my neck of the woods are decent, hard-working people, many of them elderly, who put every penny they have into their homes, but who often find themselves caught in a gap between the legislation we have here in Westminster and what is delivered back home in Northern Ireland. We must be very clear: a home is a home, whether it is built of bricks and mortar or a high-quality residential mobile home on a licensed site.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that in many parts of Northern Ireland, but especially in my constituency, this is about striking a balance between those who own or rent their mobile homes and the site owners?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend sums up some of the issues. It is a question of getting that balance.

I am worried, as I often am, that our constituents in the Province are being left behind. We have seen the Mobile Homes Act bring protections to those in England and Wales by dealing with those rogue site owners who, frankly, are more concerned with profit than they are with people's right to live in peace and contentment, but we in Northern Ireland are still waiting for the same robust approach. I know that the Minister is very responsive to the requests of us all. My ask of him is to engage with the Minister back home to ensure that what is happening here will happen for people in Northern Ireland as well.

I will not take the extra minute, Sir Alec, because I am conscious of other Members wanting to speak, but I will highlight three specific points that must be addressed. The first is the 10% commission fee. It is a hidden and heavy burden for an elderly person to face a 10% exit fee just to move into a care home or to be closer to family. We need parity across the United Kingdom in how those fees are regulated. That is my first request of the Minister.

My second request relates to energy costs. Many of my constituents are off-grid and rely on liquefied petroleum gas or supplied electricity. I thank the Government for the warm home discount, but it is often a struggle for those residents to access it. We need a system that is automatic, not one that requires a senior citizen to jump through digital hoops.

Thirdly, on site licensing and enforcement, we need to ensure that local councils in Northern Ireland have the teeth needed to deal with those few site owners who harass or bully residents. A fit and proper persons test must be as meaningful in Comber or Newtownards as it is in Cornwall.

I have highlighted the Northern Ireland question and the role that perhaps the Minister will kindly take on for us in relation to the Minister back home, Gordon Lyons. Will the Minister commit to a meeting or corresponding with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that the legislative gaps are closed and that my constituents in Strangford can sleep easy knowing that their homes and rights are protected?

9.57 am

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to speak in this debate and to represent park home owners in my constituency, and to follow the passionate call for action from my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish). It is genuinely touching to see that we have a cross-party consensus between many in this House on the need for justice for our park home residents.

Problems relating to park homes have been a constant and worrying part of my casework since I was elected. I regularly speak to residents who are frustrated and angry that their security—the security of having a home—is at risk because of the power imbalance between park home owners and site owners. It is not an exaggeration to talk about park home justice.

I pay tribute to park home campaigners in my constituency. I asked them yesterday if I could put some of their names on record, because they are great tribunes there, but they did not feel that it would be appropriate or right for me to name them because of the relationship with their site owners. However, I would like to give a shout-out to two councillors in my patch, Shabina Qayyum and Samantha Hemraj, who have consistently fought on the side of park home owners for longer than I have and who brought me up to speed on these issues.

This debate speaks not just to individual cases of people falling through the gaps or a blip, but to a systemic failure in the law, regulation and enforcement of decent standards for park home residents. The reality is stark. Like other speakers, I highlight the predatory nature of the relationships. Many residents feel that site owners prey on relatives of homeowners who die by buying up their homes cheaply and selling them on at a huge profit. In one part of Peterborough, a home that was recently bought for £25,000 was sold a few weeks later, when the homeowner died before Christmas, for £85,000. That is in addition to the rank injustice of the 10% commission that site owners make on all their sales.

The bigger issue is that, in too many cases, the state is blind to residents' frustrations and too weak to deal with the injustices they face. Too often, maintenance is poor, despite increasing charges and fees being passed on to park home residents, and local authority enforcement is often weak.

Samantha Niblett: A constituent of mine, Marion Webster, is a keen supporter of the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign. Like my hon. Friend's constituents, she feels that it is incredibly unjust that, if she wants to sell her home, she has to give 10% away. That almost puts fleecehold and leasehold to shame by comparison. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time for the Government to take action on the back of this debate, which I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing?

Andrew Pakes: My hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe described some elements of this sector as management by the wild west. Residents have used stronger words to me to describe the people who run some of these sites. That is why we need justice.

Local authorities are often too reluctant or slow to intervene when problems arise, including complaints about site licence breaches, poor maintenance or sale blocking, or concerns about whether a site owner is a fit and proper person to manage the site. Resolving those problems can take years, and there are ample opportunities for site owners to duck and delay the process. I welcome the consultation on the 10% commission, and I look forward to updates on that; however, is the Minister assured that local authorities have the right mix of powers and resources to lead on this work? Do we need a national approach and better standards?

Before I finish, I want to speak about utilities, which many Members have mentioned. Like others, I have raised with the Minister for Energy issues such as the energy discount. That is an important measure that the Government introduced to help homeowners and bill payers with the cost of living, but for many park home owners in my constituency, the bill is paid directly by the site owner, and the lack of transparency, agency and power means that, yet again, something that should be good news for homeowners is tainted by the power imbalance between site owners and homeowners.

10.2 am

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this important debate. There are clearly many issues facing park home residents across the country, and I want to touch briefly on two of them.

The first is the challenge around planning and sales problems. At Devon Oaks Park, a site in my constituency, it seems that the owner has effectively mis-sold properties on varying lengths of tenancy. When it is found that he has breached the planning conditions, it is the residents who are impacted, not the park owner. Dartmoor national park is rightly seeking to enforce those conditions, but many residents will be made homeless if that issue cannot be resolved.

I would be interested to know what the Minister has in mind, particularly for the review being done on the commission. Could that review look at planning and tenancy length? Ultimately, people choose to live in park homes permanently, but they can end up on a site with a time limit, or one where some properties are on a time limit and some not. It is incredibly difficult to know what they are buying into.

The main challenge that I want to address, which has already been touched on, is the fuel costs for residents, particularly those who use LPG. I recently surveyed residents of Devon Oak Park and Bittaford Wood on whether the issue was impacting them, so that I could seek to do something about it. Everyone using LPG who responded had seen an increase in their costs. Most were paying up to a quarter more, and some were paying as much as half again. That equates to a bill increase of more than £100, and some are paying as much as £150 more. My view is that every constituent whose household relies on LPG should receive support equivalent to that going to households using oil. I appreciate

[Rebecca Smith]

that the Minister is in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, rather than the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, but I hope he will hear those pleas.

It is not difficult to understand why my constituents are seeking support. As we have heard, these households are off grid not by choice, but by circumstance. LPG prices, unlike mains gas prices, are unregulated and uncapped, and users are exposed to market volatility with no safety net. One constituent told me that they are

"finding it very hard to make ends meet."

Another told me that

"being pensioners does not give us much for essentials".

One constituent simply said: "Help, please." I plead with the Minister to hear that and to commit to make that plea on behalf of park home owners to his colleagues in other Departments.

10.4 am

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on securing this timely debate. My constituency is known for its coastal beauty, and as such it is a hotspot for park homes. Of UK mobile home owners, 80% are aged 65 and above, and they buy their homes in pursuit of a quiet, secure retirement. Unfortunately, many end up enduring a living nightmare, due to the widespread intimidation and mis-selling by some site owners.

My constituent Dennis is one such retiree. He was mis-sold a holiday home on a holiday park under the false pretence that it was a residential home. He was persuaded to make the purchase by signage that suggested that the caravan could be used as his sole residence and inhabited all year round. After moving in, Dennis discovered that he was legally required to have a permanent home elsewhere, which is the rule for holiday parks.

After the summer was over, Dennis faced, in his words, a

"relentless campaign of harassment, intimidation and verbal abuse".

He was frequently approached by members of staff and warned that his home would be removed from the site if he did not vacate it. My constituent was threatened with physical violence. Eventually, when that intimidation became too much, Dennis sold his home back to the site at a 60% loss. The site sold it four days later for a substantial profit. Dennis told me earlier this year that, having lost tens of thousands of pounds in savings and with legal representation having cost more than £4,000, he felt that his retirement was ruined. That story is repeated again and again, up and down the country.

The Holiday Park Action Group represents more 84,000 holiday park home owners across the country. As its founder Carole Keeble told me, Dennis is one of thousands of victims whose lives have been severely impacted by an unregulated industry. Sites often have a mixed licence that permits them to sell both residential and holiday homes, and they are sometimes deliberately unclear about which type they are selling. Buyers are often not properly informed of their contractual rights and obligations and are then forced to resell at a loss. Victims are led to think that they are at fault for having bought the home, not realising that they were intentionally misled. According to the Holiday Park Action Group, that has led to mental health problems and, tragically, to suicides.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister respond to this debate by telling us how his Department plans to work with the Department for Business and Trade to establish robust protections and to regulate this industry, where people such as my constituent Dennis are being exploited?

10.8 am

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this important debate.

There are six park home estates in my constituency. They provide vital accommodation and a strong sense of community among residents who take pride in their homes and their estates. This debate raises a fundamental issue of fairness. Many of my park home residents are retirees, often on fixed incomes. Many downsize into park homes precisely to release equity, reduce costs and secure greater financial stability. When they come to sell their home, the requirement to hand over 10% of the sale price to the site owner causes real distress.

Chris Coghlan: Park home owners in my constituency tell me that site owners have pressured them into selling, in order to get that 10% commission. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is wrong and that the 10% commission should be abolished?

Clive Jones: I agree 100%. It is not a small administrative fee: it can amount to tens of thousands of pounds. That charge exists outside the protections that most homeowners take for granted. In the mainstream housing market, sellers are protected by competition and choice. Estate agent fees are negotiated. Services must be delivered to justify the costs and, if someone does not like the terms, they can walk away. Park home residents do not have that freedom.

We would not accept this in any other part of the housing system—we would not accept a mandatory 10% charge simply for the right to sell our own homes. People delay moving closer to their families and put off downsizing further. Even when their health declines, some remain in homes that no longer meet their needs simply because they cannot afford to lose such a large portion of their asset. No group of homeowners should face a system that strips away rights and imposes disproportionate financial penalties.

It is time to bring fairness back into the system. That is why I support the PHOJC's calls for the 10% charge to be ended without delay or replaced with a fairer system that does not penalise residents. Changes should also be made to ensure that park home residents have the same protection and fair treatment as all other homeowners, bringing park home living in line with normal consumer and housing rights.

10.11 am

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for bringing the voice of park home owners to Parliament. For many people, choosing a park home is not just a

housing decision; it is about investing in the next chapter of their lives. It is a choice for peace and a slower, gentler pace of life. People sell their brick-and-mortar homes and invest their life savings. They are not chasing luxury; they are seeking a bit of security.

Sir Alec, you will know that in York and North Yorkshire we have some of the best park homes in the country. When people go to Mill Garth Park or Mount Pleasant Park in my constituency, they see immediately that these are beautiful parks, set among nature, with close-knit communities—but for too many, what was meant to be a peaceful retirement has slowly, heartbreakingly turned into something else entirely. For some residents, their park home has become a financial prison.

Residents who believed they were buying certainty now lie awake worrying about pitch fees they cannot control. That is why I warmly welcome the Government's plan to move annual pitch fee increases away from retail price index and towards consumer price index. However, there is one issue that still casts a very long shadow over the lives of park home residents: the 10% commission charge on resale.

One of my constituents simply wants to sell up to move closer to their son. Time is precious in life and, for however many years they have left, they just want more time together as a family; but when she and her husband sell up, 10% of the proceeds will go not towards the move or towards their future, but to the site owner. There is no other form of home ownership in the country that requires sellers to hand over 10% of their home's value to another person. If I were at the Financial Conduct Authority, investigating a similar pricing structure in the financial services industry, I would be saying loud and clear, "Mis-selling, mis-selling, mis-selling." It absolutely stinks.

I am genuinely pleased that the Government have launched a formal review of that 10% commission. After all, this is not just about regulations, commissions or fees; it is about dignity, security and ensuring that a home someone chose for peace does not become a source of fear. Retirees should be able to enjoy the life they have earned, without having to fight just to hold on.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Sir Christopher, I will set an immediate two-minute limit.

10.13 am

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I have been involved with the park homes issue for the best part of 30 years; I have 2,000 people in my constituency living in park homes, and I am much concerned by the abuses so many of them have suffered—not just in my constituency, but across the country.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters), who referred to my private Member's Bill, the Mobile Homes (Pitch Fees) Act 2023, which changed the pitch fee maximum from RPI to CPI. I was privileged to be able to take that Bill through all its stages in one day; it is an example of how private Member's Bills can be used to help park home residents.

My former colleague Peter Aldous did exactly the same thing, introducing the fit and proper person legislation through the Mobile Homes Act 2013. That Bill was effectively drafted in what is now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and was given priority by the then Minister, Grant Shapps, who said, "I can't get parliamentary time from the Government, but I'm going to promote this among Back Benchers." I ask the Minister here today to do something similar regarding the lack of action on complex ownership. That issue was raised in 2017 and the Government promised to take action on it, but nothing has happened.

The Minister kindly came along and addressed the all-party parliamentary group on park homes in February last year. Since then, he has honoured his commitment to do something about the 10% commission issue. However, at the moment there is complete radio silence on dealing with the abuses that exist, some of which have been referred to by the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) and others. Action must be taken to protect park home owners from rogue operators, of whom there are far too many.

10.15 am

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). Demographically, Lancaster and Wyre has a very similar number of park homes to his constituency, and I have discussed them with him on a number of occasions, which shows the cross-party consensus that what is going on in this industry is nothing short of a scandal.

Colleagues may have seen my constituency in the "Panorama" documentary on park homes in 2024, in which Wyre country park featured. I pay tribute to the two brave park residents who spoke out and were interviewed, but that did not come consequence-free. We have talked a lot about bullying and intimidation, and sadly, in August 2025, both their park homes burned down on the same day, in broad daylight, 90 minutes apart from each other. The cause was never found—I will leave that hanging, and I pay tribute to them.

There are a great many park home sites that are well run, and probably a lot of park home owners are listening to this and thinking, "Actually, I live somewhere that is pretty good." But unfortunately, the rogue operators are now giving the entire industry a bad name, which is why we need to take action.

I agree entirely with the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) at the beginning of the debate and I congratulate him on securing it. In the limited time that I have, I will take the opportunity to put on record my concerns about one particular site in my constituency, called Havenlyn residential park.

I have been approached by dozens of residents and park home owners on that site. The issues of bullying, intimidation and rules being changed without any consultation are alarming. In the past couple of days, I have heard from one of them that the terms and conditions of park residents have now been changed, so that if someone is selling a park home on that site, they cannot sell it to anyone younger than them. Ultimately, that will force many into an impossible situation, because, given the nature of park homes, older people live on these sites and there are issues when they are looking to

[Cat Smith]

sell—they might be towards the end of their life, or perhaps the previous owner had died and left it as an inheritance to their children, which, as I have heard, just ends up becoming a burden.

In the remaining seconds that I have left, I will ask the Minister these questions. Can he do any more to empower local authorities, which are meant to be regulating and enforcing regulations? Do they need stronger statutory duties or more resources, because at the moment Wyre council does not seem able to protect residents in my constituency?

10.18 am

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I will make three brief points. The first is on fit and proper persons. As my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) indicated, the legislation is on the statute book. Peter Aldous did a super job to get it there, but it now needs to be properly implemented. The problems we have heard about this morning tend to be generated by cowboy owners, who are not fit and proper people and should never, ever have been allowed to acquire park homes in the first place.

Secondly, on licensing, it is absolutely clear that local authorities often lack the expertise to enforce the legislation that is already on the statute book. We must have licensing officers who understand the terms and conditions of the licences granted for the operation of these parks, and who know how to enforce them. Many of the problems that I have experienced in my constituency arise from a lack of enforcement, when cowboy operators could and should be brought to book.

Thirdly, I will make myself the most unpopular person in the room—

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Never!

Sir Roger Gale: I will be in a minority of one. If we are to address the 10% commission issue, and we must, we have to understand that it is part of the business model. Park home owners have the opportunity to read the lease they take out; they know what they are buying and what they are signing, and the commission is a significant part of the model. If it is going to be revised, and I accept that there is a strong case for revision, we have to take account of the fact that those costs will fall elsewhere.

10.19 am

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Alec. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on securing this debate. For residents of park homes in my constituency, this is not a technical issue; it is about power, protection and whether anyone steps in when things go wrong. Park homes are meant to offer security and affordability, particularly for older people. For many, park homes represent their life savings and their final move, but too often, they instead experience anxiety about charges they do not understand, standards that quietly slip and enforcement that never seems to arrive.

Let me give some examples. Pitch fees are a major source of the pressure they face. Residents face increases imposed with little explanation, often linked to CPI, entirely at the site owner's discretion. Getting basic receipts can be a struggle, and many residents do not challenge these increases because they are afraid—they are afraid of retaliation, afraid of being labelled difficult and afraid that services will quietly deteriorate if they speak up.

Then there is maintenance. Members have already mentioned some examples of local authorities failing to enforce. Such examples are why I have written to East Herts district council, which is the licensing authority for a park home in my constituency, to set out my residents' concerns. I expect the district council to act promptly, and my participation in this debate should underline that expectation clearly.

Finally, I turn to the 10% sales commission, which we have heard so much about today. However, we have not really heard why it is set at that arbitrary level. On behalf of park home residents in my constituency, I ask the Minister to consider seriously either removing it or reducing it to a far lower level.

At its heart, this debate is about fairness. Park home residents are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for honesty about what they are buying, transparency about what they are paying for, proper maintenance of the places they live and councils that enforce the rules. I ask the Minister to consider all that very carefully.

10.21 am

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall and for setting the scene so clearly about the many issues faced by people living in park homes. Time is short, so I will speak only about the 10% commission.

Back in 2022, I presented a petition to the House calling for annual pitch fee increases for park homes to be linked to consumer price inflation rather than retail price inflation. The petition was signed by 165 residents of Ashwood Park in Wincham, with the support of the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), and I was pleased that the previous Government enacted that change. It was a simple but meaningful adjustment, as the change to the 10% commission would be.

We know that 160,000 people live in park homes. Many of them are retired, and they moved there for affordability, security and a sense of community, but that is not what they are getting. The commission was lowered in 1983 from 15% to 10%, so let me ask the Minister the following questions, because it could be changed again. Who is the call for evidence open to? Are all park home residents able to make a submission? What is the timeline for a decision once the call for evidence has been closed? What assurances can the Minister provide that the decision on reforming the commission charge will be made in a timely way? And is this matter a top priority for the Minister and his Department?

10.23 am

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on securing this important debate. In my constituency, there are a number of park home sites, including in Rainworth, Calverton and Ollerton, and those sites

often provide an affordable and accessible housing option for people later in life. Park homes in my constituency are situated close to local amenities, making them particularly suitable for vulnerable and older residents. However, the uncertainty that many park home owners face over their utility bills is a significant concern.

