

**Tuesday
19 May 2026**

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No. 4**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 19 May 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Tuesday 19 May 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in the present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of Makerfield, in the room of Joshua Cameron Simons, who, since his election for the said Borough Constituency, has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Three Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham in the county of Buckingham.—(*Jonathan Reynolds.*)

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make. I would like to draw Members' attention to the fact that the book for entering the private Members' Bill ballot is now open. It will be open until the House rises today and while the House is sitting tomorrow. On both days, the book will be available for Members to sign in the No Lobby until 6 pm. It will then be taken to the Public Bill Office and remain open for signatures until the rise of the House.

The ballot itself will be drawn at 9 am this Thursday in Committee Room 16. An announcement setting out these and other arrangements, and the dates when ten-minute rule motions can be made and presentation Bills introduced, is published in the Order Paper.

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Family Courts

1. **Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): What steps he is taking to reform the family courts. [900001]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): The Government are reforming the family justice system to better support families and children. We are rolling out the child-focused model nationally, developing a cross-system family justice strategy and legislating for new child safety measures that ensure that child welfare continues to be prioritised.

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful for that response. My constituent Olivia is an extraordinary survivor of sustained coercive control involving psychological, physical and financial abuse—a set of abuses that continued even after her separation from her partner, because of child contact arrangements, which left her in persistent fear

for both her safety and that of her child. What steps are the Secretary of State and his Front Bench team taking to strengthen safeguarding in the family courts and to protect domestic abuse survivors from re-traumatisation, particularly when perpetrators use mechanisms such as child contact arrangements to continue their abuse?

Mr Lammy: The whole House will have sympathy for Olivia. The family courts must never be a place for perpetrators to continue their abuse. Repealing the presumption of parental involvement will ensure that children's wellbeing continues to be the court's primary focus when considering contact. Under the child-focused model, independent domestic violence advisers can provide victims with specialist family support.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): One of the successes of the family justice system is the family mediation voucher scheme. Two thirds of families who use the scheme avoid going to court, which takes a lot of pressure off the family courts. It started in 2021 and gets renewed every year, often at the end of the year or even when the next year has started, which creates huge uncertainty. Will the Secretary of State just say that he will make the scheme permanent from now on?

Mr Lammy: I can confirm to the Chair of the Select Committee that the family mediation voucher scheme will be extended for another year, giving separating families £500 towards their mediation costs to help them solve issues with childcare and finances without going to court. I will look carefully at the permanency of those arrangements.

Reoffending

2. **Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help reduce levels of reoffending. [900002]

10. **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What steps he is taking to help reduce levels of reoffending. [900010]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): The Government are giving offenders the tools to move away from a life of crime. We are led by the evidence when addressing needs such as housing, employment and substance misuse treatment and support in order to develop personal skills and behaviours. We are also investing £700 million in probation and expanding intensive supervision courts for prolific offenders.

Tony Vaughan: Reach Out and Recover Kent, a brilliant organisation that I met in Folkestone over the weekend, helps people, including ex-offenders, to recover and stay away from addiction so they can gain skills and work to reintegrate into society. However, Ministry of Justice figures show that at the six-month post-release point, the reoffending rate is twice as high for unemployed adults as for those in employment. What are the Government doing to ensure that more ex-offenders in my constituency get tailored and timely support, particularly for addiction, to get them back into work and enable them to leave offending behind them once and for all?

Jake Richards: My hon. and learned Friend is right to raise those issues and the good work that is happening in his constituency. As he knows, Lord Timpson is leading work on what happens when inmates are in custody. That means working with health services to ensure that our prisoners are getting the support they need, as well as with private sector employers to ensure that there are opportunities afterwards. I will ask Lord Timpson to write to him with the specifics about what is happening in his area.

Tim Farron: I had the honour of taking part as a volunteer in a restorative justice programme at His Majesty's Prison Haverigg in Cumbria a few years ago. Restorative justice gives victims the opportunity to share with offenders the real impact of their crimes and gives offenders the opportunity to take serious responsibility. Studies show that restorative justice reduces reoffending rates by up to 28%, so what is the Minister doing to ensure that restorative justice programmes are delivered in every prison?

Jake Richards: The hon. Gentleman is right that there is an important role for restorative justice in our criminal justice system. Just yesterday we made an announcement on the use of restorative justice in our youth courts, as well as the appointment of Jacob Dunne as an expert adviser. Jacob Dunne, who will be known to many Members of the House, is a great champion of restorative justice, and someone who has experienced it. There is more to do in the adult estate, and the Government will announce measures on rehub, which is an essential cog of the restorative justice system, in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The Government are talking a good game on reducing the cycle of reoffending, but meaningful prison education plays a key role in that objective. Recent analysis has found a significant decrease in the core education hours in public sector prisons. That has been seen most acutely in female prisons, where there has been a fall of 30%. What is the Minister doing to reverse that decline in education hours across all prisons, end the postcode lottery that we see currently, and ensure that obligations to equality are met?

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is right to raise the importance of education in our prisons. The scandal with education in our prisons is that there are classrooms and workshops that are left empty day in, day out, because the prison system remains unstable and capacity is going through the roof. This Government have been rightly focused on getting stability into the prison system. We will make announcements about investment into education, but we will also be using the private sector and the third sector, not just Government contracts. Again, Lord Timpson will be making announcements on that in due course.

Violence against Women and Girls

3. Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): How he plans to work with the Prime Minister's adviser on women and girls to help tackle violence against women and girls through the criminal justice system. [900003]

4. Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): How he plans to work with the Prime Minister's adviser on women and girls to help tackle violence against women and girls through the criminal justice system. [900004]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): This Government are committed to halving violence against women and girls. Baroness Harman will report directly to the Prime Minister and work across Government to ensure that we deliver the urgent change that is needed. There are few who can match Baroness Harman's decades-long commitment to women and girls. She has consistently driven change, and I look forward to working closely with her in our new roles.

Dave Robertson: In March, the Prime Minister agreed to meet survivors of abuse by Mohammed Fayed, the former owner of Harrods, Fulham football club and other businesses. Almost 500 survivors have come forward, all of whom have been waiting for years, and in many cases decades, for justice. Can the Minister confirm whether the Prime Minister's adviser on women and girls will attend that meeting, and what progress has been made on scheduling it?

Catherine Atkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued leadership as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the survivors of Fayed and Harrods. I was in contact with Baroness Harman yesterday and will raise the possibility of her joining the Prime Minister's meeting with victims and survivors. I too would be humbled to meet those for whom my hon. Friend has advocated so powerfully both in and outside this Chamber.

Dr Gardner: I welcome the announcement of a record £100 million expansion of GPS tagging for domestic abusers following a pilot by the Greater London Authority that saw reoffending fall by up to 63%. However, the current plans will apply only to the highest-risk offenders. Given that all domestic abuse is serious and many perpetrators escalate their violence on release, I am concerned that this will allow abusers to slip through the net. Will the Minister consider extending GPS tagging to all convicted offenders of domestic abuse, not just those deemed high risk?

Catherine Atkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for her consistent and proactive support for domestic abuse victims. Ensuring that it is perpetrators and not victims who are punished and restricted is key to the DAPOL—domestic abuse perpetrators on licence—pilot that will be rolled out nationally from September. Offenders are tagged on release and subjected to strict conditions, such as exclusion zones and curfews. DAPOL will allow the Probation Service to tag any and all offenders who are considered to be at risk of perpetrating domestic abuse. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss her concerns.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Further to the Minister's response to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), and on the basis that justice delayed is justice denied, will she seek to use her good offices with the Home Office to ensure that the

Metropolitan police expedite their investigations so that the hundreds of women who suffered at the hands of Fayed can at last have the justice that they deserve?

Catherine Atkinson: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that justice delayed is justice denied, which is why this Government are taking such proactive steps to reduce the delays that victims are experiencing. I would be happy to meet him and other Members who I know are hugely concerned about the impact of these cases on victims and survivors.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I welcome the Minister to her place. Almost the first thing the Prime Minister's new adviser on women and girls did after she was appointed was to say on social media that Arooj Shah, the recently defeated leader of Oldham council, should be given a peerage. She did so despite the fact that Shah spent years trying to block a full inquiry into rape and grooming gangs in Oldham. What does the Minister think that says to victims and survivors, and how can they and the public trust the new adviser now? I would also be interested to know whether the Minister agrees that Shah should be made a life peer.

Catherine Atkinson: Baroness Harman's record speaks for itself. She has spent decades turning words into action, whether by passing landmark legislation, strengthening protections or relentlessly pushing this issue, which should never be used for party political point scoring, up the political agenda. It is this Prime Minister and this Government who are determined to halve violence against women and girls. Our VAWG strategy sets out the plan to do so, and we are getting on with the job of delivering it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the new Minister to her post. For all the policies she might be glad to inherit, she is also inheriting a plan later this year to let out potentially thousands of the worst offenders against women and girls, including rapists and those responsible for sexual assault. The Government are refusing to be transparent about this and are not answering freedom of information requests and written questions about how many rapists and sexual assault offenders will be allowed out of prison earlier. Will this new Minister turn over a new leaf and at least be transparent about how many rapists the Government will be letting out of prison early later this year?

Catherine Atkinson: The Conservatives left a criminal justice system in which victims wait years for trials and feel traumatised by their experiences in court and in which our prisons were full, with the system at risk of collapse. That is not to mention the Probation Service, which, after the Conservatives' failed privatisation attempts, was on its knees. It is this Labour Government who are taking action to halve violence against women and girls, reduce the time that victims wait to see justice and better support victims with record investment in victim support services.

Dr Mullan: I ask the Minister to think about a situation in which a victim of rape comes to her constituency surgery whose rapist is currently in prison but will now get out of prison earlier. I wonder what that victim

would think about the answer the Minister has just given to a serious question about a serious issue. If she refuses to tell the House that information, will she—at the very least—commit to writing to all the women and girls whose offender is currently not due to come out of prison for two or three years, but who will now be getting out this year? Will she at least have the good grace to tell the victims when that is going to happen?

Catherine Atkinson: I meet constituents every week, and victims will always be my priority. The hon. Gentleman has come to this House time and again to list horrific offences, but he has not once apologised for the damage that his party did to our justice system. Victims will not forget the mess the Conservatives created, forgive their failure to take action or be fooled by their claims to care now. It is this Labour Government who have committed to halving violence against women and girls, and this Labour Government who have the plan to make it happen.

Family Court: Harassment of Domestic Abuse Victims

5. Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent people convicted of domestic abuse from using family court proceedings to harass their victims. [900005]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): Perpetrators must not be allowed to use the family courts to further their abuse. While the family courts already have a range of tools designed to protect victims, we are going further by rolling out the child-focused courts model nationally.

Richard Quigley: While I welcome the steps the Department has already taken to prevent perpetrators of domestic abuse from using the family courts to continue coercive control, will the Minister look to ensure that legal aid is accessible to victims in pathfinder courts, particularly at decision hearings, given the worrying reports that it has become nearly impossible to access it in practice, so that perpetrators cannot exploit this process and continue their campaigns of harassment?

Catherine Atkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for again speaking up on behalf of domestic abuse victims. I remember the powerful debate that he secured on protecting children from domestic abuse. The Government recognise the vital role that legal aid plays in supporting victims of abuse. Child-focused courts, otherwise known as pathfinder courts, have been rolled out to 10 court areas, most recently the Isle of Wight in January. Legal aid is available in child-focused courts for victims of domestic violence or those at risk of abuse, but we are aware that there are challenges affecting timely access. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend on this issue, and I assure the House that we are working to resolve this matter swiftly.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): About one in 20 rural households experience some form of domestic abuse, although experts believe that this figure is significantly understated owing to chronic under-reporting. Evidence shows that financial control and exclusion from business decisions are a particular feature in rural areas. The pressures of multigenerational living,

the unique stresses of farming life and the combination of geographic and digital isolation can all heighten vulnerability. Will the Minister set out what specific steps the Government are taking to address those rural risk factors and improve reporting pathways, and will she consider setting up a special committee to look into this issue?

Catherine Atkinson: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important issue. Alongside the roll-out of child-focused courts, more work needs to be done to look at coercive control. I know it is an issue of real interest to many across the House, and it is something that the Government take very seriously.

Jury Trial Proposals

6. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of proposed changes to jury trials on the criminal justice system. [900006]

20. **Sarah Pochin** (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of restricting the right to trial by jury in some circumstances on levels of public confidence in the criminal justice system. [900024]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): We inherited a justice system in crisis, with a backlog of over 80,000 cases—double what it was in the pre-covid era—and with victims, witnesses and defendants waiting years for justice. That is what truly undermines confidence in our justice system. Justice delayed is justice denied. Only by pulling every lever—investment, efficiency and reform—can we turn the tide.

Gregory Stafford: On the Secretary of State's watch, the courts backlog has reached record levels, yet his answer is to weaken one of the oldest rights in our justice system: trial by jury. The backlog was not caused by juries and it will not be solved by scrapping juries. The Bar Council says there is very little evidence for the Government's approach, while the Institute for Government estimates that it would save at most about 2% of court time, and even that may be generous. Why will the Government not drop this ill-judged proposal and focus instead on the serious reforms needed to cut the backlog and speed up justice for victims?

Mr Lammy: If the hon. Gentleman were serious, he would get on top of the detail. We are not scrapping juries; juries remain a cornerstone of our system. Just as Margaret Thatcher made changes to the jury system, and just as the Blair Government made changes to the jury system, we are making changes to bring down the backlog.

Sarah Pochin: On Saturday, the Secretary of State promised extra court time for anyone arrested at the "Unite the Kingdom" march, yet there are grooming gang survivors who have waited more than 20 years for their cases to come to court. How is it that he is able to find court time to arrest protesters, yet some victims of vile sexual abuse are waiting decades to have their cases heard in court?

Mr Lammy: I would have thought that the hon. Lady, as a magistrate, would recognise that the right to protest exists in our country and we defend it, but that where people spew hate or incite violence and where anyone causes criminal damage or harm, of course the courts will bear down on them in the strongest possible way.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Hon. Members fairly hold strong views on these reforms. It is notable that, in Scotland, the right to elect between solemn and summary procedure for certain offences does not sit with the accused but with the procurator fiscal, but the people of Scotland are listening to this salient debate. Does the Secretary of State agree that we must conduct the debate on the Government's reforms without feeding the increasingly malignant narratives of certain groups who are seeking to undermine public confidence in prosecutions and convictions in every corner of the United Kingdom?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is fundamental that people have confidence in our justice system, wherever they are across these isles. That is why this Government are seeking to do all they can to get both the court system and the prison system out of the crisis that we inherited.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Ind): It must be absolutely exhausting for the Justice Secretary to hold on to an idea that only he still pretends is a good one. The Mayor of London is opposed to these changes and has tried to persuade the Justice Secretary to bin them. The Mayor of Greater Manchester is opposed to this ludicrous idea. The leader of Scottish Labour was opposed to this idea—and it does not even involve Scotland. The former Welsh First Minister was apparently opposed to it. When is the Justice Secretary going to get his ego out the way and bin the ludicrous idea of curtailing jury trials?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman makes his point with real force. However, he never talks about victims, and has not explained how we should bring down the backlog. The truth is that we are determined to bring down the backlog, and that is why—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Turner, I took the question; I expect you to hear the answer as well.

Mr Lammy: We are determined to bring down the backlog. The hon. Gentleman knows that Governments of all stripes stand by our jury system and stand by Magna Carta. We are not scrapping jury trials.

Karl Turner: Bin it!

Mr Lammy: I know that the hon. Gentleman gets excited about this, but he should recognise that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I come with good news: with increased funding from the Government, uncapped sitting days and improved disposal rates, backlogs in the Crown courts are falling. At the Old Bailey in 2025, the backlog fell by a quarter, in Chelmsford it fell by 10%, and Maidstone saw a 5% reduction. The

truth is that proper funding for our courts and uncapped sitting days are bringing down the backlogs, but the Government are choosing to ignore that data and are persisting in taking a sledgehammer to jury trials, although that will not deliver shorter wait times for victims. Why will the Minister not trust those in the justice system who want to deliver for victims using the increased funding and resource that he has delivered for them?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for recognising that we have seen a small reduction because of the increased investment I have put in, and because of the extra sitting days; the modernisation that we have talked about, and enlisting artificial intelligence in particular, will also make a difference. However, given the size of the backlog, if we are serious about bringing it down over the next few years, we will need reform as well.

Open Prisons: Policy on Convicted Paedophiles

7. **Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Whether his Department has a policy on the housing of convicted paedophiles in open prisons. [900007]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): Prisoners are moved to an open prison as part of the rehabilitation process, but only after they pass a thorough risk assessment. Every prisoner, including those serving a sentence for a sexual offence, is subject to an individual risk assessment. They will not be allowed to move to an open prison unless they are assessed as presenting a low enough risk. A prisoner can be immediately returned from an open prison to closed conditions if their risk increases.

Alicia Kearns: Paedophiles should be behind bars, not roaming our communities. I am afraid that the Minister's words will ring hollow for my constituent who received a call in January and was told that her abuser, the paedophile, who was only two years into a nine-year sentence, had been moved into an open prison, and now had the right to leave the site freely, and even stay out overnight. Will the Government review these moves? Clearly something is not working. Will the Minister also specifically look into this case, which is utterly unacceptable?

Jake Richards: As I said, each case is considered on its own circumstances, and the risk is assessed by the professionals. I am very happy to look into that case and make sure that the appropriate officials look into it too.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): As an MP whose constituency has a category C prison for male sex offenders that is almost at capacity—HMP Littlehey—I welcome the clarity from the Minister regarding paedophiles in the prison estate.

We know that the Minister is on the hook to deliver thousands of new category C and D prison places. I want to ask him about the prison places he has made almost no progress on since the election because the contractor ISG went into administration in September 2024. I first highlighted the failure of that project last year.

Can he confirm whether, since then, all those 12 prisons have had new contractors appointed? When will those prison places be delivered?

Jake Richards: This Government are undertaking the biggest prison building programme since the Victorian era. We will be building 13,000 new places by 2031. We inherited a prison capacity crisis from the Conservatives, so it takes some chutzpah for them to start asking questions about prison building. We are committed to the prison building programme that we announced in 2024, and we are confident that we will match it. We are fixing the mess that they created.

Knife Crime Strategy

8. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What progress he has made with Cabinet colleagues on the Government's knife crime strategy. [900008]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): I am delighted to be working with the Home Secretary and other Cabinet colleagues to deliver our ambitious goal of halving knife crime within a decade. In February, we published the youth knife possession guidance, which delivers tougher consequences for knife carriers. The youth justice White Paper published yesterday sets out how the Government will intervene earlier to stop children becoming involved in offending, and ensure that those who do are dealt with swiftly and effectively.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I welcome the Government's knife crime strategy, with its ambitious goal of halving knife crime in a decade, and its recognition that serious violence is both a criminal justice issue and a social failure. I commend Thames Valley police on their hard work to tackle knife crime in Aylesbury and the villages. We have seen some really good measures, such as the knife crime amnesty bins, which have had a positive effect. As the Secretary of State knows, the challenge of knife crime starts with its root causes, which include poverty and a lack of opportunity for young people. We still struggle with that in Aylesbury and the villages. What more is the Secretary of State doing across Government to address these two root causes?

Mr Lammy: I agree that poverty, exclusion and a lack of opportunity are all root causes of crime. Our youth justice White Paper focuses on intervening earlier to address risks before they escalate, working across Government to tackle the root causes of crime, and ensuring that every child has the support and opportunities that they need to thrive.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Has the Secretary of State established the success or otherwise of knife amnesties introduced by previous Administrations in reducing knife crime, given the prevalence—and increase—of knife crime in many large urban centres across the country?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right that there is a role for knife amnesties. As it happens, I was out last week in Deptford looking at a knife amnesty programme. If he looks at the first item on my Instagram, he will see me doing that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Last year, 6,397 knife criminals were sent to prison, and the average sentence was just over eight months. As the Government scrapped almost all sentences of less than a year, will the Justice Secretary say very clearly whether he expects as many knife criminals to go to jail next year as did last year?

Mr Lammy: The outrage under the last Government was watching knife crime go up year on year, while the hon. Gentleman was sitting in the Home Office—

Nick Timothy: That's not even true!

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Timothy, you get two questions. Can you at least wait half a minute before you jump in?

Mr Lammy: It is a serious subject, and I am pleased that after 22 months in office, we have seen falls in knife crime in the last year. We will continue with our knife crime strategy.

Nick Timothy: What the Justice Secretary just said about the record of the last Government was factually untrue, and he should withdraw it. He does not want to admit it, but it is his policy to send fewer knife criminals to jail. That is why he just said what he did. His White Paper was announced yesterday, and buried in it, on page 46—he can read it again—is his plan to not just go soft on young criminals, but make others, “including vulnerable adults and young adults...subject to a different process”.

That is wrong. Can the Justice Secretary rule out weaker sentences, and a target of reducing imprisonment rates for any adult criminals?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman left us with a prison capacity crisis. The last Government had success in reducing the number of young people in prison—he knows it, and the record is there—and I worked with Michael Gove and David Cameron as they set out on that mission. The strategy we published yesterday puts public protection first. There will always be young people who have to be in custody, but we are determined to reduce the number of young people on remand in particular by working with the most vulnerable.

Victims Code

9. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on a new victims code. [900009]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): The Victims' Commissioner will deliver a new, strengthened victims code. We have engaged with victims, support services and criminal justice professionals in a consultation that closed on 30 April, and we are now taking time to consider nearly 200 responses. We will issue a public response ahead of finalising the new code and bringing it into force.

Patrick Hurley: In my constituency, an acknowledged victim of violent crime is being alleged to be contributorily negligent in the civil courts. That is retraumatising, and appears to be contrary to natural justice. Will the Minister

meet me and my constituents to discuss this further, and see what measures can be put in place to address concerns about how the civil law system deals with such cases?

Catherine Atkinson: The new victims code will ensure that victims know what services, support and information they are entitled to in the criminal justice system, but our civil and family courts should never be used to perpetuate the trauma that victims have suffered. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend, or to arrange a meeting with the relevant Minister, so that we can better understand the case that my hon. Friend raises, and what his constituent faces.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): In 1990, Dr David Birkett was brutally murdered in a crime that shocked the Teesside community. He was discovered by his young daughter, who is a constituent of mine. Despite the Deputy Prime Minister's very welcome opposition, the murderer was recently released. May I thank the Ministry of Justice for agreeing to a request from me and the hon. Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) for a meeting with my constituent to hear her concerns about the process, and about her interactions with the Parole Board leading up to the murderer's release? I know that the matter is subject to an ongoing judicial review, but I thank the Ministry of Justice for its continued attention to this case, and urge it to learn what we can do to support victims in the future.

Catherine Atkinson: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for raising this deeply distressing case. I pay tribute to Dr Birkett's daughter for her courage in continuing to engage, which is truly commendable. He is right that the Parole Board is independent of Government. The Deputy Prime Minister's application for reconsideration was not considered to have reached the threshold. He decided to seek permission not to set aside the Parole Board's decision, but for judicial review of the decision, and that has been filed. I await the response, and hope that permission is granted, but I reassure the right hon. Member and Dr Birkett's family that this Department will continue to seek to mitigate the hurt that they are feeling.

Criminalisation of Children in Care

11. **John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent the criminalisation of children while in care. [900012]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): Far too many care-experienced people end up in the criminal justice system. Last November, the Deputy Prime Minister announced a review of the national protocol for reducing the criminalisation of that cohort. Officials are actively working on that, and we will publish a strengthened protocol later this year.

John Whitby: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Children in care have often faced significant trauma, instability, neglect or abuse. As a result, many of them end up in the criminal justice system, and care leavers are 10 times more likely to end up in prison. Counselling has been shown to help keep children in care out of prison, which is obviously

better for the young people, and saves the state money in the long term. Will the Minister consider changing national protocol guidelines to ensure that trauma counselling is provided to children in care who are identified as being at risk of engaging in criminality?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue. The disproportionate number of care leavers and children who have been in our criminal justice system is a national disgrace. Just yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister met the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister)—the Minister responsible for children's social care—to look at the issues in the round. As I said, we are looking at strengthening the protocol, and we will publish that in due course.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Of course, the youngest children in care are babies. It might shock the House to learn that there are 36 babies residing, through no fault of their own, in mother and baby units around the country. Given that babies are taken away from their mothers on a case-by-case basis after 18 months, I wonder whether part of the sentencing review should be about whether it is appropriate at all for mothers and babies—particularly the babies—to be imprisoned, apart from in the most serious criminal cases.

Jake Richards: I thank the hon. Member for that important question; he is right to raise the matter. Indeed, he raised a similar theme in the Commons just yesterday. Lord Timpson has a particular focus on female offenders and women inmates in prison, and he will make an announcement in due course.

Criminal Justice System: Support for Men and Boys

12. **Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support men and boys through the criminal justice system. [900014]

14. **Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support men and boys through the criminal justice system. [900016]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): The Prime Minister asked me to lead work across Government to improve outcomes for boys and men. That includes a specific focus on convening and co-ordinating the brilliant work being done across Departments, including on health and wellbeing, education and employment, and masculinities and connection. Furthermore, yesterday we set out a plan for youth justice reform, which was the first in many years.

Alistair Strathern: The Anti-Slavery Commissioner recently called out the targeted online grooming of young men by county lines gangs. That is far from being an isolated case of such targeting. Young men growing up in Britain today are all too often targeted by those in the worst corners of the internet—from those in the manosphere to predatory gambling companies to get-rich-quick schemes. However, while Ofcom rightly has guidance for platforms about how to better protect women and girls from the specific harms that they can

be exposed to, no such parallel guidance exists for young men and boys growing up in Britain. We are all worse off as a result. We recently convened over 60 MPs to write to Ofcom to urge it to put that right. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join us today in calling on Ofcom to step up? It is in its gift to do so. Let us get this done.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Secretary of State knows what the question is.

Mr Lammy: It is an excellent question. My hon. Friend is quite right; there are many concerns about the online space and what it means for men and boys in a modern society, and there is an important role for Ofcom. I encourage him to write to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, and I will take a close interest. I hope that he gets a meeting with a Minister.

Amanda Martin: As the founding member of the Labour group for men and boys, I welcome the Government's focus on prevention opportunity, because supporting men and boys is not zero sum; it benefits women, girls, families and communities, too. In Portsmouth, too many boys and young men are struggling with education, mental health and pathways into work, while many older men tell me that they increasingly feel isolated, overlooked and mistrustful of institution and politics. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with Cabinet colleagues about rebuilding purpose, trust and opportunity for men and boys across our communities? Will he work with me to turn this ambition into meaningful action for men and boys in Portsmouth?

Mr Lammy: I am keen to work with my hon. Friend on this issue. I recognise that there are real issues in her constituency in this regard. She will be pleased to hear that last month I attended a roundtable with some of the leading figures in the men and boys sector to hear their concerns directly from them. I am also chairing the interministerial group on men and boys. There is real excitement, right across Whitehall, about the fact that we can do something about this over the next two years.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): An often under-appreciated element of the criminal justice system is the impact that it has on fathers' ability to stay part of their family. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) shared research conducted by the University of Plymouth about fathers separated from their children, and the impact of that on family life. If we are to rehabilitate people in prison, we must help them maintain their family relationships. Will the Secretary of State take steps to tackle communication barriers for those with young children, and improve the way in which children can integrate with parents in prison?

Mr Lammy: A few years ago, I set up the all-party parliamentary group for fatherhood. The hon. Lady is right: the role of fathers in all children's lives is vital. There is nothing more affecting than programmes in prison, for example, where fathers who are illiterate and unable to write are helped to do so in order to stay in communication with their children. I will look closely.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I am sure that the House will join me in paying tribute to the former Minister for victims, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), for her amazing work. I wish the new Minister the best of luck in the role.

Some 90% of young men and boys incarcerated for violent offences have experienced or witnessed domestic abuse or another form of abuse at home. The Government are investing in increasing the number of independent domestic violence advisers available to adult survivors, but there is no like-for-like equivalent for children to access that kind of direct advocacy. Will the Justice Secretary consider that proposal, which a number of victims charities have advocated for, to ensure that young men and boys have the domestic abuse support that they need and deserve?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for her tremendous work. I think the whole House will recognise that, as a Minister, she was entirely on top of her brief and she commanded the respect of victims groups right across our country. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point and I will look closely at what more we can do for young people who experience domestic violence.

Prisoner Releases in Error

13. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of prisoners released in error since July 2024. [900015]

19. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of prisoners released in error since July 2024. [900022]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): The Government are committed to transparency on this issue. We publish data on releases in error each July in the HM Prison and Probation Service annual digest. On 15 April we also published ad hoc data for April 2025 to March 2026, alongside Dame Lynne Owens' independent review and the Government's response, accepting, in principle, all the recommendations.

Joe Robertson: Oh dear. My question was about how many prisoners have been released in error under this Government, and the Minister does not seem to know the answer. That is okay, as I can tell him. It is 441, which over a two-year period is the worst on record. Will he now apologise, or will he provide a convoluted excuse about why it is not his Government's fault?

Jake Richards: That question is a very good example of someone not listening to my answer but assuming that he had. We will release the data for this very serious and important issue, as we should, in due course. We released the data earlier this year on an ad hoc basis. By the way, in 14 years the Conservative Government never released data on prisoner releases in error, so we will take no lectures from the Opposition Benches on that issue. Fundamentally, Dame Lynne Owens has conducted a review of this important issue and set out a series of recommendations on how to solve it, which we have accepted and will begin to implement, so I will take no lessons from the Opposition Benches on this issue.

James Wild: Despite implementing what the Justice Secretary said were the strongest ever checks, every week criminals are being given a "Get out of jail free" card. How many of those 441 prisoners, wrongly let out of prison on Labour's watch, remain at large, and why is it still taking days for the Prison Service to let the police know when it has wrongly released people?

Jake Richards: The truth is that this is a long-standing issue in our criminal justice system, and it is a disgrace—any release in error is a disgrace. How do we solve the issue? We solve it by investing in our prison system. That is why we are building more prisons than we have done since the Victorian era. We are investing in stabilising the prison population. That is why we introduced the Sentencing Act 2026, so finally we have some sustainability in our prison system, after the Conservatives did absolutely nothing. We are taking action, as recommended by Dame Lynne Owens, and that action will be undertaken rapidly.

Topical Questions

T1. [900025] **Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): Since the last Justice questions, the Victims and Courts Act 2026 and the Crime and Policing Act 2026, which both put victims at the heart of the justice system, have received Royal Assent. In the Gracious Speech, His Majesty the King confirmed that we will proceed with the Courts and Tribunals Bill to turn the tide on the Crown court backlog and deliver swifter justice for victims, and that we remain committed to a Hillsborough law to bring in a duty of candour for public service and rebuild confidence in the justice system. Those are yet more examples of this Government getting on with delivering justice for the British people.

Ben Maguire: Cornwall continues to face some of the UK's worst legal aid deserts, with rurality and lack of transport adding to the postcode lottery. According to the Law Society, a third of domestic abuse survivors were forced to represent themselves in court, as even when advice is available, eligibility criteria often stand in their way. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss raising the income threshold for the legal aid means test in line with inflation and removing the capital assets requirement altogether to ensure that victims of economic abuse can access justice?

Mr Lammy: It is of course important that those who need legal aid can access it, including those in rural communities and victims of domestic abuse. We work with the market to mitigate localised pressures where they exist, by supporting a mix of face-to-face, telephone and remote advice provision. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a meeting with the Minister.

T2. [900026] **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): Last Friday I met a constituent whose child was fatally stabbed five years ago. As a parent myself, I cannot begin to imagine what the family have gone through and the trauma they have faced since. Concerningly, the killer of that child has repeatedly accessed social media while in prison to cruelly taunt the victim's family. I have spoken with other constituents and

their families who have unfortunately had similar experiences. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is completely unacceptable, and will he look at my constituent's case so that we can ensure that violent offenders cannot continue to taunt victims from behind bars?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Let me be absolutely clear: prisoners are not permitted to have access to social media in any circumstances and face punishment if they do so. All cases are investigated by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service if they are discovered. A few weeks ago I visited our state-of-the-art digital forensics lab, which interrogates any phones found and provides evidence to bring successful prosecutions in court. I hope that reassures his constituent.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Justice Secretary.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): This weekend, two marches came to London: one was condemned by the Justice Secretary; about the other—yet another anti-Israel march—there was not a word. Once again we heard crowds of people demanding intifada revolution and other coded calls for attacks on British Jews. If the Crown Prosecution Service refuses to prosecute the thugs who chant “Globalise the intifada” and other calls for violence, why will the Justice Secretary not change the law so that these people get what they deserve?

Mr Lammy: I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that everyone inciting violence against Jewish communities in our country must face the full force of the law. I know he will recognise that I represent the Stamford Hill area of London, with its significant Orthodox Jewish community, and I am grateful that he has raised this. Can I just remind him that the CPS updated its guidance on hate crimes on 5 May, to ensure that people face the law as they should?

T3. [900027] **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I have concerns about recent reports that the Society of Media Lawyers, which opposes the reform of strategic lawsuits against public participation, has had significant access to Ministers and civil servants while lobbying against stronger protections for journalists, whistleblowers and campaigners. SLAPPs continue to be used by the super-wealthy and super-powerful to silence investigative reporting and public interest speech. Will the Government bring forward meaningful and undiluted anti-SLAPP legislation?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We cannot allow the rich and powerful to use their resources to stop proper investigation, and I will be bringing forward legislation as soon as time allows.

T4. [900029] **Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I have heard from victims of domestic abuse and stalking about the harrowing journey they face in rebuilding their lives. For many, the one thing that gives them comfort is the knowledge that their abuser cannot reach them from behind bars, but Government changes to category D prisons can now allow these offenders to be moved to open conditions much earlier than before, despite their crimes being exempt from standard determinate sentence 40—SDS 40—because of their

recognised higher risk. Will the Minister meet me to discuss excluding domestic abusers and stalkers from early transfer to open prisons, so that the victims' peace of mind can be retained?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): As I said earlier, all prisoners, including those convicted of domestic violence and stalking offences, will be allowed to move to an open prison only when they have been assessed and risk assessed. I am very happy to organise a meeting between the hon. Gentleman and the relevant Minister to discuss this case.

T6. [900031] **Michelle Scrogam** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I welcome the youth justice White Paper and its focus on tackling the root causes of offending. Like many of my colleagues, I have seen tragic cases of vulnerable young people being clearly exploited by adults and drawn into crime. May I urge the Minister to ensure that the new offence of child criminal exploitation is brought forward swiftly and that it is robust enough to go after those responsible?

Mr Lammy: There is nothing more tragic than seeing young people, often from deprived backgrounds, preyed on by adults to run drugs and all sorts of contraband across the country. We will be bringing that offence forward as soon as possible.

T5. [900030] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Kendal magistrates court was outrageously closed in 2017, on the promise that sittings would continue in other public buildings in Kendal, yet there has not been a single sitting in Kendal since 2020. Will the Justice Secretary put this right urgently, so that that promise can be kept and local people can have reasonable access to justice?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government inherited a justice system in crisis, with a record and rising caseload. He also knows that the last Government closed courts right across the country. We are legislating for structural reform. We are investing £2.78 billion to bring down the backlog. We will continue to look closely at the needs in Kendal, but he recognises that it will take some time to address what we inherited.

T9. [900034] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): The latest Women's Aid annual audit highlights that nearly 80% of domestic abuse survivors now face devastating tech-facilitated abuse and online stalking. How will the Ministry of Justice collaborate across Government to ensure that our courts and prosecutors are fully equipped to tackle digital violence?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): I thank my hon. Friend for her consistent efforts to raise the issue of online harms. Whether it is physical, verbal or online, abuse is abuse, and this Government are determined to tackle violence against women and girls online as well as off. We are making it illegal to take or make intimate images without consent, including deepfakes. Our new deletion orders will ensure that courts can require offenders convicted of intimate image offences to delete images of their victims. The VAWG strategy sets out our plan across Government to tackle digitally facilitated violence.

T7. [900032] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): We know how grooming gangs regularly trafficked young, vulnerable girls across borders, but survivors of these appalling crimes are deeply concerned that the UK and Scottish Governments' separate inquiries will not investigate cross-border grooming gangs. What is the Minister doing to ensure that both the perpetrators of these horrific crimes and the institutions that failed the victims are properly held to account?

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is right to raise this and has done so consistently. I meet justice counterparts from the devolved Governments regularly, and I will ensure that this issue is high on the agenda for our next meeting, because it is very important. There is a lot of good work happening in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. We need to ensure that it is joined up, to address that particular mischief, which is incredibly serious.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Can the Minister assure me and my constituents back home that the changes to the unduly lenient sentence scheme will ensure that victims of crime in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across the kingdom are better supported at every stage of the criminal justice system?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. I am very proud that this Government have listened to victims. I have met with the Victims' Commissioner and an array of victims who have been complaining about the unduly lenient sentence scheme. We have been able to modernise it by allowing an out-of-time route for victims and bereaved family members to refer sentences outside the 28-day limit. Clearly, 28 days is sometimes not appropriate for families who are deeply distressed, so we have been able to make that change, working on a cross-party basis. I am proud that this Government are putting victims at the heart of the criminal justice system.

T8. [900033] **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I think it is fair to say that the Government and I do not see eye to eye when it comes to the policy of curtailing trial by jury. However, if the Government are determined to go down that route, their own impact assessment sets out that a significant number of magistrates need to be recruited—the MOJ has put it at 7,000 over three years. In order for the Government's own plan to work, will they commit not to change any of the rules around trial by jury until they have recruited those magistrates?

Mr Lammy: Magistrates play a hugely important role. I was sad that they were cut back under the previous Government. There used to be about 29,000. The hon. Gentleman will see the recruitment campaign right across the country. We need a new generation of magistrates, and I want them to come from all backgrounds.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Half of all prisoners lack the basic literacy skills needed to navigate everyday life, only one in three secure employment within six months of release, and a third reoffend within a year. Rehabilitation, reducing reoffending, and improving public safety must be at the heart of our

criminal justice system. Will the Secretary of State please commit to increasing funding for prison education, so that offenders can access the basic skills and support they need to rebuild their lives, reintegrate, and contribute positively to society when they leave prison?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend has been consistent in raising that important issue, and we are committed to ensuring sufficient education provision for prisoners. I would gently stress, however, that we can only provide that education if we are able to get prisoners into the classroom. We need to stabilise and get order back into the prison system after the chaos that we inherited, but this Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that prisoners have education and work opportunities on leaving prison.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I represent a very rural area, and people have to drive many miles to get to a court. With fuel prices currently so high, why are ordinary citizens reimbursed for jury service at the rate of only 31.4p per mile for travel by car, yet the standard HMRC approved rate is 45p per mile? It does not cover the cost of travel, and penalises those who live in rural areas.

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is a member of the Justice Committee, and she raises an important and practical point. The Government recognise the hugely important civic duty role that jurors play day in, day out across the country, and we will always keep remuneration and travel costs under review. We have heard the question.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I am sure it has not missed anybody's radar that I recently launched a campaign for lifelong sex education, and last week I met some parish councillors, one of whom works in the Probation Service. She thanked me for the campaign because of the amount of re-education they have to do, particularly for young men, on what is acceptable within sexual relationships. Will the Secretary of State, or a relevant Minister, meet me to talk about the importance of lifelong sex education in re-educating potential reoffenders?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for her campaign and work in this area. It is important that prisoners and those on probation are re-educated about codes of conduct, and I am happy for her to arrange a meeting with the Prisons Minister.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he is taking through the criminal justice system to support victims of violence against women, particularly those who report historical cases of sexual violence? Several of my young constituents have faced terrible communication, years of delay, and ultimately the Crown Prosecution Service not progressing with prosecution.

Catherine Atkinson: Those of us who have spent years campaigning to address violence against women and girls know that we are building on the work of pioneers. Baroness Harman was one of those pioneers, and I am looking forward to working closely with her across Government to deliver our VAWG strategy. As part of that we will be delivering the new victims' code, which will set out the service, support and information

that victims are entitled to. We are supporting victims with the largest ever investment of £550 million in victim support services.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): In the past six months, the black country was rocked by two horrific cases of Sikh women being raped in racially aggravated assaults. The two attacks shook the entire community to our core, but it recently came to light that a Reform party election candidate celebrated those appalling attacks. Thankfully, he has now stood down after being elected just two weeks ago. Will the Minister say more about how women will be supported in such cases, where not only were they victims of horrific sexual attacks, but racial hatred was also involved?

Catherine Atkinson: It is unsurprising, but yet again we do not have any Reform MPs in the Chamber. People will be shocked to hear about those cases of racially aggravated sexual violence, and any comments celebrating them are utterly repugnant. The Government are determined to support victims of violence against women and girls. We are committed to supporting victims not only with £550 million for victim support, but we are also introducing independent legal advisers for adult rape victims.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): What assessment has the Minister made of the report concerning communication between the former Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, and the International Criminal Court prosecutor, Karim Khan, regarding the court investigation into war crimes in Gaza? What steps is he taking to uphold the independence of the international judicial institutions that we set up?

Jake Richards: Some of the matters that the hon. Member has raised are perhaps matters for the Foreign Secretary, rather than the Justice Secretary. As he said, we clearly always respect international law and the principle of the rule of law more generally.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Sexual assaults and harassment on trains have risen by more than a third over the past 10 years, yet too many trains and stations still lack adequate CCTV. That evidence gap lets criminals evade justice and fails victims. What steps are the Secretary of State and his colleagues taking to improve CCTV coverage across the whole rail network, so that perpetrators of violence against women and girls can be brought to justice?

Catherine Atkinson: My hon. Friend and neighbour shares with me a keen interest in rail, as we represent a city that is at the centre of the largest cluster of rail companies in Europe. We have launched a new campaign to drive up reporting of harassment on trains, and the new safer railway scheme, under which train operators must show what they are doing to tackle violence against

women and girls so that they can travel with confidence. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on that initiative.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The former Minister for safeguarding and violence against women and girls said that real change in combating violence usually came only after threats from her following “catastrophic mistakes”. Does that not confirm that the Government are unwilling to take the tough decisions necessary to tackle violence against women and girls?

Catherine Atkinson: I am honoured to take up the role and build on the incredible work that my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) undertook. She was absolutely essential to the development of the VAWG strategy, “Freedom from violence and abuse”, so that this Government have a plan to prevent violence, pursue and prosecute perpetrators and support victims. We will be working across Government to deliver the strongest crackdown in British history.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): My constituent Tam is a mental health legal aid lawyer who has seen demand in the sector rise while fees fail to keep up. As a result, many have left that line of work, despite the Government’s Mental Health Act 2025 increasing the workload. This is unacceptable when people’s liberty is at stake, so what specific assessments has the Department made of the current sustainability of the mental health legal aid sector, and what concrete steps is it taking to ensure the financial viability of that sector?

Mr Lammy: We have announced additional funding of up to £34 million a year for criminal legal aid advocates, and an additional £92 million beyond that for criminal legal aid solicitors. The hon. Lady has mentioned the important issue of legal aid in relation to mental health cases, which we will look closely at in the next funding period.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) on her first outing at the Dispatch Box. On Friday, I met Jimmy, an imprisonment for public protection prisoner whose case I have previously raised with the Prime Minister, the Justice Secretary and the Prisons Minister. Despite good progress, he still does not have a firm release date after more than 20 years in prison and over a decade since IPP sentences were abolished. Will the Justice Secretary urge his Department to do all it can to expedite Jimmy’s release and that of the estimated other 2,800 people who remain in prison on IPP sentences?

Mr Lammy: I recognise the real issues that exist for IPP prisoners—we have discussed those issues at length, and will continue to do so. The Prisons Minister has done a lot of work in this area, engaging with all of those who raise these issues on an almost weekly basis, including in another place. Of course, we want to do more and see those prisoners who are not going to cause public harm released.

Lord Mandelson: Government Response to Humble Address

12.38 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the Government's approach to redacting or withholding documents within scope of the Humble Address agreed by the House on 4 February 2026.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Darren Jones): As I have set out to this House on previous occasions, the Government are working to comply with the motion passed in February. I can reassure the House that this remains the case, and I can provide the following update today.

The Government confirmed before Prorogation that we had referred more than 300 documents to the Intelligence and Security Committee. At the time, that represented all the documents in scope of the motion where the Government believed that publication would be prejudicial to UK national security or international relations. The Government have repeatedly assessed all the documents we have collected to make sure that all of those that need to be referred to the ISC are referred to the Committee. As part of this quality control process, the Government identified a small number of further documents that we felt should be reviewed by the ISC, and we immediately submitted those documents to the Committee. As Friday's statement from the Committee set out, it has now considered all those documents.

As I have previously said to the House, the Government will be publishing a second tranche of material. This is currently being finalised and will be one of the largest Government publications ever laid in this House. That is reflective of the breadth of the motion, and also the Government's commitment to transparency in responding to it. It constitutes a very significant disclosure exercise involving sensitive material from across Government. The Government have taken seriously our obligations to comply with the Humble Address in full, while also upholding other public interest issues, such as our duty of care to junior staff. The Government have carried out this work according to a robust process, with assurance from an independent KC.

Given that the House is due to rise on Thursday, and given the length of the publication, the second tranche will now be published after Whitsun recess to give the House sufficient time to review the material and to be able to ask me and the Government questions. It could have been published this Thursday, but I felt that the House would have deemed that to be inappropriate, given that it will be such a significant publication. *[Interruption.]* To refer back to my previous comments, this will be the largest publication—other than, I think, the Chilcot inquiry report—ever published to the House.

When the Government publish the second tranche of documents, we will also publish a methodology confirming the process we have followed, and the basis on which content has been redacted will be clear from the published information. The targeted redactions made to the material, beyond those relevant to national security or international

relations, have been made in line with clear precedent set by previous Administrations in responding to Humble Addresses.

As I set out to the House on 23 February, and again when we published the first tranche of material on 11 March, we have taken the normal approach to redacting junior officials' names, contact details such as telephone numbers and email addresses, the personal data of third parties where that is not in scope of the motion, and, where relevant, legal professional privilege. That has been done using the principles set out in the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and in line with the ministerial code and the resolutions on ministerial accountability passed by both Houses in 1997. Those resolutions state:

"Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with relevant statute".

I am sure that Members across the House will recognise that there is no public interest in the Government publishing the names and contact details of junior officials or their telephone numbers.

Mr Speaker: Order. Minister, you have been in the House for some time. Ministers have three minutes to respond to an urgent question, and it is over three and a half minutes now. I was not given notice of extra time being needed, and other people would obviously need to know that, too. I set out the rules of the House, and we should adhere to them. We have broken them once again, and we have only been back a few days.

Darren Jones: Forgive me, Mr Speaker. In that case, I will sit down and provide further detail in answer to questions from Members.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for what he has said. As you and the House know, the Intelligence and Security Committee has been considering redactions to documents on the grounds that, if unredacted, those documents may prejudice national security or international relations. It has become apparent to us that the Government also intend to redact documents for other reasons not specifically permitted in the Humble Address or, in some cases, to withhold documents altogether.

As the Minister says, the Government issued a list of further grounds on which they intended to redact along with the first tranche of documents that they published. Those grounds include email addresses, phone numbers and what is described as personal data. There is no mechanism for the House to confirm that those redactions are limited only to what is necessary, but I want to ask the Minister about material that the Government intend to withhold for yet further reasons, such as commercial confidentiality or to protect the monarch. The Government also intend to withhold some documents related to vetting in their entirety.

I should make it clear that my Committee has considerable sympathy with the substantive arguments that the Government may make for withholding information beyond that currently justified in the Humble Address. There are, for example, valid concerns about the disclosure of information given in a vetting process inhibiting future subjects of vetting, or those who are

asked about them, from being as open and forthcoming as they need to be for vetting to be effective. However, we cannot accept that the Government are entitled to ignore, or unilaterally alter, the terms of the Humble Address.

Does the Minister accept that if the Government want to argue that the Humble Address is too broad as drafted and needs to be refined, they must come to the House and make that argument, and secure the House's consent to any alteration? Does he further accept that without doing so, when the next set of documents is published with information withheld, the Government will not succeed in persuading the House or the wider world that this matter is closed? Finally, does he accept that if the Government took it upon themselves to redact or withhold information contrary to the terms of the Humble Address by which they agreed to be bound in February, that would be an issue not just of process, but of parliamentary sovereignty?

Darren Jones: In response to the questions from the right hon. and learned Gentleman about compliance with the Humble Address, I refer him to the statement that I have made previously in relation to the principles set out in legislation and the motions of the House.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman was, I think, asking me specifically about personal data that was collected as part of the security vetting process. As I think he suggested, the raw data that is collected as part of those investigations—perhaps relating to how much money someone has in a particular account, or with whom that person may have had a personal relationship in the past—would never be published, because if we did so, people would feel unable to answer those questions honestly and frankly in any UK security vetting investigation in the future, which would undermine the very basis of our national security system.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My first concern is about the number of WhatsApp and other channels that have been used for very informal but important communications between officials and Ministers—a practice that seems to have started very actively under the Johnson Government and continued thereafter. My second concern is about the use of low-level IT systems for quite serious documents of record. Can the Minister update the House on what is being done to tighten up those important channels?

Darren Jones: I share those concerns as well as similar concerns that have been raised by the Intelligence and Security Committee, not only about the extensive use of what we call non-corporate communications channels but about information that should have been on a higher level of classification that was shared at “official sensitive”. I have already announced to the House the imminent start of a review of the use of non-corporate communications channels, and I shall be taking further action to ensure that sensitive information is shared at the appropriate classification.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The House gave the Government a clear instruction that the only documents that could be redacted were those that might prejudice UK national security or international relations, and all those documents were to be referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee, so for my incredibly respected right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) to say that the Government have applied redactions to documents sent to the ISC, beyond the scope agreed by the House, and have also withheld documents entirely from the ISC, is an extremely serious matter that completely undermines what the House agreed. There may be legitimate reasons why the Government do not want to place certain matters in the public domain, but if the Humble Address motion does not allow for redaction on those grounds, the Government cannot just unilaterally decide to ignore the will of the House.

Sadly, this pattern of backsliding fits a pattern of behaviour. The Prime Minister's chief of staff had to resign over the Mandelson scandal, but apparently he is already back and advising the Prime Minister. We forced the Government to hold an inquiry into the grooming gangs, but then they sabotaged it and dragged their feet for a whole year. We said that it needed to be harder to obtain indefinite leave to remain; the Home Secretary said she would do it, but Labour Back Benchers did not like it, and now it is not in the King's Speech. Again and again, as soon as attention moves elsewhere, the Government start backsliding.

We now expect the Government to discuss their approach to the Humble Address constructively, and we would welcome such discussions. Let me therefore ask the Minister some questions. Now that the ISC has reviewed all the documents, when will the Government release all the rest of the Mandelson files? The Minister has said “after Whitsun”; when after Whitsun? Will the Government return to the House to ask permission for the redactions that they clearly wish to make which go beyond the scope of the Humble Address? Will the Minister brief Opposition Members, on Privy Council terms, about the broader redactions that the Government clearly wish to make?

Labour Members voted for a cover-up when they voted against referring the Prime Minister to the Privileges Committee over this matter. *[Interruption.]* They do not like it, but it is true. This House, and the people of this country, deserve better than yet another cover-up.

Darren Jones: I take these matters very seriously, as I am sure Members across the House would recognise, and I will not for one instant countenance the idea that, as loud as the hon. Gentleman may want to shout it, there is a cover-up. If there was any suggestion of a cover-up, I would not be standing at this Dispatch Box to defend the process; I would resign. That has not been the case, and I suggest the hon. Gentleman may want to focus on the substance of the matter at hand.

On the questions the hon. Gentleman has put to me, I have answered them in the statement and in my answer to the deputy Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and I refer him to my previous answers.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I rise to support the ISC in its carefully considered concerns, and I am disappointed at the answer that the Government have given. It seems to me that one of the questions on the Mandelson appointment is: why, when the United Kingdom Security Vetting document had two red boxes ticked, including “This man should not be appointed”, was that somehow or other translated into “He should be appointed”?

It is very important that the public know and understand that we are learning from the mistakes that were clearly made, and we cannot know that lessons have been learned unless the documents are checked. My Committee and the ISC are trying our best to get to the truth, and we are having obstacles put in our way. For that reason, I believe that the ISC should be allowed to look at the file, with proper redactions, to understand how mitigations could be put in place to make us safe when it came to the appointment of Peter Mandelson.

Darren Jones: To confirm, the documents that relate to the recommendation put to the Foreign Office and the Foreign Office’s decision to appoint Peter Mandelson irrespective of the recommendation that was put to it have been referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee. What has not been referred is the raw data collected as part of interviews undertaken with Peter Mandelson, which in any circumstances we would not share in relation to any appointment. I confirm that neither I nor any decision maker in this process has seen that level of personal detail, because it is kept so securely to ensure that, when people go through this process, they feel able to give full and frank answers, without a wide range of politicians or others seeing their deeply personal information.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): This House did not pass the motion on the Humble Address so that Ministers could decide, four months later, which inconvenient information they would prefer that Parliament did not see. Given the ISC’s concerns that the Government are redacting information far too broadly, we must ensure that the Government are not just withholding documents and information from Parliament on their own say-so. Every day this pantomime drags on, public trust erodes further. Parliament asks for transparency, Epstein’s victims deserve justice and the public deserve answers, not redactions. The point is not that any Member of this House wants a junior civil servant’s personal data to be published, but that it is not the Government’s decision where the line is to be drawn.

Given that documents on Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor’s trade envoy role are also due to be laid before this House shortly, will the Minister confirm that he will personally ensure that those are produced without redaction, too?

Darren Jones: On the first part of the hon. Lady’s question on the assumptions about the Government withholding information that we should not withhold, I am afraid that that is just incorrect. This is the most extensive disclosure of information, I think ever, in relation to a Humble Address. The sheer depth of the document when it is published will illustrate the point

that the Government have gone to great lengths to ensure that we are complying with the Humble Address. That is why we established the process with the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, with independent KC oversight: to ensure that the process is done properly.

On the hon. Lady’s question about the motion in relation to Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, that Humble Address is being administered by the Department for Business and Trade, and I understand the document is due to be published very shortly.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have asked the Minister, both in this House and through written questions on numerous occasions, to give the House reassurances that Morgan McSweeney only ever handled documents for which he had the appropriate level of security vetting when working in Downing Street. The vagueness of the Minister’s replies has been noted by Members of this House and journalists, so today I again give the Minister a chance to put this issue to bed by stating clearly on the record that, at all times while working in Downing Street, Morgan McSweeney had the appropriate level of security clearance for all the documents he handled.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I refer him to my previous answer.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Minister will be aware that on 21 April the ISC, on which I sit, made it clear that the

“Humble Address does not allow for documents to be withheld from Parliament, only for redactions to be made where the ISC has agreed to them.”

Last week, we were obliged to issue a further statement saying that it had come to our attention that documents were being withheld from the ISC. The right hon. Gentleman may feel that that is justified, but the Humble Address does not permit it. The point is that he is confusing scrutiny with disclosure. The ISC is well used to making judgments about what is made public. That is why the House chose the ISC as the mechanism to deal with these matters. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, in line with the Humble Address, all material will be submitted to the ISC? In particular, will he confirm that there was no document or any communication—emails and so on—related to the mitigation of any risks associated with Peter Mandelson’s appointment?