In many cases, park home residents in my constituency purchase electricity, gas or water through the site owner rather than directly from a utility supplier. Although that arrangement can simplify billing by reducing the number of payments that residents need to manage, it can also make it difficult to understand how charges are calculated or to confirm whether bills accurately reflect individual household usage. It may sometimes be possible to request further information, but residents can be reluctant to do so in fear of retaliation or of a breakdown in relationships with site owners. No one should feel intimidated or isolated in their own home. I am concerned that the lack of transparency and risk of retaliation may disproportionately affect older and more vulnerable constituents. That is particularly worrying given the current uncertainty around electricity and gas prices.

For far too long, park home residents have been treated as an afterthought: paying more, getting less and having little power to challenge it. The 10% sales charge, high utility costs and poor services are a pattern of unfairness. I urge the Minister to introduce real reform, restore balances and give my constituents the dignity and protection that they need and deserve.

10.25 am

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I, too, have been contacted by many of my constituents, throughout my six and a half years as the MP for South West Hertfordshire, with a wide range of complaints and concerns about park homes, particularly from residents of Long Pightle Park, Highview and Newlands Park. This debate is the result of excellent work by the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign, which is of course supported by several hon. Members in attendance at this debate. This issue is cross-party and cross-country, so I applaud all those hon. Members for their excellent efforts. I also make reference to Councillor Vicky Edwards and Councillor Ian Campbell in my constituency, who helped me with this speech.

Park homes offer an affordable option for many people across the UK to relocate, often in retirement, and enjoy the beauty of our natural landscapes. That is something that I can definitely attest to in South West Hertfordshire. But park homes also leave residents vulnerable to many issues, including exploitative site operators, and the majority of park home owners are retirees or older people. As has been noted, the longest-running campaign, the PHOJC, is against the 10% commission that residents are still expected to pay to site owners during the purchase of their park home. That is especially damaging to elderly residents, who do not have excess capital and for whom the commission is a significant part of their retirement fund. It is important that the Government continue the existing inquiry—a continuation of the work of the previous Government—into the impact that a change in the maximum commission legislation would have on residents and on the industry as a whole. I know that my constituents will continue to support the work being done on that campaign.

I still receive many complaints from park home owners in my constituency, mostly regarding poorly maintained landscapes, drainage facilities and fire hydrants, and regarding rubbish and debris being inappropriately stored and disposed of. Some of the figures bandied around for the works being done are three times the market value; they are excessive. I encourage the Government to continue the excellent work, to listen to the results of the consultation, and to implement the proposed measures as quickly as possible.

10.27 am

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this important debate. I am sure he will be much thanked by my residents in Gainsborough Park, Fir Hill, Glenleigh, Roseveare, Buckler Village, and the Old Rectory Mews, for raising the issues that they raise with me—the 10% commission being prime among them. That commission is not simply a financial burden, although on a modest park home it can result, as we have heard, in tens of thousands of pounds' worth of fees at the very moment when a resident is most vulnerable. It also reinforces the structural imbalance of power that we have heard so much about today.

I want to add another issue into the mix: council tax. A tax that we know is regressive at the best of times, it has caused a lot of confusion and distress for residents in my constituency who have faced incorrect council tax bandings on their homes and, separately, site owners being charged council tax on empty pitches, which creates knock-on pressures for other residents. The council tax system, as currently designed, simply does not map well on to the park homes tenant model. That is creating real hardship and confusion for my constituents and deserves attention alongside the commission question.

I say to Ministers that the case for reform is already well established. Residents now need action. I am very glad that the call for evidence has been renewed. I encourage all my residents to submit. We must recognise that park homes are a valued part of our housing stock. The people who live in them deserve the same protections, recourse and security that we would consider a baseline anywhere else in the housing market.

10.29 am

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing the debate. We have discussed these issues multiple times on the all-party parliamentary group on park homes, of which he is also a member.

Park home residents are often the forgotten home owners in our housing system. In this place we rightly discuss leaseholders, renters and first-time buyers, but we almost never talk about the 160,000 people who own park homes in England, four in five of whom are over 65. The quiet injustice that they have faced for many years is overwhelming. These people are overwhelmingly older residents, and most of the time are on fixed incomes. They choose this way of life, in park homes, because it is settled, affordable and within reach, when so much of the rest of the housing market is not. They pay their site fees and maintenance charges, and keep their homes in good order, often for decades.

[Mr Joshua Reynolds]

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) talked about the issues with the agreements—eight months or 12 months—when people buy their homes. One reason for those issues is that when people buy their park homes, they are often told, "Don't worry about conveyancing or solicitors. You don't need that. It's not important." They would never have been told that if they bought another property, but that is okay when it comes to park homes. That is where quite a lot of the issues, including those faced by the hon. Lady's constituent, come from.

When people come to sell their park home, the law steps in and takes 10% of the sale price—not the gain or profit, but the price. That is handed straight over to the site owner. That is not for services rendered at the point of sale, for an obligation that has been discharged, or for anything that we as Members can quantify and put our fingers on—or that the industry itself can explain—but just because they are selling their park home. For most park home owners, selling is not a choice, but a last resort: they are downsizing and moving closer to relatives, or, in quite a lot of cases, they are going to pay for care costs that age has made unavoidable.

At the precise moment when every single penny matters most, the system reaches into their pockets and takes a 10% slice. On a £300,000 park home, that is £30,000, but many park homes in my Maidenhead constituency go for upwards of £500,000, £550,000 or £600,000. That is a massive amount of money. It could pay for a lot of years of social care, but it is being taken out of the system—being paid for now by our local authorities—because of that 10%. That can determine whether someone dies in dignity or experiences difficulty at a time that should be secure.

I have at various times called the 10% commission unfair and illogical, and I stand by that. It singles out one group of home owners for a deduction. No leaseholder, freeholder or shared owner would ever tolerate that.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I agree with my hon. Friend's point about sales commission charges. Given that we had a consultation into park home sales commission charges in 2022, which concluded that there was no good justification for them, does he agree that what we now need from the Government is not another a consultation, but a fixed timeline so that we can understand when real action will be taken on behalf of our constituents in park homes?

Mr Joshua Reynolds: My hon. Friend is completely right. Park home residents have had consultation after consultation over many years. Site owners will respond to the current Government consultation, because they have lawyers to back them up and support them in putting in their thoughts, but the park home owners I have spoken to worry that there is no point in submitting responses to yet another consultation when, as they see it, nothing is going to happen. I worry that far fewer park home owners will respond to this consultation, and we will therefore end up with a one-sided consultation.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way. As he knows, there are many park homes across Bracknell Forest, which we both represent. I understand the scepticism that some have expressed about the call for evidence, but as he has identified, the Government need to put forward something that can stand up to those with very expensive lawyers behind them. Will he therefore take this opportunity to urge everyone who lives in a park home, whether in Bracknell Forest or elsewhere across the country, to contribute to that call for evidence, so that the evidence base can be as robust as it needs to be and we can abolish the 10% charge?

Mr Reynolds: I thank my constituency neighbour for that point. It is incredibly important that everybody responds to the consultation, so we must encourage more people to do so.

The financial cost of the 10% commission is only part of the story. We have heard time and again about unscrupulous site owners who have used intimidation to drive residents off their pitches. There are fewer bad actors who own sites than there were a number of years ago, but some still know that if they intimidate residents and force a sale, they will get a 10% commission. We see that time and again. In my constituency, one owner bought a site for £200,000. They then intimidated countless park home residents, who sold their properties, and made that £200,000 back within less than 12 months. That is the business model of unscrupulous site owners. We need to think about where the 10% commission came from. It has not always been 10%: it was 15% a number of years ago, so it is an arbitrary number.

I pay tribute to Sonia McColl OBE and the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign. Over decades, she and the campaign have done what many in this place only wish we had been able to do. They secured two legislative changes: ending sale blocking, and shifting pitch fees from RPI to CPI, which the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) spoke about. Sonia and the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign have driven lots of the work that is happening here. Another petition is going to Downing Street later today. I was lucky to be able to present one to Downing Street last year, and I know that many of us are willing to submit them in future.

We need to be honest about what we are going to do. There is a consultation on the table, but lots of residents have been consulted before. I ask the Minister for a clear timeline for when we will see action, when we will have a conclusion with published responses, and when the 160,000 residents will get the fair deal that has been promised for so long but postponed for much longer.

10.36 am

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. It is a pleasure to see so many Members in this debate. It is always ominous to have my Deputy Chief Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), sitting next to me in a debate—I do not know whether that is an expectation of great things or a sign that there will be a meeting without coffee. Might I say that he made a very, very good speech? I hope the Minister takes it on board.

In all seriousness, I thank the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for securing this debate on Government support for park home owners. He introduced

the issue in a humorous way, but also in a very serious, constructive way. I understand that he has a busy day, as he is also introducing a ten-minute rule Bill, which is a testament to the way he represents his Rushcliffe constituents. I suspect he will also have a very busy evening.

The hon. Gentleman is right to bring up this issue, as about 159,000 people live in mobile or park homes across 1,800 sites. We all recognise that park homes present themselves as an attractive choice for some people, and are therefore an important part of the national housing market.

Colleagues across the House have made excellent speeches, but I would like to mention a few from Conservative Members. My hon. Friend the Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) said that everybody would automatically pick a park home site in South Shropshire, but I politely disagree. Given that we have the beautiful Solent on the south coast, I suspect that many people would choose one of the many park home sites in my Hamble Valley constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) rightly mentioned fuel costs, which came up throughout the debate. I will come to that in a minute, and I hope the Minister will expand on that. She spoke about planning enforcement and raised a specific case, and it important that we get that right. My right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) mentioned the lack of expertise in local planning authorities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has done a huge amount of work in this space. In the last Parliament, I was delighted to co-sign his Bill, and I was pleased that the previous Government backed it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) spoke about the huge problems that many park home owners face. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire mentioned the sporadic nature of maintenance on sites across the country.

The hon. Member for Rushcliffe is absolutely right to bring this important topic to light. Park homes are an often overlooked part of our housing sector that provide a comfortable living space and a community-oriented way of life. They are particularly valued by our older members of society, who have worked hard and deserve suitable protections and support. I think all of us here can agree that home ownership brings with it not just a sense of accomplishment, but an expectation of security and peace of mind, yet for many park home residents that expectation is not always met, particularly when their home sits on a site run by an unscrupulous operator. We have a duty to ensure that someone who has invested their life savings in a home does not find themselves facing unpredictable costs or unclear rights.

I am proud that the last Government recognised that more had to be done to protect park home owners' rights and to support residents' awareness of both their rights and the responsibilities. After a thorough review of the mobile or park homes legislation, the previous Government—this was mentioned on both sides of the Chamber—brought forward legislation to make it a legal requirement for a site owner or manager to demonstrate that they are a fit and proper person to manage a mobile home site. Too often, park home residents have been asked to pay significant sums, only to find that site maintenance falls short of what they have every right to expect. That is not just disappointing; it is fundamentally unfair. If operators are to charge those fees, they must also meet their clear responsibility to keep sites safe, well maintained and fit for purpose.

As I mentioned, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch promoted the Mobile Homes (Pitch Fees) Act 2023. That delivered important economic relief for park home residents. Changing the basis for pitch fee increases from the retail prices index to the generally lower consumer prices index ensures that annual rises are more proportionate and fairer. That change had long been called for by the Park Home Owners Justice Campaign.

Many Members across the Chamber raised the issue of the 10% commission on the sale of a park home. The last Government began the important process of researching the potential impact of a change to the maximum commission paid on such a sale. I am watching with interest this Government's efforts to look in greater detail at commission payments and I hope that the Minister will look at that with great scrutiny—I know that he will, given the way he conducts himself. We look forward to seeing what the Government come forward with.

A burden that park home owners face—this genuinely is not a political point, as my party looked into the issue when we were in government, and it was apparent that there was no straightforward fix—is that they are often among the hardest hit when it comes to energy costs. That is largely because many do not have the freedom to choose their own energy supplier, leaving them more exposed to higher prices and less competitive markets. I note that towards the end of last year, Ofgem reignited efforts to look into this issue through a call for evidence on the rules around the resale of gas and electricity and the maximum resale price arrangements. The issue was last reviewed in 2001, so I look forward to looking into the findings when they are published.

We must recognise that energy costs for park home residents are not shaped only by resale arrangements. Unlike households on the mains gas and electricity network, which benefit from the energy price cap, many park homes rely on heating oil or liquefied petroleum gas to heat their homes and water, so I welcome the Government's commitment of £53 million to support households reliant on heating oil, in particular low-income families, who are most affected. It is right that support is targeted where need is greatest. I note that in England, that funding will be delivered through local authorities via the crisis and resilience fund, which came into effect on 1 April. However, I remain concerned that there is still no clear confirmation as to whether park home residents will be eligible for that support. Given the specific vulnerabilities that they face in relation to energy supply and pricing, I hope that the Minister will be able to address that point directly in his response this morning.

We have seen how difficult it can be to ensure that people off grid actually receive and benefit from funding support. That was a lesson learned in 2022, when similar measures to support similar groups were brought in after the shocks from the start of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. I hope that the Minister will commit to monitoring the efficiency of funding distribution.

Members here today, particularly the hon. Member for Rushcliffe, outlined several issues that park home owners face and the importance of them receiving the

[Paul Holmes]

appropriate Government support. Supporting park home owners is about providing more protections and security for the residents who live in these communities, and supporting the wider housing market. It requires cross-party support—something that as a shadow Housing Minister I commit to providing when the Government come forward with their proposals. The Minister gave me a wry smile, but it is now on the record that if the Government come forward with sensible proposals to tackle this issue, then on a cross-party basis we will look at that seriously. It does require cross-party support, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how the Government plan to provide continued and accelerated support, so that park home owners across the country, including in my constituency of Hamble Valley, get the services they deserve for the money they have saved.

10.45 am

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Alec. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) on securing this important debate. I thank all other hon. Members who have participated, and like many of them I welcome the strong cross-party nature and tone of the debate. I have valued the opportunity to hear the individual stories hon. Members have shared, including some really egregious examples of harassment and intimidation, such as the case of Dennis, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume).

One challenge in considering law and policy in respect of park homes is the huge variation in arrangements across the approximately 1,832 sites in England. The more real case studies that can be brought to the Government's attention, the greater rigour we can bring to policy development.

Despite representing less than 1% of housing stock, the park home sector is an important part of the housing market. Mobiles homes, as has been mentioned, provide housing for around 160,000 people, some of whom are among the most vulnerable in our society. As hon. Members are no doubt aware, park home sites are often advertised on the basis that they offer a luxurious, secure and supportive lifestyle, particularly for older people. In many cases, that is true, and it is important that several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith), mentioned that there are some great park home sites. Unfortunately, as the debate has powerfully reinforced, the experience of many park home owners is far removed from that idyllic vision.

I am unlikely to be able to cover all the points raised in this wide-ranging debate in the time available, but let me ensure that I at least cover the two main issues raised: site licensing and enforcement, and the commission payment. On licensing and enforcement, the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 provides the foundational legislative underpinning for the site licensing regime operated by local authorities. The primary purpose of that regime is to ensure that sites are set up in the right places, which is why site owners are required to obtain planning permission to operate land as a caravan site. Unless a given site is exempt from having one, it will require a licence after planning permission has been granted, with relevant conditions attached by the local authority. The requirement for a licence is designed to ensure that sites and the amenities on them are properly maintained and kept safe for residents and other users.

The wide-ranging Mobile Homes Act 2013, introduced changes to the procedures and penalties for enforcement of site licence conditions on residential parks. The new site licensing system, subsequently brought into force in 2014, gave local authorities substantial enforcement powers, including the ability to issue compliance notices and the discretion to refuse to grant or transfer applications. It also provided local authorities with powers to charge annual fees, to provide the resources they need to carry out their functions.

Since 2021, there have been additional requirements for all site owners to be assessed by the local authority and placed on a local register of fit and proper persons. I commend Peter Aldous, a very valued former Member of this House, for the private Member's Bill he took forward on that issue. A person can be included on the register, with or without conditions, for up to five years, and local authorities can charge fees to cover their functions in respect of the fit and proper person test. Taken together, those measures provide a robust range of powers for local authorities to draw on, and the Government expect them to be used effectively to ensure that sites are well managed by competent persons.

At this point, I want to acknowledge the commendable work done by individual local authorities over the years, as well as the notable successes some have had in ensuring that sites are well maintained and in successfully prosecuting non-compliant site owners. However, my Department is aware that some local authorities do not apply or enforce existing legislation as effectively as they could and should. There are a variety of reasons for that, including cost and, on occasion, lack of expertise, but in some cases local authorities might simply decide not to take appropriate enforcement action. I therefore encourage residents who have concerns about health and safety on their site to raise them initially with the local authority if the site owner fails to address the problem. They can then consider escalating the matter to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman if their local authority does not deal effectively with their complaint.

Turning to the commission payment, the 10% commission fee charged on the sale of park homes has been the subject of intense debate over many years, as we all know. Park home residents see it as an unfair and unjustified charge that has a negative impact on their finances and mobility. Site operators argue that the commission is a vital part of their income and that a substantial reduction in the commission rate would reduce total income without reducing expenditure, thus threatening the financial viability of parks. That important point was raised by the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale); there are many elements of this complex problem.

I fully understand hon. Members' desire to secure change in this matter, and I assure those present that I share their impatience. Unfortunately—this is where I have to take issue slightly with the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan)—research undertaken

by the previous Government was not conclusive on either the purpose of the commission or the impact of its removal or reduction. The final report, published in 2022, recommended further work to clarify the rationale of the commission so that the Government can make informed policy choices. In 2023, the then Government sought feedback from stakeholder representative bodies on the report's recommendations. The feedback reinforced the view that there was no clarity or consensus in the sector on the rationale for the commission.

We are not consulting for consultation's sake. There is a reason the Government published a call for evidence on 5 March this year concerning the rationale for the commission payment. Through that call for evidence, we are seeking to understand the following: the reasons for charging a commission before it became a statutory requirement in 1975, and whether those reasons have changed; what goods and services are paid for by the commission; how the commission rate is calculated to be a percentage of the future sale price of a park home; how the commission payment relates to other charges in the sector; and how receiving commission in the future enables site owners to meet their obligations effectively and efficiently.

To date, we have had 400 responses from park home residents. I encourage residents and site owners across the country to engage with that call for evidence before it closes on 29 May. I encourage all hon. Members here to tell their constituents about it so that we can get the maximum amount of evidence submitted. Then we can properly consider what, if any, changes are needed to the payment of a commission, what the options are and how they would impact on the sector.

Mr Joshua Reynolds: Many park home residents in Maidenhead have told me that complete swathes of the consultation are not relevant to residents but are to site owners. Can the Minister clarify which questions he expects residents to be able to respond to, because many feel that those questions are just not relevant to them?

Matthew Pennycook: I am sorry to hear that feedback. We will take into account any feedback that park home residents wish to submit—even in general terms and outside the strict questions they have responded to—when we are making policy decisions. I emphasise once again that I want the widest possible response from across the country that grapples with the complexity and the particular arrangements in place on specific sites so that we can make informed choices.