Darren Jones: All documents that are in the scope of the Humble Address will be published in the normal way. On the right hon. Member’s question about the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee, any redactions that had any relationship with international relations or national security have been submitted to the Committee for its consideration. As he knows, and as I have confirmed to the House, that process has concluded. I think he is asking me again about personal data, and I refer him to my statement, which makes the point that compliance with the Humble Address sits in the context of the Freedom of Information Act, the ministerial code and motions passed by both Houses about how to comply with such a motion. As I have said, all further information will be published in due course.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I am very concerned that it appears that No. 10 is still continuing to cover up Mandelson's dodgy dealings by redacting and withholding certain information. What was Mandelson's role in the Prime Minister's meeting with Palantir, why did the former Health Secretary grant Palantir unlimited access to identifiable NHS patient data, and what assurances can the Minister give us that any information relating to Mandelson's involvement with Palantir will be exposed to full public transparency and scrutiny?

Darren Jones: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that all documents will be published in relation to the Humble Address, as I have set out today and previously, but I again reassert the fact that any suggestion of a cover-up is merely a conspiracy theory.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): When Olly Robbins appeared before us on the Foreign Affairs Committee, he was asked why he did not view the summary document produced by UK Security Vetting. He pointed to the sensitivity of the vetting interviews—what the Minister calls the raw detail—and said that those detailed vetting files should remain in a “hermetically sealed box”. We have heard that that box was not opened for sharing with the Prime Minister, and it has not been opened for sharing with those of us who sit on the Intelligence and Security Committee. The Government do need the consent of Parliament to keep the full details sealed and inaccessible to the ISC. In the future, does the Minister intend the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to have the discretion to award developed vetting, or will that sit solely with UKSV?

Darren Jones: As I have said, any summary documentation and recommendation that was put by UKSV to the Foreign Office has been shared with the hon. Gentleman's Committee. What has not been shared was the raw data collected in interviews with Peter Mandelson. As I have said repeatedly to the House, and as I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees, there is not such a mechanism for that level of personal detail—I am talking about how much money someone has in personal accounts, and who they may or may not have had a relationship with in the past—because if it was known that that could be made public to politicians, people going through the security process would not feel able to give full and frank answers, and that would undermine the very nature of our national security system. I am sure that, as a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, he would not wish to advocate for that.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I would like to thank the ISC and the Foreign Affairs Committee for their roles in this process. Although it has not been mentioned today, would the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister provide the House with an update on the Government's proposed legislation to remove peerages from those disgraced peers?

Darren Jones: I was delighted to see it confirmed last week in the King's Speech that that legislation will be introduced in this Session. We will be bringing it forward shortly.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): I press the Minister on his lack of answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings

(Sir John Hayes). When it became apparent that Mandelson posed an obvious and serious security risk to the state, it was said that ongoing mitigations were put in place to control that risk. Will the ISC see those ongoing mitigations? And if not, why not?

Darren Jones: I think this is a question specifically to the Foreign Office in relation to evidence given by the former permanent secretary, and it is about how mitigations can be put in place to manage risks. For example, as I understand it, Mr Speaker, if you previously had a client in a commercial relationship with a business, you would not be allowed to meet them privately while you held public office. These are the types of mitigations to which I think the Foreign Office was referring, and I think they sound legitimate in the circumstances.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his response to the urgent question and for the way he conducts himself on this very sensitive issue. I know that when he stands at the Dispatch Box to talk about it, his thoughts are with the victims of Jeffrey Epstein. Will the second tranche of materials include materials that have previously been referred to the ISC?

Darren Jones: The second tranche of information will publish all remaining documents except those that are currently with the Metropolitan police in relation to ongoing criminal investigations. As I said to the House, this will be a very significant publication, which will warrant careful consideration from Members across the House. We want to publish it with sufficient notice to allow Members to consider it before coming to the House to ask any questions they may have of the Government, which is why we are now publishing it after the Whitsun recess.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In more than 30 years of its existence, the Intelligence and Security Committee has never once suffered from a leak. Therefore, anything that is disclosed to it, no matter how sensitive, is not going to be published. Therefore, the question of it undermining the security vetting process if such raw data were published does not arise, because the ISC is the one parliamentary body guaranteed to ensure that that does not happen. So can the Minister stop obfuscating on that aspect and can he confirm that, irrespective of the question of the raw data, what will definitely be made available to the ISC, if it has not been already, are the annotations and the documents that show how an initial failure to pass vetting for Lord Mandelson became a decision to approve him and state that he had been successful in getting through the process?

Darren Jones: I can confirm that all documents that need to be referred to the ISC have now been referred to it. That process has concluded, which is why we can move to publication after the recess.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister must accept that there is no more august Committee in this place than the ISC. He must further accept that it is the least partisan organ of this Parliament. It is against that incomprehensible reality that the pedlars of chaos in No. 10 have sought to confound the ISC by withholding information and deviating unilaterally from

[Dave Doogan]

the terms of the Humble Address. The Minister has given himself and No. 10 till after the Whitsun recess. Will he say very clearly when after Whitsun recess he will release the next tranche of documents?

Darren Jones: Let me reassert: I really do not think Members are advocating that the raw information collected as part of national security screening interviews with people who are becoming public servants ought to be shared with Parliament. The summary of those recommendations and the advice put to Departments should be and have been shared, and I think that is the appropriate way to handle that. The hon. Gentleman asks me specifically when after the Whitsun recess the document will be published. We stand ready to do so as soon as we are able to secure the time in the House.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): This is a deeply unhappy and unacceptable situation. It is completely unacceptable, after writing and raising questions informally with officials and the Minister himself, for the Chair and members of the ISC to have to come to this House to pose an urgent question. Will the Minister confirm that if there are any changes to permissions, he will come to this House and seek approval from the House for those changes?

Darren Jones: I think I am right in saying that the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam, who secured the urgent question, made the point that the Committee was in some agreement in relation to the Government's argument about sharing raw data. I do not think that is the issue in dispute, so I am not sure that any suggestion of withholding information against the will of the motion is in contention. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) asks me about compliance with the motion more generally; I refer him to my previous answer.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I simply repeat that the House, surely, has a right to know when we are going to get the report. The ISC said that it was unhappy with the amount of WhatsApp messaging being used by the Government. The image being created among the public is that of a Government who are avoiding the issue and are incompetent, and that is undermining public confidence. The Minister started off by saying he could have presented the document this Thursday. If he knows he could have done that on Thursday, will he tell us when after Whitsun we will see it?

Darren Jones: As I say and as the House will see when the document is published, if I had published the document on Thursday, with the House rising on Thursday afternoon, Members would rightly have criticised the Government for not being able to have sufficient time to read it and ask questions of the Government. I am keen for it to be published as soon as possible after the Whitsun recess and I am arranging that with business managers.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I am afraid that the answers about publication simply are not good enough. The Minister may think that he is putting an argument to this House, but he is treating

this House and the public as a bunch of mugs. The reality is that one of his own Back Benchers said that, as a result of what has happened, his party is being called the paedo protectors party. Will the right hon. Gentleman publish the data before the unnecessary and costly by-election—yes or no?

Darren Jones: The information will be published to the House after the Whitsun recess, as I set out. I am afraid that I just disagree with the right hon. Gentleman's sentiment.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I add to the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). The Minister outlined a date this week that the information could have been published, so why can he not commit to a timetable so we can hold him to account? That is the key point. This whole grubby saga has highlighted why the public do not seem to think that the ministerial code and responsibility in government count for anything any more. As a lesson from this grubby saga, will the Minister bring forward legislation to make the ministerial code binding and ensure consequences, so that action is taken when Ministers fall short and do not honour their end of the deal?

Darren Jones: The Government believe the ministerial code is functioning as it should. We have increased the accountability measures associated with it. Where legislation is required—for example to remove peerages from disgraced peers in the other place—we will bring it forward shortly.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Do Labour MPs not realise that it is because of high-handed behaviour like this that they suffered such a drubbing on 7 May? The Minister has said that the documents will be published after we return from Whit on 1 June, but he has repeatedly refused to answer whether or not they will be published by the Makerfield by-election on 18 June. Let me ask him yet again: can he guarantee to the House and the constituents we represent that this large batch of documents will be published in advance of the Makerfield by-election on 18 June—yes or no?

Darren Jones: The right hon. Gentleman knows we have to secure time in the House with business managers. I am ready for the document to be published as soon as we are ready to do so, and I have committed to do so after the recess.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): One thing this sorry episode has achieved is to make the Minister an absolute expert on warm words and platitudes. I want to go back to the issue of disappearing messages, which was raised earlier. Obviously, those messages are not retrievable, but the very minimum we should get is a detailed breakdown of all those who were asked to supply information and said they could not do so because they had disappearing messages on their phones. We are entitled to know which Ministers' communications and which conversations are no longer accessible to us.

Darren Jones: All of the documents that have been made available through the Humble Address will be published in the second tranche.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): In 2021, the Prime Minister wrote an essay in which he said,

“Where the current Tory government has muddled the waters of transparency...I want to make it easier to hold government to account.”

He said that a Labour Government must

“play its role in restoring honesty, decency and transparency in public life”—

and yet here we are. Does the Minister agree that after all the redacting of messages, it is not only the Labour party that is being damaged, but democracy itself?

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman is making assumptions about redactions that he has neither seen nor read. Redactions have been made in relation to personal data or national security and international relations—that is it.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Government stand accused by not one but two of the most august Committees in this House of not playing fair in giving across the information. The Minister’s argument is simply that the Government have done nothing wrong. If that is the case, why would both of those Committees come to this House and lay those accusations?

Darren Jones: That is a question for those Committees.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The Foreign Affairs Committee heard about the pressure that the Foreign Office was under to move quickly on the appointment of Peter Mandelson as ambassador to the United States. Now, concerns have been raised about the lack of transparency surrounding the papers connected to that appointment. If the Government have nothing to hide, why are they changing the terms and scope of the Humble Address, and withholding and redacting documents from the Intelligence and Security Committee? Will the Minister ensure that the UKSV summary document will be shared with the ISC?

Darren Jones: The Government are not trying to amend the terms or scope of the Humble Address—that is a factually incorrect statement. The hon. Member asked me about documents that can be shared with the Intelligence and Security Committee in relation to UKSV’s recommendations and the decisions made by the Foreign Office. I can confirm that those documents have been shared.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response to the urgent question. Constituents have contacted me regarding the overreach of Government bodies and their refusal to stay within their parameters, as displayed in the last few days by the legal judgment that the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland’s claim of collusion in the Royal Ulster Constabulary exceeded the ombudsman’s legal powers. Today we have an urgent question, and constituents are again highlighting overreach and a refusal to be accountable to the public. Rebuilding trust is vital, and I believe the Minister is committed to doing that, but will he start the process of rebuilding trust in all aspects of public life when appointed individuals refuse to stay within their limits? What steps can be taken at every level of public service?

Darren Jones: I share the hon. Member’s sentiment on public trust, which is why the Government have initiated the Ethics and Integrity Commission, updated the ministerial code, and are bringing forward legislation on the removal of peerages from disgraced peers in the other place. We are undertaking what is probably the most wide-ranging work on ethics and standards in public life for many decades.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): When Parliament passed the Humble Address, it was very clear that the House did not trust the Government on this issue, which is why we wanted the ISC involved. It is clear that there are redactions happening beyond the will of Parliament. If that is the case, does the Minister accept that he has to come to the House to ask for permission, and if he does not do so, then he needs to tell us why?

Darren Jones: I refer to my opening statement in relation to compliance with the Humble Address and the right for the Government to withhold information subject to public interest duties—for example, the names and contact details of junior officials. All redactions that are in relation to national security and international relations have been submitted to the Intelligence and Security Committee and agreed in line with the Humble Address.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Given the scale and significance of the Mandelson files due to be released, why does the Minister not accept that the review of those files over the Whitsun recess would be a good use of everyone’s time, with questions to Ministers being put after 1 June when we return? Is it because Ministers intend to limit scrutiny by this House? That is exactly what it looks like to me and to my constituents.

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. The intent is to increase scrutiny, not to decrease it.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the Minister recognise just how damning it is of the Government’s lack of regard for transparency and accountability that the ISC finds itself in the position of having to publicly condemn their actions?

Darren Jones: Questions about the Committee’s statement are for the Committee. As I have set out, we have complied fully with the Humble Address and the work of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

David Davis: On a point of order, given that this applies directly to the Minister, I draw the House’s attention to the motion tabled by the now Prime Minister on 4 December 2018 following non-compliance with a previous Humble Address. It starts:

“That this House finds Ministers in contempt for their failure to comply with the requirements of the motion for return passed on 13 November 2018”. —[*Official Report*, 4 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 668.]

That motion was passed by this House.

We have just debated an area where the Government may potentially be in contempt of the House; indeed, the obfuscation we have heard looks like that. It is important that the House and the Government know that there is precedent in this area. I give notice that if,

[David Davis]

after we have received the next tranche of documents, the Humble Address has not been met in full, or if we have not been told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I will seek to table such a motion.

Mr Speaker: I do not want to continue the debate, so this is advice for other Members who are trying to catch my eye: an experienced Member like Sir David will not leave it here, but will pursue this through the many other avenues that are available. I suggest that the issue will be coming back at some point. I have also had a letter from the ISC, and at some point I will also need to respond to it, so it is not quite the end as we sit here.

Dr Mullan: Further to that point of order, while I do not have the same experience as my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), the Minister has said that the documents are ready to publish and that the only issue is securing Government time to do that on 1 June, the first day back after recess. What advice can the Speaker provide to the House on what other mechanisms are available to ensure that there is time on that day, if the Government are unwilling to allocate it?

Mr Speaker: It is not a matter for me; it is a matter for the Government, thankfully. As I understand it, there is a very large number of documents. What has not been mentioned in this debate is the ability to print such a large number and make them available to the House. I have been advised that publication will be coming as soon as possible—I do not want to speak for the Minister, but rest assured that it will not be left. It is important that we have time to go through those documents. They may be good reading for Whitsun; other Members may be campaigning. I am keeping a very close eye on it, but I understand that there is a big issue with printing such a high number of documents, so it is not as straightforward as has been presented.

Mr Francois: Further to that point of order, the Minister's excuse for not guaranteeing that the documents will be available by 18 June is that he would need to secure parliamentary time. This is news to some of us, who have been here a while and understand that the Government effectively control the timetable of Parliament. Indeed, every Thursday when the House is sitting they make a business statement to tell us what is coming up in the next two weeks. Mr Speaker, are you aware of anything in the Standing Orders or Erskine May that would prevent the Government from making a business statement on Thursday, naming a day for publication after the Whitsun recess?

Mr Speaker: We love speculation. I did not quite hear the Minister say that he was worried about the by-election. I know that the Minister will want to ensure that this House is informed as soon as possible. I will look to ensure that that happens. Let us calm down and not speculate too much. Hopefully, Whitsun may bring some generosity to some Members—I think they need a little bit more sunshine.

Speaker's Statement

1.18 pm

Mr Speaker: Nominations closed at 1 pm yesterday for candidates for the post of Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. One nomination was received, and a ballot will therefore not be held. I congratulate Bob Blackman on his re-election as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. Well done, Bob.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the House for the confidence it has shown in me. I will endeavour to ensure that Back Benchers get the opportunity to debate the issues they wish to debate in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall as much as possible. I ask you to use your good offices, Mr Speaker, to prevail on the Government Whips, the Opposition Whips and indeed the Liberal Whips to ensure that they nominate their members of the Committee as fast as possible—preferably by tomorrow—so that the Committee can get up and working in the new Session to formulate those debates as soon as the Government allow us time.

Mr Speaker: I can only endorse what the hon. Gentleman says: the sooner we get the Committee working, the sooner we get the debates coming through. Once again, I thank him for the work he has put in already and the experience he has brought to this position.

High Speed 2 Reset

1.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): With permission, I will make a statement on High Speed 2.

Last summer, I stood at this Dispatch Box and promised that we would be straight with the British people not just about the appalling mess we inherited, but about how we would fundamentally reset the HS2 project. Today I am publishing the latest parliamentary report and the Lovegrove report—an assessment of what past failings in the delivery of HS2 mean for the civil service and the wider public sector. This was a Cabinet Secretary investigation commissioned by the Prime Minister last year. I will also take this opportunity to update hon. Members on the latest stage of the HS2 reset.

However, I will first remind the House of the litany of failures we inherited in July 2024. Costs soared by £37 billion under the previous Government alone, with billions of pounds of taxpayers' money sunk into phase 2 work for the sections north of Birmingham before they were abruptly cancelled. Huge contracts were handed out without improvements in price, despite the Oakervee review's recommendation to negotiate a better position.

Instead of signalling the country's ambition, HS2 became a symbol of this country's decline. After more than five years of construction and more than £40 billion spent, the country was no closer to having an operational HS2 railway than when construction first began. That is the shocking legacy of the previous Government, and I am afraid it gets worse: I can today confirm that the previous Government spent most of HS2's budget without laying a single metre of its track. Today is about ending that era of neglect.

New chief executive officer Mark Wild and chair Mike Brown have an almost impossible task on their hands; as Mark put it to me recently, it is like changing the engine of an aeroplane mid-flight. However, the new leadership team at HS2 is turning things around, with six major construction milestones reached earlier than planned in the past year. The organisation is more focused on the things that matter, with 300 back-office roles removed. HS2 Ltd is reviewing its supply chain contracts and the incentives within them to ensure that we finish the job at the lowest reasonable cost, and it is managing those contractors properly now to ensure that supplier performance is up to scratch. Finally, we are seeing improved oversight, with HS2's leadership now receiving real-time updates, helping to prevent delays and keep construction to time.

However, there is no getting away from the fact that the vast majority of HS2's previous budget was blown on completing around a third of the entire project. Over the past year, Mark Wild and HS2 Ltd have worked closely with me and my Department to assess the remaining work to be done. They have now provided me with updated costs and timescales, which I can share with the House.

It gives me no pleasure to say that the expected cost of completing HS2 is now between £87.7 billion and £102.7 billion, priced in 2025. Two thirds of that increase is down to past misunderstanding of the work required, underestimation and inefficiency—issues within the control of HS2 Ltd, some of its suppliers and previous

Governments. The remaining third is linked to inflation, which was not factored into previous cost estimates regularly enough.

On timings, I said last year that I could see no route by which trains could be running by 2033. We now expect the first services to run from Old Oak Common to Birmingham Curzon Street between May 2036 and October 2039. Where the previous Government could not say when the full HS2 scheme between Euston and Handsacre Junction would be delivered, I now expect it to happen between May 2040 and December 2043. Lessons have been learned from the Stewart review, meaning that HS2's cost and schedules are now built on more solid foundations, with credible estimates published as ranges to ensure that they better stand the test of time.

Colleagues may feel that they have heard this all before; I understand that scepticism, but it is different this time. HS2 Ltd has now used the same experts and methods behind the successful Crossrail reset. It has priced future work against what we have learned so far, and its homework has been checked by an independent panel of experts.

However, if this seems like an obscene increase in time and costs, it is because it is. If it seems that I am angry, it is because I am. I am angry on behalf of taxpayers and affected communities who have been swindled by the failures of successive Conservative Governments; I am angry on behalf of the thousands of rail and construction workers who are giving their all on this project, and who do not deserve to have their industry tarnished in this way; and I am angry on behalf of passengers who continue to wait for the new services and new opportunities that they deserve.

Despite this sorry situation, we are determined to claw back as much time and money as possible. The Lovegrove report not only corroborates the Stewart review's damning assessment of the decision-making environment under the previous Government, but talks about the original "gold plating" of HS2 and a focus on "the highest possible speeds, resulting in bespoke and highly engineered design".

To translate: it was a massively over-specified folly, with the prospect of the fastest trains anywhere in the world tickling the fancy of Conservative Ministers. If we were a country the size of China, I could understand it—but we are not. Passengers just want reliable trains that turn up when they are supposed to, more services and more seats. They want a common-sense approach that gets them the railway they deserve, not a vanity project with trains so fast that proper testing could not be done until track and railway systems were complete.

I therefore asked Mark Wild to remove the gold-plating and complexity from this project, and I have today accepted his recommendation to align HS2 with speeds already delivered on other European high-speed networks. That means we will still run some of the fastest trains in Europe, with speeds reaching 320 kph; but, crucially, it will lower the cost of testing and make delivering the project less risky. It could realise savings of up to £2.5 billion and save at least a year in delivery time.

I realise that there will be those who will say that this is all too much and that we should just cancel the whole thing. However, I can confirm today that it could cost almost as much to cancel the line as it would to finish it,

[Heidi Alexander]

while delivering none of the benefits, with half-finished structures strewn across the English countryside, a relic of what could have been.

This Labour Government are clear that we will deliver HS2 to completion, because this country can build big things; we just need competent people at the helm to deliver them. Prime Ministers Cameron, May, Johnson, Truss and Sunak—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I am sure that the Secretary of State did not mean to use the name of the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak).

Heidi Alexander: My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Previous Prime Ministers, in my view, created the world's most expensive slow-motion car crash, and they barely batted an eyelid. This Government have rolled up our sleeves and done the hard yards, putting the right team in place and being honest about the scale of the challenge.

I understand that this statement today will be met with cynicism and anger, but I say with genuine pride and conviction that I believe we are finally starting to see real delivery. Tunnelling machines are currently working under Londoners' feet to make HS2 to Euston a reality, and Birmingham's skyline is changing before our eyes, with new film studios, a sports quarter and housing all being built around the new Curzon Street station. This is national renewal in action. When I last worked with Mark Wild and Mike Brown, we took the delayed and over-budget Crossrail project and turned it into the Elizabeth line, which has now served more than half a billion passengers. We have done it before, and we will do it again. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

1.30 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

The Secretary of State's comments today demonstrate not only the challenges faced in the past and the reasons that action was taken to reduce the scope of HS2, but the significant challenges ahead if it is finally to be delivered. It is true that the early years of the HS2 project were beset with delay and cost overruns, with HS2 Ltd failing to maintain tight control of the budget and, frankly, the Department for Transport allowing it to get away with it. It was for that reason that the previous Government appointed Mark Wild OBE as the new chief executive of HS2 Ltd with the clear instruction to get a grip of costs and robustly oversee the project. It is apparent from today's statement that HS2's leadership under Mark Wild is taking those steps to try to achieve that.

Where there are actions that can reduce costs in the long run, the Opposition will clearly support them, but given concerns about trust in the project, I hope that the Government and HS2 Ltd will set out in detail how they believe these measures will save money and deliver even on this new extended timetable.

In addition, we have to acknowledge the deep-seated infrastructure challenges we face in this country. When the Prime Minister was campaigning during the last general election, we heard a range of promises about housing and infrastructure goals, but they completely foundered when they came into contact with reality. That is why the Opposition propose substantial changes to environmental legislation to give us the freedoms needed to cut environmental red tape, both for business and large infrastructure projects. Even the Prime Minister does not support regulations that lead to a £100-million bat tunnel—does the Secretary of State?

This issue must be addressed because the Secretary of State has made a number of strong statements. If she is angry, as she says she is, those statements must be backed up by consequential legislative changes that prevent cost overruns from occurring in future.

Turning to the specifics, I wish to press the Secretary of State on matters on which those in the sector have indicated they want assurances. For example, what do the new project cost figures include? Do they include all the rolling stock under the new plans? To what extent is funding for Euston included in the new estimates, and do they include signalling? Do the Government intend to set out precisely what is being funded and when the various elements will be delivered under their new timetable? Can the Secretary of State also explain what steps the Government have taken to improve HS2 Ltd's performance on settling claims with those impacted by construction, since she has highlighted separately that this is an area that requires improvement?

Of course, HS2 does not operate in a vacuum. On the same day that this statement is being made to the House, it has been announced that Government pressure will result in one in seven rail services being cut on one of Avanti West Coast's routes following a Government request to reduce expenditure. Given the comments made about the project, is it appropriate that services on the west coast will offer fewer services to passengers?

Ultimately, the Government are right to take steps to reduce costs on this project. Errors were made and should be rectified, and I am glad that the Government continue to support Mark Wild and his team as they work towards opening HS2.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the shadow Rail Minister for his questions and the tone in which he presented his case. He was not quite as bombastic at the Dispatch Box as he normally is, so I can only assume that perhaps he was considering making an apology for the dreadful mess that the previous Government left this project in. I did not hear one, but I accept the manner in which he made his points. I do question where the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden), is today. This is not the first time that he has run scared from an oral statement, and I can only assume that it is because he is embarrassed by his party's abject record on transport.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the appointment of the new CEO, Mark Wild, under the previous Government. I gently say to him that it is a bit like an arsonist demanding praise for calling the fire brigade. Let me quote what Mark Wild said about what he had inherited when he spoke to the Public Accounts Committee just days after he started in his job:

“we are in a completely unacceptable position...we have to acknowledge that HS2 has failed in its mission to control costs.”

The hon. Gentleman asked a number of specific questions, and I will answer them directly. He asks how reducing the speed to 320 kph will save money and ensure delivery. To be clear, that will mean that trains on HS2 are running as fast as bullet trains in Japan. We are making three scope changes in this announcement today: first, reducing the speed; secondly, reducing automatic train operation; and thirdly, ensuring that the signalling we put in on HS2 is aligned with the European train control system that is being rolled out on the trans-Pennine route upgrade and across the Network Rail system more broadly. We will depend on proven technologies; we are not taking a punt on world firsts. That is the way to reduce risk in the delivery of this programme and potentially reduce cost as well by up to £2.5 billion.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about bat tunnels. I can tell him that we are building no more bat tunnels on HS2 and that this Government have changed legislation through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, which could mean a different approach to protected species in future. I gently ask him who was overseeing the project when HS2 took the decision to proceed with the bat tunnel. It was not this Government; it was his Government, and we have taken actions to ensure that regulations in future do not get in the way of building the homes and infrastructure that this country needs.

The hon. Gentleman asked me specifically whether the revised cost ranges include a number of different areas. I can confirm that there is provision within this range for the delivery of Euston, though we have also gone out to market to attract private investment, given that in the 10-year infrastructure strategy we set out our ambition to deliver the new HS2 station through a public-private partnership. The signalling costs are also included in those cost ranges.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asked me what action HS2 is taking to improve its performance on settling claims on land and property. I know that there are very many hon. Members in this House whose constituents will have experienced frustrations in that regard. In the letter I recently wrote to the chair of HS2 setting out his priorities for the year, I was clear that I wanted greater attention on this area.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked me about some of the minor changes that Avanti West Coast has made recently to its summer timetable. It came to me with a proposition to better optimise its service pattern to meet the demand in the summer months. If we can save money because we are not moving trains around the country with half-empty carriages, as a responsible Government I think it is reasonable for us to look at that. On the timetable introduced on Sunday, we have seen significant enhancements, including additional seats on London Northwestern services between London and Birmingham. We are seeing the most regular Mid Cornwall Metro service in 60 years. Where his Government failed to invest in Britain's rail network, this Government are doing exactly the opposite and ensuring that people across the country have the trains they need and deserve.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for being honest with the House and for grasping the nub of the problem. We should not need the publication of the Lovegrove report or today's statement to know that the cost and timetable overruns on HS2 started long before, because the previous Government wanted spades in the ground before the designs, costs and permits were ready. They then cancelled half the project, so we have the Aston to Old Oak Common project. I am glad that the Government picked that up and are moving ahead on the Euston element as well. We also had the Stewart review and the Oakervee report to tell us what went wrong.

My question is not actually on HS2, because the Rail Minister and the HS2 chief exec are coming to the Committee tomorrow, but on elements that are picked up in the Lovegrove report. What is the Secretary of State doing now to ensure that essential transport projects, starting with the lower Thames crossing and the Northern Powerhouse Rail project, do not go the same way? Will she assure me that she will not put on the high-vis and the hard hat for the photo opportunities until all the detail, permits and cost budgets are in place first?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee is right that the problems of HS2 were born many years ago. The fact that the civil engineering was delayed for four years is not the product of decisions by this Government or the current management of HS2, but is, as she says, about overly optimistic cost estimates, construction starting before designs were mature, insufficiently controlled delivery, poor contractual arrangements, gold-plating, and constant changes in policy and scope. She is entirely right on that.

My hon. Friend asked me what lessons we are learning about the delivery of future transport infrastructure. On Northern Powerhouse Rail, we have worked closely with local leaders to agree scope, priorities and sequencing in advance, so that we know what elements of the overall programme will be delivered first. We have set an overall budget cap for that, and are securing local contributions to ensure that we maximise the economic and regeneration potential of the new transport infrastructure in those places. We are learning the lessons.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her candour on the scale of the HS2 disaster and for the specificity of the range of dates she provided. The Liberal Democrats certainly agree with her intent: we need to make the most of this shambles, and it would be better to do something with what has been built rather than scrap it and hope that doing so resets the past. It is also good news that the Secretary of State has outlined a commitment to proven technology, rather than the innovations of the future—warp drive and whatever else was being talked about before. In particular, the use of the ETCS for signalling is welcome.

We in this country know how to build high-speed lines, because we did it between London St Pancras and the channel tunnel at a reasonable cost. Of course, our French and Spanish allies also know how to do it. The high-speed line from Tours to Bordeaux in France took

[Olly Glover]

15 years, including all the planning and construction. The Secretary of State highlighted Crossrail's expertise on the expert panel, which is welcome, but is she sure that that expertise is the same as is needed in the more specialised case of high-speed rail construction? Is she confident that her expert panel has the specific high-speed rail construction and commissioning skills that we need, from either the UK or abroad, to turn the situation around?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for our overall approach. I am reassured that we have the capability and capacity that is needed in the executive leadership of HS2. That was not the case previously. A new financial director and new commercial director are in place, and I am reassured that the six new appointments to the HS2 board, which the new chair has led over the past year, have the right skills.

On the expert panel, I assure the hon. Gentleman that there are the multiple layers of assurance as regards the new plan and who has looked at it. We have real expertise on the third line of defence panel, including Kenny Laird, Andrew Paul, Rachel McLean, Colin Brown, Laurent Troger and Miles Ashley. We have also included a rep from the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, and the project representative is involved as well. This is a substantial group of people, who are all putting their shoulder to the wheel to make this project a success.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The consequences of the Conservative party's failure to manage this project effectively are nowhere felt more deeply than in Crewe and Nantwich, where jobs and regeneration benefits have been lost and Cheshire East council has £11 million in sunk costs. I welcome the shift in emphasis from speed to capacity, but the network between Birmingham and Crewe is at capacity now, let alone in 10 or 20 years' time. Will the Secretary of State commit to looking more urgently at how we address capacity constraints between Birmingham and Crewe? Will her Department engage with Cheshire East council on its plans to mitigate its losses as a result of the decision to cancel the line in the midlands?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has been a great advocate for his constituents, and I totally agree that the focus now, as it should have been all along, is on delivering more seats, and more trains that run on time. We will conduct a further feasibility study on connectivity north of Birmingham. That will consider all options and the impact of each option on economic growth, housing, capacity on the rail network, journey times and resilience, as well as looking at how we might design, consent and fund any future specified scheme. I am willing to continue a dialogue with him about those issues.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): In her statement, the Secretary of State said that she was angry, and I can assure her that I have been consistently angry about this unaffordable, unwanted railway ever since it was green lit—angry on behalf of my constituents, who have to live in hellish conditions while it is constructed.

Landowners are still waiting for payment for land taken, and our roads are churned up by construction traffic, and still unfixed. There is still not the money to deliver mitigation projects that were promised a decade ago. I heard nothing about any of those challenges in her statement.

May I ask the Secretary of State specifically about noise modelling? Modelling has found that in Wendover—where trains were already going to come through at 320 kph—hundreds of homes will face noise that is above the permitted decibel limit set down by the World Health Organisation. Will she commit to the Government fully remodelling the noise impacts on real people—certainly in Buckinghamshire—of the new speed that she has set for HS2, and come back to the House with a commitment that the noise level will not be above the level set out in WHO guidance?

Heidi Alexander: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman's Buckinghamshire constituents will have experienced considerable disruption to their lives as a result of this construction project, and I know that those who live nearest to infrastructure schemes tend to take more of the pain before the gain from the new service is delivered. I will look into the matter of the noise impacts of a lower-speed railway. My instinct is that the noise is likely to be less, but if what I learn is any different from that, I will write to him and let him know.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State will not be surprised to see me rise yet again to raise issues with HS2. She is right to be angry about the scale of the failings laid out in the reports published today. She is angry, and I am angry, but our anger pales into insignificance when compared to the anger of my constituents, who have had to fight for 17 years as a result of the failures of HS2 Ltd. We heard today in the announcement that we potentially face another 13 years before we even carry on with the work north of Curzon Street to connect to Handsacre junction—and all of that, by the way, is north of Birmingham.

The community is furious. My constituents are the most, or certainly some of the most, impacted by HS2. Just last month, the A38 going past Lichfield was closed, forcing 70,000 vehicles a day on to roads in the city. My constituents are fed up. Can the Secretary of State give some reassurance that the ongoing works at Streethay—that is one of only two places north of Curzon Street where work is continuing—will be completed on time, by October? What mitigations will the Department put in place for communities like mine, who are significantly impacted? By the sounds of it, it could be a third of a century from the start of this process before the trains actually start travelling through our part of the world.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has been a fearsome advocate for his constituents on this issue, and I know that he is meeting the Rail Minister later today to talk about the impact on his constituency.

I have heard nothing to suggest that the works at Streethay will not be delivered on time. If there is any new information that I have not been apprised of, I will come back to my hon. Friend and let him know. It is important that we continue with the works north of Birmingham up to Handsacre junction, because that is how HS2 will connect to the wider rail network. In the

short term, this project will improve connections between London and Birmingham; in the longer term, this is about improving the frequency, capacity and reliability of connections to the north-west, and beyond to Scotland. I appreciate his constituents' patience with this project, because it is in the national interest.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I have to say, I share a good deal of the Secretary of State's frustration, not least because I was one of those who argued at the time that if the speed of the railway was reduced to roughly what she is proposing, it would open up a number of alternative route options, avoiding the open countryside that the line now cuts across.

Can I counter-intuitively ask her to be a little more ambitious, despite everything she has said about high-speed rail? She will recognise that the strategic benefits of high-speed rail, as they were put to this House originally, were about a nationwide network, not simply a line between London and Birmingham. Can she confirm that this Government—and future Governments, hopefully—will seek to expand that network, so that high-speed rail focuses not on going faster, but on going further?

Heidi Alexander: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a very interesting point. One of the things that I am most keen to do is ensure that the huge investment that we are putting into HS2 between London and Birmingham results in an improved passenger experience for people across the rest of the country more broadly. That is one of the reasons why, when we made the announcement about Northern Powerhouse Rail earlier this year, we also announced a feasibility study on a new connection between Birmingham and Manchester. While it is slightly too soon to get into the specifics of what that would look like, I can assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that there is thinking and planning under way in the Department on ensuring that this investment unlocks the maximum benefit across the country.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Given the huge sums that the Secretary of State is talking about, what I want to raise might appear relatively trivial, but for my community it is quite significant. We have a charity called Hillingdon Outdoor Activities Centre, which used a lake where local young people in particular could learn to sail and canoe. That lake was taken over by HS2 as part of the route and has not been available for six years. An alternative was not identified until very recently—again, that is part of the decision making on HS2. All the charity's reserves have now gone, and staff are being laid off. Will the Secretary of State arrange a meeting for me with her officials and HS2, so that I can talk through the opportunities that there might be to assist the charity in continuing to provide an excellent service to our community?

Heidi Alexander: I would be very happy to ask relevant officers from HS2 to meet my right hon. Friend and look at options for the Hillingdon Outdoor Activities Centre. When I look at the scale of some of the structures being built on the outskirts of London—the 2.1-mile-long Colne valley viaduct, for example—it is evident what a huge and ambitious construction project this is. I am

sorry that there have been some impacts on communities and community groups, and I would be happy to look at alternatives.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): My constituents did not want HS2, and they have been putting up with the disruption of construction for years. Some of them warned that this would be a colossal waste of money, and they were right. This railway is costing nearly a billion pounds a mile. Every pound of cost overrun is a pound not spent on the local infrastructure that my constituents actually use and need. Given the Department's complete failure to date to hold HS2 Ltd to account, what commitment can the Secretary of State give that we will not be here again in a few years' time, talking about HS2 overspend?

Heidi Alexander: We have taken a different approach this time; our estimates are informed by the work done over the last five years. I am committed to ensuring that the scope remains the same, and that we do not have the chopping and changing that characterised the previous Government's approach to this project.

Although I recognise that there will be some impacts in the hon. Lady's constituency, this is a great engineering feat that we are involved in delivering. It will be the first new terminus station that this country has built in 125 years, and there will be new stations at Birmingham Interchange, Old Oak Common and Euston. Although I am always happy to talk to her about the local impacts, HS2 can provide very significant improvements to the rail network, and the Government are entirely right to be committed to completing this project.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My Chesterfield constituents at one time hoped that they might be beneficiaries of HS2. That feels like many years ago. I share the Secretary of State's fury about the incompetence that has got us to this stage. We would not have supported a programme like this, had we known that the line would go only to Birmingham. The line should be going to Manchester and Leeds, at the very least; any serious country that had high-speed rail would agree.

I am glad that the Secretary of State has laid out how she will get a grip on this, but I would like to add to what the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) said: once she has demonstrated that this Government have got a grip of the costs and the timescales, can we be more ambitious and reopen discussions about extending the line beyond Birmingham, and up to Manchester and Leeds?

Heidi Alexander: As I said to the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), in our announcement about Northern Powerhouse Rail a couple of months ago, we committed to doing a feasibility study on what a future link between Birmingham and Manchester might look like. We have not taken any decisions on the route, the specification, or the speed that the new line would facilitate. I recognise that there are significant capacity constraints north of Birmingham, but as we set up Great British Railways and renationalise our railways, I am keen to ensure that HS2 becomes the spine of the network and unlocks capacity, frequency and reliability improvements elsewhere in the country.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): If the Secretary of State decides to scrap HS2 in a year's time, or in a few months' time, she will have my full support. What assurances can she offer on providing better services to our residents, on unpaid land claims and on the destruction of roads? In Beaconsfield, Marlow and the south Bucks villages, we have seen nothing from HS2 but a negative impact.

Heidi Alexander: I am keen that HS2 should always engage with the community and local businesses with care, respect and rigour. If that has not been the hon. Lady's experience locally, I know that I and other Ministers will be only too happy to take that issue away. I am aware that she has an Adjournment debate on the matter later today.

I have to disagree with the hon. Lady on the idea that we should cancel the project. In his letter to my Department's permanent secretary, the chief executive of HS2 made it very clear that cancelling this project and doing the necessary remediation could cost almost as much as completing the line. We would have half-completed structures strewn across the English countryside, and I am sure that her constituents would not wish to see that. That is why it is right to reset this project and to complete HS2, as I have set out today.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): This shocking overspend is equivalent to more than £1,000 per household in the United Kingdom. Families in my constituency and across Britain work very hard to earn money to pay the bills and to try to have a reasonable standard of living. HS2 was meant to bring considerable benefits to the north of England and to Scotland; more reliable and quicker services to Glasgow and the west and central belt of Scotland; more passenger capacity and opportunities for people in the north of Scotland; economic growth; and the reduction of emissions by displacing flights. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss what the long-term plan is to improve rail services between Scotland, the north of England and the rest of our family of nations, so that we have appropriate and reduced journey times, passenger capacity at an appropriate level and services becoming more reliable?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right. This is shocking, and the truth of the matter is that this Government are picking up the bill for the mess created by the previous Government. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss how we can improve the capacity, frequency and reliability of services between England and his constituents in Glasgow, and I look forward to discussing that with him in more detail soon.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I can sense the Secretary of State's anger at the scale, width and depth of the failures in this project, but it was initiated in 2009, when Labour was in power. I am looking at the collective failure on both sides of the House. Labour Members are so quick to point out the ferries problem in Scotland, but it pales into insignificance before the scale of this incompetence.

The Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), said on BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme yesterday

that the most important thing is that HS2 will create a high-speed link between London and the north-west, and eventually to Scotland. Scottish taxpayers are paying for this folly. The Secretary of State can say the rest of the project will come in 2043, but will she explain when the project will extend to Scotland, as was suggested yesterday? How much more will we in Scotland be expected to pay? How many years after 2043 will it be delivered?

Heidi Alexander: I have been clear and remain clear that we will not extend HS2 north of the west midlands. When I made the Northern Powerhouse Rail announcement a couple of months ago, I announced that we will do a feasibility study about the longer term, after the delivery of HS2 to Birmingham and the delivery of east-west connectivity across the north of England through Northern Powerhouse Rail, and about how we can look to invest in improving the infrastructure between Birmingham and Manchester. That work will start this summer, and I am happy to keep the hon. Gentleman updated.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I welcome the clarity and determination to deliver on HS2. Rail investment is infrastructure investment, which drives growth, but may I urge the Secretary of State to look at driving growth between towns as well as between cities, for example by bringing lines such as the Calder Valley line into the 21st century?

Heidi Alexander: That approach certainly lies behind much of the work that we have done in our plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail. My hon. Friend will be aware that at the spending review we announced more than £15 billion for mayors in our city regions to improve connectivity between towns and cities, which are major centres of employment. His aspirations for his area and for his constituents align very closely with ours.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): My communities in Balsall Common and Berkswell have taken huge amounts of pain since long before I was first elected in 2019. That pain has been exacerbated by the conduct of HS2 and its subcontractors towards communities. I have met Mark Wild, who knows my concerns about that. I take heart from the level of engagement he has given, and I hope that it continues.

One of the key issues affecting my communities is the land being taken by HS2 that is yet to be released, including around Arden Cross—a project worth hundreds of millions of pounds that includes a health campus and is in conjunction with the local mayor, local councils and the University of Warwick. I am told that it might take four years, but I think it could be done in two years. Will the Secretary of State take a look at this issue?

Heidi Alexander: I hope the hon. Gentleman is reassured that I am already looking at this matter and have discussed it with HS2's leadership. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) has certainly raised it with me as well. Where possible, I am keen to release land to enable development and regeneration and to unlock new homes and workspaces. If that can take place without compromising the delivery of HS2, I am keen that it should happen. A piece of work is under way within HS2 to look at the specific issues relating to Arden Cross.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I welcome the honesty and clarity, after years of sitting opposite the Conservatives and not knowing whether HS2 was happening at all, or where it would start and stop—it was going to be a Y-shape in the beginning. This is good news, in a way. I echo the praise for Mark Wild, who has met with my residents, and for Lord Hendy in the other place. However, for my residents in Old Oak Common—this fabled area that was once going to be the terminus—the ever-lengthening timeline is disappointing. Will the Secretary of State consider opening the Elizabeth line station a bit earlier? Some new builds, such as Oaklands Rise, were promised that there would be a brand-new station in 2026, so surely there should be something in it for them before 2039.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that development around Old Oak Common is proceeding in advance of the completion of the rail network. I am pleased that the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation has gone out to find a development partner to build 8,000 new homes in the area, with potentially 1,000 of them starting in this Parliament. We need to ensure that there is adequate public transport provision for any homes and development that happen to provide for new residents. I will take away her specific point about the Elizabeth line; I am not entirely sure of its feasibility, but I will come back to her with more detail.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Many farmers, small businesses and residents have had access to their properties disrupted by the construction of HS2. The Wilcoxes in my constituency have been battling for more than five years to get a simple deed of easement to guarantee access to their property. As a former property lawyer, I know that is a very simple document that should have been agreed; without it, properties become unmortgageable and unsellable. Will the Secretary of State set out what steps she is taking to ensure that these deeds of easement are entered into without further delay?

Heidi Alexander: I am sorry to hear of the situation that the hon. Lady describes. If she wants to write to me about that specific case, I will raise it with the leadership of HS2 for her.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I thank the Secretary of State for her honesty in coming to the House with this update. Wales is, of course, footing the bill for HS2, a project based entirely in England now costing up to £103 billion. While Scotland and Northern Ireland have their fair share of Barnett consequentials, Wales has nothing. People in Wales have had enough of being treated as second-class citizens—they recently elected a Senedd with a majority of Members within it committed to ending this injustice. Will the Secretary of State respect the wishes of the people of Wales and be open to talks with the Welsh Government on reclassifying HS2 so that Wales no longer pays for it, or at least gets its fair share of the Barnett consequentials?

Heidi Alexander: It is not true to say that Wales is getting nothing. At the spending review last year we announced £445 million in direct funding to modernise and upgrade Welsh rail, and only a couple of months ago, in February, the UK Government, with the former Welsh Government, announced a long-term pipeline of rail enhancements that could total up to £14 billion.

I would be happy to discuss rail enhancements with the new leadership of the Senedd, and I look forward to having a constructive working relationship with the First Minister and his Cabinet.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Having chaired the all-party parliamentary group on rail for the last nine or 10 years, I have seen a procession of Ministers and officials come along and give reassurances such as those we have heard from the Secretary of State today. It is hard to believe that her successors will not come to the House in the distant future to talk about further resets of the project. Will the Secretary of State assure us that the spending on HS2 will not affect the announcement she made a few weeks ago about improving other rail services in the north? I know that she would be disappointed if I did not also mention the campaign by me and the Father of the House to improve services to northern Lincolnshire.

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman would expect me to have comprehensive discussions with my colleagues in the Treasury before announcing rail enhancements, and that is what we have done over the past couple of months, whether about Northern Powerhouse Rail—we set out those really ambitious plans at the start of the year—or indeed the anticipated profile of expenditure required over the next 10 years. I assure him that nothing I have announced today changes what I announced in January on Northern Powerhouse Rail.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Before being elected to this place, I was a member of the independent panel for the community and environment fund and the business and local economy fund for HS2, which was responsible for disbursing funding to communities disrupted by the building of a whacking great railway line. Communities rightly and understandably get grumpy when large-scale infrastructure projects affect their communities but there is no obvious benefit to them—a railway line goes through, but there is no station for them to benefit from. What assurance can the Secretary of State give the House that she is looking at what can be learned positively from what has happened with HS2, and in particular at how we can strengthen and make clearer the link between community benefit and large-scale infrastructure projects when the immediate benefit is not obvious to those communities?

Heidi Alexander: One of the failings of HS2 has been to focus on the speed of the line and the four stations, when actually one of its major benefits is to free up capacity on the existing west coast main line between London and Birmingham to enable better regional services and to enable more freight to transfer from lorries on the road to the rail network. For too long the project has been about speed and not about seats and reliability. Through this reset, we are changing that. As I said earlier, we are determined to ensure that this will be the spine of the Great British Rail network that we will deliver as we renationalise the railways.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. It is outrageous to hear about the waste, with money thrown away by successive Conservative Governments. Even now, the eye-watering level of money required to reset HS2 grates on people up in Yorkshire and the north, where the northern legs were cancelled. We also get

[Tom Gordon]

comparatively less funding per head for transport than counterparts in the south. Does she agree that the small amount of money to be saved from reducing the scope and speed would be better spent on schemes such as Northern Powerhouse Rail and reinstating the York area capacity scheme, estimated at only around £150 million, which would unlock the bottleneck at York station and deliver benefit across the north?

Heidi Alexander: I cannot spend the money twice. I have taken the decision to reduce the speed of HS2 to 320 kph, which we believe could save up to £2.5 billion and result in delivery a year earlier. Given how long people have been waiting for this new railway, I think that is the responsible thing to do so that people can get on these trains sooner than they otherwise would. I understand that the hon. Member is a fearsome advocate for those rail improvements for his constituency, and I am sure that we will talk about them more at the next Transport questions.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The truth of the matter is that despite spending over £103 billion of taxpayers' money, my son has laid more rail track from his Lego set than the previous Government did under the HS2 programme. But seriously, whistleblowers have alleged that costs were deliberately hidden from Parliament, documents were shredded and staff who spoke out were sacked. Before another penny is spent by the British taxpayer, how will the Secretary of State ensure that in the future there are accountable binding mechanisms to stop contractors and executives from misleading the House again?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Member is right to raise those important issues. We will always treat any whistleblowing complaints with the utmost seriousness. When it comes to fraud, I reassure him that, as part of the reset, HS2 is strengthening its counter-fraud capability and its internal controls and processes. When spending this amount of taxpayers money, it should be treated it as if it were our own, with the care and attention that we would apply to our own money. We are therefore taking all necessary steps to ensure that we strengthen the controls within the organisation to ensure value for money for the taxpayer.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for reeling off a list of depressing dates in the far future, leading all but the youngest of us to contemplate our mortality. What is also depressing is the serious lack of investment in rail infrastructure in the north-west north of Manchester; it is an ongoing issue. I get that HS2 has sucked up money, energy and attention, but I wonder whether the Secretary of State might seek to put that right by being creative with use of the existing main line. For instance, will she work with Network Rail, me and Westmorland and Furness council to advance the cause for reopening stations such as Shap and Tebay, ensuring massively improved public transport links for rural north Westmorland?

Heidi Alexander: If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me about the case for reopening Shap and Tebay, I would gladly consider that. We are reopening some rail stations across the north of England. The

Northumberland line, which I visited at the start of last year, has been an enormous success, with new stations at places like Ashington and Blyth. We are investing in rail in the north of England—that was demonstrated by our commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail—but I am happy to look at the specifics of the scheme that he suggests.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I thank the Minister for delivering this really important update in the House, rather than at party conference as the previous Tory Prime Minister did. What has really struck me about this statement is that the cost of HS2 is now measured in the hundreds of billions, but what we are spending on active travel is measured in the hundreds of millions. I think the Government previously committed only £600 million until 2030 on active travel. Projects such as the Thame to Haddenham greenway would deliver an enormous benefit to my constituents. Will she reflect on the differential between how much is being spent on active travel and this project?

Heidi Alexander: I will gently correct the hon. Member. When it comes to HS2, we may be talking about tens of billions, but we are not talking about hundreds of billions. He makes a fair point about the importance of investment in walking and cycling. The Government are due to launch the third iteration of the cycling and walking strategy, and we are backing that with £600 million-worth of investment. We realise the benefits that active travel—people walking and cycling more, and using public transport—can have not just for people's own health, but for the environment and the economy. It is something that the local transport Minister and I care deeply about and will ensure that we make progress on.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, for her positivity and for trying to make matters better. She talked about maximising international standards and reshaping governance to find efficiencies, yet my constituents in Northern Ireland are facing critical infrastructure deficits of their own. If the fundamental reset is truly about driving economic growth and maximising value across the United Kingdom, will the Secretary of State please, very genuinely, explicitly outline how the billions clawed back from streamlining HS2 will be used to support Union connectivity and in particular air passenger duty, which hampers connectivity within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Heidi Alexander: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on levering in a question on air passenger duty into a statement on HS2.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): He never misses an opportunity.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): My hon. Friend is right; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) never misses an opportunity. I am very concerned about ensuring that connectivity between the UK mainland and Northern Ireland remains and that it is reliable and affordable for people. I will be sure to talk further to the hon. Gentleman about what more can be done—aside from air passenger duty, which is a matter for the Treasury. If there is anything that my Department can do to improve the situation for his constituents, I will be only too happy to talk to him.

Debate on the Address

[4TH DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 18 May).

Question again proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Energy Security

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (i) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I call the shadow Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero.

2.22 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I beg to move amendment (i), at the end of the Question to add:

"but respectfully regret that the Gracious Speech commits to banning the issuance of licences to explore new oil and gas fields; recognise that this proposal will have a particularly negative impact on Aberdeen, the North East of Scotland and the wider UK economy; believe instead the Government must approve the Rosebank oil field and the Jackdaw gas field, which would boost UK energy security; urge the Government to drop its opposition to new oil and gas licences and instead legislate for a presumption in favour of approving new licences, and permit the exporting of oil and gas technology overseas; further regret the cancellation of a third large-scale nuclear power plant at Wylfa; and further urge the Government to abolish the 'carbon tax' regime to avoid more refinery closures, protect the domestic supply of refined products, and reduce the tax burden on UK industry."

This may be our last meeting across the Dispatch Box, because the Secretary of State is once again on manoeuvres. Considering that he is gunning for a promotion, let us review his record, shall we? He promised in the election that he would cut everybody's energy bills by £300. What has he delivered? Energy bills are up by £200 thanks to his plans. He said that he would protect pensioners, but weeks into office he axed the winter fuel payment—a policy that many Labour MPs have cited as their worst political decision in power.

The Secretary of State promised that Great British Energy would lead to a mind-blowing reduction in bills. Yet, two years in, it has not taken a penny off household bills, but has given a six-figure salary to one of his mates. Now, we learn that Great British Energy has been putting solar panels, made by Chinese slave labour, on British primary schools—something that the Secretary of State promised to this House that he would not do. What is next? Oh, that's right: the Secretary of State said that he could control the price of wind. However, his botched wind auction signed us up to the highest prices in a decade—way more than the cost of electricity that he inherited.

Promise after broken promise, bills up, pensioners betrayed, six-figure salaries for his mates and eye-watering contracts for wind developers—now, to top it all off, a so-called energy independence Bill that would shut down

the North sea, in the greatest act of industrial self-harm in a generation. If that is what gets someone a promotion in the Labour party, Lord help us all.

Let us turn to the so-called energy independence Bill. For true energy independence, we need our own oil and gas, but the Bill enforces the wilful destruction of the North sea. We need our own petrol, diesel and jet fuel, but the Bill does nothing to save our refineries, which are being taxed into oblivion. We need an electricity system that keeps the lights on for British households and industry, but his plan will leave us at the mercy of foreign imports. That is not independence; it doesn't even come close. It is an energy dependence Bill that would leave us weaker, poorer and more reliant on foreign regimes.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State said that for energy independence we need our own oil and gas, rather than investing in renewables. She will know that her Government paid £44 billion to subsidise our energy during the time of the Ukraine price spike. Will she tell us by how much our bills were reduced as a result of having our own oil and gas when the Ukraine crisis happened?

Claire Coutinho: First, let me say to the hon. Gentleman that bills came down £500 under me; they have gone up by £200 because of the Secretary of State's plans. Secondly, let me tell him another hard truth. He should listen to this; he might learn something. Cutting off production in the North sea does not mean that we use any less oil and gas. Production is not linked to consumption. All it means is that we will import more of that gas from abroad. That is weaker and it makes us more reliant on imports.

Mr Perkins *rose—*

Claire Coutinho: He used up his chance; he should have asked a better question.

There are some parts of this work that I welcome. The Fingleton review is impressive. I thank those involved and, as I have made clear before, we will support that work going forward. Nuclear is the only form of energy that can provide round-the-clock, totally clean power, and I will always support policies that make it as easy as possible to build.

There is a catch, however. The Secretary of State says he wants to ease nuclear regulations while, at the very same time, he has cancelled the project that they would be used on. By cancelling the third large-scale nuclear power station that I signed off, he has killed the nuclear pipeline. He is repeating his own mistakes. We are set to have yet another Labour Government who fail to start a single new large-scale nuclear power plant, and now we hear that Natural England is adding yet more delays to Hinkley Point C for little environmental gain. Is he fighting that? No. He is defending the status quo.