I want to come on to the timeline, because several hon. Members have pressed me on it. Following an assessment of the responses received, we will publish a summary of them in the summer. I intend to outline our final position at the very latest by the end of this year. To respond to the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), it is one of many priorities—but a very real priority—for the Government to bring the clarity that both park home residents and site owners require and have been calling for now for some years. I will strain every sinew to ensure that that happens as early as possible, but I give the commitment that we will have clarity on the position by the end of the year.

Hon. Members raised a series of other matters, including written agreements, contractual rights, conveyancing, the adequacy of existing redress mechanisms in respect of pitch fees, overcharging in relation to utilities, and harassment by site owners. I assure them that the Government either have taken action or are exploring action in a number of those areas. That might take a range of forms, such as raising awareness about the protections and enforcement mechanisms that already exist or providing further guidance. We are taking some very real steps, not least in respect of utilities, which I want to speak to briefly.

Sir Christopher Chope: When the Minister kindly came to the APPG on park homes, he heard from Nat Slade, the environmental health officer for Arun district council, about the issues he faces and the need for urgent action on complex ownership structures, which was first promised in 2017. Where is that on the Minister's agenda?

Matthew Pennycook: I will address that point before sitting down, but I want to briefly touch on utilities. As resellers of electricity or gas, site owners must comply with the maximum resale price provisions, which prevent them from reselling energy at a higher price than they paid. There are other protections in place for residents, including the right to ask for documentary evidence to support any demands for charges. Where a resident has been overcharged, they can recover those amounts through a small claims court and may also receive interest on the excess charge.

However, it is evident that the rules and how to enforce them are not always well understood in the sector. To further empower residents, I have tasked my officials with working with the relevant Departments to raise awareness and, if necessary, to make additional guidance available. As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), noted, we are also taking steps to ensure that residents are protected by the rules already in place. In October, Ofgem issued a call for input to assess whether current arrangements under the maximum resale price provisions remain fit for purpose, ensure fair pricing and protect customers.

Before I conclude, I will take up the point raised by the hon. Member for Christchurch. Despite the legislation that has been introduced over the decades, which was designed to address widespread malpractice and poor standards in the industry, we know that problems remain. We recognise that more needs to be done to further strengthen protections for park home owners, to improve park home site management and to support local authorities to bear down on unprofessional site owners. To that end, we do keep existing legislation under review. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) to discuss complex ownership structures, in particular, and what they do in terms of the management of sites. However, I want to make it clear to hon. Members that legislation is effective only if it is used and enforced effectively. The Government want to see more robust enforcement by local authorities against unprofessional site owners and will continue to work with site licensing officers to raise awareness of their responsibilities and to share good practice.

Responsible site owners have a role to play in building stronger relationships with residents and local authorities to tackle the unfair competition from unprofessional site owners. We also want residents to better understand their rights and to feel empowered and confident enough to enforce them, without fear of site owners or local

[Matthew Pennycook]

authorities. We will continue to engage with national residents associations and encourage residents to contact LEASE, the Government-funded Leasehold Advisory Service, for advice about their rights.

There are no quick fixes when it comes to improving the lives of park home residents, but I look forward to continuing to work with hon. Members across the House as we seek to do so. Because such a wide range of issues has been raised, I commit from the Dispatch Box to write to all colleagues—perhaps in a "Dear colleagues" letter—setting out precisely what the Government are doing on all the issues I have not had time to cover.

10.57 am

James Naish: I thank hon. Members for joining the debate. We have covered the whole country—from the south coast all the way up to parts of northern England and to Northern Ireland, which of course has slightly different legislative foundations—and I am really pleased there has been such strong representation. I thank the Minister for outlining the timeline on the commitment towards the end of the year, and for providing clarity to park home owners.

Three things have come up repeatedly: the security that park homes provide, the need for greater transparency and ultimately the word that has been repeated by so many Members, which is "fairness". With the Minister's support, I hope we can make progress over this Parliament to ensure that park and mobile home owners have that fairness. I look forward to seeing the moves the Government make over the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for park home owners.

UK-India Technology Security Initiative

11 am

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK-India Technology Security Initiative.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. As a member of the Business and Trade Committee, I recently visited India, alongside colleagues from across the House, as part of our inquiry into the UK's trade with India. It was a fascinating visit, where we discussed critical trade policy such as the UK-India technology security initiative with Indian officials and officials from His Majesty's Government.

I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group for cyber innovation and of the digital inclusion APPG. I care deeply about how our people and communities are empowered by technological advances and not left behind.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the hon. Gentleman says, it is important that no one is left behind. Does he agree that the devolved regions are sometimes left behind? We must remember that we have a world-class cyber ecosystem at Queen's University Belfast, with thriving tech start-ups across Northern Ireland. Will he join me in asking the Minister what steps have been taken to ensure that the £7 million joint research programme on future telecoms and the new connectivity and innovation centre are directly accessible to firms in Strangford and across Northern Ireland, as well as the UK mainland?

Dan Aldridge: When I was on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, we visited Queen's and talked about its cyber-security prowess. The ecosystem in the UK is very much connected—something we are very proud of—so I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

I am delighted to have secured this debate; in the spirit of interconnected communities, before going into the specifics of the UK-India TSI, I will talk about something a bit closer to home. This topic speaks to one of the reasons why Britain's international relationships, our diplomacy and our international trade agreements matter not just at the Government level, but locally, on the streets of Weston-super-Mare and in towns, villages and cities across the UK.

My constituency might not be a place that people automatically associate with India, but our town is home to a small but thriving Indian community. Their contribution to local life is immeasurable, whether in our NHS, businesses, schools or civic institutions. The people who came to Weston from India and whose families have grown up here are woven into the fabric of what makes our town work.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): What a wonderful speech my hon. Friend is making about this important connection that our two countries can have! Similarly, I pay tribute to my constituency; it might not be associated with a huge Indian community, but it does have one, and they contribute a lot to the UK, and certainly to our medical professions and businesses locally.

Dan Aldridge: I thank my hon. Friend, who accompanied me to India. It was a phenomenally insightful visit.

The human connection is not incidental to this debate; it is the very foundation of it. I use this opportunity to give a special shout-out to people such as Akhilesh Madhav and his family, who chose Weston to work in our NHS, to care for our people and to raise their children. Akhilesh and his friends and colleagues do more than just work and live in Weston-super-Mare; they are tireless community builders and campaigners, setting up new organisations such as FYI-Weston, which hosts wonderful, inclusive events, bringing people together from across our community to connect, learn, make friends and often do business, linking our two great countries.

I also give a shout-out to Sanju Varghese, who along with his friends created the charitable Weston Association of Malayalees, a forum to help Malayalees from Kerala in India to engage with local communities through acts of service. The association is always out with local groups, litter picking and fundraising for local causes.

Our shared stories go back generations, with a complex history, but firmly focused on the future and a desire to create opportunity and prosperity. They are all examples of how the relationship between the United Kingdom and India is not, in essence, a relationship between two Governments, two economies or even two sets of interests; it is actually a relationship between people and communities. We share a history, a legal tradition, a language and deep cultural ties. It is a friendship with deep roots, which is now growing into something genuinely transformative.

Sarah Edwards: My hon. Friend is correct that we had a wonderful trip to India as part of the Business and Trade Committee's work. One thing we looked at was the joint value of the free trade agreement that we have recently signed, which sends a powerful signal about the future and how our countries can benefit each other.

Dan Aldridge: Absolutely. Building on that point, many of us who made that visit think we need to address the problem that too much of British public life is working with an image of India that is frankly decades out of date. Many still think of India as a poor nation, a country that we assist, rather than as a strategic partner of great global significance.

Not only is that perception inaccurate, but to continue thinking like that is a strategic weakness for the UK. India has risen dramatically to the top five of the world's biggest economies, from a position of 13th in the year 2000. Under Viksit Bharat, the developed India vision, the Indian Government are targeting GDP of between $30 trillion and $40 trillion by 2047. To put that in context, that would potentially make India the biggest economy in the world, at about eight or nine times the size of the current UK economy.

Those numbers alone should command attention, but what really struck me during last month's visit to India was not the statistics, but the confidence, energy and sense of forward momentum. Whoever we spoke to, the message was the same: India knows where it is going, and it is moving fast. If we in all parts of the UK do not wake up to that reality, we will limit our part in that story and the ways it could deliver shared prosperity, innovation and opportunity for both our countries.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): The hon. Member is making a very persuasive argument for building relationships between two democratic nations. Does he agree that consideration of human rights must also be at the forefront? There are violations in Kashmir, so does he agree that the Government should intervene and ensure that international law is upheld?

Dan Aldridge: I thank the hon. Member for his question. We must take those considerations really seriously, and they are absolutely part of a wide-ranging conversation that we have with all our trading partners. We should be aiming for the best out of our relationships; we do not want a low bar.

This issue is not simply about what the UK can gain, but about recognising that our futures are increasingly interconnected and that we have to build new ways to navigate that. Our Government understand the potential and the scale of the opportunity, but its value has to filter out to the rest of the economy, to towns such as mine where trade with India might feel very far away from the daily concerns of the majority. We need to change that and build those relationships to show how much we can all gain from each other. Whether in clean energy, technology, education or trade, there is a real opportunity to build a partnership that supports both our economies while creating good jobs, stronger industries and deeper ties between our people. The question for us is not whether India will succeed; it is whether we choose to engage with that success in a meaningful, long-term and mutually beneficial way.

It is against that backdrop that the UK-India TSI matters so much. It sets out a bold new framework for how our two countries can work together on the defining technologies of our generation. That is not a vague statement of intent; it is an ambitious partnership covering telecoms, 5G infrastructure, AI, critical minerals, semiconductors, quantum computing, advanced materials and health and biotechnology. It is co-ordinated at the highest levels by the national security advisers of both countries and it is already delivering.

A year on from the launch of the TSI, both Governments reaffirmed their commitment to expand into new frontier domains. Private sector partnerships are multiplying, research collaborations are under way and investment is flowing. It is an important framework and forum for dialogue and diplomacy in key areas such as critical minerals, which are crucial to our economic and national security. That is particularly important right now, as China increases its global dominance of critical mineral production and refining capability, giving it enormous leverage over the global supply of those minerals.

How we build and strengthen our supply chains in an increasingly complicated and unpredictable world must be at the top of the Government's agenda. Last week in the Business and Trade Committee we heard plea after plea from industry for a focus on diplomacy and dialogue to get Britain's strategy on critical minerals right. The UK Government published their critical minerals strategy in November last year, aiming to increase global production while building resilient domestic and global supply networks. That is a much needed start, but for it to deliver, we need dedicated and sustained diplomacy to support our relationships with trusted

[Dan Aldridge]

international partners such as India, with both the resource base and political will to build resilient supply chains alongside us.

Sarah Edwards: The point on critical minerals, which the Select Committee has been looking into, is really important. One piece of evidence we heard was on the slight concern about the size of the UK and our ability to do this alone, which meant that our emphasis would be on friendshoring and the throughput of material we would need to make this viable. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that we need these types of deals to make sure that we can, for example, recycle our lithium and that we have friends to do that with, so that we can support important initiatives such as this?

Dan Aldridge: I absolutely agree. One of the most exciting things about the UK-India partnership is the complementarity of our needs. To build on my hon. Friend's point about that partnership on critical minerals, an example of our partnership is the UK-India critical minerals supply chain observatory—the first of its kind in the world. The second phase, which has been backed by nearly £2 million in funding, will deliver the world's largest data infrastructure on the critical minerals value chain.

Our two Governments are also establishing a UK-India critical minerals guild to transform financing standards and push innovation—as somebody who worked for a chartered institute, that excites me more than most. The geopolitical argument here is simple: in a world where we must do more to secure reliable access to critical minerals that power our economy, our defence and our energy transition, having a partner of India's scale, with its own often complementary interests in diversifying global supply chains, is not just useful, but a strategic necessity.

Under the TSI, the first UK-India conference on AI opportunities was held in Bengaluru in February last year. Both Governments have agreed to establish a joint India-UK centre for AI to drive advancement in the use of AI in telecoms, including in telecoms cyber-security. I find it compelling that the TSI's approach to AI emphasises governance as well as innovation. Given the scale of the challenge facing Parliaments around the world on this issue, having a trusted, democratic partner with whom we can develop shared frameworks, conduct joint research and exchange expertise on safety and bias testing is vital.

Sarah Edwards: One of the interesting things that we learned on the trip was that India's approach is also about how it uses Government procurement. With careful consideration, that could be used to make sure that UK tech companies can grow and benefit from having a revenue stream and contract. There may be things we can learn from India in terms of how the country approaches that sensibly and safely, so that we can use it as a driving force for economic growth in the UK.

Dan Aldridge: As ever, I agree with my hon. Friend. Specifically on the point about how we build our domestic capacity, there is something very exciting about the new £500 million investment in sovereign AI. It would be great to hear how that investment might—I hope—be linked closely to this work.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member is making an excellent speech, with plenty of thoughts for the Minister to reply to. We probably all agree that student exchange is important. The hon. Member showed his knowledge of Queen's University Belfast, and I thank him for that, but student exchange also matters when it comes to technology and working together. Does he agree that, although we must always focus on immigration, we should perhaps look at and do more with the good points of student exchanges, which create opportunities for UK students as well as those from India?

Dan Aldridge: I absolutely agree. One of the things I took back to my constituency was about how I engage with schoolchildren and college students, but that point is much wider; we should be really ambitious in that cross-cultural dialogue. There is nothing but gains to be had, so far as I can see.

It came out loud and clear from our counterparts in India that cross-party political support for the UK and India's partnership on AI and technology was critical in reassuring Indian officials and politicians that the UK was a safe and reliable partner. Politicians and officials in India were really impressed that the main two UK political parties could share a stage in India, and saw that as a real positive—a really good thing on the global stage.

On semiconductors, under the TSI the UK and India are pursuing a broad and ambitious partnership focused on research and development in chip design, compound semiconductors and advanced packaging. Both Governments have committed to sharing best practice on supply chain challenges and to facilitating trade and investment flows between semiconductor companies in both countries.

Then there is quantum: quantum computing, quantum sensing, quantum communications. For most people, those technologies remain firmly in the realm of science fiction, but not for long. The countries that invest in quantum research and development now will have decisive advantages in cryptography, defence and pharmaceuticals, and in areas that we cannot yet fully predict. It is important that elected Members champion these frontier technologies and make them real for people in our constituencies, because if we do not do it, who will? It will probably be a drama or a TikTok, and those are not necessarily the best places for them to get their information.

The TSI explicitly includes quantum as a priority area for collaboration. I find the idea of building partnerships between UK and Indian research centres and developing the next generation of technologies together really exciting. The UK has world-leading quantum research capabilities. India has the engineering talent and institutional ambition to match them, and it is a brilliant match.

These are the technologies of tomorrow, and our collaboration on these sectors provides huge opportunities for the UK, particularly the small and medium-sized enterprises in our constituencies. The Indian Government and Indian businesses are actively looking for British partners, particularly SMEs, and the TSI is not just a

framework for multinational corporations or Government-to-Government exchanges; it is designed to create partnerships at every level of the economy, including start-ups, research institutions, academic collaborators and supply chain partners. I am excited that next month I will be welcoming some start-up innovators from India to Parliament.

Our partnerships with small and medium-sized enterprises are the exception, not the rule, but it is our responsibility as local representatives to help change that—to open doors and to make the benefits of the UK-India partnership seen in our constituencies up and down the country. The only way we can make the most of the relationship is through sustained engagement, which relates to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about youth and student engagement. The only limit is our creativity. A lot of this is not about huge investment, but about creativity of thought.

Sarah Edwards: I thank my hon. Friend for his compelling point about the role of parliamentarians and how we can engage with our constituents and other organisations. I also pay tribute to the British high commission, which did a lot of work to make sure that our trip went well and is hugely important in engaging our businesses right across the country. I have a specific shout-out to Harjinder Kang, the trade commissioner, who has done some excellent work. Will my hon. Friend also pay tribute to the work that will continue?

Dan Aldridge: Absolutely. All the officials we worked with were fantastic.

The UK-India tech security initiative is the right framework at the right moment. It covers the technologies that will define this country and it brings together Government, industry and academia. It has the backing of both Prime Ministers and cross-party support. We must ensure that the ambition of the TSI is matched by delivery and that it is felt in towns across the country, including Tamworth, Weston-super-Mare and Worle, because the India of 2047 will be one of the world's biggest economies—if not the biggest—and a technological superpower and confident global leader. It is being built right now, and the question for Britain and our constituents is a simple one: do we want to be part of that story? I believe we do, and we should run towards it.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Alec. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Dan Aldridge) for so expertly introducing this debate on the UK-India technology security initiative.

Technology and my early upbringing in India have profoundly shaped my life, so it is a particular privilege to respond to this debate on behalf of the Government. When my family moved from Bihar to south Wales, we came with a simple aspiration: to take the opportunity to work hard, to contribute and to build a better future. Technology played a pretty key role in it. At school in Cardiff, catching up with a new education system, I depended on the local public library computer. Access to those dusty old public PCs was formative in transforming my education and changing the trajectory of my life. I reflect on that, because the UK-India tech security initiative is not just about geopolitical security. It is about scaling opportunity in communities right across the UK.

Indian investment has already created over 1,800 jobs across the UK. Following the Prime Minister's visit to Mumbai in October, we have secured a further £1.3 billion in direct investment. Britain's significant leadership on the world stage is clearly delivering concrete returns for our communities in every part of our country. The UK-India technology security initiative will go further still: it will create good, well-paid jobs in the UK, build our children's skills for the future and drive investment in every part of our country.

I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare and for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and other Members for their contributions to the debate. Their remarks have underlined how the UK-India relationship is not abstract or remote, but is lived every day in constituencies like theirs, through families, through businesses, through schools and through public services. That living bridge is the foundation on which our partnership rests.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare is right to challenge the outdated perceptions of India today. India has the highest growth rate in the G20. It has been the second largest source of foreign direct investment in the UK for six years. It is also one of the world's fastest-growing technology powers, underpinned by a thriving ecosystem of innovation, entrepreneurship and digital transformation.

It is no exaggeration to say that our future prosperity depends on our ability to drive innovation-led growth, to secure the supply chains and technologies on which our economy relies and to build a strong research base and skills future so that British people and businesses can thrive. The UK cannot deliver those objectives alone. The technologies that will define the coming decades are global by nature, and success depends on our trusted partnerships.

The Government agree with my hon. Friend that partnership with India is therefore a strategic necessity. Our bilateral relationship has gone from strength to strength, with technology and innovation firmly at its core. That progress was underscored during the recent visits in both directions by our Prime Minister and Prime Minister Modi when the UK-India vision for 2035 was agreed. Those visits also saw the signing of the landmark comprehensive economic and trade agreement with India. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth pointed out, it is our most economically significant bilateral trade deal since leaving the European Union. It is expected to increase bilateral trade, which is worth £47.4 billion a year, by £25.5 billion and to increase both Indian and UK GDP by nearly £5 billion a year in the long run.