By the end of this Parliament we will still be waiting for a decision as to whether small modular reactors will go ahead, by 2030 there will be less nuclear online than there is now, and in 2035, which is 10 years away, the Government still will not have started any new large-scale nuclear power plants in this country. That is the same old stop-start approach that killed the industry to begin

[*Claire Coutinho*]

with. If that is what the Secretary of State calls being ambitious for nuclear, he needs to give his head a wobble.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): My constituency has the Heysham 1 and Heysham 2 power plants. The reason why nuclear power will possibly go down is because plants are coming to the end of their lives and the right hon. Lady's Government did nothing about that for 14 years. Why did she not deliver when she was in government?

Claire Coutinho: Let me tell the hon. Lady. Under the last Labour Government, which the Energy Secretary was part of—[*Interruption.*] Let me explain. Not a single new nuclear power plant was started. When we came into power in 2015 and got control of the energy brief, there was one nuclear welder left in the country. It is the stop-start approach that kills the nuclear industry. Here is the problem: the Government have killed the pipeline again. These are the same old mistakes, and I am raising them because we are getting into the same trouble again—[*Interruption.*] The Ministers say that those were not mistakes and that it was not a mistake not to start a single new nuclear power plant. That is what they think, on the record.

On to the North Sea. Andy Burnham, who is hoping to be Labour leader, talked yesterday about reindustrialisation. Meanwhile, today the Secretary of State is asking his Back Benchers to vote to shut down the North sea. This is the single greatest act of industrial self-harm we have seen in a generation. Only a complete wacko would respond to a supply shortage by shutting down their own oil and gas industry. We are in the absurd position of the Labour Chancellor thanking Canada and Norway for increasing their oil and gas production while her own Government are shutting down British production. And why? It is so we can be more reliant on higher-emission gas from Qatar or the US and so we can send billions of pounds to Norway to import gas from the very same basin that we could be drilling ourselves. The Government are calling this energy independence. Have they lost their mind?

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): The right hon. Lady talks of absurd positions. I did a little research before the debate today. I went back to 21 May 2024, just before the last general election, and in this House, in her capacity as Secretary of State, she said that she believed in net zero. She said:

“We are on track to reach net zero by 2050, and we will do so in a way that brings the public with us.”—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 724.]

Her position now is that she does not believe in net zero, and does not believe that it is desirable or achievable. Is that not absurd?

Claire Coutinho: People change their minds when they look at facts—[*Interruption.*] I am not hiding from this. I think the hon. Gentleman needs to look at the overall record of the things I said in government. The first thing I said when I went into position was that we cannot impoverish ourselves in the name of net zero. I started a true costing of renewables in the Department,

because we did not have a proper costing of energy. Who cancelled that work? It was the Secretary of State. I backed the North sea; I signed off Rosebank; I legislated to protect those North sea licences. Who is turning all of that around? The Secretary of State. We all know the real reason that he is doing it. He is shutting down British oil and gas to show climate leadership. He put that in the King's Speech. Let us be crystal clear, though. What he is saying is that he is willing to turn his back on British industry, even though we will not need any less energy. We will rely on higher-emission imports from abroad because he cares more about the climate bureaucrats than about the jobs of British workers. That is what climate leadership means to him.

Where exactly is this meant to be leading us—bankruptcy? Where does it end—cheering as the lights go out as the last factory in Britain closes? That is what the Secretary of State's North sea and carbon tax policies are doing. They are simply offshoring British emissions to the coal-powered refineries of India, the diesel tankers bringing us gas from the US and Qatar, and the factories in Trinidad from where we are now getting our ammonia. That does not help the climate and it does not help British workers.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Businesses in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton need stable and affordable energy to grow and invest, so does my right hon. Friend agree that our “get Britain drilling” Bill is vital not just for energy security but for our future economic security?

Claire Coutinho: The North sea is a vital part of our industry. It provides us not only with the gas that we need for energy security but with the feedstock that feeds into our chemicals and plastics industries. There is a whole supply chain of other industries that rely on the North sea and on our having a successful industrial base. If we lose just one of those foundational industries, it is like dominoes: the rest will go. If we keep offshoring British emissions, it will not help the climate and it will not help British workers. Do the Government understand how bad it looks when they make speeches patting themselves on the back here in Westminster while hard-working Brits out there lose their jobs so that we can import more goods with higher emissions from abroad? That is why the vote on the North sea today should be a litmus test for them. Do they reject decarbonisation by deindustrialisation or not?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Claire Coutinho: I will just make a bit of progress.

Now let us talk about electricity. A key part of the Secretary of State's plan is to make us more reliant on electricity imports. He does not like to talk about it, but at the height of winter, when we need it most, we will be importing twice as much electricity by 2030 as we did when this Government came into office. What does that mean? It means relying on the goodwill of France and Norway to keep the lights on in Britain. I remind the House that we are now in a situation where France is on the edge of a debt crisis, with the National Rally topping the polls. Does the House really think it prudent to hand over the keys to our electricity security to Marine

Le Pen? Let us be honest, that is the Secretary of State's plan. Whichever way we look at it, this is not an energy independence Bill. It is an energy dependence Bill that makes Britain beholden to Marine Le Pen for our electricity, to Xi Jinping for our solar panels and to Donald Trump for our gas. The Government's plan is for energy scarcity, but what we need is energy abundance. That is why our plan would be to double down on nuclear, to axe the carbon tax to save British industry, to get Britain drilling and to make electricity cheap.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The right hon. Lady paints a picture of the stark consequences of the Labour party's policy for a total proscription on new oil and gas licences. Can she advise us what the future will look like for the United Kingdom without access to oil and gas from the North sea basin?

Claire Coutinho: I know that the hon. Gentleman's party has changed position on this recently, and I welcome that change. As I have said, the North sea is a foundational industry. It is not just about the oil and gas it provides. It is not just about the tax revenues. It is not just about the jobs that exist within that industry. It is about all those other industries it supports, including the chemicals and plastics industries. By the way, even the renewables industry supports more drilling in the North sea, because it needs the specialist rigs, the undersea technologies and the exact same workers. There are so many industries and wider economies that the Government are killing just because of the ideological bent of this Secretary of State.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Claire Coutinho: I will make a bit more progress.

Here is the fundamental bind that the Labour party is in. It does not matter who its next leader is—they will all fail. Its supposedly popular leadership contenders will become unpopular very quickly when they cannot keep their promises. It happened to us in government. It is happening to Labour now. It is happening to Reform at council level. It will happen to whoever is in government next unless they face up to the trade-offs that get us better growth.

Growth is the antidote to so many of our problems, but to deliver it, we need two things: cheap, abundant energy and economic freedom. By shutting down the North sea, cancelling nuclear projects and keeping a distorted electricity market in place, the Government are making energy scarce and expensive. Being part of the EU does not solve that problem. The EU leaders themselves rail against their own energy policy. Reindustrialisation is just a meaningless slogan unless we back the North sea, axe the carbon taxes that are killing British industry and cut the cost of energy. If none of Labour's contenders has the courage to say anything about these issues, nothing will change.

Alongside cheap, abundant energy, the most important ingredient for growth is economic freedom, but the Labour party openly stands for more state control, more tax and spend, more red tape on employing people, more expensive energy, less AI, fewer profits and more subsidies. It has been on this path for two years now, and what do we have to show for it? Higher inflation,

weaker growth and soaring unemployment. Why would anyone want more of this? Families are working harder and harder and getting less and less at the end of the month. And if people want full-fat socialism, why would they choose Labour when they have the boob whisperer offering them bigger and better?

Our whole system is flooded with caution. Nobody is incentivised to take any risks.

That is what is making us poorer. The truth is that the personalities in the Labour leadership race do not matter. Unless we get cheap, abundant energy, remove the legal straitjackets and onerous taxes, and fix the broken regulators and the sluggish machine of government to set the economy free, nothing is going to change.

If Labour Members think that Andy Burnham has the answers, let me tell them this. Andy is like the fun uncle who sits on the sidelines saying whatever he wants without anybody holding him accountable: "Let's have ice cream for dinner! Let's go to the zoo next week! Let's nationalise everything! Who cares about the bond markets? Let's rejoin the EU!" He has said whatever he liked because he has never had to pick up the bill. Now that he is actually looking at being in charge, he is having to go back on all those promises. Members should ask him this: how is he going to fund his nationalisation plans? He wants to stick to the fiscal rules. Is he really saying that he is going back to taxpayers, who already face the highest tax burden in history? When he talks about reindustrialisation, they should ask him whether he supports the Secretary of State's plans to shut down the oil and gas industry—the biggest act of industrial self-harm committed in generations. If Andy Burnham wants more powers at a local level, amen to that—I could not agree more—but Labour Members should ask him how he can argue for economic freedom in one breath, while in another dictating to people what tumble dryers or cars they have to buy.

If Labour Members really cared about growth and reindustrialisation, they would axe carbon taxes, get Britain drilling, double down on nuclear and make electricity cheap. In short, they would put the national interest ahead of the Secretary of State's ideology and vote with us tonight.

2.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): It is a privilege to speak in support of this Gracious Speech. This debate takes place in the shadow of the second fossil fuel shock in four years. Families and businesses across the country are deeply concerned about the impact of the Iran war on the cost of living—a war which this country did not start and this Government chose not to join, but which is having significant effects here at home, just like when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and energy bills rocketed, and the British people and firms paid the price.

The argument at the heart of this Gracious Speech is that there is one overriding lesson of these two crises: while we remain exposed to the fossil fuel rollercoaster, we are deeply vulnerable as a country. Our sovereignty, our security and the British people's living standards are undermined by this dependence and exposure, for a simple reason: we do not control the price of oil and gas, which is set on international markets. It is different from what it was like in the 1970s when we had fossil

[Ed Miliband]

fuel shocks. There is an answer staring us in the face: energy independence through clean home-grown power that we control—clean home-grown energy that comes from our own wind, sun and nuclear resources that cannot be disrupted by foreign wars, that cannot be controlled by the whims of petrostates and dictators, and that means that our national security and energy security cannot be held hostage.

One commentator put it incredibly well in 2023, after Russia invaded Ukraine:

“Moving to home-based, clean power mitigates risks to bill payers, now and in the future”,

protecting consumers from

“volatility in international fossil fuel markets.”—[*Official Report*, 16 November 2023; Vol. 740, c. 53-54WS.]

I agree with that commentator—it was the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), the shadow Energy Secretary, in *Hansard* on 16 November 2023. I agree with her. The problem is that she no longer agrees with herself. Where the evidence says we need more renewables, not less, she opposes them. Where the evidence says we should electrify as much as we can, she says we should abandon support for people to get heat pumps. Where the evidence says electric vehicles can protect consumers, she opposes action for their take-up—not because the facts have changed, not because the evidence has changed, but because she has jumped on the anti-clean energy, anti-net zero bandwagon. I am very happy to give way to her, so that she can tell the House whether she agrees with herself.

Claire Coutinho: I will very happily ask the Secretary of State the question—[*Interruption.*] Well, he said he would happily give way; he does not look so happy now. In government, I started work on the true costing of renewables, because the Department does not have an accurate costing of energy—it does not have an accurate costing of clean power 2030. Why has he not published one?

Ed Miliband: It was not worth giving way after all. The shadow Secretary of State cannot answer the question.

Dave Doogan: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ed Miliband: I will not give way. [*Interruption.*] I will later on.

What a sorry state of affairs: the shadow Secretary of State cannot even agree with herself. There was a gaping contradiction at the heart of the shadow Secretary of State's speech just now. For all the verbiage—for everything she said—she has no answer to the crisis before us, because even she cannot seriously believe what she is putting forward. The idea that new exploration licences for oil and gas will solve our energy security challenges is obviously nonsense. According to the National Energy System Operator, new licences will make no material difference to capacity and therefore security of supply. Nor will new drilling take a single penny off bills. Members should not take my word for it. When asked if new oil and gas would cut bills, the shadow Secretary of State said new licences

“wouldn't necessarily bring energy bills down, that's not what we're saying.”

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ed Miliband: I will not give way for a minute.

The shadow Secretary of State comes to the House with a plan which will not take a penny off bills, which will not give us energy security and which rejects the things she used to believe.

Claire Coutinho: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ed Miliband: I am not going to give way again.

This is the difference with Labour: we are learning the lessons of the fossil fuel crises we face, and we are acting.

Dave Doogan: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. He is accused of being messianic in his approach to proscribing new oil and gas licences in the North sea. If it can be demonstrated that UK consumption of oil and gas is not falling at a rate that is equal to, or faster than, the rate of production in the United Kingdom, will he release his screeching U-turn on new oil and gas licences in the North sea?

Ed Miliband: The SNP has had more positions on this than the Kama Sutra, so it is genuinely hard to keep up. We have a very simple position: we want to keep existing oil and gas fields open for their lifetime. One of the things that the energy independence Bill will do is introduce transitional energy certificates—so-called tiebacks—which is what industry has called for. We are not in favour of a “turning off the taps” position, but I will be honest with the House: nor are we in favour of a “drilling every last drop” position.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Why not?

Ed Miliband: Because if we did that, we would end up in climate disaster. That is the truth.

Harriet Cross: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ed Miliband: I am not going to give way.

Don't take my word for it. This is what the Energy Transitions Commission, which includes energy companies, says:

“Any national strategy which assumes that all fossil fuel reserves must be exploited is incompatible with limiting global warming to safe levels”.

The truth is that new licences are totally marginal to the North sea.

Harriet Cross: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ed Miliband: I am going to make some progress, and then I will give way.

For nearly two years, we have been moving at speed on our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower. We came to office amid a legacy of the irrational onshore wind ban; the fiasco of the allocation round 5 auction, with no offshore wind secured; and years of dither and delay on nuclear—the shadow Secretary of State amused me on nuclear, and I will come to that in a

second. The Conservative Government left us exposed through 14 years of neglect, and we are clearing up their mess.

In less than two years—opposed every step of the way by the Conservative party—we have secured enough clean energy for the equivalent of 23 million homes through two record-breaking renewables auctions, but the lesson of these two fossil fuel crises is that we need to go further and faster.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Ed Miliband: I will make a bit more progress.

That is why we have already brought forward our next renewables auction and taken steps to fast-track the roll-out of renewables on public land. But renewables are only part of the story, and I want to come to nuclear, because this is going to be fun. Those drafting the Opposition amendment obviously have a real sense of humour. Here is the truth about their record. They promised a final investment decision on Sizewell C in the last Parliament and did not deliver. They promised SMRs and never delivered. They promised fusion and never delivered. We have delivered them all, and they have the cheek to complain when we are delivering the biggest nuclear building programme in half a century—delivered by this Labour Government.

I should welcome the fact that the shadow Secretary of State supports our nuclear regulation Bill, but I am bound to ask: why did her party not do it? Was it incompetence, idleness, ideology or a combination of all three? There is always a great quote from the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) that we can read out. This is what he said following the last general election: “After 14 years of Conservative Government, we are now in a position where it’s more difficult to build critical infrastructure than it was when we came into power”. It is a Labour Government clearing up their mess.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Included in that list of achievements is the £12 billion deal signed last September to bring new nuclear to Hartlepool, making Hartlepool one of the biggest clean energy economies in this country. Does the Secretary of State agree that as we secure energy security, we must also secure economic security for those parts of the country that are left behind?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and this is what is so exciting. Contrary to what the shadow Energy Secretary said, we are seeing a renaissance of nuclear in this country, and not just through the Rolls-Royce programme—although we were very pleased to sign the agreement with Rolls-Royce alongside the Chancellor recently; there are also other routes to markets. We are very encouraging of the efforts of my hon. Friend, and others.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose*—

Ed Miliband: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, because he and I go back a long way.

Sir John Hayes: The Secretary of State and I do go back a long way, and we agree, actually, about the crisis of capitalism, in terms of the sacrifice of domestic production for imports; he and I have a lot in common in that regard. He will understand that the economic uncertainty he describes and the need for greater national economic resilience applies to food too, so—while accepting that we should put solar on buildings and have offshore wind—surely he understands that by putting solar plants at scale on the most productive farmland, which is needed to deliver food security, his argument about economic resilience falls flat. Will he look at that again? There is a middle way. He and I do indeed go back a long way, so for heaven’s sake let’s compromise.

Ed Miliband: Well, we may agree on some things, but not on this. I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, so let me say this. Even the most ambitious plans for solar involve less than 1% of agricultural land—something like 0.6%. I say to Conservative Members that it is somewhat irrational that in relation to nuclear, they want to be builders not blockers, but in relation to everything else, they want to be blockers not builders. If we support the nuclear power plant, we have got to support the grid to connect that nuclear power plant. If we want to get away, as the right hon. Gentleman says he does, from our dependence on international fossil fuel markets, we need to support the cheapest, cleanest form of power, which is solar power. What an array of choices.

Jim Shannon: I want to see nuclear power in Northern Ireland, although unfortunately that is down to the Northern Ireland Assembly and it looks like there might be some obstacles. I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to tidal power, battery storage and green hydrogen. He has always been keen to ensure that Northern Ireland can also be part of the growth that is coming from here. Will he give Northern Ireland some encouragement that when it comes to moving forward with green energy, we are part of that plan across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Ed Miliband: I am always happy to work with the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great respect, as are my team of Ministers.

Mr Perkins: The shadow Secretary of State did not take my second intervention when I attempted to get an answer from her. We know that Conservative Members propose to get rid of the energy profits levy, costing the Government about £12 billion, and they want to get rid of VAT, costing about £5 billion or £6 billion. We know they have a plan for oil or gas that might be here in four or 10 years, although it is owned by somebody else, and they believe they will use that collection of policies to reduce people’s energy prices. Does my right hon. Friend see any credibility in the plans from Conservative Members that he can share with us, because we have not heard it from them?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes his point incredibly well, and I do want to say something about renewables before I move on. At the time of the AR7 auction, the right hon. Member for East Surrey said that we should cancel that auction. As I said, that auction secured power for the equivalent of 16 million homes—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps Opposition Members could listen

[Ed Miliband]

for a second. That included offshore wind at prices that are 40% cheaper to build and operate than new gas. At the time, the right hon. Lady shouted out from a sedentary position “Gas is falling!”, as a justification for her position—[*Interruption.*] She did say that. Today, the gas price is around 50% higher than it was then.

There is a really important point here: there can be no clearer demonstration of the gamble that Conservative Members wanted us to take. What a terrible call; what a foolish position. We are at a time of the greatest geopolitical instability in generations. Anyone who would rationally learn the lessons from when Russia invaded Ukraine would say, “We cannot gamble on low fossil fuel prices, because this is what happens.”

Seamus Logan *rose*—

Ed Miliband: I am going to make some progress. By contrast, we stand for national security through energy security and energy independence.

How we protect consumers is very important. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor showed at the Budget last year that she took decisions to raise taxes, including on the wealthiest, so that we could cut bills for everyone, and we saw that happen in April. The Gracious Speech also includes legislation to raise the rate of the electricity generator levy from 45% to 55%, as part of our plan to break the link between electricity and gas prices, and act on the excess profits that arise from that link. We are also making a big call: keeping in place the windfall tax on oil and gas profits during this conflict. In the last few weeks, we have seen profits from major oil and gas companies soar.

Harriet Cross: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ed Miliband: No, I am not going to give way. These are unearned profits as a result of the war.

Harriet Cross: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Ed Miliband: I will just make a bit of progress. We say tax those profits to help the British people.

Harriet Cross: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ed Miliband: No, I am not giving way. The energy profits levy has raised £12 billion since it was introduced in 2022.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ed Miliband: I am not giving way, no. Let me quote the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), the former Prime Minister, who was the Chancellor at the time. These are not my words—this is not Red Ed; it's Red Rishi! He said:

“The oil and gas sector is making extraordinary profits, not as the result of recent changes to risk taking or innovation or efficiency, but as the result of surging...commodity prices,”—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2022; Vol. 715, c. 450.]

He was right.

Seamus Logan: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ed Miliband: No, I am not giving way.

At this moment, what have the official Opposition, alongside the SNP, decided to call for? They have called for the Government to dump that policy. Let us get this straight: at the precise moment that the British people struggle with the effects of the war, those parties say that the priority with scarce resources is to cut taxes for the largest oil and gas companies making record profits. Let us be clear: no amount of false accounting or fuzzy maths can hide the facts about the idea of cutting these taxes at this moment of windfall profits to improve revenues.

Harriet Cross: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. Just so that no one is under any false interpretation of what that tax does and how it works, does the Secretary of State understand that the tax does not apply to trading nor to overseas production? It is on production from the North sea, which is not where those profits are being made, is it?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Lady obviously does not understand that prices are going up, including from the North sea. Let us look at the amount that the tax raises. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, even before this crisis the windfall tax was forecast to raise £5 billion by September 2027. Conservative Members—the official Opposition—have to explain: where is the money going to come from, then? They are going to cut that tax of £5 billion for the biggest oil and gas companies. By contrast, we believe that we should tax fairly and use the resources to help the British people.

Seamus Logan: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ed Miliband: I am not going to give way as I need to finish soon.

The energy independence Bill will legislate to help deliver the biggest investment in home upgrades in British history through our £15 billion warm homes plan. As part of this, we will act to help private renters. This is important, because it is about how we make sure that, in the drive to clean power, we help everybody in our society. It is a scandal that 1.6 million children living in private rented homes are suffering from cold, damp or mould, according to Citizens Advice. We say it is time to act. Minimum energy efficiency standards for renters were promised by the previous Government, then scrapped. The energy independence Bill will legislate for them by cutting bills for renters, and lifting 400,000 families out of fuel poverty by 2030.

Part of this goes to the question asked by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place. We believe that the drive for energy independence can deliver for workers and communities. We are already seeing the jobs that clean energy is creating across the country: 11,000 more workers in nuclear, according to the industry's latest estimates, 8,000 more in offshore wind, with thousands more upgrading the grid, on the way to 400,000 extra clean energy jobs by 2030, and £90 billion of private investment announced since the election.

Seamus Logan *rose*—

Ed Miliband: I am not going to give way.

We want to ensure that those jobs are good jobs, so we will amend employment rights legislation, as part of the energy independence Bill, to enable us to bring the rights of offshore renewables workers in line with those working in oil and gas. It is by driving forward in clean energy that we have the best chance of a fair transition in the North sea. Some 70,000 jobs were lost in less than a decade under the last Government. We are determined to lead the world in industries such as offshore wind, hydrogen and carbon capture, and we will continue to use North sea oil and gas for decades to come by keeping existing fields open for their lifetime. That is why the energy independence Bill will legislate to introduce transitional energy certificates, something the industry has welcomed. I also say to Reform Members that we look forward to debating their plans for fracking during the debate on the EIB, because fracking will make no difference to bills. It is dangerous and roundly opposed by local communities, and we will act on it.

Lizzi Collinge: Part of my constituency is in Lancashire, where fracking testing took place. We suffered earth tremors as a result. Does the Secretary of State agree that the British people do not want fracking in our communities, and do not want the risks that we saw in Lancashire?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend puts it well. There is something ironic about the fact that Reform says nationally that it wants fracking, but its representatives in Scarborough and Lancashire seem to say that they are against it. From now until the general election, we are going to be asking where Reform candidates stand: is it with their local community, or is it with the fracking industry?

Seamus Logan: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ed Miliband: No.

I have set out the approach to energy security that underpins this Gracious Speech. Above all, we will learn the lessons of the fossil fuel crises of our age. We will build our energy independence, tackle the affordability crisis, deliver good jobs and investment in our communities, and make the right decisions for today's generation and future generations. I commend the Gracious Speech to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Lib Dem spokesperson, I think it would be helpful for everybody to know that there will be an immediate five-minute time limit after she has spoken.

3.1 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Oil and gas prices have a long history of spiking and damaging our economy. The UK was among those countries in western Europe worst hit by the price shock following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As long as we remain tied to volatile international fossil fuel markets, dictators and foreign wars will have a grip on our economy and on the pockets of families and pensioners

across this country. Surely it is time to wake up to that reality and learn the lessons of the past. That is why we Liberal Democrats welcome the Government bringing forward a Bill on energy independence. We will scrutinise it carefully to ensure that it contains not only the urgent and ambitious measures necessary to bring down energy bills and ensure energy security, but a fair, managed and prosperous transition to clean energy.

As households nervously await next week's announcement of the energy price cap, with forecasts showing that households could be hit with a £300 Trump war tax on energy bills, we Liberal Democrats are clear that the best way to get energy bills down is through home-grown renewable power, with prices that we control.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Lib Dems are big fans of localism—that is not a dig, by the way. In my constituency, Church Langley primary school has led the way by having solar panels on its roof, and it is able to generate all the energy it needs from those solar panels. Does the hon. Lady welcome the work that this Government are doing to ensure that other schools can benefit from the same sort of system?

Pippa Heylings: I definitely welcome that; as the hon. Gentleman will hear later in my speech, we want to go even further. As we know, it is Liberal Democrats who fix people's church roofs and put the solar panels on them.

For too long, the pace of change has been too slow. It has left people and businesses trapped, at the mercy of a broken energy system that they are literally paying the price for. It is time to take back control of our energy future, and that starts with our communities. In the last Session of Parliament, I welcomed the Government agreeing with our calls to include community energy and community benefits in the Great British Energy Act 2025. Now communities must be given the right to sell and buy energy locally, and we must mandate community benefit requirements where communities host renewable infrastructure. The transition must be done with those communities, not to them.

I also welcomed the adoption of the New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill, or sunshine Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), which requires solar panels on all new homes—but why wait until 2027, and why not go further? We Liberal Democrats want to see solar on new warehouses and car parks, turning rooftops across the country into sources of clean, affordable power. We also want to see solar panels on schools and hospitals. Since 2019, energy bills for schools and the NHS have more than doubled, forcing impossible choices between heating and healthcare or between bills and books. The current Government investment reaches less than 1% of schools. Liberal Democrats would go further and faster, helping to protect frontline budgets for our schools and hospitals.

Families, too, want to do the right thing; there has been a record increase in sales of solar panels and heat pumps since the start of the war in Iran. We must build on that momentum and help households and small businesses to take back control of their bills, giving them access to zero-interest or low-interest loans for upgrading properties by establishing an energy security bank to support electrification.

[Pippa Heylings]

At the same time we need to fix the broken energy market. It remains absurd that electricity is still priced so highly compared with gas, meaning that people are often not rewarded for electrifying their homes and businesses. It is also crazy that consumers are paying billions to switch off our wind turbines when the grid cannot cope with surplus renewable generation. That is why I welcomed the recent steps taken to begin breaking the link between gas and electricity prices, a reform that the Liberal Democrats have long called for. However, we urge the Government to go further and faster in their Bill: moving unfair policy levies off electricity bills, providing a progressive social energy tariff for those unable to absorb repeated bill shocks, upgrading grid infrastructure and ensuring that customers benefit directly from cheaper renewable power through flexibility when there is surplus renewable generation.

Yes, we need energy independence, but that does not mean isolation. The UK and the EU have deeply interconnected energy systems, but the damaging Brexit deal has meant a huge increase in energy costs. Our future lies in ever closer energy ties to our nearest neighbours, and this Government need to drop their red lines on Europe. Rejoining the EU's internal electricity market and linking our emissions trading schemes will reduce costs and strengthen resilience.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) was right to say that

“it is simply fantasy and fabrication for some in this House to pretend that there is a solution in the North sea”—[*Official Report*, 13 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 31.]

to people's high energy bills. Even when North sea production was at its peak nearly 30 years ago, the UK was still exposed to global price shocks, because we have been price takers. Nor is the answer fracking, which some are calling for; it destroys our countryside and pollutes our waterways. We will push for a complete ban on fracking and complete clarity on closing all the loopholes.