The UK and India are natural tech partners, with major Indian tech companies like Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services and Wipro already expanding in the UK, supporting jobs, productivity and innovation across our economy. Dozens of Indian firms and entrepreneurs are investing here in Britain, creating the jobs and growth of the future. Linkfields, an AI company based in Hyderabad, is investing £10 million in London, Manchester, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Mastek, whose representatives I met in India and which is located

[Kanishka Narayan]

in Mumbai, is opening an office in Leeds and an AI centre in London, creating 200 skilled jobs including 75 apprenticeships. EdSupreme, which is using AI to help people with physiotherapy, is investing £10 million across England and Wales and creating 100 jobs.

That is why the UK-India technology security initiative exists. It is a landmark partnership, bringing into sharper focus collaboration in frontier technology across telecoms, critical minerals, semiconductors, AI, quantum, biotechnology, healthtech and advanced materials. It is clear that working closely with India allows us not only to open new opportunities for our businesses and make sure that our technologies rely on secure and trustworthy foundations, but to work with a partner that is increasingly setting the global agenda. That was evident this year during my visit to India for the AI summit, which underscored the global role that India is now playing in convening Governments, industry and academia across every part of the world.

Alongside the Deputy Prime Minister and an 18-strong delegation of cutting-edge UK businesses and 13 UK universities, we delivered on investment and talent commitments set in train during the Prime Minister's earlier visit, with commitments secured from Indian companies such as Hexaware, Nagarro and CoRover to expand their UK footprint.

I also saw at first hand the breadth of commercial interest that the UK has in India. Our partnership is focused on driving that innovation across businesses in our countries. That was evident when I spent time at the British Council with the founder of ElevenLabs, a great British AI company, celebrating students and future founders shaping our two tech ecosystems. That is what the UK-India technology security initiative is designed to achieve.

We have already delivered several joint AI innovation projects together through the UK-India joint centre for AI, working on the development of AI innovations in priority areas such as healthcare, climate, energy, agriculture and finance. The joint centre will also play a cross-cutting role, enabling the safe adoption of AI across other TSI sectors, including telecoms and wider digital infrastructure.

Our co-operation extends to advanced connectivity. Working together to shape future communications networks will help to provide seamless coverage, even in the most remote areas of our countries, and underpin innovations in healthcare, smart city infrastructure and autonomous vehicles. We are delivering on this through the India-UK Connectivity and Innovation Centre, with an initial £24 million in joint funding. The centre will drive innovation in how AI is used in telecoms networks, in non-terrestrial networks such as satellite internet, and in telecoms cybersecurity. I will flag to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, that this will include opportunities for Belfast and for Northern Ireland—an ecosystem of which I have personally seen the strengths, particularly in cyber-security.

The technology security initiative is already delivering in biotechnology and health technology, sectors that matter both for our economic growth and for our resilience. In February, the UK biotech and pharma SME delegation visited Mumbai and Hyderabad to strengthen UK-India collaboration in biomanufacturing and pharmaceutical innovation.

We are also collaborating on innovative technologies in femtech, with a letter of intent between the National Institute for Health and Care Research and India's Department of Biotechnology. By bringing together expertise from both our countries, this partnership has the potential not only to improve health outcomes for women, but to support economic growth by driving innovation, attracting investment and strengthening our life sciences sector.

The TSI will secure supply chains, as my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare and for Tamworth highlighted. Through the UK-India critical minerals guild, we are strengthening joint capabilities in critical minerals; I will closely consider its collective feedback and its particular observations on the partnership on critical minerals. Backed by £1.5 million in funding, phase 2 will now extend the scope of our joint observatory, further developing digital data infrastructure on the critical minerals value chain and establishing a new satellite campus at the Indian School of Mines in Dhanbad.[1]

The TSI is a strategic investment in our future. We are committed to its delivery. Just last week, our National Security Adviser led bilateral discussions in Delhi on the India-UK Technology Security Initiative, agreeing that the next phase of the TSI must prioritise business engagement and growth.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare again for securing this debate and for highlighting something I feel personally, which is that notwithstanding our historic connections, what most ties the UK and India together is that we are two countries chasing the future. We are chasing a future built on the foundations of our people-to-people and business-to-business connections. I look forward to continuing this work as our partnership deepens, so that we can deliver further benefits for the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

1.[*Official Report,* 29 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 10WC.] (Correction)

International Parental Child Abduction

[Dr Andrew Murrison *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of international parental child abduction.

It is a privilege to make my remarks under your very capable stewardship, Dr Murrison. I understand that these issues are very sensitive and of huge human significance, so I feel privileged to be able to bring the eyes and ears of the House to them. I salute the left-behind parents, some of whom have joined us in the Gallery this afternoon, for their indefatigability and courage. I know that they will take little comfort in such words, but I must say them anyway. I think it important to emphasise the need not to prejudice ongoing legal proceedings, but as representatives of our constituents we feel a natural and proper inclination to advocate for them.

According to Reunite International, more than 500 children are abducted from the UK by a parent every year. Among the families that attended the most recent roundtable on this subject in Parliament, there was upwards of half a century in lost years—that is to say, lost contact with their children. The testimonies I have heard, although individually unique, paint a troubling, consistent picture of deliberate misleading, ill-fated recovery attempts and financial costs running into the millions. Many have travelled to foreign jurisdictions, time after time, in the hope of recovering their children. The human toll on both sides is staggering.

The Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction provides the principal international framework governing these cases. Crucially, it mandates the expeditious handling of abduction proceedings, yet according to testimonies that I have received, months often elapse before the first substantive hearing, in a clear breach of the convention. Such delays risk the factual entrenchment of the abducted child in the new jurisdiction, entirely undermining the notional remedy of return. The convention exists precisely to prevent that outcome, but far too often it does not.

Several structural concerns recur across the cases that have been brought to me. The first is about the undermining of established jurisdictional findings. In one instance, the High Court here had already determined the child's habitual residence to be in England. The Polish first instance court was aligned, ordering return. However, the appellate outcome reversed that position, despite there being no dispute as to the original wrongful removal and no clear finding that the article 13 threshold had clearly been met at the first instance. That raises a concern about consistency in applying Hague principles at an appellate level and about the degree to which appellate courts revisit or expand factual assessments beyond convention limits.

The second concern is about the creeping expansion of article 13(b) welfare arguments as a basis for refusing return. These provisions were always intended to be narrow exceptions, not an open door for wide-ranging allegations. Where such arguments are routinely entertained without proper substantiation, there is a considerable possibility that summary return proceedings will be converted into de facto welfare determinations, which is not what the convention intended.

The third concern is about the insufficient use of protective measures. In the case I mentioned, the UK had jurisdiction and capacity to implement protective measures upon return, with an active High Court framework available. These mechanisms should be taken seriously and fully operationalised. Failure to do so risks theoretical concerns hardening into grounds for non-return. The post-decision consequences of such outcomes are stark: the child remains outside the jurisdiction of the habitual residence, there is no effective restoration of the pre-removal status quo and contact arrangements remain limited and unresolved. That illustrates how delay, combined with appellate intervention, can effectively neutralise the convention remedy entirely.

I am, of course, conscious that not every parent who crosses a border with a child is a wrongful abductor in the conventional sense. There are genuine cases—we must be clear-eyed about this—in which a parent flees with a child from real, documented domestic abuse, and the law must be sensitive to that reality. Article 13(b) exists precisely for such circumstances. Where the threshold is genuinely met, it should of course be engaged.

The concern is not about the protection itself, but about its expansion and, at times, its misapplication. The difficulty is that the very features that make these cases so emotionally charged also render them susceptible to the weaponisation of abuse allegations as a litigation strategy. It is therefore incumbent on courts and authorities to apply rigorous scrutiny to such claims, neither dismissing them reflexively nor accepting them uncritically, so that the protection is reserved for those who genuinely need it rather than becoming the means by which the convention's core remedy is routinely frustrated.

The Child Abduction Act 1984 does not provide for the occurrence of a criminal offence when a parent has consent to take a child out of the country but then fails to return them. That legal loophole became known as the Nicolaou problem, following a 2012 judicial review process. The Law Commission's 2014 report identified this legal blind spot and recommended a change in the law. I am pleased to say that the Crime and Policing Bill, which completed its passage through Parliament late last night, will finally close that loophole. All abductions from the UK will now be criminal.

Based purely on the volume of human stories, Poland appears to be at the sharp end of these affairs. I must set out the record plainly as it stands. The European Commission launched infringement proceedings against Warsaw, and the European Court of Justice concluded that steps taken by the Poles to disrupt and ignore UK convention orders were in contravention of EU law. A financial penalty was imposed for such intransigence. I would very much welcome the Minister's reflection on the status of the British Government's support for the European Commission's proceedings in relation to Poland's infringements in this area.

The European Court of Human Rights found that although initial steps were timely, subsequent enforcement actions were marred by delays, ineffective procedures and a lack of co-ordination. Moreover, the court determined that authorities repeatedly relied on flawed or misleading information and failed to adjust their strategy when

[Rachel Gilmour]

previous steps had failed. The failures were primarily attributable to the authorities, and not solely the abductors' actions. It therefore held that there had been a violation of article 8 of the convention.

The bottom line is this: abductions to Poland often endure because of the incompetence, deliberate or otherwise, of the authorities. At the very least, the conduct of the Polish authorities has been marked by wilful negligence, if not a sinister concerted effort to frustrate enforcement orders. That speaks to practices that have seemingly been institutionalised. On listening to some of these stories, it is hard to shake a distinct impression of conspiracy—that the abducting parent is in co-ordination with the authorities, aided and abetted to evade enforcement.

Britain and Poland have a close bond. I think of the brave Polish pilots who fought with distinction, with British wings, in our country's finest hour. In recent decades, many of Poland's sons and daughters have made their home on these shores. They say that friends should be able to talk candidly, openly and earnestly with each other, even when it comes to uncomfortable discussions—in fact, especially when it comes to tricky home truths.

The Government line is that these issues are raised at every opportunity with Polish counterparts. I appreciate that this is a delicate diplomatic dance, but Poland's famous intransigence on the issue has hardly been subtle. Beyond the diplomatic niceties, I would like to know what the response is when the question is put pointedly to Polish officials. When sincere representations are made at the highest level, they should not be met with prevarication.

There is much angst about how the current default position is to enforce the reciprocal enforcement of maintenance orders without any scrutiny at all. In practice, that can result in maintenance being enforced against a left-behind parent, even in cases in which there has been an abduction and an existing Hague return order. REMO case hearings are typically held abroad, without the involvement of the other parent and with no opportunity for defence. Amounts are often arbitrarily assigned, with no consideration given to affordability. To the best of my knowledge, REMO enforcement has been successfully challenged on only one occasion, and even then only on a technicality. For left-behind parents, it adds insult to profound injury that they are expected to fund the illegal abduction of their own children and are often forced to spend thousands of pounds pursuing appeals in UK courts against REMO enforcement.

This mechanism is problematic, for clear reasons. Hague convention return orders are effectively disregarded in financial enforcement proceedings. Left-behind parents may be required to pay backdated and ongoing maintenance. Worse still, the system risks inadvertently incentivising abduction, because it can have the perverse result of delivering a financial reward to the abducting parent. Surely any case in which there is a Hague convention return order should not qualify for maintenance payments of this kind. That should be enshrined in law here. I ask the Minister to help us understand what measures the Government can take to ensure the adequate protection of abduction victims against being penalised in this way when foreign courts reward abductors with high maintenance orders in unreasonable circumstances.

There is also understandable concern that Britain's position outside the European Union may be influencing how such cases are handled in EU jurisdictions. There is a prevailing sense that the UK has been left out in the cold and perhaps even punished, and that other states have used the Brexit farrago as a smokescreen allowing them to turn a blind eye. Although the precise impact is unclear, it is a mood worth acknowledging as part of the broader context. Will the Minister reflect on that point?

I am told that the European Commission has a team actively working on these cases. Is there an argument for a dedicated taskforce within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office? I absolutely understand the pressures under which our foreign service finds itself in these times of geopolitical turmoil, but I would welcome the Minister's view on that point.

Much has been said recently about the fragility of international law. It is for countries with shared values that believe in the primacy of the rule of law and international treaties to make the case for it by practising it. I remind Warsaw that Poland was a signatory to the Hague convention too.

As I bring my remarks to an end, I ask the Minister to outline what support children and families who have been victims of abductions can access. Will he furnish us with the statistics on repatriation, specifically from Poland? If he does not have the figures to hand, will he commit to providing that information to me in writing?

I also ask, perhaps naively, whether sufficient consideration is given to the child's perspective in these often highly fraught cases. The child's voice is a good place to start and to return to throughout. Our role is not to litigate constituents' cases in the Chamber, but to push the Government to ensure that our counterparts honour the decisions of our courts, call on them to fulfil their obligations under international law, and oversee the safe and timely return of abducted children back to the country whence they were taken. I implore the Government to bring to bear all the diplomatic power that we have on this matter, because British children, wherever they are sent or taken, deserve nothing less.

2.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) for bringing this very difficult matter to the House. It is as heartbreaking as it is complex, and she illustrated that very well. The wrongful removal of a child from their home and family—international parental child abduction—is not always a mere legal dispute. It is a profound violation of a child's security and a parent's rights.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I wish him well: he always seems able to encapsulate our thoughts, whether we are here or in the Chamber. We will thank him for his answers today and look for some direction. It is always a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), and the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), in their place.

Over the years, there have been occasions, although not many, when I have been involved with families affected. I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly and am now in my 16th year as an MP. For the Democratic

Unionist party, the protection of the family unit and the safety of our children have always been paramount and always will be. That is reinforced by seeing our own children growing up, and even more at the grandchildren stage: I am very much there now with six grandchildren. We believe in a society where the rule of law is respected and where those who seek to circumvent our courts, whether by crossing the Irish sea or an international border, are held to account.

Everyone will know the film "The Equalizer", with Denzel Washington. For anyone who has not seen it, it is definitely worth watching. I repeatedly watch it when it is on TV. It starts with a lady in New York whose daughter is missing after going on holiday with her dad, who had decided not to send her back. It is a film, of course, and not real life, but the character played by Denzel Washington was able to go on a train to convince the father to send his daughter back. Although the father had four burly bodyguards, Denzel Washington was able to dispatch all four of them with a sharp credit card. Sometimes we all wish we had a Denzel Washington in our corner—the man who can make things happen. Maybe I should not say this, but sometimes it is necessary to slip slightly aside of the rules to ensure a son or daughter can return home—and he did that.

We welcome the progress of the Crime and Policing Bill, which is currently moving through this place. I thank the Minister for Policing and Crime for all the hard work and effort that went in to making that happen. I need not say any more about all the amendments from the House of Lords that came back. Last night, none came back, so that is now laid to bed.

Although it is a crime to take a child out of the country without consent, there is a gap in our law. It has always been a clear criminal offence to retain a child abroad after a permitted holiday or visit. The Bill would correct that injustice and ensure that wrongful retention is treated with the same seriousness as abduction. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead clearly illustrated that in her contribution setting the scene. It is a common-sense change that we wholeheartedly support.

Families have been torn apart. Without naming names, a mother's son was taken on holiday by his dad. This lady from Northern Ireland was married to a man from Lebanon, and the young boy was able to go on holiday there. We all know that Lebanon has been a country in crisis for many years. It was almost impossible to find out where the father lived and where the child was, in a society that closes ranks. There is a mother back home in Northern Ireland whose heart is breaking. That is a difficult situation to deal with. The consulate was able to give some assistance, but it was a tragically difficult case.

Legislation alone is not enough. We must ensure that the 1980 Hague convention is not just a piece of paper, but a working reality. When a child from Northern Ireland is taken to a foreign jurisdiction, they should be returned promptly so that our local courts can decide what is in their best interests. We cannot have a situation in which foreign jurisdictions become a safe haven for those who defy Northern Ireland's judicial orders. Although I call on the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department of Justice to ensure that our central authority for Northern Ireland is fully resourced, the issue is UK-wide—it clearly falls on the shoulders of the Minister who is here today—and I believe that we must see UK-wide protection.

Families in these crises do not have weeks or months to wait. Every day in which a child is separated from their habitual home is a day of trauma. We all love our children and grandchildren. If someone's child is away somewhere where they feel powerless, unable to do something, that must weigh heavily on their shoulders, both physically and emotionally. We need very swift and decisive action and seamless co-operation between the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Home Office and international partners such as Interpol. We must continue to press for a justice system that is responsive, a border that is secure against such activity and a law that puts the best interests of the child at the heart of everything we do. I look forward very much to the contributions from the shadow Minister, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson and the Minister in particular.

I will conclude with this. Let us stand together to ensure that this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a place where every child is protected and where no parent ever has to face the agony of an empty bed because of a blatant disregard for our laws. Our laws have to be paramount, and they have to work for the people. Our duty today in this House is to ensure that our Government can provide that for them.

2.52 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) on securing this important debate. I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak on an issue of such importance to many families across the country and beyond.

Since being elected to this House, I have been approached by constituents whose situations have made it impossible for me to look away. I have met parents who have written to me asking for support so that our legal system will protect them and their children. Some parents have had their children moved by the other parent; others have fled violence. That includes two of my Hazel Grove constituents whom I will not name, because they are going through active legal cases. One of those parents fled Australia, and the other Poland, with their children because of domestic abuse and coercive control from their partners. In one case, the abuse was proven in court and it was so substantial that the other parent's parents—the grandparents of the children—intervened. They felt that the children should be removed from that country for the safety of the children and this parent. Yet these families have found themselves caught in a legal framework that has not accounted for what they were living through and fleeing.

The 1980 Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction was built on a sound principle: that a child who had been wrongfully removed from their country of habitual residence should be returned promptly. In the vast majority of cases, that is absolutely the right outcome, and the convention has served many thousands of families well over the decades. But the convention was drafted in 1980, and in the intervening 46 years our understanding of domestic abuse and many circumstances that had not been considered in the initial drafting of the legislation has changed enormously.

[Lisa Smart]

I am very grateful for the work of the Hague Mothers, who have helped me to understand some of the issues around these cases. They are campaigning to end injustices caused by the 1980 Hague convention on international child abduction, particularly for mothers fleeing domestic abuse. I am also very grateful to constituents who have been to see me—both the "abductor" and the other parent, whose children have been abducted. The convention was originally aimed primarily at abducting fathers and was designed to ensure the quick and safe return of the child. However, there has now been a shift, and about 75% of the parents who are brought before the courts are mothers, with at least 75% of cases involving allegations of domestic abuse. No two families are the same, and no two cases can be identical, but it cannot be beyond the wit of humanity to find a way through with the interests of the children at its heart.

The convention provides three defences against returning a child, one of which is that doing so would expose the child to "a grave risk" of

"physical or psychological harm or otherwise place the child in an intolerable situation."

On paper, that sounds like an adequate safeguard. In practice, it has not always proven sufficient. If the abuse has been targeted not at the children, but at the other parent, that is where the legal wrangling can come.

It has long been argued—the evidence bears this out—that one of the convention's most significant shortcomings is that it failed to anticipate that some so-called abductors could be domestic abuse victims fleeing their abusers. A parent—often but not always the mother—who escapes to this country to protect themselves and their children from violence should not find themselves faced with a legal mechanism that treats them as a wrongdoer. Yet that is precisely the situation too many find themselves in.