We need a secure energy mix, and that includes nuclear; we believe that small modular reactors have great potential to strengthen energy security alongside renewables. Oil and gas will also be part of that energy mix for decades to come, but we must recognise the need for a fair and managed energy transition, given that our remaining reserves are in decline. Communities cannot be left behind. We urge the Government to establish a just transition commission, to future-proof supply chain jobs, and to enable the retention of our brilliant, skilled oil and gas workers in high-quality jobs in renewables and other sectors.

Harriet Cross: Does the hon. Lady agree that new licences in the North sea would help protect the workforce and the supply chain, to help with the transition to new energies?

Pippa Heylings: Research has shown that the hundreds of new oil and gas licences awarded by the Government between 2010 and 2024 have resulted in only about 36 days' worth of extra gas. We need to look at the jobs that people can move into. I think there were 75,000 jobs lost without any outcry from the previous Government. We are looking at a just energy transition that helps those high-skilled workers into jobs.

Seamus Logan: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Pippa Heylings: I will keep going.

Proponents of prolonged over-reliance on fossil fuels often ignore the costs of inaction. There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that transitioning away from fossil fuels is essential to our efforts to tackle climate change. Communities around the country are already feeling the impacts and costs of extreme weather events. My South Cambridgeshire constituency is one of the most water-stressed in the country; last month, we saw 5% of the average rainfall, and we are feeling it. Floods and droughts have battered farmers across the country—they are reeling from the worst harvest on record, which will lead to problems with food security and put up our food prices.

One avoidable death is one too many for the elderly and vulnerable during recurrent heatwaves. No one wants ravaging wildfires ripping through our most treasured woodlands and national parks. As the Government-suppressed assessment on global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security laid bare, the destruction of nature threatens the UK's resilience, prosperity and national security.

People want to know the truth. In my constituency and across the country, people's emergency briefings are happening. People are taking control. They want to know and to be better prepared. That is why we must also look to prepare for the climate shocks that we cannot avoid. We reject the Government's false dichotomy between climate and nature, where they say that nature is a blocker to growth. We have to be better prepared. We have to overcome the silos between energy, climate and nature. We need to promote nature-based approaches to capture carbon as well as adapting. We have to work on storing water, regenerating our soil, cooling buildings and protecting people's homes from becoming uninsurable.

A secure future for our country depends on our energy independence, on restored nature and resilient communities, and on meeting our responsibility to our children and young people for a healthier future for generations to come.

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

3.10 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Select Committee has taken evidence on much of what is in the Gracious Speech, and a big part of this debate has been about the threats that we face as a result of the second fossil fuel crisis in five years. I remember the first in 1973: as a six-year-old, candles on the table were fun, but it was not much fun for most of the country. We have repeated that experience multiple times since.

We have heard one piece of evidence again and again in the Committee: to address the challenge of the current fossil fuel crisis, the Government must bring down the cost of electricity, to enable the transition away from our dependence on oil and gas.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): To support the hon. Gentleman's argument about the price of electricity, renewable energy is largely generated in Scotland, north Wales and south-west England. We have the highest level of fuel poverty, we

have no mains gas, and the suffering caused to those rural areas is remarkable. Until that is improved, we are not in a position to move to an electricity-based economy.

Bill Esterson: The Government were supportive of heating oil in the recently announced measures precisely for some of the reasons that the hon. Member sets out. We have to address this threat, and we have to transition for reasons of energy security, cost and bringing bills down. Anybody going to the pump now or looking at what their bills are likely to be—I think Martin Lewis was today predicting the latest increase in the price cap—can see what is coming for domestic and business consumers.

Ukraine has learned about energy security the hard way, from the Russian attacks on its oil and gas installations, and it has shown us all. We have seen the same in the middle east with the war with Iran. Decentralising and moving away from dependence on oil and gas is key to protecting our energy generation.

The economic arguments are strong. The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), was talking about growth earlier; I ask her just to look at what the Office for Budget Responsibility is saying. The OBR makes the point that the costs of not addressing climate change are significantly more than the costs of making the transition. The Climate Change Committee predicts that, if we do not act, we will see a 7% fall in GDP by 2050. If we really want to be scared, we should listen to the actuaries: they know a thing or two about this, and they predict that global GDP will fall by 50% between 2070 and 2090, with catastrophic consequences across the world, unless we take the action that we need to take. We have to act.

The North sea is a super-mature basin, with a fraction left of what was there to start with. We were in a hurry to extract from the North sea. Peak North sea extraction was 1999, with 4.5 million barrels of oil a day. By 2023, after 13 of the Conservatives' 14 years in office, that had fallen to 1.23 million barrels a day. That is a quarter of its peak production, and it will halve again by 2030. As NESO says, new licences will not make a material difference to capacity or production. Jackdaw, if it is given consent, would provide only 2% of UK demand. Rosebank would account for only 7% of production by 2030 levels. Those fields would not stop the decline, but only slow it.

Seamus Logan: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. At last, I have finally got to my feet. I am surprised that I was not allowed to intervene earlier, because I agree with much of what has been said, and especially with what the Secretary of State said about renewables and Acorn. Would the hon. Member agree that granting a licence for Jackdaw would be much more environmentally friendly than importing liquefied petroleum gas from Qatar or the USA?

Bill Esterson: As I have said, the amount we are talking about is very small, compared to the needs of the UK. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member might not be so disappointed by what I say next. There is an argument—the Government have done some of this with tiebacks—for continuing to support production in the North sea, because the supply chains in our oil and gas industry

will be critical for the development of renewable generation in the North sea and more widely. Some of the workers involved have already moved into sectors such as nuclear. It is important that an agreement with the TUC on the clean jobs plan is pursued. I welcome what the Secretary of State announced about rights in the North sea for renewables. It is key that we enable that transition and give a well-paid future to people working in oil and gas now.

I have talked about the opportunities for security. Increased generation and electrification will reduce the reliance on imports of oil and gas. The Secretary of State referred to what will hopefully be in the Bill about optimising the grid, and that will only help with that process, too. Through NESO, the Government have already addressed the issues with the connection queue, which is being cleared. Giving people access to excess renewables, being able to sell back to the grid and encouraging businesses to make greater use of flexibility will only help people to access cheaper energy.

The economics add up. The clean energy economy is growing three times faster than the rest of the economy. It is delivering the jobs that the Secretary of State referred to. The warm homes plan, which will be supported by the warm homes agency, will deliver healthier homes to live in and better air quality. It is critical, as I said at the start, that we reduce the price of electricity so that people can take advantage of the technology in the warm homes plan. It is already cheaper, according to Autotrader, to buy a new electric vehicle, and the second-hand market has been cheaper for some time. Enabling more people to drive electric can only help in that transition and in the reduction in our reliance on oil and gas.

The Government have to have the confidence to deliver this agenda. They have to have the confidence that they are right that energy independence will come from a move away from oil and gas and towards renewables. They have to make the case to people that they will benefit from investment in their homes, their transport and more widely. I very much support and look forward to debating in detail the energy independence Bill.

3.19 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), who speaks with great authority and talks a lot of good sense.

I have to say to Labour Members that a change of Prime Minister will solve nothing. We tried that four times, and it did us no good at all. This King's Speech should have been an opportunity for fundamental reform, but do the Government have the courage to do that? We Conservative Members suspect that they do not. For too many years, we have concentrated on wealth redistribution, rather than wealth creation, and we are getting poorer and poorer, and less and less able to do the things in the public sector that we want to do. But let me start with a more consensual point, and welcome the Government's commitment to the nuclear fusion site at West Burton, which is only two miles from the town that I represent. I see that the Minister for Energy is present, and I have talked to him about this. This is fantastic, cutting-edge technology. Only this morning, I received a letter from the West Burton chief executive, who said

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

“At the heart of STEP FUSION is a world-leading technical effort.”

Those people who say that Britain is broken should look at the thousands of jobs we are creating, and the millions of pounds-worth of investment. The chief executive thanked us. He said:

“The UK is recognised globally for its lead in fusion regulation, having set a proportionate approach comparable to industrial processes through the 2023 Energy Act.”

So there we are: we have consensual, working-together, cutting-edge technology.

We have heard a bit about solar farms. I visited over 30 villages in my constituency during an open churches festival this weekend, including the village of Fillingham. At Fillingham aerodrome, I saw solar panels being built. Nobody seemed to care that there is a brownfield site to hand, measuring 100 or 200 acres, but there is solar planned for 16,000 acres of prime agricultural land around Gainsborough. I heard what was said earlier by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). What we need is a moderate approach. From my cottage, I can climb a hill on the Wolds and look across the North sea, and I can see that we are world leaders in offshore wind. That is fair enough, and it is popular, but I am talking about using 16,000 acres of prime agricultural land for solar, with all the profits going to entrepreneurs in London and large landowners.

Bill Esterson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he has said; and I always find his contributions interesting. My Committee heard from the Country Land and Business Association on the subject of solar panels on agricultural land, and its evidence was clear: this does not have the impact that is feared, and is actually often beneficial to farmers in providing them with an alternative revenue stream without affecting their ability to grow crops.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course, getting £100,000 a year for owning 100 acres is a wonderful incentive, but is it possible to grow those crops? We are the breadbasket of England. Is it possible to grow wheat and barley where there are solar panels? But I do not want to go on about it; we know the arguments now.

As for nationalising British Steel, we do not take an ideological view. Hundreds of my constituents work in British Steel. Greg Clark ran it for nine months, and paid all the wages. I personally am neither for nor opposed to it. However, just nationalising British Steel will not make a difference when we have the highest energy costs in Europe. That is the real problem, and it is the problem that the Government need to address. Let us not get bogged down in the arguments about whether to nationalise. Let us find a private sector buyer. Let us get the workers back into operation, get our blast furnaces moving, and not be over-worried about ideologies. We want to create virgin steel.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent point about British Steel, where hundreds of my constituents work. Does he agree that in the short term, nationalisation may be the way forward, but in the longer term, we need

to get private sector investment into the industry, and the way to achieve that is to reduce energy costs? That is absolutely critical, not just for steel but for so many of our heavy industries.

Sir Edward Leigh: My hon. Friend is very well respected in his area for the fantastic amount of work that he has done in Scunthorpe. He is constantly holding the Government to account, and indeed working with the Government. We have to do this together to protect our steelmaking capacity, for the sake of our industrial wealth.

I agree—we all agree—that the energy independence Bill provides a framework for transitioning the UK energy market away from fossil fuels and towards alternative forms of energy. We have no problem with that; it is sensible in the context of nuclear energy. However, the ideological pursuit of renewables is doing harm, and is at odds with achieving energy security when we have our own fossil-fuel resources in the North sea. It is not a zero-sum game. I do not see the ideological virtue of simply exporting our carbon emissions, which we are doing.

Ms Billington: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: No, I must make some progress. I do apologise.

I should have thought that we could have a compromise on this. We could have a policy that is sensible, gradually moving away from fossil fuels and gradually becoming a more green-energy economy, but we should not simply export our emissions and set arbitrary dates.

As this is a debate on the King's Speech, I hope you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I mention another subject in the short time available to me. When you get to my age, you can say unpopular things; I have not got much longer anyway. [HON. MEMBERS: “Aah!”] I have two minutes!

The problem with our country is that we are governing by focus group. What do focus groups want? They want less tax and, of course, better public services. Debt is already 100% of GDP, and within 50 years, because of the triple lock and other benefit increases, it will be 170%. Of course the old vote, but the old have children and grandchildren, and we have a responsibility to younger people in our country. The Government know that the present system is unsustainable. While the average increase in the triple lock measures over the past 13 years—and we brought that in; it was supposed to be a temporary measure, but no party has the courage to change it—has been about 40%, pensions have gone up by over 60%. That is nearly £20 billion of annual additional costs so far, and that will get bigger every year and more unaffordable. The gap is likely to grow to £120 billion, if not more, by 2050, exacerbating the economic crisis. Whoever becomes Prime Minister will have to cope with that. By then, there will be 20% to 25% fewer taxpaying workers—our children and our grandchildren—per pensioner in Britain.

Of course we have to care for old people, particularly old people in poverty, and divert resources to them, but we must remember the younger people as well. This is entirely unsustainable. Yes, we want to keep a triple lock, but not the triple lock. We want it to be the

average of the three indices, so that the amount does not go up exponentially every year. The Government should do the right thing by the nation, and bring in a measure to that effect. They should make our finances affordable, and those on my party's Front Bench should not oppose them. We should govern in the national interest. We should make our finances sustainable, and then we really can help the people who are most in need.

3.27 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): His Majesty's Gracious Speech set out a legislative programme for the Government, including plans to build our national security, our economic security and our energy security. I welcome this agenda, which is consistent with the manifesto on which my hon. Friends and I were elected. I urge all members of the Government to exhibit a relentless urgency, and a focus on delivery of that programme, to ensure that the ambition is matched by its impact.

We were elected in 2024 on a mandate for change—for national renewal—after 14 years of decline under the Tories. As for the achievements, there is a great deal that I could focus on, if I had more time, but I want to deal specifically with the national health service, migration—on which there have been very positive announcements recently—the minimum wage increase, and workers' and renters' rights. This is a Government who are delivering on their agenda. Despite the prophets of doom on the Opposition Benches, the most recent figures once again show unemployment continuing to fall and the fastest growth in the G7 in the last quarter.

So many of the fundamentals are going in the right direction, but anyone who spent time attempting to persuade voters to vote Labour in the recent elections will have been left in no doubt but that our voters remain unconvinced that we are going fast enough or far enough to bring about the change they want. I would like to focus on some specific measures in His Majesty's Gracious Speech that I particularly welcome.

First, on the energy independence Bill, I very much welcome the Government's action to protect households and industry from global instability by powering forward with clean, home-grown energy to create energy independence and get off the fossil fuel rollercoaster. Both the energy independence Bill and the nuclear regulation Bill will strengthen our resilience to energy price shocks for the long term and bring down the cost of bills for families.

As has been said, during the Ukraine crisis the Government at the time paid to subsidise customers' bills, because we were so dependent on global markets. The intervention that the Government made—politically, I think they had to make it because of the impact in the number of people who would have gone under—cost the British taxpayer £44 billion in a single year. The idea that the response to the further global insecurity of the Iran war is to reduce investment in renewables is quite mad. So I welcome the Government's two further Bills, and I absolutely support the increase in nuclear that this Government are getting on with after the dither and delay of the previous Government.

It was quite remarkable to hear the speech of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), who on the one hand said the Government have not done enough on nuclear in two years, and on the other hand said that the

Government cannot blame the Conservatives for 14 years of inaction, because the previous Government got in the way of it. It was absolutely incoherent.

The exchange of letters between the shadow Secretary of State and the chair of the Climate Change Committee, and I encourage everyone to look at them, made it clear that when she voted against allocation round 7, she simply did not understand what she was talking about in terms of the difference between an LCOE—a levelised cost of energy—and contracts for difference. So when she says that we should follow her advice, we should treat that with the greatest of scepticism.

I should also say that I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) on the need to reduce energy bills far more to help with the cost of living, but also to ease the green transition, benefit consumers and support industry in this country.

The King's Speech also has a clean water Bill, and alongside climate action we do need nature action. Nature is the foundation of our national economic security, and we cannot tackle climate change without restoring nature. The Government made a promise to clean up Britain's rivers and seas, and I am delighted to see this clean water Bill in the King's Speech—not only in tackling water industry reform, which is crucial, but in recognising the need to tackle agricultural water pollution and road-based water pollution.

I welcome the European partnership Bill, because it is important that we work more closely with our European partners, and I fully support what the Government are doing on apprenticeships, because apprenticeships and greater investment in adult education are absolutely crucial if we are to equip tomorrow's workers with the skills they need to support industry. So there are many measures in this King's Speech that can make a real difference—there is also the need to go further and faster—and I look forward to supporting it later.

3.32 pm

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): If we are moving into an era of electric cars—thousands of them, mostly made in China, of course—and if we are moving into an era of artificial intelligence developed in the United States, we will need infinitely more electricity than this country is capable of producing at present. Since the days of the great Walter Marshall, the head of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd at one time, I have been a supporter of nuclear energy. I believe passionately that we have to move much faster towards small nuclear reactors if we are to begin to meet the needs of tomorrow—the needs of our children and our grandchildren. I hope very much that we can unite behind that move.

However, in the meantime we have to bridge the gap, and I believe it is sheer folly for this Government not to take advantage of the resource we have in the North sea to help us do that. It is absolute nonsense to buy in fuel from Norway or elsewhere, when we could be producing it from the same sources ourselves, and we should be doing that. Do not tell me that it is a drop in the ocean, because it is an important potential contributor to bridging the gap in our energy needs.

Sadly, the Secretary of State is no longer with us. *[Interruption.]* I take no lessons from a former failed Leader of the Opposition. The Secretary of State, in extremely derisory fashion, spoke of the minimal cost

[Sir Roger Gale]

to agricultural land of solar panels. Those solar panels are, in east Kent, covering agricultural land on which was growing bread-making wheat. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) referred to the breadbasket of England. We cannot lose that land, and we do not need to lose it when we have acres of rooftops in public ownership and acres of car parks that could and should be used first.

The Secretary of State said that we will have to produce the network to get the future power we need to homes, businesses, hospitals and schools. He implied that that requires a network of pylons right across the United Kingdom. As a grandparent, I am not prepared to see my grandchildren's future environment sacrificed on the altar of hideous pylons strung up by National Grid simply to meet the desires of its shareholders—we need to remember that it is a private company.

We must learn how to underground our cables. It is happening throughout Europe, where they already have overhead cables and are taking them down. National Grid, for example through the Sea Link project, is planning to build in my corner of England a 90 foot high converter station the size of five football pitches. It is being built on marshland, which it has just discovered is wet. That means it will have to import thousands of tonnes of concrete and destroy the whole local environment around it, which includes a nature reserve and a site of special scientific interest. That is not progress; that is selling the family silver. It is selling the environment of our children's future and we must not do that. We have to strike a balance between meeting our future needs, bridging the gap and protecting our environment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have 18 seconds left so I will stop there.

3.36 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the measures in the King's Speech on energy security, as on many other issues. The Opposition's wrong-headed approach would leave us tethered to global markets that we cannot control. They would lock our country out of much-needed jobs and condemn Brits to higher bills. The energy independence and nuclear regulation Bills, in contrast, are further leaps towards the stronger energy security we need.

In my speech, I want to tackle an issue—it was actually touched on by the previous speaker, the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale)—which will increasingly drive the amount of energy our country needs to generate: the development and deployment of artificial intelligence. The Government did not bring forward in this King's Speech our manifesto commitment to

“ensure the safe development and use of AI models by introducing binding regulation on the handful of companies developing the most powerful AI models”.

Indeed, AI was not mentioned in the speech. The Government have acted decisively on one symptom of the lack of regulation: the widespread production of sexualised images. That, however, followed 3 million such images being generated. Harm was already done, and I underline here the recent comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips).

The Government have, rightly in my view, launched their sovereign AI fund, supporting innovative start-ups to scale up and generate value here in the UK, including access to compute. I know that many Ministers in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero have been working hard to ensure that the capacity is there to deliver that additional compute. However, when it comes to the design and use of AI systems and models, we have only the AI Security Institute, a world-first, expert-led organisation, but one that lacks statutory powers and has to ask companies politely to engage. Even the Trump Administration now appear to recognise the need for the evaluation of frontier AI models before release. If we are genuinely serious about our country's economic security, we must devote as much attention to AI and its astonishingly transformative, productive and disruptive potential as we are rightly devoting to energy security and the delivery of home-grown renewables. That will first require working with the EU on digital regulation, and I will push for that to be reflected in the welcome EU partnership Bill.

In the briefing pack for the King's Speech, the Government maintain that nearly one third of UK AI start-up leaders are considering relocating overseas due to regulatory complexity and capital constraints. Given that regulatory complexity will often relate to cross-border issues, the prescription is not deregulation but regulatory co-ordination.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Anneliese Dodds: In order to keep to time, I will not.

Capital constraints, and relatedly, constraints in compute, are real. We must recognise that while unilateral measures to support sovereign AI are important, their scope is necessarily limited. We must again work with reliable partners that share our values, not least within the EU.

Finally, we must be brave enough to open up the discussion on the fiscal framework for AI. We currently tax labour, the very thing that AI will—in some sectors and in specific ways—displace. We must examine now how we might use the public stake from our sovereign AI investments, or mechanisms such as a token tax or reform to capital gains, as the TUC has suggested, to build up the resources that may be needed. There is potential for significant disruption to the labour market, and we must be more ready for it.

Research out today from King's College London suggests that 69% of workers and 64% of employers are worried about the economic impact of AI-related job losses. A majority of all groups surveyed predicted that AI's benefits will mainly go to wealthy investors or companies, not workers or society. A majority of all groups also backed Government intervention. If we are to secure the fastest adoption of AI in the G7, as is the Government's intention, we must deal with those issues too. Our young people will not forgive us if we fail to engage with this generational challenge.

3.41 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Britain is becoming harder to govern. That is not principally the result of disruptive, destabilising societal change, or even because an increasingly complicated world is creating more uncertainty for all Governments; the problem lies in governance itself. The Prime Minister

complains that when he pulls levers in Downing Street, they have less practical effect than he had hoped. Simon Case, on leaving office, put that very clearly. He said that “an increasing number of English devolution settlements, independent quangos and arm’s length bodies, courts, statutory consultees and the like, block the path from what a winning political party promises at an election to what it can then achieve in power.”

Successive Governments have delegated power to all kinds of unelected, unaccountable bodies, from the Office for Budget Responsibility to Network Rail, the Environment Agency to all kinds of other quangos, the names of which we barely know—and neither do we know how their memberships are chosen or to whom they are accountable. It is time for a more radical programme than this King’s Speech offers. It is time for Parliament and Government to be more confident about the difference that they can make.

The Secretary of State, in opening the debate, talked about economic resilience, and he was right to do so. It is absolutely right that in the age in which we live we need to build greater national economic resilience. But that means facing up to the fact that we manufacture too little of what we consume and we grow too little of the food we need to feed the nation.

The sort of economic resilience that he describes requires us to look again at the balance of payments. It is said that Harold Wilson, the then Labour Prime Minister, lost the 1970 election against expectations because there were bad balance of trade figures. No one now speaks of the balance of trade, yet the truth is that we import far more than we did then. In the mid-1980s we grew about 75% of the food we consumed; the import figure is now 40%.

It is preposterous that we have lengthened supply lines and, as a result, decreased traceability. We do not really know where much of what we consume is made, or how or by whom it is made. In the far east, there are all kinds of unacceptable conditions that would not be tolerated in this country, and yet we still choose to import large amounts of those kinds of goods.

If we really want to build more national economic resilience, let us have a fresh look at the character and shape of our economy. To do that, we will also need to look at productivity. As the Father of House described, it is not good enough for Government to spend endlessly without looking at the value they get from that expenditure. We know that both public sector and private sector productivity has stalled for a considerable time. That is not unique to this country; it is a problem for the whole of western Europe and most modern economies. None the less, we need new measures to focus on productivity, so that what we get for what we spend becomes the issue, not how much we spend as a whole.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend is giving a good lecture on what needs to happen. What incentives do we need to provide to farmers to grow more and to use their land as effectively as possible, as well as to employers to use their time as effectively as possible, so that we can literally operate on a 24-hour day, three-shift production operation?

Sir John Hayes: Before I deal with that excellent point—I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making it—I remind the House that the current trade deficit is about £25 billion, which would have been unthinkable a

generation or two ago. On the question my hon. Friend asks, we have to rebalance the food chain. For too long, major retailers have held a gun to the head of primary and secondary producers. What matters is not the size of the cake, but who is getting what sort of slice of the cake.

While major retailers continue to make huge profits, the people who actually grow and make the food have had their livelihoods under persistent pressure for the whole time I have been in this House, and no Government have had the courage to face up to that fact. We need to give more power to the Groceries Code Adjudicator to intervene where sharp practice takes place and to stand up for the hard-working farmers in Lincolnshire—farmers elsewhere, yes, but particularly those in Lincolnshire—who grow so much of the food that we consume across the kingdom.

If we are going to build productivity, we have to invest in skills. When I was the Minister for Skills, I am proud to say that we built up apprenticeship starts to around half a million a year. That was still not enough, in my view—I think we should have more apprenticeships than that. Nevertheless, we got it up to about half a million a year, but that has fallen to about 350,000 now. That we have fewer apprenticeship starts than we did then means that we have to re-evaluate what advanced learning looks like. Higher education is all very well, but higher learning matters just as much. Vocational, practical and technical skills both deliver for the economy, because they satisfy economic need, and give a chance for fulfilment to people whose aptitudes, tastes and talents lie in that direction. To build productivity, we need to invest in skills.

That is the kind of radical programme—boosting productivity, tackling the trade deficit and building skills—that I had hoped to see. I implore the Government to address those kinds of issues in the common interest, for the national good, for the common good, in the national interest.

3.48 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who made a characteristically interesting speech. I agree very much on the need to improve our investment in productivity and skills.

I will start by making a very brief tribute to Suzannah Reeves, Joanna Midgley, John Hacking and Angela Gartside, four councillors in my constituency who lost their seats in the elections last week, not because they were not excellent councillors—every single one of them was a brilliant councillor, deeply rooted in their community—but because the public wanted to give the Government a kicking. Perhaps, on that basis, I should apologise to them for the loss of their seats.

I think that loss is because as a Government—this is not aimed at any individual; this is collectively—we have not communicated the really good work that we did in the last Session, laying the foundations for this country’s recovery. This King’s Speech is packed with measures to carry on that work, do the same and move forward faster, such as the energy independence Bill, as the Secretary of State has set out. The move to clean power is absolutely key not just to build the green

[Jeff Smith]

industry and green jobs of the future, but to deliver the climate commitments that so many people in my patch in south Manchester care about.

I am conscious that I have limited time, so I will focus on some of the measures that will make a big difference to my constituents in Manchester Withington. I strongly welcome the northern powerhouse Bill. When HS2 was cancelled, it was a real kick in the teeth for people in the north. We were looking for that link between the northern economy and the south-east. Notwithstanding the shambolic planning and delivery that the Secretary of State set out earlier by HS2 Ltd, overseen by the then Government, it was a real shame that it was cancelled. But we have always argued in the north that Northern Powerhouse Rail is actually more important. Getting that east-west connectivity across the great cities of the north will drive our economy and make us able to thrive and compete on a global scale, so I am pleased that the Government have set out the Bill for Northern Powerhouse Rail.

I want to make two points. First—maybe I am the first to do this in respect of the new Bill—can I make a plea? We need that underground through station at Manchester Piccadilly as part of that delivery. It is expensive, but anything else will be a false economy. That will be the way that we drive connectivity across the cities of the north, which we need to do. Secondly, can I get some early clarity on the route? The route proposed from Manchester airport to the city of Manchester at Piccadilly is under my constituency, as previously proposed, and there was some controversy and discussion about the site's vent shafts. I will not get into that detail now, but it is important that we give our constituents early details and an early opportunity to have their voices heard.

I want to speak briefly about the overnight visitor levy Bill because it has taken some criticism from a number of places over the last couple of weeks. Manchester has had an overnight visitor levy since 2023 and—believe it or not—the sky has not fallen in. We are still the third most visited city in the UK. The key point is it is permissive; it is not an obligation. I am sure that many of us visit cities across Europe and the US, and the visitor tax we see in those cities has never put me off, even in my impoverished inter-railing days. It will not stop people wanting to visit a city like Manchester. It drives investment into the destinations, which makes them more attractive to visitors.

In my constituency, the commonhold and leasehold reform Bill will be hugely welcome. Too many leaseholders have been trapped in the system with spiralling charges, opaque management and limited rights over their own homes. Our excellent Housing Minister is already making a difference on that, and I am pleased to see that coming forward. Likewise, the social housing Bill will make a big difference. Since I became an MP in 2015, the biggest issue in my inbox has been housing, and it is important that we can expand house building.