The challenges do not end there. When a child is taken to a non-convention country, which has not signed up to the Hague framework, the remedies available are even more limited. In those cases, it may be necessary to pursue legal proceedings in the country to which the child has been taken. For any parent, that prospect is daunting.

Under section 1 of the Child Abduction Act 1984, it is a criminal offence for a connected person to take a child out of the UK without the appropriate consent, but there is no equivalent offence when someone takes a child abroad with consent and refuses to return them. That was identified by the Law Commission in 2014 and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Minehead mentioned, it has taken until the Crime and Policing Bill to begin to address it. I welcome the legislation before Parliament to close the loophole, but the delay is worth noting because it has caused real harm to real families.

I also want to raise the situation in Scotland, because the law there operates differently and creates significant disparities in the support available. Due to differences in criminal law, many parents whose children are wrongfully removed from Scotland cannot access the same assistance from the police as those in England and Wales. Police Scotland's powers to prevent abduction are more limited, and some individual cases demonstrate with painful clarity the human cost of that inconsistency.

I will turn briefly to the family court, because any discussion of international child abduction must acknowledge the domestic legal backdrop against which such cases are heard. A report published last year by the Public Accounts Committee made it plain that family court services were not operating as they should. Regional disparities are wide, waiting times are excessive, and too many children endure prolonged uncertainty when what they need is resolution.

The Liberal Democrats have long called for meaningful reform. We are heartened by the results of the child-focused courts pilot, which saw significantly faster resolution of cases, with the backlog in pilot areas more than halved. The child-centric approach of the courts focused on the best interests of the child, rather than on adversarial process. That is exactly what the family court should embody. We welcome the decision to expand those courts across England and Wales. We will continue to hold the Government to account to ensure that roll-out is effective and that the benefits of the pilot are reproduced nationally.

International abduction cases do not remain neatly within domestic borders; they require international co-operation, diplomatic engagement and, where the Hague convention does not apply, a willingness to pursue legal routes in foreign jurisdictions. The Government should ensure that resources, legal aid and consular support are in place to help families navigate those processes. Too many parents are left to do so without adequate assistance.

The Liberal Democrats are therefore calling for the Crime and Policing Bill's provisions to close the "consent to retain" loophole to be passed into law without delay. We want a serious review of the disparities between Scotland and the rest of the UK, so that all children receive the same standard of protection. We want to see the expansion of child-focused courts delivered with the rigour and resources needed to realise their potential. We want to see the Government ensure that parents facing international abduction—in particular those fleeing domestic abuse—have access to proper legal support and are not left to navigate complex cross-border legal systems alone.

The law exists to protect children, and when a child is taken from a parent, or when a parent is forced to flee violence with a child in tow, our legal framework should be capable of reaching the right outcome. That means being honest about the limits of international conventions, updating domestic law where it has fallen behind, and ensuring that the family courts are fit for purpose.

2.59 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) on securing this important debate, shining a light on the topic of international parental child abduction and providing an opportunity to highlight the devastating impact that it has on families. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as ever, for his very thoughtful contributions.

As we have heard, and as many hon. Members in this place know, cases of international parental child abduction are truly horrific and deeply distressing. The breakdown of relationships is often traumatic for all involved,

especially for children, but when a parent has their child abducted and taken abroad, the consequences are profound. It is not only emotionally devastating, but financially draining for parents who are forced to fight, often for years, simply to secure contact with their child, let alone their safe return. Navigating courts, legal systems and bureaucratic processes across multiple jurisdictions is complex, it is costly and far too often it is unsuccessful.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead has set out how deeply concerning and troubling these cases can be, and has illustrated the scale and severity of the problem. I pay tribute to those in the Public Gallery, but I acknowledge that there are many more outside this place who are also be affected by this issue, and many hon. Members who are not in this Chamber, but who will have had similar items of casework in their constituency inboxes.

I am reminded of a case in my constituency. I had not long come to this place when someone from my constituency came to see me. Her child had been abducted. She, together with her family, the Foreign Office and particularly the ambassador in the country concerned, worked tirelessly over many months. In that case, they were successful and that child was safely returned to the UK, but I acknowledge that that is not the case for everyone. I also recognise that Ministers across successive Governments, alongside diplomats and officials, have worked and are working to raise such cases with the Governments concerned. I remember some of them from my time as a Minister in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; they were often some of the most troubling cases that we could try to imagine.

Progress in securing outcomes and in reuniting children with their families in the UK is often unacceptably slow. Parents continue to fight tirelessly for their rights, yet their efforts are frequently obstructed, sometimes by the very authorities that should be upholding international law. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), the shadow Foreign Secretary, has a constituency case that is known to the Minister and the FCDO, and she has asked me to raise it in this debate.

The case of Mr Tom Toolan highlights the challenges very starkly. Mr Toolan's daughter, Rhian, was taken to Poland in 2018 by his former partner, despite a court order explicitly prohibiting her removal from the UK. Over the past eight years, he has been unable to secure her return. Rhian is now 12 years old. During that time, Mr Toolan has endured the anguish of missing his daughter grow up. He has missed birthdays, Christmases and countless irreplaceable moments. I am sure we would all agree that that is truly heartbreaking. At every stage he has faced frustration and delay. Despite the provisions of the Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction, despite sustained diplomatic engagement and despite even the issuing of a return order by the courts involved, Rhian has still not been returned home, and Mr Toolan's ordeal continues. He has said:

> "The Hague Convention was designed to ensure that children unlawfully abducted would be returned within six weeks. But we all know that this does not work—particularly when appeals and procedural delays are used to prevent the return of an abducted child."

Having incurred legal costs exceeding £160,000, Mr Toolan deserves answers, and so do others in similar situations.

I will use this debate to ask the Minister a number of questions. First, what further steps are being taken to support efforts to bring Rhian home? More broadly, can the Minister outline the latest discussions he has had with international counterparts on improving the operation and effectiveness of the Hague convention? What assurances has he received and what concrete actions will follow? Will the Government establish stronger mechanisms to support the return of British children abducted overseas?

We know Mr Toolan's is not an isolated case. The number of international parental child abduction cases has risen significantly in recent decades. Official figures show an increase from 272 cases in 2003-04 to 580 in 2012-13. Sadly, the true figure today may well exceed 1,000 annually—we do not necessarily know the full picture. Can the Minister provide an updated figure for the number of cases currently known to the Government? How many are being directly supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office?

Previous Governments undertook awareness campaigns to deter parents from taking children abroad unlawfully. What further preventive measures are now being considered? In addition, what steps are being taken to strengthen the enforcement of court orders designed to prevent abduction, particularly through the use of border controls and travel restrictions?

Finally, can the Minister set out the Government's approach to holding countries accountable where they fail to comply with the Hague convention? In particular, how are the Government working with both signatory and non-signatory states to ensure that international obligations are respected, while strengthening co-operation and preventing delays in the return process? This issue demands urgency, resolve and sustained international co-operation. For the families affected, time lost is time that can never be recovered.

3.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) for securing this debate. I am also grateful for the contributions of other right hon. and hon. Members, particularly those who have represented their constituents' perspectives.

As the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), rightly said, this is a deeply distressing topic, and I am conscious that I am addressing it in front of two colleagues who have been Foreign Office Ministers. I am sure that they share our thoughts for all families affected by international parental child abduction, particularly the children who are going through such upheaval and uncertainty. I will respond to the points made today while being careful not to comment on individual cases or disclose personal details; I hope that the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), will understand why I do not wish to comment in detail on her case.

Wendy Morton: Perhaps, if it is in order, the Minister could provide a written update to my right hon. Friend.

Mr Falconer: I would be happy to. Hon. Members are welcome to contact me directly to discuss specific cases further. For those watching in the Public Gallery or

[Mr Falconer]

at home, I am the Minister for consular affairs, though, for the reasons that the shadow Minister set out, these cases will often be dealt with by the Minister responsible for that region—the Minister for Europe in the case of Poland, and the Minister for the Indo-Pacific in the case of Australia.

The Government take the issue of international parental child abduction extremely seriously. We are proud to be a party to the 1980 Hague convention. We work with more than 80 countries to support the prompt return of children to their country of habitual residence. That is an important principle that has been supported across the House this afternoon.

Where parents raise persistent problems with how the convention is applied, we raise those concerns directly with foreign Governments and will continue to do so whenever appropriate. At the same time, decisions on return ultimately rest with courts, often in the country where the child is located. Those courts must consider where the child is habitually resident, the child's best interests and the child's own views. Decisions about a child's long-term future should be taken by the court that determines the child's habitual residence.

We have put in place clear measures to try to prevent international parental child abduction and have published guidance on the practical steps a parent can take when they think there is a risk. I will focus on what happens in England and Wales because, as Members have pointed out, the arrangements in Scotland and Northern Ireland operate under a different law; for the purposes of clarity and time, it is probably better to focus on England and Wales, but if any hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) or his colleagues, would like to write to me with questions on Northern Ireland or Scotland, I am very happy to take them up.

In England and Wales, concerned parents can get a specific issue or prohibited steps order to prevent a child from being taken out of the country. Our courts can order the Passport Office to withhold a British passport temporarily from a child at risk of abduction. The police can also issue a port alert if a parent is concerned that their child is likely to be taken abroad without their consent within the next 48 hours.

We continue to support our charity partner, Reunite International, which provides online prevention guides—not just for England and Wales, but for Scotland and Northern Ireland—to help parents understand and navigate the options of support available to them. When a child is abducted and taken abroad, our consulate staff provide compassionate support to the family. That can include practical guidance on travel, local systems and procedures and help making contact with the local authorities.

At the request of either parent, the Foreign Office can also formally express an interest in the case with the courts or authorities involved. We can also help families access specialist support, including through Reunite International, which should be able to provide expert advice. In relation to the 1980 Hague convention, the UK works closely with authorities seeking a return for parents. Our central authorities remain engaged throughout the process until the courts have reached a final decision.

It is important to be clear on roles. Decisions on enforcement rest with the authorities and courts of the country where the child is located. Our consular responsibilities mean that we cannot interfere in foreign legal systems, just as we would not accept foreign powers interfering in ours. We cannot compel enforcement, influence court outcomes or take part in any illegal efforts to return a child.

I have not seen the film that the hon. Member for Strangford describes, but I am not sure that I can use a credit card in the way he outlined to secure returns, however frustrating that may be. I recognise the deep frustration that many parents experience, especially when cases face long delays or return orders are not enforced. In those circumstances, the Government raise concerns with foreign partners at senior levels and press them to meet their obligations under the convention.

I turn to Poland, a country raised by a number of hon. Members. It is a close European partner. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) spoke movingly about the shared history between our two countries—a history that includes my constituency of Lincoln, where many of those pilots set up as permanent residents. As she says, it is also one of the countries where we have the highest number of outstanding Hague return orders affecting British parents. We recognise the serious impact that Poland's failure to enforce a number of return orders has had. That concern is reflected in rulings by the European Court of Human Rights and action by the European Commission.

That is why we raise international parental child abduction with the Polish authorities consistently and at senior levels. I can confirm that the Deputy Prime Minister raised it with Poland's Deputy Prime Minister Sikorski in January, the Foreign Secretary raised it with Polish counterparts in October and, earlier this month, the British ambassador in Warsaw, alongside eight other diplomatic missions, wrote to the Polish Minister of Justice to seek a meeting and press for progress on these cases. I can assure hon. Members that the UK continues to play a full role. Some of those eight countries are members of the EU, and some are not.

Our officials continue to engage regularly with Polish authorities on enforcement. In April 2025, the UK Ministry of Justice hosted a joint workshop, alongside my Department, for Polish and UK authorities. We shared UK best practice on enforcement and discussed closer co-operation. We will continue to work with Poland and other partners to improve enforcement and outcomes for children and families.

I recognise the sensitivity and delicacy of the issues raised in relation to violence against women and girls and the very sensitive questions around domestic abuse. We recognise concerns raised in some contexts about how the 1980 Hague convention operates in cases involving domestic abuse. That is why we have sought to take a leading international role, serving on the steering committee of two Hague conference forums examining how the conventions operate where domestic abuse is present. Both those forums took place in the past two years. This is an active and ongoing effort on our part.

At home, we are working closely with victims' organisations, the devolved Governments and the senior family judiciary in England and Wales. I am grateful for the kind recognition by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove of the progress made recently in tightening the law in that area. We are also commissioning research into how

the convention operates in domestic abuse cases so that future policy is grounded in evidence and focused on improving outcomes for children and survivors.

For countries that have not yet joined the 1980 convention, we actively encourage accession through both bilateral and multilateral engagement, while seeking solutions to existing cases in exactly the way the shadow Minister describes. Those efforts include the Malta process, which aims to improve co-operation in cross-border family law disputes involving children. We also work with Reunite International to support mediation as an alternative to court proceedings. Last month, in Lagos, our deputy high commissioner hosted a workshop with Nigerian partners focused on international parental child abduction and family mediation.

Members have reasonably asked me for figures. If the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead will permit me, I might ask the Minister for Europe to write to her specifically on cases involving Poland, but the Foreign Office are aware of 177 cases in 2024 and 167 in 2025.

We recognise the profound distress caused by international parental child abduction and take these cases extremely seriously. We work with partners through the 1980 Hague convention, raise concerns about enforcement and non-compliance at the highest level and press for improvement where systems fall short. We recognise that decisions on return ultimately rest with the courts and the authorities in the country where the child is located, so we must work with our partners abroad to build up their capacity where we are concerned about it.

On a personal note, supporting British nationals overseas remains a core public service performed by my Department and it is a key priority for me personally. We remain committed to prevention, stronger international co-operation and supporting affected children and families throughout what I know is often a long and painful process. I join the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead in paying tribute to the family members in the Public Gallery.

3.18 pm

Rachel Gilmour: I thank the Minister for his inclusive and thorough response to some of the concerns raised today. I will certainly be writing to him on behalf of my constituent who is sitting behind me. I also thank the obviously doting father and grandpapa, the omnipresent hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for his contribution—quite an imaginative one it was, too—and, as ever, my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), who put the right, honourable and proper Liberal Democrat policy at the heart of her contribution. It was a real privilege to listen to the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who brings a great deal of experience and knowledge to the debate. As a new Member of Parliament, I have learned a lot from that. I thank her very much for her contribution.

Some Members might have heard a little noise going on behind me. The little noise is called Kit, and he is three months old. Kit is beautiful, articulate and vocal, but Kit too is a victim of child abduction, because Kit will never meet his half-brothers and sisters. What we have talked about in this debate can affect the oldest and the very youngest. That is why it is so important.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of international parental child abduction.

3.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fire and Rescue Services: Funding

4 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): I will call Matt Vickers to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for fire and rescue services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. Our firefighters are heroes. They are the people who put their lives on the line to protect us all. While others run from danger, they run towards it. It is only right that we support them with the colleagues, equipment and funding that they need to do their jobs properly.

I will use the debate to highlight the ongoing and serious challenges facing fire and rescue services, including Cleveland Fire Brigade, which serves my community in Stockton, as well as Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, and Redcar and Cleveland. I also want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to all the firefighters and support staff in fire brigades across the country, particularly those who work for the Cleveland and Durham fire brigades. I have met many of them on shadow shifts and seen at first hand their incredible skill, determination, commitment and bravery.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Employees of Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service tell me that funding cuts have seen shift systems worsening; rope, water and animal rescue services being scaled back and watches usually running with around six firefighters instead of nine. Does the hon. Member agree that that is putting unexpected pressure on stretched rural fire and rescue teams and will cause a damaging workforce and equipment crisis, all of which may ultimately put people's lives at risk?

Matt Vickers: A lot of fire services across the country are facing huge challenges. The debate will draw out some of the challenges that are unique to rural and coastal communities.

We want firefighters to be backed, for their safety and for the safety of the communities we serve. Our firefighters work tirelessly, day in, day out, to protect our community, and we all owe them our thanks. We should be incredibly proud of their work in challenging circumstances. Of course, it is right that efforts be made to ensure our public services are as efficient as possible, optimising outcomes and spending public money wisely.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is very important that any reorganisation of services involve the engagement of firefighters, because they know the service and its needs best? Does he share my relief that Oxfordshire county council has backed away from what would have been a botched reorganisation that would have reduced support both for my constituents in Oxford city and across the county by not listening enough to what firefighters said was needed?

Matt Vickers: It is hugely important that firefighters and communities are involved in those discussions, so that we can get the structure that works best for the communities involved. Over recent years, Cleveland Fire Brigade has achieved that. It has made difficult decisions, streamlining operations, managing workforce numbers and finding efficiencies wherever possible, but there comes a point at which continued pressure risks undermining resilience.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I declare an interest as the chair of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group. The FBU is calling for increased investment, saying that without it, cuts will kill. Does the hon. Member recognise that 14 years of austerity have led to more than 12,000 firefighter jobs being cut?

Matt Vickers: I am sure that the hon. Lady would also recognise that the situation is getting worse, not better. Across the country, despite the fact that we are paying record levels of tax, our fire services are under pressure. We might want to talk about the history of it, but I want to talk about what will happen in my community in the coming months, as the Government make hay with this horrendous settlement that could see the number of firefighters in my community reduced. That is why I am here today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Just three weeks ago, there was a massive fire at Corries farm outside Newtownards. The response of fire service personnel was absolutely excellent, but the issue was access to water pressure, which there is always less of in rural communities. One solution is to have a water tanker in each district, but that means capital expenditure. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a new look is needed at the response to fires in rural areas?

Matt Vickers: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. Ensuring that we have the right capabilities and resources to respond in rural communities often requires technology and capital investment. It is important to put that into the mix as we see what the funding settlement will look like.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Matt Vickers: I will make a little progress.

The Government's latest settlement takes things a step too far. Huge concerns have been raised about the impact on frontline services and on the safety of the public and our brave firefighters. Through the dedication of our firefighters and its sound leadership, Cleveland Fire Brigade has one of the fastest response times in the country to fires in the home, as well as one of the highest rates of home fire safety visits. It serves almost 580,000 people, from urban town centres to rural and coastal communities, as well as Teesside's significant industrial assets.

Cleveland faces a series of unique challenges. It is a small force, less able to spread or absorb costs through economies of scale. It serves a disproportionately large and complex industrial landscape, covering petrochemical sites, heavy manufacturing and complex infrastructure. It serves an area with significant pockets of deprivation, which are linked to higher incident rates.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point in advocating for his area. Does he agree that sometimes cuts can inadvertently have a damaging effect on neighbouring areas? In my county of Berkshire, where there is an excellent fire service, cuts proposed in neighbouring Oxfordshire would have meant appliances in Reading having to travel up to 25 miles outside Reading to serve and cover for colleagues, leaving Reading exposed. Does he agree that that is not a great way to address these problems?

Matt Vickers: Cross-border support and mutual aid is vital. It is important to understand the profile of those areas and where those demands take us when we invest in our fire services as we should.

Deprivation is linked to higher incident rates, greater vulnerabilities and an increased need for community safety interventions. Cleveland has long been associated with higher levels of deliberate fires; at times it has earned the label of UK arson capital. That places a disproportionate demand on prevention work as well as frontline response. It is among the busiest non-metropolitan fire brigades in the country and is getting busier. That unique mix means that the financial settlement is uniquely harmful to the safety of firefighters and the public in our community. It stretches them to breaking point.

Steve Wright, the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, has said that our fire services face a real-terms cut that puts lives at risk. When someone calls 999, they are in the panic of an emergency. It could be a fire in their home or community, a traffic incident or someone drowning. They deserve nothing less than a quick, fully staffed and fully equipped response. This settlement puts that at risk.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a superb speech. In Buckinghamshire, the Lib Dem-led fire authority has consulted on removing a third of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes fire engines and closing two fire stations in my constituency, Stokenchurch and Great Missenden. At a time when risk is increasing and we are seeing more fires, not least from battery storage, now is not the time to reduce frontline firefighting capability.

Matt Vickers: I could not agree more. As the Fire Brigades Union puts it, these cuts are putting lives at risk. The inability to respond to the increasing number of fires and hazards has real consequences for real people out there in our communities.

Cleveland Fire Brigade is currently facing a significant deficit. Even if council taxpayers are hit with the highest possible increase in precept, Cleveland's medium-term financial strategy shows a three-year deficit of £1.2 million.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service has a similar deficit of £1.5 million. I do not think this is about party politics, because a fire authority can only work with what it has got. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to work across parties to encourage the Government to properly fund all our fire services so that we can protect all our residents, regardless of who runs their local fire authority?

Matt Vickers: First, we have to see central Government funding in place to ensure that we can run safe and effective fire services. Secondly, within that funding envelope we have to ensure that local fire authorities spend the money wisely. In recent years, many of them have looked at those efficiencies, but we are now getting to the point at which we need to go further and the Government need to step up.

Like other businesses and organisations, our fire brigades have been hit by the national insurance increase and spiralling energy costs. We need to ensure that our firefighters receive a fair pay settlement. If the fire precept is not increased in the coming years, the funding gap in Cleveland could rise to nearly £4 million. The answer is not simply to increase council tax even further. In my part of the world, Stockton's Labour council has already increased council tax by 54% since 2016. It is for this Labour Government to fund our fire services properly and to fix the apparently "fair" funding formula, which is damaging Cleveland and Durham fire brigades. I am sure that the Minister will say that Cleveland's core spending power has increased, but as the chief fire officer told me himself, it is nowhere near enough to meet the increasing cost pressures.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): People in our area of Dorset and Wiltshire have been told that we face the potential closure of eight fire stations. At a time when, quite apart from anything else, we do not know what is happening on the international scene and people are talking of dark days ahead, does the hon. Member agree that cutting these essential services seems like total and utter madness?

Matt Vickers: I could not agree more. More than ever, we are seeing fire services that are lean and efficient, having undergone all sorts of savings. We have now got to the point at which there is no fat and we are hitting the bone. We cannot go on like this without real consequences for public safety. These funding decisions have real consequences for Cleveland, including a likely reduction in frontline firefighters and cuts to the number of fire appliances. Demand on our firefighters is rising. It is not acceptable to ask them to do even more with even less.

It is not just our fire brigades that are under pressure. I have also heard from Cleveland Mountain Rescue, a hugely valued voluntary mountain rescue team that provides vital cover at fell races and mountain bike events. Are the Government thanking it for their incredible service and commitment? No, they are hitting it with Care Quality Commission registration and inspection regimes: more bureaucracy, more red tape and more costs. If the mountain rescue team is forced to reduce its services as a result, that will put yet more pressure on our local fire brigades. Has the Minister considered the consequences of these changes and the impact that they could have on fire services?

There is a broader point here: whether it is Cleveland Fire Brigade facing funding pressures or Cleveland Mountain Rescue facing new bureaucracy, the Government must support the people who protect the public, not make their job harder. By incident per head of population, Cleveland Fire Brigade is one of the busiest non-metropolitan fire services in the country. It attends six times as many deliberate fires as the national average.

[Matt Vickers]

Last year alone, it saw a 25% increase in arson and deliberate fire incidents, which cause huge concern within our communities.

The Government's "fair funding" approach is neither fair nor reflective of need. It systematically disadvantages places such as Stockton-on-Tees and the wider Cleveland area. It creates unacceptable risks for emergency response and public safety, because it fails to recognise local need. Factors such as individual risk, level of deprivation and geographic complexity must be given a proper weighting.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. May I thank Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service for its response to the fire at Newell House in Sherborne the other night? I am in awe of the bravery of its firefighters, who were on the scene within eight minutes.

The hon. Member talks about the particular issues that his local fire service faces. Dorset faces an increase in its population of nearly 50% during the summer months, as well as the issues caused by rurality and being a coastal community. Fundamentally, however, the issue in the funding model is that the Government's assumptions on our population increases from council tax revenue are just wrong. The fire service has proven that they are wrong. If we do not have a fair funding formula, how on earth are we ever going to provide the services that local communities deserve?

Matt Vickers: The hon. Gentleman has the pleasure of representing a beautiful part of the world. Sherborne is a beautiful patch that needs proper fire protection. He is right. We have talked about deprivation and the challenges that industrial sites pose, but knowing how many people live in an area and how many homes need to be protected by the fire service is pretty fundamental. We need to get that right.

The unfair funding settlement could mean fire engines arriving at emergencies without enough crew to respond effectively and save lives, or, worse still, engines not leaving stations at all because there are no firefighters to staff them. Last month, Stockton council passed a motion highlighting that the Government's approach to public service funding has failed to deliver genuinely fair or needs-based funding for fire and rescue services, as well as for policing and local government. A letter has been sent by the council to outline those concerns and to set out the stark reality of the situation. However, we have yet to receive a response.

Will the Minister confirm whether she is in discussions with the Treasury about the challenges facing our fire services, and explain what action will be taken to properly fund Cleveland and Durham fire brigades? If the issue is not addressed, it will force difficult decisions on staffing, equipment and service delivery, and ultimately shift the burden of national funding failures on to local residents. The Government have increased taxes to record levels. The Chancellor's first two Budgets have raised taxes by £36 billion and £26 billion, respectively, pushing the overall tax burden to a historic high, yet we have seen cuts to the number of police officers on our streets, and now potential cuts to our fire services.

Jim Shannon: I should have made this point earlier; I do not think it has been mentioned. Back home in Northern Ireland, we have an issue with gorse fires in the mountains. We had two massive fires just last weekend. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that with the summer and what we hope will be hot weather comes the threat of gorse fires and the loss of peatland and farmland? Should that not be motivating the Minister and the Government to respond positively?

Matt Vickers: Certainly there are the pressures of the summer and the consequences for rural communities. Fire authorities across the country are also having to make incredibly tough decisions about what they resource and the people they can employ. It is a pressure point that is moving at a hell of a pace and we need a quick response to the challenge.

I hope the Minister will be able to provide answers and reassurance on some of the points that people have raised. What are the Government planning to do to properly support Cleveland and Durham fire brigades and deal with their significant financial shortfalls? How will the Minister and the Government fix the fair funding formula to ensure that communities such as mine in Stockton and those across Teesside are treated fairly?

If we fail to fund our fire services properly, we put lives at risk. Firefighters in our communities have raised the alarm repeatedly and their concerns cannot be ignored. The service responsible for protecting us is being asked to do too much with too little. I urge the Minister to carefully consider the points that have been raised, and to work with colleagues to deliver a financial settlement that is fair, forward looking and reflective of the unique challenges faced by Cleveland and Durham fire brigades. I urge her to listen to firefighters, fire chiefs and local residents in communities who are deeply concerned, to invest in our fire services and to keep us all safe.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison, particularly given your specific interest in this matter. I thank the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) for securing this important debate, and for the consistent way in which he raises the issue in the House in his role as shadow Minister for crime, policing and fire. I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's position.

We all know about the role that fire and rescue services play in keeping people safe. Every day, firefighters and fire service staff protect lives, prevent harm and provide reassurance to communities. Alongside responding to fires, they attend road traffic collisions, floods, wildfires and other emergencies. They deliver vital prevention and protection activity, and increasingly support wider resilience efforts at a local and national level, as hon. Members have mentioned.

To carry out that work effectively, fire and rescue services rely on a mix of funding from central Government, council tax precept, retained business rates and specific grants. Getting that framework right is essential, particularly at a time when services face changing risks, increasing complexity and growing demands, beyond traditional fire incidents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) was right that 14 years of Conservative austerity have absolutely battered our fire and rescue services. Fourteen years of Conservative cuts to local authority and fire service budgets have left many areas operating on a shoestring: 20% of firefighter capacity was lost across the country during that period. Throughout the period, the Fire Brigades Union and its membership have worked tirelessly to protect the public and do more with less.

We are working hard to remedy that. That is why the 2026-27 local government finance settlement marks a significant change. After a decade of short-term settlements, it delivers the first multi-year funding settlement for local government in 10 years. It gives fire and rescue authorities the stability and certainty that they need to plan ahead, invest in their workforce and estates, and make sound, long-term decisions in the interests of public safety.

Kim Johnson: This morning, I met Anne Davies, whose husband Jeff became the first UK firefighter to have his death from cancer officially recorded as having been caused by the job. Does my hon. Friend agree that this investment in the fire and rescue service will provide the necessary equipment so that no more firefighters die as a result of industrial injuries?

Samantha Dixon: I would like to point out to my hon. Friend the speech that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care made at the recent FBU conference, announcing welfare checks for fire and rescue service members. That significant move will protect the workforce for the future. That is really important, and is welcomed across the sector.

Importantly, since the provisional settlement, the Government have secured an additional £15 million for fire and rescue services. That ensures a minimum uplift of 3.8% in core spending power in 2026 for all stand-alone FRAs, with some services receiving increases of more than 7%.

Vikki Slade: Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service's core spending power is going up over the three years only because of the increase in local taxpayers. The actual amount being provided is going down, not just in real terms but in actual cash terms. We simply do not have enough money to keep our fire stations open. Will the Minister commit to meet us again to look at reforming our funding formula for Dorset and Wiltshire?

Samantha Dixon: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I will come to how the Government are addressing the reform of the funding settlement for fire and rescue services shortly. It is an important point that all Members who have attended this afternoon need to understand for the context of our future fire and rescue services.

Cleveland Fire Authority, which serves Stockton West, will have access to £37.8 million in core spending power in 2026-27, which is an increase of 3.8%. That provides the authority with greater certainty about how it can best serve the communities of Stockton-on-Tees and the wider Cleveland area.

However, although the Government set the national funding framework, decisions about how resources are deployed locally must rightly remain with fire and rescue authorities and chief fire officers, who are best placed to understand local risk and demand through their community risk management plans, and to make operational decisions in consultation with the workforce and communities. That speaks to the wider point that Members have made about local decisions reflecting local needs.

Greg Smith: In Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, there was a consultation. The public overwhelmingly said no to cuts that that fire authority was pushing, and firefighters very clearly said, "No, this is crazy. Don't do it." How can the Government ensure that fire authorities, which are making local decisions, reflect the important views not just of the public, but of firefighters themselves?

Samantha Dixon: Fire authorities, by and large, are locally elected representatives; they are accountable to their communities, they should serve their local communities, and they need to respond to what they hear from consultations. That is an important point for Members from Dorset and Wiltshire; they need to respond to what their local communities are doing in the way that the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service has done in recent days.

Matt Rodda: Will the Minister give way?

Samantha Dixon: I am going to make some progress.

The Government are committed not only to providing stable funding, but to continuing to work with the fire sector to make sure that the funding system remains fair and responsive. Funding allocations for fire and rescue authorities are determined through a national funding formula, which assesses relative need using factors such as population and other cost-and-demand drivers.

The current fire funding formula was designed more than a decade ago. As part of the fair funding review and following a consultation, the Government updated the relative needs formula for fire and rescue, using the most up-to-date data available and changes in individual authority's allocations so that they reflect updated data in the formula.

Looking ahead—this is really important in relation to the point made by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade)—we have committed to working with the fire sector on a comprehensive review of the formula ahead of the next spending review. As part of that engagement, every fire and rescue service in England has been invited to participate in sector engagement workshops, the first of which is taking place in Manchester today. It includes chief fire officers, heads of finances and relevant officers. It is an important opportunity to reform funding for the future.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am also a member of the FBU parliamentary group. I understand that consultations on the formula are going on, and we welcome them. Will the Minister ensure that trade union representatives are built into those regional consultations?

Samantha Dixon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his point, because it brings me to the work of the ministerial advisory group—a group established following our manifesto commitment to work with the entire sector.

[Samantha Dixon]

The ministerial advisory group involves the National Fire Chiefs Council, the inspectorate, the Fire Standards Board, the National Joint Council, the Local Government Association and the Fire Brigades Union. They sit at the table looking at reforming the role of the firefighter, the funding for the fire sector, and the governance of and arrangements for the wider sector. I have asked that group to be bold in its decision making, because after the past 14 years, the sector cannot continue as it is. We need to support that work as fully as we can. Local fire authorities need to listen to their communities, work with their communities, and work with the Government to support their communities going forward.

Funding is only one part of the picture. There is exciting work ahead of us. There is a generational opportunity, and this Government are determined to seize it.

Question put and agreed to.

National Accident Prevention Strategy

4.30 pm

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a national accident prevention strategy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. Today, I want to draw the House's attention to what can only be described as a silent and spiralling crisis in our country: the devastating human cost of preventable accidents. This is not a new issue, but it is getting worse and, crucially, it is still not given the level of sustained national attention that its scale demands. Too often, people think of accidents as tragic misfortune, but they are often ordinary moments: a fall at home, a collision on the road, an accident at work, a lapse in safety in a familiar environment.

Every Member here will recognise the pattern: we hear it in our advice surgeries, we receive the letters and we take the calls. We meet parents who have lost children, spouses who have lost partners and children who have lost a parent in circumstances that are sudden, awful and preventable. Towards the end of last year, following two road fatalities in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield in our community over the course of a week and the drowning of a teenager in Sutton park, I had the valuable experience of meeting a long-standing resident of Royal Sutton Coldfield, Becky Hickman, who is the chief executive officer of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and has championed accident prevention at the national level for over 20 years. Indeed, she is in the Public Gallery today.

One of those horrific accidents took place on Friday 22 August last year, when, tragically, 21-year-old Natasha Thorp was struck by a car on Brassington Avenue in my constituency and died shortly afterwards. I have had the privilege of getting to know her family a little and of joining Natasha's father and other members of her family at the recent installation of a memorial bench in Sutton Park overlooking Blackroot pool. It is hard to describe the life-changing trauma they have suffered, but they are not alone.

RoSPA and I welcome the Department for Transport's new road safety strategy, but it is a small part of a much bigger issue and strategy. Road traffic accidents are sadly not isolated events, and accidental deaths and injuries do not only happen on the roads. Tragedies can occur at home, at work and when out in open spaces.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): One of the gaps that we consistently see is in water safety, where interventions are often reactive rather than preventive. Following the tragic death of a young boy in a reservoir local to me in Yorkshire, I have been working on Sam's law and with organisations such as RoSPA, the Royal Life Saving Society, and the fire and rescue services to develop a clear, risk-based approach for water safety, including guidance on when and how lifesaving equipment should be provided. Does the right hon. Member agree that the national accident prevention strategy must bring together those kinds of organisations, which have the experience and knowledge to make sure that these sorts of incidents never happen again?

Sir Andrew Mitchell: As the hon. Member will see as I develop my speech, I very much agree with him.

In Birmingham, we have the seventh highest number of accidental deaths in England. Each year, more than 550 families in our city lose a loved one due to a preventable accident. That is more than one death every day. Across the west midlands, more than 2,000 people annually die due to accidents, the equivalent of wiping out a small village year after year. Nationally, there has been an 8% rise in accidental death rates and a 3% increase in hospital admissions in just one year. Over the past decade, accidental death rates have risen by more than 40%. That is not a blip, a statistical anomaly or a short-term fluctuation; it is a serious problem that has been brushed under the carpet for too long.

There is a wider national cost to this issue. Accidents place a significant and growing burden on the national health service. Every preventable injury that results in an emergency admission adds pressure to already stretched A&E departments, ambulance services and hospital wards. We are talking about millions of bed days every year linked to accident-related admissions. Accidents now are believed to cost us at least £6 billion annually in NHS medical care. The impact on NHS staff is also profound. Doctors, nurses, paramedics and support staff are dealing daily with injuries and emergencies that in many cases could have been prevented. That is not only a clinical challenge, but a human one, placing additional strain on a workforce who are already under great pressure.

The burden extends across the economy. When people are injured, they are often unable to work—sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently. Families lose income; employers lose skilled workers; productivity falls. The country loses millions of working days each year due to accident-related absence. The combined cost to UK business is now estimated at about £6 billion every year.

Taken together, this represents a hidden but substantial cost to the country—to our health service, economy and public finances. The truth is that we can do better. Indeed, we have done better before. We know what works: safer homes, stronger product standards, effective public awareness campaigns, improved design of public spaces, better data collection, and co-ordinated action across Government and local agencies.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Twenty-eight-year-old Benedict Solly was killed on the A37, near Cerne Abbas, at a notorious accident hotspot. Local residents had been calling for interventions to make that junction safe, but part of the problem is that the decision on whether to make an intervention at the junction is based on historical data, which is only recording actual collisions—not near misses, accidents avoided or all those other things. Does the right hon. Member agree that we need a wider dataset in order to inform the interventions that we make to avoid fatal accidents occurring?

Sir Andrew Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point, and he adds that particular tragedy to the tragedies that I have already mentioned. Of course he is right that, with modern technology racing ahead in so many ways, our data should be better and more effective at informing the decisions that are made. He made that point with great eloquence.

What is currently lacking is a clear, coherent and sustained national strategy to bring these efforts together. At present, responsibility for accident prevention is fragmented across multiple Departments: Health, Transport, Housing, Education and others. The result is a system in which responsibility is dispersed, co-ordination is inconsistent and prevention too often falls through institutional gaps. That is why I believe there is now a compelling case for a national accident prevention strategy. Such a strategy would have benefits across the whole of Government: safer roads for the Department for Transport, reduced pressure on the national health service for the Department of Health and Social Care, less spending on benefits for people unable to work because of accidents for the Department for Work and Pensions and higher productivity for the Treasury. A national accident prevention strategy must therefore be led by the Cabinet Office, which has the oversight necessary to set cross-Government priorities and to co-ordinate and align the activities of different Departments to achieve them.

Becky Hickman and RoSPA should be asked to produce a report for the Government on what such a strategy might look like. It should, in my view, be based on a few clear principles: first, ministerial leadership at the centre of Government, ensuring accountability and direction; secondly, a clear focus on prevention, rather than simply reacting after harm has occurred—the very point that the hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) was making just a moment ago.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Rural communities face unique challenges when it comes to prevention and addressing accidents. We are more isolated, we have terrible signal, we have roads more likely to lead to crashes and agriculture is Britain's most dangerous industry. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that any national accident prevention strategies must focus on rurality and be matched by proper investment in public health funding, which areas such as Somerset have always lost out on?