Briefly, I want to mention the ticket touting Bill. In my role in the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse, I have realised that ticket touts costs approximately £400,000 every single day, intensifying cost of living pressures for households across the UK. It is great that the Government have set out a draft Bill, but it is

disappointing that it is only a draft Bill. It is important to get this right, but I urge the Government to bring that forward as quickly as possible.

I will end on a positive note. I have dealt with GOV.UK One Login on several occasions in recent times, and digital access to services is making a big difference already. Let's ignore the conspiracy theorists and get on with the digital access to services Bill to improve our services for everybody.

3.53 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith). Something I find less pleasurable—indeed, I detest it—is the use of the phrase in our discourse that “Britain is broken”. I hate that phrase because it is not true. I wonder if we could reflect on how damaging and intoxicating the opium of nostalgia is. It is not like a wistful nostalgia, harmless and benign, used by commentators and politicians; it is an angry, aggressive and malign form of nostalgia. The reality—let's open up and be honest about this—is that there was never a golden age, and the idea that somehow everything in the past is better and today it is all rotten and broken is utterly poisoning our democracy and discourse. The only things that were better about the past are that the music was better and we were younger. Let us not fall for witless, unpatriotic guff about Britain being in terminal decline. We are a wonderful people with a history strong and rich and resources second to none. We are not broken, but we must be better.

A wise Government would acknowledge our challenges, strengthen our alliances with NATO and the Commonwealth, and reconnect with Europe, not least on energy security. John Maynard Keynes famously said, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?” Members do not need to love everything about the European Union to know that our security and sovereignty now obviously depend on deepening and widening our alliances. We need to see Europe as the third bloc alongside the US and China; if we are detached from it, we are not safe.

Our security also involves looking internally on energy and food security. Over the past few weeks, the energy market has been in the eye of the storm, with the loss of 14.4 million barrels of crude oil a day.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Food prices have become the biggest pressure on family budgets, and our food system is failing households, farmers and the economy alike. It is clear that a good food Bill is a glaring missed opportunity to back British farmers and improve public health, so does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot have food security without energy security, and that the Government must set out a national food strategy to support that?

Tim Farron: I strongly support my hon. Friend's food security Bill, and I will come to that in a moment.

The loss of Gulf crude oil output since Donald Trump's war began has been partly offset by draining stockpiles and other temporary reliefs. In the developed world, prices have risen and crippled many communities that I represent in Westmorland, as well communities across the whole country. So far, we have yet to run out, but the International Energy Agency warned just last

week that oil inventories are being depleted at a record pace. Governments, companies and consumers therefore need to be ready. Are we? I do not think so.

Energy security is now utterly urgent. If I cannot convince hon. Members of all the science that points to the need to tackle the catastrophic blight of human-made climate change, surely I can convince them that our energy security rests on domestically produced renewable energy: Putin cannot turn off the sun, the wind or our waves. Surely we should therefore rejoin the European international energy market and invest massively in the national grid.

It is vital that we recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) wisely said, the importance of food security in all this. The United Kingdom is only 55% food secure. The outsourcing of our agriculture has become a national security liability. We need more short, diversified food chains, with more incentives to primary producers to grow food domestically. The problem is that England is now the only country in the United Kingdom and the only country in Europe that does not provide support for farmers to produce food. Perhaps we can agree that back in 2020, when the previous Government was drawing up the environmental land management scheme, which this Government adopted, that that was how things felt at the time. But the facts have changed. It is time to change our mind, and back our farmers to produce the food that we need. Food prices are projected to be 50% higher in November this year than they were in 2021. Agricultural inflation is double regular inflation, and is therefore feeding through to food inflation, which will harm our communities.

We live against the backdrop of uncertainty. The technological and geopolitical shifts that we are living through include the threat to the very future of NATO, as well as Russian and Chinese aggression. Our energy, food and military resilience matters more now than it ever has before. We are fools if we do not respond.

We are not a broken country. We are a brilliant country. But we are a vulnerable country. We should not be energy insecure or food insecure, should not have the smallest Army we have had in 200 years, and should not be decoupled from our allies in Europe, but the good news is that we can fix all those things if we have the will. That will mean uncomfortable choices and changed stances for many, but the facts have changed, so we need to change our minds.

3.59 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I am really pleased to speak in this debate on the Gracious Speech.

This Government were elected to deliver change. For too long in my community we felt at best ignored and at worst left behind. Decisions taken in Whitehall and Westminster did not address the challenges we faced, and investment and opportunities did not reach us. Frankly, Westminster did not hear us.

The measures in the last King's Speech began to change that: the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 brings decisions closer to home; the changes to the Green Book give us a fair go at securing the investment that we deserve; breakfast clubs and free school meals do not just set children up for the

day but give them the best start in life; and we are starting the process of bringing buses back into public control. Meanwhile, public services are showing signs of recovery following 14 years of austerity. This King's Speech builds on that, but we must deliver more, and we must deliver it faster.

Today's debate is rightly about energy. I recently visited the port of Blyth in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery), where I heard about their vision and the jobs and opportunities that the renewables sector is already bringing. We have been at the mercy of repeated international crises, underlining why we must secure energy independence to protect people across the country. Previous Governments did not move quickly enough, and we are paying the price.

My region is leading the way to building clean, renewable energy and energy security. New seabed sites off our coast can unlock at least 6 GW of offshore capacity. That means billions of pounds of investment coming to our region, creating jobs and opportunity. In my constituency, the West Hartford business park, with support from Arlington and the port of Blyth, will unlock 2,000 jobs and more than £400 million of local investment. The Moor Farm roundabout upgrades—never knowingly not mentioned by me—adds to the sense of possibility, acting as a gateway to growth across the north-east.

We are building futures. The energy central campus at Blyth and the energy academy in Wallsend are training a new generation of skilled workers for the industries of the future. When Opposition parties talk down clean energy, they are talking down opportunity. Opposing this clean energy drive could cost up to 17,000 jobs in our regional renewables sector. Opposition Members should level with my communities about what their plans would mean for those people's jobs and families.

The energy independence Bill will take us further, and I want my region at the very heart of it. As a Labour and Co-operative MP, I am proud that we are delivering community energy and the local power plan, which will ensure that by 2030 every community can benefit from a local energy project. This will transform our energy future and give communities a stake in clean, affordable power.

Let me turn to a few other measures in the Gracious Speech. Since being elected, I have championed the rights of leaseholders and freeholders, which is a huge issue in my community. In the '60s new towns of Cramlington and Killingworth, many homes were built as leasehold, and too many are now trapped without the protections they deserve. Similarly, many new build estates—although some of them have been around for over a decade, pushing the definition of new build—still have not been adopted. I know that Ministers are passionate about ending these injustices and putting the protections that are needed in place once and for all.

I would like to see us building on the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) on ticket touting. Since being elected, I have worked alongside the Co-operative party to call for action to tackle ticket touts and price gouging for culture, music and sport events. Fans are at the heart of events, whether gigs, matches or shows, and too

[Emma Foody]

often they are robbed of the opportunity to go or are ripped off through price surging and touts buying and reselling tickets.

There are many other Bills in this programme that I support and that will make a real difference in my community. On housing, education, national security and immigration, this King's Speech is a programme to build on the change that has already been delivered, to go further and faster and to extend opportunity to communities such as mine. At the heart of this programme are measures to improve people's lives and provide the good jobs and opportunities of the future. It is now time to get on with delivering this change. I look forward to supporting these measures.

4.3 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody).

As a scientist by background, I welcome the cross-party agreement on nuclear power forming a key part of our energy supply for the future. That was not always the case. There was certainly opposition to nuclear power previously on the Labour Benches, as indeed there was among Liberal Democrat Back Benchers, so I am delighted that we have agreement on this positive way forward.

The key is ensuring a mixed economy in energy supply. I welcomed the use of solar power on the roof of the Aspire leisure centre adjacent to the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital, which was granted by the previous Conservative Government. The centre and the hospital are supplied by that solar energy, which also contributes towards the grid. That is welcome news, but I cannot understand why the Government will not agree to exploit the North sea to a further extent. That would not come on stream straight away, but surely we must think about it for the future.

Let me cover one or two other areas. The Vagrancy Act 1824 is coming to an end, but we still require from the Government the necessary statutory instrument to make that happen—there was no commitment in the King's Speech. Can we see that? On the social housing renewal Bill, the Government's ambition is huge but timid. We must go faster and further to provide the much-needed social housing required in this country, which has not been built for more than 30 years.

We live in a dangerous world. With the war in Ukraine causing energy price hikes, we must think about what that has done to the windfall from the petrol pumps going to the Treasury. At the same time, we have a fragile truce in the middle east, the civil war in Sudan, in which more people are being killed than in any other conflict, and half a million Christians in Nigeria have been massacred by Islamists.

This is the sad reality. I was absolutely appalled that on 7 October 2023, after the attempt by Hamas to commit genocide against the people of Israel, we saw people celebrating on our streets. We have subsequently turned a blind eye to the hate marches that have assembled 100 yards away from a synagogue in London at midday, just as the Shabbat services were coming to an end. That

has continued for week after week, and the congregation have been intimidated while going about their lawful business.

The Prime Minister has quite rightly talked about combating antisemitism, but words are not enough; we need action now. A blind eye was turned to the Hamas and Hezbollah flags in those marches. A deaf ear was cocked to the phrase, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free", which means the destruction of the state of Israel. Equally, a deaf ear was cocked to the phrase, "Globalise the intifada". What have we seen as a result? Jewish businesses and restaurants have been attacked, synagogues have been attacked, and we now see Jewish people on the streets being attacked purely because of their religion. That is absolutely unacceptable.

We have to start somewhere, so I welcome the decision by the Government to bring forward legislation on proscribing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is long overdue. I have led the campaign for that in Parliament for many years, but we must go further. Why is the Iranian ambassador still here? He should be kicked out. The embassy should be closed down, and all the so-called diplomats should be refused entry to this country. Iran is the head of the snake that controls all the terrorism in the middle east, and we must recognise that.

Jim Shannon: There is one thing the Government have not done that they could do, which I know the hon. Gentleman would like to happen, as would I and many others in this House. There are assets in London owned by the Iranian Government, and it is well known where they all are. Does he feel, as I do, that here in London, where we have some control, it is time that those assets were taken away from Iran?

Bob Blackman: The assets of the IRGC and the despotic regime in Iran must be sequestered and brought into use for the people of this country. There are 11 well-known properties—detached houses—owned by this despotic regime that are not used at the moment. They could be used for homeless families and Brits who need somewhere to live, but we do not take the necessary action. As I have raised previously, we have 13 charities that get their funding from Iran. They have their headquarters in the UK, and they are banned in Arab countries. Why are they allowed to exist and spread their poison?

We must also go further on university campuses. Vice-chancellors have a duty to protect Jewish students, but they do not carry out that duty. Perhaps we could start in our schools by teaching our children the true history of the middle east. In 1948, the Arab countries tried to prevent Israel from being set up and encouraged and almost forced the Arabs to leave the state of Israel so that they could go in and kill everyone. Israel won that war, and no one has forgiven it since. We can also look to 1967 and 1973, when Israel fought wars once again to protect itself. The sad fact is that that is not taught in our schools. We need to understand that if we do not educate our children in the right way, propaganda will unfortunately be allowed to grow.

Why was one of our Labour colleagues banned from going into a school in his constituency solely because he is Jewish? That cannot be acceptable. Words are not enough; we need prompt, firm action to root out antisemitism and anti-Jewish hatred once and for all.

4.10 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on the Gracious Speech. I am proud that since our Labour Government took office in July 2024, we have introduced a number of policies to improve our country's energy independence, and therefore our energy security, by increasing domestic clean energy production and reducing reliance on imported fossil fuels. One of the best examples of that is the creation of Great British Energy: publicly owned energy investment designed to support British clean energy projects. I also welcome our clean power 2030 plan, under which most UK electricity will come from low-carbon domestic sources by the end of the decade through expanding offshore wind, removing planning barriers to onshore wind, increasing solar power generation, investing in grid infrastructure and supporting nuclear and carbon capture projects.

The King's Speech outlines our plans to go faster and further, taking definitive action to protect the energy, defence and economic security of the United Kingdom for the long term, including through the introduction of an energy independence Bill to scale up home grown renewable energy and protect living standards, helping to tackle the affordability crisis, particularly for low-income households, including through our warm homes plan.

Sir Roger Gale: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Hopkins: I am sorry but I am short on time, so I will continue.

We have seen at first hand the devastating impact of exposure to volatile international gas markets, which caused major price rises after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Government are taking measures to protect our citizens and ensure that such stark and unaffordable increases are never passed on to households again, regardless of global conflicts, supply disruptions and sudden rises in international energy prices. With the war in the middle east being felt in the pockets of people at home, that is more important than ever. I welcome the fact that more stable energy costs for households and businesses in Luton South and South Bedfordshire and those across the country is a priority, while also giving the Government greater flexibility during international crises.

Our Government's mission to secure our energy independence is just one facet of the work the Labour Government are doing to strengthen our sovereign capability. They are using the economic freedom gained after leaving the EU to have greater democratic oversight and to intervene more directly in the economy through our industrial strategy and public investment, with a focus on backing British business and good, skilled, unionised jobs. There is no better example of that than our commitment to safeguard the domestic production of steel through the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill, which we will debate later this week. That highlights the importance of the role of an active state in supporting its citizens as well as protecting our national resilience, our economic security and our ability to act independently in the interests of our citizens in an increasingly volatile and uncertain world.

I have spoken about the sovereignty and security of energy, but part of building a more secure Britain for my constituents is also about ensuring that everyone has access to a safe and secure home. I welcome our Labour Government's commitment to address the long-term housing shortages that have driven up rents, made home ownership harder and placed increasing pressure on social housing and public services. Increasing supply through long-term investment in social and council housing, with significant restrictions on right to buy under the Social Housing Bill, alongside planning reforms and reform of the leasehold system—including the capping of ground rents—will make the housing market more affordable and stable, particularly for families in constituencies such as mine where more affordable family homes are desperately needed. Indeed, expanding our housing supply goes hand in hand with our efforts to strengthen our national resilience, reduce housing inequality and create a stable foundation for long-term social and economic security. They are part of building a stronger and fairer country for all.

4.14 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Last week in the Gracious Speech, the Government pledged to introduce a new Representation of the People Bill. Constitutional issues such as the electoral system can seem far removed from people's daily lives, but that could not be further from the truth. With a better electoral system, politicians and parties will be more focused on the issues that really matter to voters. Electoral reform is a necessary step to ensure a fairer society with better schools, better hospitals, safer communities, clean air and clean water.

The Representation of the People Bill has the potential to be the latest chapter in the evolution of our democracy. Ours is a proud history of a franchise that has expanded across the generations, extending the vote to an ever broader base of people. From the Great Reform Act 1832 to the Representation of the People Act 1918, which granted the right of voting to women, to the Representation of the People Act 1969, which made the UK the first democracy to give votes to everyone aged 18 and above, this is a story of progress and we should continue it.

I welcome that the Government are continuing this trend with votes for 16 and 17-year-olds. When I trained 16 and 17-year-old recruits in the regular Army, some of them were bound months later to serve in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, which they did. If 16-year-olds can join our armed forces and pay tax, they deserve a voice in how both of those are used. The new Representation of the People Bill has the potential to occupy a place in the pantheon of progressive extensions to the franchise.

By contrast, our current system of first past the post enables parties to turn a small plurality of votes into a massive majority of seats, and 2024 showed that at its worst. The general election of '24 was the most disproportionate in modern British history. Turnout was the second lowest since records began in 1885; less than 60% of the electorate cast a vote. They were unconvinced and uninspired by both Labour and the Conservatives. Labour won one third of the vote, Labour won two thirds of the seats and Labour won three thirds of the levers of power. The 2024 general election result was a direct consequence of the first-past-the-post voting

[Richard Foord]

system. This winner-takes-all approach threatens to reward populists who thrive in divisive and adversarial politics.

I speak not in relation to our party political self-interest here in the Liberal Democrats. We were delivered a result that was proportionate to the votes cast. Yet I look around me at the MPs from Reform UK or from the Green party; if the 2024 general election had been conducted under the additional member system of proportional representation, Reform UK would now have 94 MPs sitting on these Benches and the Green party would have 42. Instead, they have five and four respectively. The disparity between votes cast and seats won adds significantly to the disillusion that many of us will have heard on the streets of the UK when we were out there campaigning in the local elections earlier this month.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Is not the biggest problem with first past the post that often people are voting against rather than for someone? That poisons our democracy, because everyone ends up with someone who they do not want.

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend is spot on. I accept that former Labour voters vote for me to keep out the Tories and Reform, and former Conservative voters vote for me to keep out Labour and the Green party. That is not the system that we want. We want a system where people can vote positively for change, with hope. It is little wonder that the only other European country besides the UK that elects its Parliament in this way is Belarus. If first past the post continues, we could see just 30% of votes bringing in a Government with extremist ideas. I want to see a proportionate, not a disproportionate, number of MPs for Reform UK and the Green party.

I do not agree with those parties on universal access, on defence or on immigration. On universal access, Reform UK talks about tax breaks for people who opt out of the NHS, while the Green party talks about bringing in a basic income for everybody, with no conditions. One wants to strip us of universal healthcare; the other wants to have taxpayers paying for universal income. On defence, we see Reform UK apologising for Putin's aggression against Ukraine and the Green party pledging to dismantle the UK's nuclear weapons; one is lowering the Ukrainian flag over town halls that it controls while the other would hoist a white flag over defence establishments in this country. On immigration, whether it is the Green party threatening to end proper controls on—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Can I encourage the hon. Gentleman to return to at least some of the substance of His Majesty's Gracious Address?

Richard Foord: Madam Deputy Speaker, these parties do not represent the moderate majority, but with as little as 30% of the vote at the next general election, they could control all the levers of power. First past the post is unfair and unrepresentative, and it undermines the legitimacy of our elections. I urge the Government not to prolong the disenchantment, the apathy and the

hopelessness. People are fed up with being told to vote for the lesser evil. The Representation of the People Bill is this Government's opportunity to get it right.

4.20 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I agree with every word that the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) has just said about first past the post and proportional representation. It is Labour party policy, and it unites the left and the right of the Labour party. I think it is probably one of the few things that my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) and I work together on passionately. If colleagues on the Government Benches think that first past the post was great for us in the last election, then just wait till the next one. Proportional representation is the right thing to do. It is the most democratic thing to do. It is also the best thing to do in our own self-interest.

Our party came into government against a backdrop of the deindustrialisation, privatisation and austerity that, over the course of decades, have bled this country dry. That backdrop has left millions of people in abject poverty in the fifth richest country in the world, and millions more struggling to get by. Of course, people are enraged by the state of our society, but gifting far-right politicians declaring war on minority groups are exploiting this rage to sow division. They are funded by many of the people who cause these problems in the first place and who want us to punch down so that we do not look up at them.

This threat is on our streets and in our political system, from the "Unite the Kingdom" rally, mocking Muslim women and calling for mass deportations, including of British citizens, to the Reform councillors celebrating the rape of a Sikh woman and saying that Nigerians should be melted down to fill potholes. Unless we want these people running this country, we have to get our act together. I want to be clear that this is not a criticism of the Secretary of State, who I think has done an excellent job in his role, particularly against some of the flat-earthers in the Opposition parties. However, while we have done some good things in government, including improving workers' and renters' rights, creating GB Energy and increasing funding to local councils, the fact is that we have not delivered change at the pace and scale that voters expect.

There is also far too much that this Government have got wrong, such as attempting to limit jury trials and cutting benefits for disabled people, and their failures over the genocide in Gaza. These mistakes, and the refusal to learn from them, are fuelling the collapse of the two-party system and the rise of a multi-party political landscape, but the leadership's strategy to stop Reform has just reinforced the narrative that immigration is what is wrong with our society. Not only is that completely at odds with Labour values, but it has also been a complete electoral disaster. We have smashed apart our own voter coalition, and as we haemorrhage votes to the Greens, we are also delivering seats to Reform.

I refuse to put a positive spin on the last two years, because I want us to be better. We have to face unpleasant facts. I know it is painful. It is painful for all of us, because we all believe in the potential of a Labour Government. We all understand what is at stake here, and I know that colleagues who disagree with this

analysis also genuinely want to improve people's lives and stop a far-right Government, but I am afraid the argument that we can achieve this by sticking to a failed political strategy just does not hold water. This Labour Government need a total reset to show that they are listening, that they understand what they got wrong and that they have a clear plan to change, but their response to a catastrophic performance in the local elections has been to double down on the incrementalism that we have seen thus far, and that is what we see again in this King's Speech.

While there are positives, including the Hillsborough law, measures for Ukraine and a commitment to ban conversion practices, it is clear to most of us that they are not enough. We should be taking much bolder measures to tackle the cost of living crisis and rebalance the economy so that it works for working-class people. Let me give just two examples: rent controls, so that housing costs are affordable and people are not priced out of their communities; and nationalising utilities, to prioritise public need over private profit and bring down bills. We need to do that at the same time as unashamedly standing up for the full diversity of the working class—wherever people were born, whatever the colour of their skin, their religion, their sexuality or gender identity, whether they are disabled or not, and whether they are in work or not. Tinkering around the edges was never going to cut it.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): I agree with so much of what my hon. Friend is saying. We need to be ambitious, and we need to be looking at the big picture and fixing systems as well as situations. Like her, I want to see us being far more ambitious from here onward. The headings of the Bills in the King's Speech offer huge potential for us to do things that are far more transformative and meaningful, and address the root causes of many of the problems we face. Does she agree that if the Government take a radical, different approach to working through the Bills in this King's Speech, there is a chance to deliver the kind of change we have been hoping for?

Nadia Whittome: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. It would probably be best not to have a candid discussion about this in the Chamber. Yes, the King's Speech provides headings, but I am afraid that is all they are—they are hints at what we need; they are not the sum of it. It is not that the change has been promised but I do not believe it is coming. It has not been promised. We are doubling down on the mistakes we have made. What we have heard from the Prime Minister is, "We've done great things in government. You just haven't realised it yet."

Tinkering around the edges was never going to cut it. Chasing the far right on immigration was never going to work. If we do not learn these lessons now, it will be too late. We will be squandering the generational opportunity of a Labour Government to transform this country for the better, and we will be allowing the far right to win, and I refuse to sit here quietly and let that happen.

4.27 pm

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), because she made a very important point at the end. She is right: this is a very underwhelming

King's Speech. There are some welcome headlines, but the fact is that the ambition is very diminished. The reason for that—and she represents it—is that the Labour party is fundamentally split. It is unable to move forward boldly in any direction that is needed. I do not make personal accusations. I know what it is like; I sat on the Government Benches in the last Parliament, supporting a Government who were also fatally split and unable to move forward. This is the consequence of the politics that we are in. By the way, I welcome the eloquent and elegant repudiation of her previous position by the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho). She made an excellent speech about the difficulty of the Government's policy, and she is now in the right place.

Across the board, and particularly on the topic of energy security, we see bold ambition and the right statements being made, particularly about energy independence and resilience, but the detail that follows is utterly underwhelming. In this area, we see a decision not to exploit the enormous opportunities of the reserves we have in the North sea. We should all welcome the aspiration of energy independence, including eventually to reap the huge benefits of the abundant natural resources that we should be using for energy, but I am afraid we are not going to get there this way.

Likewise, in other crucial areas of national priority—defence being the main one—we hear the right language about the need for investment. We hear about the need to recover our defences, which have been sadly depleted over many decades. We have a chronic weakness in our national defences, and yet we still have no defence investment plan and no clarity on where the money will be spent or even where it will come from.

I represent a military constituency with many amazing tech and military firms that are developing the kit we need for our defences. They are laying off staff as we speak, because the money is not promised and it is not available to them. It is scandalous: in all sectors where the United Kingdom has real current and enormous potential advantages, the high-tech sectors of fintech, agri-tech and AI—areas that, thanks to Brexit, we are able to drive ahead on, boldly and independently—we are being hobbled by a lack of ambition and a chronic inability to release the talents and opportunities there.

I was going to intervene earlier on the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who was bemoaning the exit of UK tech entrepreneurs in the AI space and saying that we should be more like Europe in that regard. Those entrepreneurs are not leaving the United Kingdom to go to the EU; they are going to the middle east, the United States or the far east, because those countries have a pro-tech industrial policy, and that is what we need in our country.

I have been meeting a bunch of businesses recently—we are on a bit of a prawn cocktail operation in the Reform party, and it is amazing which businesses want to come and talk to us at the moment. It is very encouraging, but they are all depressed about the state of the economy. Yesterday, an AI entrepreneur said to me, "If we are not careful, this country's economy will simply be US tourism." That is all we will be able to offer, because we are driving away all the entrepreneurs and businesses that represent opportunities for growth in future. Last week I was talking to a pharmaceutical firm that is now exiting to Europe—to Switzerland, in fact. This morning

[*Danny Kruger*]

I saw a company developing the technology for small modular nuclear reactors. They are giving up and going to the United States. We are driving away the talent that we need for the future.

I am enthused by the opportunities that our high-tech sectors represent and what we could be doing, but there is also the ordinary economy. Labour used to talk a lot about that—indeed, some years ago the Chancellor wrote a book called “The Everyday Economy”—and it is a vital focus for us. But what are we doing for businesses that are the backbone of our highstreets—both national businesses and small and medium-sized businesses? We are ramping costs on to them through national insurance contributions and business rates. For small businesses the VAT threshold is way too high, inhibiting growth and job creation. A Government who want growth and productivity are going in directly the opposite direction.

I end with a plea to Ministers: I extol and applaud their aspiration for a clean transition, but right now we are in a national emergency, and we need to crowd in every possible source of electricity that we have to get our economy growing. That includes nuclear and it includes fossil fuels.

4.32 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank the Energy Secretary for making another clear case for the energy transition. I welcome the energy independence Bill, which will be one of the most significant and pragmatic pieces of legislation that we seek to work on in this Parliament and is directly entwined with our national security. Energy independence sets us free from the energy cost chaos caused by Putin’s erratic warmongering and is another step that enables us to stand in strong solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

The stabilisation of our energy security will enable us to work on Jo Cox’s agenda of progressive internationalism, by improving our capacity to be a force for good—the 10th anniversary of her tragic murder is coming up shortly. On Jo’s progressive internationalism, I am also proud to see the European partnership Bill, and I welcome the youth mobility scheme. Many of my constituents will be able to take advantage of that, so I am keen to see even more progress in our European relations, including freedom for European musical acts to tour Europe and visa-free travel. I also hail the power of rail, with delivery of a fair deal for the north of England, something that was sadly neglected during the 14 years of Conservative Government prior to 2024, and the northern powerhouse rail Bill, a scheme announced and then cancelled by the previous Conservative Government.

That said, there is more work to be done on the clean water Bill to ensure that we establish true water resilience for our national and energy security. We must ensure that the Bill does not tie us into a failed, privatised system owned by overseas actors. The only route to our security is through mutual ownership. In England, we should have a system like the one in Wales, where the people own the water company—notably different from 1970s-style nationalisation. As we know, nationalisation is at the mercy of any future Government who might

seek to privatise the sector again, whereas mutual ownership puts the public first, with local people making key decisions about their water supply systems. We should have mutual ownership of the entire water industry, which would ensure a stable and secure future for our water systems. The public must have a say in the future of our water, with genuinely clean waterways that are publicly owned and secure for the future of the nation.