Sir Andrew Mitchell: I think I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says, except that I would not wish to make an exceptional case for the countryside. This issue affects all part of our country. As he will know, the royal town of Sutton Coldfield is an ancient town and is therefore not part of the countryside as such, although within the royal town of Sutton Coldfield we have the biggest municipal park in Europe, so we at least doff our caps to the issue of rurality.

I was listing the number of clear principles that I thought should inform a report of the type I have described. I had mentioned two; the third is indeed the better use of data, so that we understand where risks are emerging, where interventions are needed and whether policies are working. I suspect I will carry the two hon. Gentlemen who have intervened on me on that point: the hon. Members for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme and for West Dorset (Edward Morello). The fourth principle is a serious focus on those most at risk of accidental harm. The fifth and final principle is a sustained approach to public education and awareness, so that safety is embedded across the life course from childhood through to older age.

I want to return briefly to the human reality behind all this: a child walking to school, a friend cooking a meal at home, a parent swimming in the sea on holiday—ordinary stories with tragic endings. As Members of Parliament, we all know of searingly heartbreaking,

[Sir Andrew Mitchell]

awful occurrences such as poor Natasha's death. We have the evidence and the tools, and we have the example of other countries such as Australia and Finland, where co-ordinated Government accident prevention strategies are already in place. What is missing in the UK is the sustained national leadership to bring those together.

We should not accept a situation in which tens of thousands of lives are lost each year to preventable accidents. We should not accept a system that is fragmented when lives depend on co-ordination. We should not accept avoidable suffering when the knowledge, tools and capacity to prevent it already exist. Ultimately, it is not just about policy, but about whether we are prepared to act on what we already know: that far too many lives are being lost unnecessarily, and that that does not have to be the case.

Those are all non-party political points. There is no party politics in this. I appeal to the good sense and experience of all Members of this House in the hope that together we can support the Government to drive that agenda forward with vigour.

4.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for allowing us the opportunity to speak on the topic. I congratulate him on a truly excellent speech.

I will give my perspective as the chair of the healthy homes and buildings all-party parliamentary group. This subject is of great interest to me: accidents in the home, on the roads, on the farm and on water—all those things together. As the right hon. Member highlighted, fatal accidents in the United Kingdom have risen at a rate of 8% in one year, and accidents now kill more than 23,000 people annually, which is more than the capacity of the London O2 arena. Of those people, nearly 800 die annually in accidental deaths in Northern Ireland.

I am going to give a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate. The number of accident fatalities in Northern Ireland is rising, with the region experiencing a rate of 39 deaths per 100,000, significantly higher than the UK average of 34 per 100,000. We in Northern Ireland are already on the back foot and behind on the targets, so we need to do better, hence I wanted to add my support and contribute to this debate. Almost 900,000 people, the equivalent of the entire population of Devon, are admitted to hospital as a result of accidents every year. People living in the most deprived areas are nearly twice as likely to be killed in an accident as those in the least deprived areas.

I want to highlight the issue of accidents on the farm, such as falling off a roof. I live on a farm, and we tend to do the work ourselves. That is the nature of the life. To be truthful, we might not adhere to some of the health and safety aspects—I may not have adhered to them, either—so accidents on the farm are regular things, whether they are machinery accidents or to do with slurry.

Over the past few years, I have heard of a number of people who have unfortunately succumbed to the fumes of the slurry tank. I remember my neighbour telling me last year, "Jim, I was out clearing the slurry tank and—it's the funniest thing—I was there, and all of a sudden I was away." It was the guy in a tractor about 10 feet away who pulled him away from it. We who live in the rural hinterland and the country are affected each day by farm issues—maybe just do not stand over slurry tanks.

I look to the Minister to highlight those issues. Back home, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs advertises regularly on TV about the dangers of the farm. Those dangers also include overhead lines: someone could be working with a Caterpillar or JCB and, all of a sudden, could hit an overhead line and be in a tragic accident. Working with animals is another example. We must always be wary of the cow that has a young calf or the bull that is in among the cows. Things can happen, so there is a real danger.

I have been in contact with RoSPA, which welcomed recent steps by the Government to improve regulation and standards in the housing sector—which I want to speak to—particularly the commitment to implement the recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry in full. I know the Government have been proactive in responding to the Grenfell inquiry and have come up with a lot of good, positive ways forward. RoSPA has also worked with leading housing providers to produce safer by design, a framework to reduce serious accidental injury in new build homes. It sets out practical measures to reduce the shocking current rate of 6,000 accidental fatalities in UK homes each and every year.

Accidents are not just an issue in the home. They affect people on the roads, at work and during leisure time. Accidents are now the leading cause of preventable deaths in people under 40, with 840,000 hospital admissions and 7 million A&E attendances being accident-related in 2022-23, costing the NHS £6 billion and 5.2 million bed days annually, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield referred to. The economic costs are exceptional, including another estimated £6 billion down to lost working days and output. If we can improve the accident rate, we can improve the economy and improve people's health, so it is a win-win in every way.

I join the right hon. Member in his call for a national accident prevention strategy. The Minister has been very active in Westminster Hall this last week—or 10 days, or even two weeks—and it is good to see her in her place again. We look forward to her answers to our requests. As the right hon. Member referred to, if we can model our national accident prevention strategy on those that have been implemented in Australia and Finland, we—including the Government and the Minister —can collectively tackle the crisis. I ask hon. Members and the Government to initiate and support steps for our constituents' safety.

If we can address this issue at Government level, in a collective and collegiate way, we can address some of these concerns. Whether an accident is in the home, on the roads, in water or on the farm—wherever it might be—we need a national accident prevention strategy and we need it now.

4.49 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) on securing this extremely important

debate. Four weeks ago today, I was at the funeral of a young man who was killed in a road traffic collision in Sussex, just after Christmas. His mother is one of my constituents. Seeing how broken-hearted she was, and seeing the young man's friends who were there at his funeral, really brought home to me how important it is that we take all the steps we can to mitigate these kinds of accidents wherever we can to avoid the future suffering of the families and friends of those who die in accidents.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) for highlighting the importance of water safety. My constituency has one of the country's major rivers—the River Thames—as a boundary, so water safety is a constant issue for the young people whom I represent. I will take the opportunity to highlight the particular risks around locks in the summer months. In my constituency, Teddington lock attracts a great deal of young people who find it appealing to jump off the lock and into the river, which is incredibly dangerous. A couple of years ago, there was a fatality in the river in Sunbury, which is not far from my constituency, so I highlight to young people, particularly those in my constituency, the enormous danger of playing around the locks.

I also pay tribute to the British Standards Institution and all its work, in what is its 125th year. It is also the 75th year of the consumer and public interest network and the BSI consumer forum, which ensure that consumer voices are heard in the development of standards so that they reflect real-world experience and mitigate accident risk.

The Liberal Democrats believe that investing in prevention through public health initiatives is the most effective way to enhance wellbeing and reduce the burden on NHS services, so we support the introduction of a national accident prevention strategy, as advocated by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. Accidents are a leading cause of preventable death and injury in the UK.

The Health and Safety Executive, the NHS and local authorities all have a role to play in accident prevention, but there is no single, overarching national strategy co-ordinating activity across settings such as roads, workplaces, homes and public spaces. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents has also long advocated for a joined-up, national approach to home safety, particularly for children and older people. Despite that, no Government have been forthcoming with legislation that would bring together all those strategies in an effective framework.

The Liberal Democrats understand the benefit of a national strategy. Road safety strategies have previously driven significant reductions in deaths and serious injuries, with the UK historically being among the safer countries in terms of road casualties, but the Government are yet to introduce a successor strategy of equivalent ambition, so progress has stalled. We have consistently pressed the Government to adopt a road safety strategy, so we welcome their action, but we are disappointed that much of the strategy is simply made up of commitments to undertake consultation, kicking meaningful activity down the road.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for action to be taken much more quickly, as well as for investment in road safety infrastructure, better enforcement on speeding and law breaking, educational programmes and improved safety technology across the motor industry. We are also campaigning for the roll-out of active ageing programmes and falls assessments for anyone over the age of 75, to prevent falls, avoid unnecessary hospital admissions and promote healthy ageing. Ill health, which can be caused by accidents, is a key cause of workforce shortages. To tackle that problem, the Government should invest in our NHS and in social care so that people can get the healthcare they need and rejoin the workforce more quickly.

We have called on the Government to fix NHS backlogs, cut ambulance waiting times and raise the minimum wage for care workers by £2 an hour to help boost our social care system and get people out of hospital quicker. Social care is essential to enabling people to live safely and independently at home, but the Government are kicking the issue into the long grass, as their commission is not set to complete for another two years. We would complete it within a year and deliver the answers and investment needed to tackle the social care crisis.

Beyond the obvious physical and mental impact of accidents, they have a broader economic impact. Each year, accidents cost UK businesses £6 billion in lost working days and output. We want the national prevention strategy to set out clearer expectations for enforcement and employer compliance. The Health and Safety Executive oversees workplace safety regulation, but budget cuts have reduced its inspection capacity.

While the NHS continues to be under huge stress, the need to introduce a strategy to reduce preventable accidents is even more pressing. Accidents cost the NHS 5.2 million bed days, which amounts to almost £6 billion. Therefore, will the Minister tell us whether the Government will accelerate plans to conclude the social care commission before 2028? What action are they taking now, in advance of the conclusion, to support people through recovery and back into work? What steps are they taking to ensure that their road safety strategy works effectively and cohesively, alongside other Government strategies, to reduce the number of preventable accidents and injuries across the country?

4.55 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) on securing the debate and on the thoughtful way in which he presented his opening remarks, highlighting the need for a national strategy to prevent accidents, not least through the lens of the horrific tragedies that he outlined in the royal town.

I am always pleased to see the Minister in her place, but this debate was tabled to discuss a national accident prevention strategy, which would need to extend well beyond the Minister's portfolio and the Department for Transport. Roads and other transport methods represent only a portion of the challenges raised in the debate. For a Government whose principal ideology appears to be predicated on a misguided notion of due process, it seems that there has been an accident in today's assignment.

The issue at hand requires a Minister whose responsibility it is to think about the broader impact and prevention of accidents, which I would argue is someone in the Cabinet Office or the Department for Work and Pensions, which holds significant responsibility in this area as the

[Greg Smith]

sponsoring Department for the Health and Safety Executive. I say none of that as a criticism of the Minister, for whom I have a high regard and respect; I do say it as a criticism of the Government, because I cannot understand why they have chosen to field the Department for Transport in this debate rather than a Department that cuts across the whole of Government.

This is an incredibly important issue. There is a risk of accident from the moment we wake up in the morning, when we travel to work or enjoy a leisure activity, and when we go about our daily business. Risk is in our journeys, and in every product we use and place we visit. The Government have a regulatory responsibility to mitigate those risks as much as possible—to prevent avoidable accidents, save lives and shield the taxpayer in the process. A national accident prevention strategy should be about creating not a burden or over-regulation, but the safety and confidence that people and businesses can live, operate and thrive in an environment with lower risk.

The cost of accidents to the NHS is estimated at around £6 billion a year. It is suggested by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents that accidents are the leading cause of death in the under-40s. We have a duty to do what we can to get to grips with the significant causes of accidents, especially as they change with new developments in our way of life.

It is interesting to dive into the figures about prevalent accidents over time. Transport-related accidents are horrific, and of course the Government should want to do more to reduce those further, but they have already fallen by 17% over the past two decades. The number of falls, however, many of which will affect our elderly constituents, is up considerably by 90%, making up 46% of all accidents. I am interested to know how the Minister plans to address some of the major emerging causes of accidents, particularly by working across different Departments.

RoSPA's November 2024 report makes several recommendations, but the clear theme is the need for a more holistic, joined-up approach to accident prevention. The Health and Safety Executive does a robust job of upholding safety standards in the workplace, but there is a need to ensure that the safety standard is consistent at work, at home and in the public realm. Future-proofing our safety standards will also play a key role in mitigating risk for the long term.

I would like to hear from the Minister what considerations the Government have made to accommodate the growing use of artificial intelligence and robotics in industry and business, both to mitigate accident risk and to utilise new technologies to reduce risks elsewhere. We have seen in our newspapers this week an example that is relevant to the Minister's Department: a self-driving car drove straight through the police cordon around a crime scene in London. That emerging technology is clearly not foolproof, and has shown on the streets of our capital city this week that it is potentially dangerous, so how will the Government rise to the regulatory challenge?

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield eloquently set out, this is a broad topic. It is clear from delving into the issue of accidents that the Government must take it seriously. Given that real strain and cost are being placed on our NHS and public services, and that some truly horrible accidents are happening around us each and every day, I would like to hear that the Government are taking this issue seriously and that work is being done across Government and not just within the Department for Transport. When it comes to delivering a broader accident prevention strategy, I hope that they will not take a narrow approach, but will listen to the recommendations of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and take the cross-departmental approach that is clearly necessary.

5.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for securing this debate. I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Government. I offer my condolences to all those affected by the incidents in his constituency that he mentioned, including Natasha's family and friends. I pay tribute to him for raising awareness of this important issue.

As the right hon. Gentleman rightly suggests, it is not unreasonable to expect to be able to go about our everyday lives without the fear or risk of accidents. The impact on individuals and their families and friends can be devastating. I share his view that we should collectively act to address those risks.

As the Minister responsible for road safety, I am aware of the right hon. Gentleman's interest in the lead-up to the publication of the road safety strategy earlier this year. He has a track record of making the case for effective safety measures in his constituency and beyond. That is of course to his great credit.

I am particularly struck by the fact that we are here on International Workers' Memorial Day. Too many people are killed or injured as a result of their work, and it is apt that we are discussing this issue on a day when we are remembering those killed in workplace incidents. We must recommit to fight for a safer future for the living.

As the right hon. Gentleman noted, accident prevention cuts across several areas and the responsibilities of many Departments. Within my ambit, it means road traffic collision prevention. More widely, accident prevention impacts home safety, safety in the workplace, product safety, building safety, safety in childcare, sickness prevention and much more.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke movingly about the incident that we have all heard about as constituency Members. The Government clearly recognise the importance of prevention, protecting lives, promoting good health and ensuring that public services are not called upon when they do not need to be. Several hon. Members have talked about the impact of accidents on our economy and the national health service. It is the first job of Government to keep the British people safe. I know that colleagues in all Departments are taking measures to ensure our approach to accident prevention is as strong as it can be.

With that in mind, I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will allow me the opportunity to speak first about the work of my own Department. This country has some of the safest roads in the world, but years of

complacency have allowed our road safety record to slip. Around four people die on our roads every single day—lives taken too soon, lives altered beyond recognition and lives grieved by families left behind.

Language and terminology matter to victims of road traffic collisions. Since 2022, other than when required by specific legislation, the Department for Transport has used the term "collision" in relation to road traffic crashes, because the term "accident" can imply that events are unavoidable or without fault. We know that the vast majority of incidents on our roads are preventable.

Earlier this year, my Department published the new road safety strategy, because we believe that road traffic collisions are preventable. Our strategy sets out how we intend to deal with the root causes of collisions. We have set out our vision for safer roads for all, including ambitious targets to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured by 65%—70% for children—by 2035. Rooted in innovation and underpinned by the safe system approach, our strategy recognises that although driver error is inevitable, deaths and serious injuries on our roads are not.

The strategy outlines concrete steps to better support road users, including consultations. Five consultations were published alongside the road safety strategy, on minimum learning periods, lower drink-drive limits and mandatory eyesight testing. I make no apology for consulting, because since we are publishing the first road safety strategy in a generation, we must take the time to get it right. It is right that we have set out in those consultations what we intend to do, but also that we listen very carefully to how best to make those changes. I want to see progress—I will be chairing a national road safety board to ensure the implementation of the strategy—and of course I want to see those numbers going down, as we have set ambitious targets for what we want to achieve over the next decade, but I do not think it was wrong to consult on them.

The strategy commits to harnessing technology, data and innovation to improve the safety of vehicles and infrastructure. It sets out a strengthened approach to enforcement, putting penalties under review and considering new powers to suspend licences. The hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) rightly raised the potential of those new technologies, including AI, but he also highlighted the importance of getting that technology right, including automated vehicles. They have a huge potential, as we know that driver error is such an important contributory factor in many road traffic collisions. The ability to remove the potential for driver error with an automated vehicle is there, but we must make sure that the technology is as reliable as a careful and competent driver. That is why we have the piloting of the automated vehicles but with a safety driver in place at the moment.

What applies to road safety as much as any other area of accident prevention is the importance of collective effort. We rely on partnerships with local authorities, industry, emergency services, charities, stakeholders and communities. In transport, we recognise the importance of a just culture, recognising that humans do make mistakes, systems can fail, safety improves when people are honest, and learning means more than blame. In aviation, rail and maritime, we have the accident investigation branches. They are not there to apportion blame or liability. Their focus is investigating serious incidents to ensure that we can learn from them and prevent reoccurrence.

Accident prevention must be a call to action, not just a new policy or a set of regulations. Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware of "THINK!", the Government's flagship road safety campaign, which aims to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on the roads in England and Wales. It seeks to change attitudes and behaviours among those at risk, and it is a good example of the importance of public awareness campaigning.

I pay tribute to all those individuals, organisations, campaigners and response teams who make such a difference to lives across the country, both by raising awareness of those most at risk of harm and by standing ready and responding night and day to help people in danger. I am thinking of our lifeboat responders, our mountain rescue teams and many others.

In housing safety—I think the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned this—the Government are taking various actions to improve safety and accident prevention. The decent homes standard is one of several new and updated measures to improve quality in the private rented sector. That includes Awaab's law, which requires landlords to address issues of damp and mould within stricter timeframes—not accidents, but ill health caused by living in unsafe conditions. There are also new fines for landlords whose properties contain serious hazards.

Action is being taken on all 58 recommendations from the Grenfell inquiry report, and that is intended to build a more robust and trusted regulatory system in the wake of that tragedy. We will never forget those taken too soon, or the impact that will still be felt every day by their loved ones.

In December, the Government published the single construction regulator prospectus and consultation document, laying out plans for regulatory reform to integrate the regulation of buildings, products and professions. That followed the appointment of an expert panel to help guide the Building Safety Regulator-led review of the building regulations guidance.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) both mentioned the dangers around rivers, canals, lakes and the sea. It takes a real collective effort by emergency services and volunteers to deliver search and rescue services, and the Government have made tangible progress in recent years to support voluntary organisations. In the recent Budget, a vehicle excise duty exemption was announced for mountain rescue, lowland rescue, cave rescue, independent lifeboats and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. That reflects a clear recognition of the public value of search and rescue volunteers and the practical costs they bear in carrying out their work. They also do important work making people aware of those dangers as part of that prevention agenda.

I was saddened to read in the annual review of RoSPA, to which I will refer in a moment, that alcohol-related deaths have increased by 5% following a period of relative stability. Those include accidents caused by exposure or poisoning. All such deaths are a tragedy.

[Lilian Greenwood]

The Government have committed to help people make healthier choices about alcohol, and we are working towards legal requirements for alcohol labels to display health warnings and consistent nutritional information.

To better support people experiencing harmful drinking and alcohol dependence, we published the first ever UK clinical guidelines on alcohol treatment to drive improvements in treatment provision. Our extensive programme of implementation support for the guidelines has been positively received by commissioners and providers, and we continue to work across Government to consider further measures to reduce the negative impact alcohol has on health inequalities, crime and the economy. The same could be said of some drug use, which is also a major cause of accidents and poisonings.

When it comes to health, it is worth speaking about falls. Falls accounted for almost half of all fatal accidents in the UK in 2023, and 59% of all accident-related hospital admissions in 2023-24, making them by far the largest single category of accidental harm. That is against a long-term backdrop of falls fatalities increasing by 81% between 2013 and 2022.

There is hope, however, and again it comes to technology. Emerging evidence from Government-funded independent evaluations indicates that falls technologies can reduce falls in care homes by between 37% and 49%, as well as reducing hospital admissions and freeing up staff time. In the next year, the Government will set new national standards for care technologies and produce trusted guidance so that people can confidently buy and use technology that supports them or the people they care for. The hon. Member for Richmond Park asked some important questions about social care, and I will ensure that she receives a written response to those questions.

Let me move on to workplace safety. The Government's Employment Rights Act 2025 is an important step towards delivering the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. Ensuring statutory sick pay from day one will reduce the risk of presenteeism, a key risk in operational environments when people are at work but unwell. Limits on non-disclosure agreements will enable learning from incidents instead of silencing them. Reducing zero-hours working will ensure greater predictability in work patterns, reducing fatigue, working alone or rushed work. The creation of the Fair Work Agency will provide better protection for whistleblowers, reinforcing a strong safety culture in our workplaces.

Making it easier for trade unions to organise ensures that more workplaces benefit from health and safety representatives and the vital work that they do. I pay tribute to trade unionists across the country who are health and safety representatives. I know at first hand the incredible work they do to keep workplaces safe.

Lee Pitcher: As the Minister mentioned, it is International Workers' Memorial Day, and trade unions have been here today to make sure we raise awareness of it. This year's theme is the psychosocial interventions required to support workers and mental health. Will she take the opportunity to remember those we have lost at work, to promote to employers the implementation of strong mental health interventions at work and to raise awareness to prevent lives being lost?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We think of all those who have lost their life at work; I think that about 120 people each year are killed in the course of their work. There is also a much more widespread problem of people suffering ill health, particularly relating to work-related stress and mental health. The best employers work really hard on those issues, often in consultation with their trade union health and safety reps.

The Health and Safety Executive is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. It delivers a combination of proportionate enforcement, targeted regulatory work engagement and the development of standards and guidance. That includes public awareness activity to promote the safe use of ladders and power tools through guidance, surveillance work and campaigns.

The hon. Member for Strangford, who is no longer in his place, rightly spoke about the risks in agriculture. HSE works extensively with the Farm Safety Partnership to ensure that industry is aware of risks. We think about similar things in relation to construction and other high-risk environments.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Lilian Greenwood: Of course.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): With a huge sense of trepidation, as he was not here for the openings—or at least not until the very end of them.

Joe Morris: I apologise for my tardiness, Dr Murrison. I just want to pick up on the point about agriculture. As we are talking about national accident prevention, it is important to recognise that accidents in rural areas require a different level of promotion and public engagement. Will the Minister therefore join me in urging everyone involved in accident prevention to recognise the unique challenges that rural areas face and to take appropriate steps where possible, whether that is in road safety or in workplace safety?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In addressing all these things, we must think about who is most at risk and what the appropriate way is to intervene. A point was made earlier about how rural areas are particularly at risk. We know that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—the people in the poorest neighbourhoods—are most at risk of being involved in serious incidents. That is true for road safety, as it is for other things, but my hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of rurality, because rural roads are among the most dangerous.

To address accidents in educational settings, the Department for Education has worked with the Food Standards Agency to develop a food safety advice webpage, including a section on choking prevention. The Department already works with the Department for Business and Trade to ensure that safety alerts for products related to early years and childcare, including the five-step safety message for parents and carers, are communicated to the sector to minimise the risk of serious injury from toys.

Finally, the Office for Product Safety and Standards, which sits within the Department for Business and Trade, and local authority trading standards has powers

to tackle the supply of unsafe or non-compliant consumer products and remove them from the market. The Product Regulation and Metrology Act 2025 introduced various measures to reduce the risk of fires, including the risk of e-bike and e-scooter battery fires. Secondary legislation will regulate battery design, compatibility and safety information for consumers. The office also works with a variety of stakeholders, including fire and rescue services, other regulators, consumer bodies and safety charities, to gather information about incidents that may be linked to product safety issues.

I pay tribute to all the charities in the sector, which do such vital work, and to the volunteers, without whom they would not function. I know that many campaigners across the country do valuable work to raise awareness of accident prevention and shine a light on areas where improvement is needed. Like the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, I note the work of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents to campaign for a reduction in accidents at home, on the road, at work and at leisure. I particularly note its recently published annual review, which followed its 2024 report calling for a national accident prevention strategy. It has powerfully highlighted the human and economic costs of accidents to individuals and to society.

We recognise that coherent action is an important factor in tackling issues that may have many dimensions and owners. I regret that I am not in a position today to commit the Government to a national strategy, but I hope that right hon. and hon. Members can be reassured of two things. First, individual Departments take seriously their responsibilities for safety, security and accident prevention; I hope that the House will recognise my passion for road safety as just one example. Secondly, we will continue to work across Government to ensure that our approach to accident prevention is the right one. That includes a focus on prevention, such as rolling out a range of measures to tackle health inequalities and stop health problems at source. It also includes better use of data, such as the establishment of a data-led road safety investigation branch covering the whole of Great Britain, which will draw on data to carry out thematic investigations and make recommendations.

Once again, I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield for securing this debate. I am grateful to you, for overseeing us this afternoon, Dr Murrison, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken.

5.21 pm

Sir Andrew Mitchell: I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their speeches, which I think have very fully answered the comments that I tried to make in opening the debate. I also thank colleagues across the House for their contribution to this important subject.

I was pleased to hear the Minister say that she will chair the national road safety board. I very much hope that she will use that opportunity to help drive the more comprehensive approach to this matter that I set out in my opening remarks. In particular, I hope that she will ensure that it does not suffer from departmental turf exchanges. There is a real win to be achieved here by helping to drive this through the whole of Whitehall and produce a genuinely comprehensive strategy. I also hope that she will use RoSPA, which she spoke about warmly. I strongly concur with her remarks: it is a great organisation that can give the necessary perspective that we require, quite apart from being an example of the good sense and wisdom of the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, where it is based.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a national accident prevention strategy.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 28 April 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

United Kingdom Trade Envoy Programme

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): The Secretary of State for Business and Trade has today made the following appointment to the United Kingdom's trade envoy programme.

The United Kingdom's trade envoys are important to this Government's growth agenda. They support Ministers to deliver trade and investment outcomes within the industrial and trade strategies and attract foreign direct investment across UK regions.

Working in close partnership with our ambassadors, high commissioners, and His Majesty's trade commissioners, trade envoys support deeper bilateral trade relationships, lead trade missions, welcome inward delegations, and address market access challenges to ensure British firms can compete and succeed.

The role as a United Kingdom trade envoy is unpaid and voluntary with cross-party membership from both Houses.

The Secretary of State is pleased to appoint:

The hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to the Republic of Korea.

Today's appointment means there are now 32 trade envoys focusing on 73 markets.

[HCWS1544]

CABINET OFFICE

State of the Estate in 2024-25

The Minister without Portfolio (Anna Turley): I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, the "State of the Estate in 2024-25".

This report describes the progress made in improving the efficiency, sustainability and performance of the central Government estate.

The report confirms that the central Government estate comprised 203,400 assets in 2024-25. This included 181,100 built assets and around 22,400 land assets. The built estate had a total floor area of 159.1 million square metres, while the Government also held 640,400 hectares of land. The freehold value of the estate increased by 9.1% to £208.4 billion.

For the central Government estate within the scope of the greening Government commitments, the following changes were reported through that framework against the baseline 2017-18 financial year: by 2024-25, overall emissions had reduced by 42.1%, with energy costs reduced by an estimated £323.6 million.

Annual running costs reduced by 0.9% to £26.6 billion, despite continued inflationary pressures across utilities, maintenance and facilities management. Costs remain concentrated in a small number of operationally intensive portfolios, particularly health, defence and schools.

Efficiency savings reached £750 million, surpassing the £500 million target a year early, with the Government also raising £2 billion from property disposals ahead of time.

The "State of the Estate" report is published on an annual basis.

[HCWS1546]

DEFENCE

Armoured Cavalry Programme

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I am releasing this statement to the House today to provide Parliament with a further update on the armoured cavalry programme, commonly known as Ajax, following issues raised on exercise Titan Storm in November 2025.

Since my last update to this House, where I provided the findings of the ministerial review, the Army Safety Investigation Team (ASIT) investigation has now completed its investigation. ASIT's findings indicate no single causal mechanism of the symptoms reported by our soldiers but rather a combination of multiple factors. Specifically on noise and vibration, levels were found to be below legal exposure limits. Instead, these symptoms were likely the result of a combination of factors, including technical issues related to platform conditions at the time of the exercise—such as incorrect track tension and loose or missing engine deck bolts—alongside environmental and human factors, including variability in training and experience, cold exposure, and air quality within the Ajax vehicle itself.

The independent expert panel review remains ongoing, with a final report due soon, and will focus on the less well understood human and environmental factors relevant across defence more broadly.

In January this year I updated this House on the ministerial review, which examined the quality of advice that Ministers, senior officials and military leadership across the MOD received. On receiving further advice from the MOD's permanent secretary, we commissioned a further independent review to explore this issue. I can confirm that the terms of reference have been agreed and a lead reviewer has been identified and will be appointed shortly.

The safety of our people is non-negotiable. That is the standard our armed forces deserve, and it is the standard this Government will uphold.

I can confirm today that all personnel have now returned to normal duties following exercise Titan Storm. The majority of soldiers who felt ill during this exercise suffered from temporary symptoms and with the ASIT report concluding that there was no single causal factor for the symptoms experienced by the soldiers, I have now agreed to restart the acceptance of vehicles from General Dynamics. However, I accept that the experience for our soldiers using Ajax has not been good enough and that is not acceptable.

I have implemented strict new controls on the reintroduction of the Ajax vehicles that is focused on providing a significantly improved user experience.

Given that the issues presented on exercise Titan Storm, and to ensure the safety of our personnel, I can confirm that the 23 vehicles on the exercise will be

treated separately and will not be put back in the hands of soldiers until we have confirmed that it is appropriate to do so.

We have been engaging extensively and directly with our soldiers throughout this process—their experiences matter and they are shaping much of what we do next. As a result, we are considering a phased approach to restarting the Ajax programme.

The first phase will include the restarting of trials using the current version of Ajax. A limited number of vehicles will be used and under very controlled circumstances and maintenance regimes.

The second phase will see the delivery of a number of improvements relating to the use of air filtration, crew compartment heating, and the electrical power generation system—key themes identified and prioritised following exercise Titan Storm.

In addition to these improvements, we will further bolster the safety approach to the Ajax programme. Taking lessons from the aviation industry, we will instigate an approach which will instil a common thread between design, maintenance and operation.

Included as part of that work, there will be named individuals within the Army chain of command who will hold the separate responsibilities for operating and maintaining the vehicle. This is to ensure there cannot be instances where desire to operate a vehicle within the chain of command compromises the necessity for the highest standards of safety. That is why any return to training will also be very controlled with a crawl-walk-run staged progression ensuring safety is paramount throughout.

Using the information gathered from our soldiers, we will continue to proceed safely, responsibly, and transparently to deliver an improved Ajax vehicle for our soldiers.

While we are proceeding cautiously with Ajax, we know we have more to do to rebuild confidence in the vehicle, and we do not underestimate the work still ahead. We aspire to deliver a vehicle into service that is effective on the battlefield and works for our soldiers.

We will continue to work with General Dynamics to proceed safely, responsibly, and transparently to deliver an improved Ajax user experience for our soldiers. The above commitments will be met within the existing programme scope and financial envelope.

As I have done, I will continue to keep the House closely updated on the progress of the programme.

[HCWS1545]

Afghan Resttlement Programme

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): Today I am able to provide the House with a further update on the Afghan resettlement programme, as we continue to make good progress towards our intent of concluding the programme in this Parliament. This statement provides an update to the House on: the progress that the Ministry of Defence is making with eligibility decisions; the changes to how we deliver relocations for Afghans under the programme; and resettlement in the UK.

Since closing all schemes to new applicants in July 2025, we have made good progress with the application pipeline—falling from circa 25,000 outstanding applications in July to now fewer than 17,000—and are publishing quarterly key performance indicators to hold ourselves to account and ensure maximum transparency. We aim to have made all decisions in the current caseload by spring next year.

I announced last month that we have concluded the Triples review.

We have also now initiated the closure of the review of the ex-gratia medical payments scheme. The scheme was set up in 2020 to provide support to former locally employed staff in Afghanistan who were injured during their employment with the MOD. In 2020, the MOD initiated a process for reviewing the EGMP cases relating to individuals who wish to have their cases reassessed. Further detail on this is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ex-gratia-medical-payments-reviews.

Having closed ARP schemes to new applicants last year and as we work to draw ARP to a close, we estimate there are fewer than 9,000 eligible persons still to relocate to the UK. This is in part because we are finding far fewer applicants meet the eligibility criteria than in the years after the scheme opened.

As part of the commitment to relocate and resettle those found eligible under the ARP schemes, the MOD has been using a third-party organisation to support individuals moving out of Afghanistan. This support has been aimed at ensuring eligible individuals and their families can safely and legally reach a UK visa application centre in a third country to progress through their Home Office entry clearance stages.

This year, however, more eligible Afghans have self-moved to a third country. Having seen increased evidence of successful self-moves and after assessing carefully again the risks to this cohort and other factors, including the value for money for the taxpayer, we have decided to end in-country assistance for movements out of Afghanistan. This decision will have the effect of more closely aligning the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and the Afghanistan response route with the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, which is based on a self-move policy. We will keep the ARP support offer under review as the context evolves.

Eligible Afghans will need to make their own way to a third country when they are able to do so. We are contacting all those immediately impacted by this change.

I want to reassure eligible Afghans that once they reach a safe third country, we maintain provision of our current support until 2028.

As I previously reported to the House, we cannot sustain ARP support indefinitely. To enable us to deliver on our ambitions to conclude this programme well within this Parliament and for us to prepare sensibly for the transition of ARP resources to other defence priorities, we intend to:

Enforce the provision within the immigration rules that requires eligible individuals to attend a VAC appointment within 12 months—save for exceptional circumstances; and

Introduce a backstop of December 2028 for the MOD'S support in third countries, including submission of entry clearance applications to the Home Office. Save for exceptional circumstances, December 2028 will therefore mark the end of relocations to the UK.

As set out by the Defence Secretary in his statement to Parliament on 18 December 2024, it remains the Government's aim to reduce the reliance on the defence estate as transitional accommodation.

The defence estate has played a vital role in providing transitional accommodation for Afghan families in recent years, enabling them to begin their new lives in the safety of the UK. But the use of the defence estate for the ARP was never intended to be a long-term solution. We have therefore ceased to run transitional sites on the defence estate, with the small number of Afghans remaining in transitional accommodation now supported by local authorities. We are also piloting an approach which empowers local authorities to make tailored decisions on where and how ARP households are accommodated, which will bring positive community outcomes. The MOD is committed to reducing the number of service family accommodation properties being used as settled accommodation and ending their use by the end of 2028.

The small number of hotels procured to help with transitional pressures also play a valuable role in providing safe and secure accommodation for Afghans as they begin their new lives in the UK. However, with a better sense of numbers yet to relocate and the strong progress made in moving those already here into settled accommodation, I can confirm we have started to reduce the use of hotels and will have closed two of six by this May.

I want to take the opportunity to thank our partners in local government and other supportive local organisations, who have, and continue to provide critical support to eligible Afghans in the resettlement process to date.

I want to restate the Government commitment to work with all those involved in ensuring that the ARP delivers on our commitment to resettle those eligible Afghans, many of whom who do so much in support of the UK and contribute to our communities and economy.

I remain confident in progress towards our goal of concluding central Government delivery of this programme well before the end of this Parliament and believe the measures we have taken and set out in this statement will help us deliver on that. I will continue to keep the House updated accordingly.

[HCWS1547]

JUSTICE

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): I hereby give notice of the Ministry of Justice's intention to seek an advance from the Contingencies Fund totalling £1.7 million.

This follows the introduction of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, currently going through Parliament, and which we anticipate will receive Royal Assent by autumn 2026.

Accessing the Contingencies Fund allows the Department to manage the expenditure associated with developing a digital system for the Legal Aid Agency to effectively administer the provision of legal aid under the provisions of the Bill, which will expand the scope of legal aid for inquests. This expenditure will ensure that we are able to implement the legal aid provisions of the Bill as quickly as possible following Royal Assent. The expenditure will also mean that we develop this system in a way that ensures the continuing recovery and effective operation of existing legal aid digital systems and protects work under way to deliver transformed digital systems for legal aid.

Parliamentary approval for resource of £1.7 million for this new service will be sought in a main estimate for Ministry of Justice. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1.7 million will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund. The cash advance will then be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

[HCWS1543]

Petition

Tuesday 28 April 2026

OBSERVATIONS

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill

The petition of residents of the constituency of Rushcliffe,

Declares that an assisted dying law should be enacted without further delay, following the House of Commons voting in favour of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill in June 2025; and further declares that there is overwhelming public support for law change.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take such actions as are within its power to facilitate the progress of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by James Naish, Official Report,* 25 March 2026; Vol. 783, c. 365.]

[P003176]

A petition in the same terms was presented by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) [P003187].

Observations from the Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell):

Parliamentary sovereignty is a fundamental principle of the UK's constitutional settlement. This means that it is Parliament, not the Government, that holds the power to make or repeal any law.

The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill was introduced to the House of Commons as a Private Member's Bill, and on the question of assisted dying, the Government have remained neutral on the Bill throughout its parliamentary stages. It is not a Government Bill and, as such, it will continue to follow the process for a Private Member's Bill.

Written Corrections

Tuesday 28 April 2026

Ministerial Correction

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Women's Health Strategy

The following extract is from the statement on the Women's Health Strategy on 16 April 2026.

Karin Smyth: The waiting list for gynae care was north of 600,000 when we took office. Today that figure is finally moving in the right direction, but we cannot make as much progress as we would like because the system simply was not designed with women in mind…

Women's health pathways are being prioritised in NHS Online, and menopause and menstrual health services will be among the first to go live when it becomes operational this year.

[*Official Report*, 16 April 2026; Vol. 783, c. 1049.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth):

Karin Smyth: The waiting list for gynae care was **nearly** 600,000 when we took office. Today that figure is finally moving in the right direction, but we cannot make as much progress as we would like because the system simply was not designed with women in mind…

Women's health pathways are being prioritised in NHS Online, and menopause and menstrual health services will be among the first to go live when it becomes operational **next** year.

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Tuesday 5 May 2026

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