Restoring waterways and nature is not separate from national security—it underpins it. My amendment (g) on today’s Order Paper recognises that functioning and healthy ecosystems reduce flood risk, protect our homes, hospitals and transportation systems from overheating, sustain soils to be able to grow food, and clean the air we breathe. The UK’s key ecosystems are every bit as vital as our roads, energy grid and water networks, yet we continue to treat them as an afterthought. As the Treasury-commissioned Dasgupta review has made clear, we undervalue the natural assets that our economy and security depend on. By legislating for a strategic nature network and recognising it as national infrastructure, we can restore, connect and maintain a system of key functional ecosystems that strengthens our national security, protects communities and builds resilience across the UK.

Other Members have mentioned the prospect of electoral reform through the Representation of the People Bill. We have just seen local council elections in which a councillor was elected on 20.5% of the vote, even lower than the lowest percentage at the last general election. Candidates are winning with increasingly low percentages of the vote as we move to a five-party system in England and a six-party system in Scotland and Wales. We need a national conversation and to think about this issue clearly for the long-term future of our country, so I will be tabling an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill that would establish a national commission for electoral reform. I urge the Government to set one up so that we can take clear actions to ensure the future of our voting system and its integrity.

I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench have heard what I have had to say about amendment (g) and the need to consider nature as infrastructure. I am content not to press it, knowing that the spirit of the amendment has been heard and taken on by the Government.

4.37 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The security and price of energy affect every household, individual and business in every constituency, up and down the country. It is a matter that concerns everyone. That is why, when the Secretary of State was in opposition, he promised during the last election to cut household energy bills by £300. Instead, in government, he has presided over a £200 increase in those bills. That is his record as he sets his sights on his next job, the job he so desperately craves: replacing the Prime Minister. He is also the Secretary of State who has set up GB Energy, which will not produce any energy, will cost taxpayers £8 billion and, as its own chief executive says, will take something like 20 years to employ just 1,000 people. There is nothing in the King’s Speech that will secure the country’s energy supply, bring down energy costs or create the jobs and investment that the Government have promised.

As we have heard from Members across this House, there is a consensus—there is unity. We all want to decarbonise energy use, but Conservative Members will not support doing so at the expense of families, households and individuals, particularly those who are hard up and least able to pay. This is not a binary choice, where we are either pro-decarbonisation or against it; we can be for it, yet understand that the security of energy supply and household energy bills must come first. What country in the world would run headlong into an ideological experiment for the sake of it, leaving hard-up citizens behind? No country in the world. This country should not, and this Government should not either.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Many of these problems have been put in the “too difficult” box for too long; they are long term and difficult to fix. Does the hon. Member at least acknowledge that the Government’s investment through the national wealth fund of £600 million into small modular reactors is a real step forward and will bring people’s bills down in the long term?

Joe Robertson: I accept that there are some difficult questions in and around this whole area of debate. The truth remains that no Government have done more to decarbonise the economy and to bring forward green technology than the last Conservative Government, but we would not do that at the expense of hard-working families. The bonkers green tax agenda that this Government are peddling is harming the debate on decarbonising the economy. I will give an example of that.

Ms Billington: I am comfortable with accepting that there has been a growing consensus about decarbonising our energy system over a period of time, starting with the Climate Change Act 2008, which only a handful of Conservative MPs voted against. However, I am puzzled that hon. Member thinks that the last Tory Government did that without any burden on the taxpayer or on bills, when the so-called energy savings package that Liz Truss put in place cost £44 billion and has left this country in profound debt.

Joe Robertson: I acknowledge that the last Government made mistakes—I do not have a problem with that—but that is not an excuse for the hon. Lady’s Government to do even worse for hard-up working families.

Bonkers green taxes harm the debate, and I will give this House an example. UK emissions trading scheme levies on the maritime sector are levied on ferry companies. My constituents on the Isle of Wight rely on those ferry companies to access things that everyone else takes for granted: health, education, jobs and seeing friends and family. Next month, someone can travel across the Solent to the Isle of Wight, taking their car on one return trip, for £511. That is for a five-mile return crossing.

The Government, instead of helping us—they say they will help, and I am still holding out hope that they will—will in July levy a carbon emission tax on the Fishbourne to Portsmouth route that the ferry company cannot avoid. It cannot decarbonise its ferries and go electric, because there is no grid charging capacity in Portsmouth harbour. There is no grid charging capacity

in Southampton either. These are not strange little harbours—they are the naval base of the United Kingdom and one of the biggest export container ports respectively—yet there is not the grid capacity to charge an Isle of Wight ferry. The ferries will pay, however, and guess what: they have passed on that charge to consumers and my constituents.

Ms Billington: Will the hon. Member give way?

Joe Robertson: I will give way to the hon. Lady to try again.

Ms Billington: Specifically on the Southampton point, it was under the Tory Government that the Labour-run Southampton council wanted to clean up and install that grid connection to be able to decarbonise shipping in that port and specifically to tackle air quality in that city. The Tories had 14 years, and they did nothing.

Joe Robertson: I gently say to the hon. Lady that the reason her Government are in such a mess and polling at under 20% is that she and her colleagues think that the universal excuse for her Government’s inaction is to blame a previous Government. She won that argument at the last election, and since then her Government have done nothing. Southampton will have that grid-charging capacity for boats in the mid-2030s, yet the Government are bringing in a charge in July this year. Do you know what the irony is, Madam Deputy Speaker? One of those ferries has batteries on board. It is a hybrid boat that can use batteries to cross the Solent and not burn fossil fuels, but it is being charged because it cannot use its batteries, because it has nowhere to plug into. The EU is bringing in that charge and ringfencing the money it receives from its emissions trading system to invest in grid capacity in ports—but not the UK Government; they are taking the money, shoving it into the Treasury and making no promises about investing in grid capacity. That is not the last Government; it is this Government.

I say to those on the Government Front Bench that these bonkers green levies make no sense, harm ordinary people and undermine the entire case for their green agenda.

4.44 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): For more and more UK households and businesses, the monthly energy bill is one of their largest bills, and it is increasing. That is largely due to rising international oil and gas prices, which in turn have been exacerbated by the recent war in Iran. It is for exactly that reason that for too long we have been energy insecure. Energy security is needed to give us cost of living security. If we get this right, we can cut bills, cut emissions and cut our dependence on volatile foreign oil and gas markets, all at the same time. I have not yet heard a single argument from Conservative Members—including the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson)—about why continued dependence on those markets is a good idea, as opposed to a driver of price shocks and increases.

For most of the past 50 years the UK has been a net importer of electricity, much of it coming through interconnectors such as the one in my constituency. The growth in British renewables is at long last, and rightly,

[Tony Vaughan]

being pushed forward by this Government, and that is starting to reduce our heavy reliance on imported energy and fossil fuels. Last year our energy production was the most British and the most clean that it has been for years. Under this Labour Government, energy production has defied the doubters who decry the decline of North sea oil and gas, and who urge us to open new fields.

Harriet Cross: I just want to make sure that everyone is clear that the hon. and learned Gentleman is talking about electricity, rather than energy. He is talking about the power that makes up just 20% of our energy mix, not the oil and gas that makes up 75% of it. The two are very different.

Tony Vaughan: Interestingly, the hon. Lady has come up with no justification for continuing to be in hock to the international oil and gas markets, so my argument that that is not a good idea has been reinforced by her intervention.

I want us to be energy independent and, eventually, energy dominant, exporting our energy around the world, generating more revenue for the Treasury, creating more jobs here at home and helping to fix our current account deficit. The new energy security Bill rightly seeks to hardwire in strong consumer protections, a stronger watchdog and a more flexible, modern grid. Giving Ofcom a clearer duty to protect households, changing the way in which support is targeted at low-income and vulnerable families, and making local grids smarter so that people can benefit from cheaper off-peak energy are not technical tweaks; they are issues on the frontline of the fight against fuel poverty.

The vast majority of my constituents in Folkestone, Hythe and Romney Marsh want to tackle climate change and lower energy bills, and they want Britain to be energy independent. The best way of achieving all those objectives is to deliver a balanced energy mix, and to ensure that savings and opportunities reach people's front doors. That means introducing a serious warm homes programme, upgraded insulation, modern heating systems, and clear duties for landlords so that renters are not left shivering in leaky homes while their landlords take all the profits. Solar finance has evolved to the point where there can be no excuse not to have a solar panel on every domestic rooftop, which could allow tenants as well as landlords to benefit from lower bills. The Government must do everything they can to make that a reality.

Renewables play a critical part in our energy production, along with new nuclear. We should continue to extract from the existing North sea oil and gas fields, but the Government are right to oppose the opening up of new fields. That would not lower people's energy bills, because the oil and gas price is determined by global markets. Moreover, as many of my colleagues have said, it would undermine our mission to tackle climate change, and would weaken our global leadership role on the issue. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State and his Department for their work in that regard. The real jobs plan for energy is to invest in clean power, grids, storage and efficiency, and to give workers in existing industries a clear path into those new roles.

Sir Roger Gale: I have sat through the entire debate, which is now getting on for three hours, and I have read the Bill, but nobody this afternoon—not one Member of this House, including myself—has referred to hydrogen, which is probably the best clean future energy there is.

Tony Vaughan: I agree with the right hon. Member that hydrogen is an important part of where we need to go, but we need to fix the fundamentals, which were not fixed during the 14 years before Labour was elected, and we need to get on with that.

New nuclear creates jobs. In my constituency we have two old nuclear power stations at Dungeness that are currently being decommissioned. Dungeness is a brilliant candidate for new nuclear technologies, with an existing grid connection, land available, population centres nearby and high electricity demand. Fundamentally, there is also strong support for new nuclear at Dungeness from the people of Romney Marsh, who understand that this is about good jobs, clean power and long-term investment in their community. I recently helped to organise an event at the community hub about new nuclear, and it was packed out with local residents who are desperate for new nuclear power generation to return to their community.

So I commend the actions of this Government to help speed up the development of new nuclear technology. My predecessor pushed for many years for the Tory Government, run by his own party, to bring new nuclear to Dungeness, but I am afraid he got nowhere, because his party was just not interested in helping him. I do welcome the intention in the nuclear regulation Bill to implement the Fingleton review to cut unnecessary delay and duplication. That is not to say that we will undermine environmental protections, which must of course remain effective and credible, as well as evidence-based. The argument is not nature versus nuclear. Climate change is itself a major threat to habitats and species, so changes must focus on faster decisions, but with real environmental integrity.

If we are to achieve true energy security, we need new nuclear to play a critical role, because the sun does not always shine and the wind does not always blow. We need warm and efficient homes, fair energy bills and a regulator with the teeth and the remit to stand up for the public as the system changes. New nuclear can generate a significant number of well-skilled, well-paid, unionised jobs and help support the reindustrialisation of Britain, which we of course desperately need, and so can the mass roll-out of renewables, grid upgrades and home retrofit.

I welcome the energy security Bill and the nuclear regulation Bill, especially the measures that help speed up the development of new nuclear. This is about whether families can afford to heat their homes, workers have good jobs in the industries of the future and Britain can stand on its own two feet in a dangerous world. To the champions of the oil and gas industry sitting on the Conservative Benches, I say that they should do the right thing for the country, and accept that we can never get bills down while we rely on international oil and gas markets, and support these measures to give us clean, cheap power and energy independence for our great nation.

4.52 pm

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): One of the many challenges facing rural constituencies such as mine is the rising cost of fuel. When the war in Iran pushed up prices, I had constituents telling me they could no longer afford their planned orders of heating oil and would try to manage without heating for as long as they could. As we might expect, residents in Frome and East Somerset rely heavily on car use, and therefore fuel such as diesel and petrol, to access health services. I am very concerned about the lack of community input into decisions being made about health services, which disproportionately affect those in communities who have to drive or get the bus, or run patient transport services in rural areas.

The King's Speech brings forward plans to abolish NHS England, but in my constituency of Frome and East Somerset, NHS Somerset has been running what it calls a test and learn exercise at Frome community hospital. For six months the number of beds was temporarily reduced from 24 to 16, and at the end of that period the test and learn was simply extended for another six months, meaning that for a full year capacity has been reduced and no full consultation with communities about these changes has been required. People are rightly concerned that a reduction in their local service will require them to travel further afield, the cost of which is rising.

I have serious concerns about whether the evidence provided so far is strong enough to justify making these changes permanent, and I am deeply troubled by how little the community has been involved in that conversation. I decided to do my own consultation, hosting a pop-up in Frome two weeks ago, and asking local people to tell us why the hospital was important for them. One constituent wrote, "I feel strongly that Frome Hospital provides so many services for local people. When I hear from elderly friends who have ended up with long stays in Bath, I find it incomprehensible that once they reach a certain stage of recovery they cannot be moved nearer home." Another constituent said, "It is a shame we must lose beds. My friend was in Bath for five weeks, then had to go to Wincanton Hospital for another seven weeks as there were no beds in Frome, and this was so hard for her family, who live miles away."

The people of Frome and its surrounding villages rely on their community hospital, yet they woke up one morning to find that a decision had, in effect, already been made to reduce its capacity, a decision that means some of the most vulnerable members of our community will not have a bed in a local community hospital setting if they are discharged from our general hospital in Bath. For an elderly person, for a carer managing on their own or for those without access to a car, the risk of being placed in a community hospital somewhere else in Somerset is a serious barrier to suitable care. A lack of public transport and increasing fuel costs place a huge additional stress on families and carers.

Two weeks ago, I was pleased to meet the Minister for Care to discuss the Government's plan for neighbourhood health centres, a policy I broadly welcome and one that I believe could genuinely benefit parts of my constituency. In the meeting, the Minister was explicit that our integrated care board was required to consult local MPs and other stakeholders on their plans for the new health centres. Not only has our ICB not been in touch, but when we

followed up with them ourselves, we were told two things: first, they had no idea they were expected to engage with MPs on this matter; and secondly, they had already decided where the hubs would go, without consulting anyone else. In both the cases I have set out, there seems to be a lack of mechanism to force ICBs or trusts to consult local people and a total lack of sanction if they fail to do so.

People who live in Frome and the surrounding villages are the experts in their own lives, and they have helpful, constructive and innovative ideas to input into decision making around the future of local health services. The Government are also overseeing the removal of Healthwatch and the Citizens' Senate, two additional bodies that centre patients' voices at the heart of discussions about their care. I am worried that without those bodies being replaced or without mechanisms in place to ensure good consultation, communities risk being entirely unheard in decisions that will, for some, affect their daily lives. I hope Ministers will co-ordinate with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Transport and elsewhere to ensure that people in Frome and East Somerset can get the health services they need in the places they need them and in an affordable way.

4.56 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to see you back in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker—the model of calmness and authority. After the week my party has had, there is virtue in the stability you represent in that Chair.

I am pleased to be back in this Chamber for the first time in this Session of Parliament to talk about policy and not personality, and to focus on one of the biggest issues our country faces: our energy security. The decision by the United States and Israel to strike Iran on 27 February has seen thousands of lives lost, billions expended in weaponry, a stalemate in the strait of Hormuz and a global energy crisis.

For many countries the situation has become very grave, very quickly. In the UK, at the pump on the day before the strikes the price for petrol was £1.35 per litre and for diesel was £1.43. The average prices now stand closer to £1.58 and £1.86 respectively. While we are relatively less reliant on the strait of Hormuz than many countries, our exposure to the fossil fuel rollercoaster that is the global market means we are being hit hard, too. The choice before is simple: get off the fossil fuel rollercoaster and accelerate our transition to green and clean energy, or people and the planet will continue to pay the price for our reliance on gas and oil.

A word on climate change: records on global temperatures date back to 1850, yet the past 11 years have been the 11 warmest years on record. We must pursue the transition to clean and green energy for our political and economic security today and for the tomorrows of all the generations yet to come.

When it comes to embracing green technology, the public are already voting with their feet. The CEO of Octopus Energy has reported a 50% increase in demand for solar panels and a 30% uplift in demand for heat pumps within weeks of the conflict in Iran starting. This is welcome news, but the transition to green, clean and home-grown energy is not a challenge that the

[Andrew Lewin]

market alone can fix. I am proud of the record of our Labour Government in the past two years: two renewable energy auctions, with bids for enough energy to power 23 million homes; ending the de facto ban on onshore wind; and scaling up the social housing warm homes fund, including more than £6 million for Welwyn Hatfield borough council in my constituency, which will see more than 600 council homes retrofitted in my community. But we have to go further, and I hope that the energy independence Bill can be a focal point for the Government.

We have to innovate. I was with the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister in January when he made an excellent speech on how to speed up the delivery of policy, which is something so many colleagues have talked about today. He talked about learning the lessons of the vaccine taskforce model and applying it more universally. I encourage colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Cabinet Office to work together with this model in mind, and particularly with a view to speeding up the all-important connections to our grid.

We have to work with the private sector. Ocado, which I am proud to say has its national headquarters in Hatfield, has been in touch with me about its ambition to speed up grid connections and the importance of an EV charging infrastructure that allows it to transition to electric vehicles. I am also pleased that Mitsubishi Electric Europe, working in Hatfield, is training gas engineers to transfer from boilers, so that their skills can be applied to heat pumps in the future.

Most importantly, however, we have to make clear that the green transition will work for everyone in our society. The warm homes social housing fund is one of the most important parts of that plan. Retrofitting the homes of people on low incomes demonstrates beyond doubt that this is not some elite project—as Conservative Members want us to believe—but one that will ultimately get bills down for the people who need it most. If the Conservatives and Reform wish to cling to fossil fuels and the global markets, it is their job to explain the cost to their constituents, but clean, green and cheap energy is the future, and this Labour Government are right to strive for energy independence.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. After the next speaker, the time limit will be reduced to four minutes.

5.1 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Too often when we debate energy in this place it becomes tribal very quickly. Members are either in favour of oil and gas or renewables—there is no room for nuance. We need renewables, we need nuclear, but we also need oil and gas.

Many Members have spoken about the cost. Cost is one element, but supply is vital, because oil and gas makes up three quarters of the energy we need every day. It is the energy we need for the 24 million homes and over 500,000 businesses that still rely on oil and gas. Oil and gas is needed in industries such as pharmaceuticals and petrochemicals. The energy independence Bill assumes that just by calling it energy independence we are suddenly not dependent on oil and gas. That is not true, and that

will not be the case far into the future because we have not developed the systems to move us away from oil and gas as quickly as we needed to.

Look at our nearest neighbours in Norway, a country that many people rightly think has its energy system done correctly. There are five flights a day from Aberdeen to Norway, taking skilled workers from what was once the oil and gas capital of Europe to work in the industry there. Norway has just said that it is going to open up three more existing gas fields, and has announced a licensing round for 70 new licences. Norway incentivises drilling because it recognises how important oil and gas is to its energy security.

Would any Member on the Government Benches like to tell me that the Norwegian Labour Government, by increasing their use and export of oil and gas from the North sea, are making Norway less energy independent? No, of course they are not. It is the UK Labour Government that are making the UK more dependent on Norway for our gas—we send £20 billion to Norway for the privilege of using the same gas from the North sea—and more dependent on liquefied natural gas from Qatar, America and Mexico. That LNG is liquefied, transported and regasified before it can be used here, so is less good for the environment.

Moving on to jobs, I will never understand how anyone can sit on the Labour Benches and not understand the importance of protecting jobs in the oil and gas sector. The Government mention new jobs in renewables. There are new jobs in renewables, but they are not coming on stream fast enough, they are not comparable, and they are not for the same skillsets. Some of those jobs are transferable, but loads are not, and the highly skilled people who have secured our energy security for the last few decades are the ones who are going to struggle to transfer. If Labour wants to say it is happy to sacrifice those jobs, those livelihoods and the communities those jobs live in—particularly in the north-east of Scotland—it can do so, because that is the message it is sending. Those skilled workers are moving abroad and taking with them the skills that will help us with our energy security and energy independence.

Labour talks about price a lot. We understand that the price of oil and gas goes up and down; that is understandable. Contracts for difference allocation round 7—AR7—signed us up to higher prices for 20 years. We have committed to paying those high prices for 20 years, which are higher than what oil and gas has been for the past few years. [Interruption.] I do not need wails; I appreciate that oil and gas is high at the moment, but it is not always high. It has been low—[Interruption.] The Minister for Energy says that that is the issue, and it is the issue if we look at one time horizon. Over the past few years, has oil and gas been low? The gas price has been low, the oil price has been low, and yet we still use it.

We are sacrificing jobs in Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland and sacrificing our energy security just to deliver green energy, because that is all this Government want to focus on. This Government should be looking at what our neighbours in Norway are doing and seeing how it is seen as a truly energy-independent country because they are still using their oil and gas, because they know they need it—their energy systems and their country are not set up not to use it. The UK is not either. We need it, we must use it, and we should be drilling all we can from the North sea—starting today.

5.6 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of a new energy security Bill in the King's Speech, which will meet our manifesto commitment not to issue licences to explore new oil and gas fields. Crucially, it will also deliver on our commitment to ban fracking.

Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, involves injecting fluid at high pressure to fracture rock and extract hydrocarbons. In 2019, a moratorium on fracking was introduced following earthquakes linked to fracking activity at Preston New Road in Lancashire. Currently, UK legislation defines fracking based on fluid volume thresholds: 1,000 cubic metres per stage, or 10,000 cubic metres in total. This leaves a legal loophole for oil and gas companies to exploit.

In beautiful Burniston in my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby, Europa Oil & Gas has proposed extracting gas using a technique called proppant squeeze, which is just hydraulic fracturing at lower fluid volumes. This means the technique exists outside the fracking moratorium. In Burniston, on the edge of the North York Moors national park, villagers have been involved in a David and Goliath battle with Europa Oil & Gas. I am delighted to say that North Yorkshire councillors threw out the recommendations of its officers and formally rejected the planning application.

However, to create indisputable clarity over fracking legislation in our country and close this loophole, any future ban must include all forms of fracking. Currently, 66 existing licences remain active, and planning applications can still proceed under current rules. If our definition of fracking remains volume-based, we risk companies continuing to frack—just under a different name. Make no mistake: the frackers have not given up. Following North Yorkshire council's rejection of Europa's proposal, Europa stated that it felt confident about winning an appeal.

The evidence is there for the Government to include small-scale fracking in our ban. A recent report published by the University of Edinburgh found that earthquakes from high-volume fracking and low-volume fracking are equally large and equally unpredictable. This means that the risk of seismicity such as earthquakes induced or triggered from proppant squeeze cannot simply be ruled out. This evidence echoes findings commissioned by the then Oil and Gas Authority into Preston New Road, which also showed that seismic impacts cannot be accurately predicted regardless of fluid volume.

I urge the Government to use the upcoming energy security Bill to replace the volume-based definition with one based on intent and process, and to introduce a blanket prohibition on fracturing rock for hydrocarbons. All forms of fracking contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and undermine our net zero commitments, and therefore all forms of fracking need to be banned.

Last December, I held a Westminster Hall debate on this issue, and the Minister responded, confirming that the Government remain open to evidence regarding a comprehensive ban. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to confirm what further evidence he requires to ban small-scale fracking—unless, of course, it is earthquakes in Scarborough.

5.10 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Energy has become one of the most important issues in Caerfyrddin and the rest of Wales in recent years. Global events have exposed how vulnerable our communities are to energy shocks, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 cost the Welsh economy £5.65 billion, averaging over £2,000 per home in Wales. As the impact of the war in Iran intensifies, Welsh households are being hit once again. Rural households are paying hundreds more in fuel and heating oil costs, and the average on-grid household energy bill could rise by nearly £300 when the energy cap is revised in July. Off-grid customers have seen their oil and gas bills at least double over the past few months.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I point out to the hon. Lady that it would be helpful if the new Welsh Government could release the £3.8 million of funding that the UK Government have given to the Welsh Government to help people struggling with their heating oil costs. I wonder when that will be distributed.

Ann Davies: I assure the hon. Member that I am sure that the funding will be released but, with all due respect, should it not have been released by the previous Welsh Government when that money was put in a few months ago?

While the measures in the King's Speech set out steps to reduce energy costs, they do not get to grips with the fundamental unfairness of our system. People in Wales pay some of the highest standing charges in the UK, despite average salaries being lower than the UK average. That is unsustainable, and action needs to be taken.

Despite being an energy-rich nation, Wales is unable to make the most of our abundant natural wealth simply due to lack of control over it. Plaid Cymru is clear: it is for the people of Wales to control and benefit from our natural resources. This extractive economy model must cease, and money generated from our wind and sea power should be kept and shared within local communities. The Crown Estate must be devolved to Wales as it is already in Scotland. Following the Senedd election, a majority of parties in the Welsh Parliament, including the Plaid Cymru Welsh Government, are calling for devolution of the Crown Estate, as is every single local authority in Wales. The case and democratic mandate are inarguable.

We have immense natural resources, including wind and tidal power, that are not being fully utilised. Electricity generation in Wales has fallen by almost 50% since its 2016 peak, as growth in renewable capacity has not kept pace with the drop in generation from coal and nuclear. If we are to strengthen our energy security, we need to see the Government and developers working with the needs of communities to deliver investment in renewables. We need to see it in a sustainable and fair way, with an emphasis on offshore wind and community-led onshore development, and developers need to be totally transparent about costs and how their investment is being funded.

The King's Speech includes the new coal licensing ban, which is welcome. However, as I have raised before in Parliament, the proposed ban in its current form does not guarantee the prevention of commercial extraction of coal from coal tips in Wales. The Government should

[Ann Davies]

bring measures forward to close this loophole so that companies can never profit from the more than 2,500 tips, containing millions of tonnes of coal between them.

In addition, Westminster must also provide justice for our valley and coalmining communities by fully funding the remediation of coal tips in Wales, which are the legacy of our pre-devolution industrial past. The price tag is estimated at £600 million, but the UK Government have committed only around £143 million.

We needed a King's Speech that addressed the unfairness at the heart of Wales's energy system. For a country so rich in energy and potential, Wales needs so much more ambition from the UK Government—an ambition that brings communities on the journey and that listens to the voice of Welsh constituents. Plaid Cymru will continue to stand up and demand the fairness that Wales deserves.

5.15 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate following His Majesty's Gracious Speech, because it is an opportunity both to reflect on things that the Government have done and to look to the future. Progress is being made in so many areas, including in the NHS—I was pleased last week to see the biggest in-month fall in waiting times since 2008—action on cost of living issues and the economy. According to the young people who contributed to a survey I undertook towards the end of last year, the cost of living is the biggest issue holding them back. Measures such as freezing rail fares and ensuring the economy can deliver continued interest rates cuts put extra money in people's pockets, but there is a huge amount still to do.

Looking ahead, I would be keen to see the Government recognise the value of our UNESCO world heritage sites, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on that matter. The Government have opportunities to make offers on education, the economy and the environment. I am also keen that the Government look at the issue of VAT on hospitality, which is a sector that is struggling at the moment. We must also go further and faster with our business rates reform.

I was pleased with some of the steps that the Government took in the first Session of this Parliament on energy, including rolling out the community energy scheme; that will make a massive difference to community institutions such as sports clubs, churches and parish councils, which will be able to generate more of their energy and export it to the grid. I was also pleased with the £600 million for small modular reactors. That is excellent news for people in Derby, who have the skills to bring those forward.

There is so much more to do. Many businesses in my constituency or nearby, such as Denby, are struggling. Denby lacks the grid connections to export the excess renewables produced at the weekend back into the grid. For ceramics producers, the cost of energy is a massive issue that holds the economy back.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of Denby Pottery, a business in my constituency that is in administration. Will he join me in urging all hon. Members to sign the petition to save Denby Pottery and encourage his constituents to do so as well?

Jonathan Davies: I absolutely would. These are their jobs, and they very much value the products produced at Denby. I put it to the Minister that if ceramics cannot go into the supercharger scheme, we need a different package to help the sector.

The war in Iran has brought energy into sharp focus again. We have seen shocks to the economy and a risk that domestic customers and businesses will be paying much more. That is why we must go further and faster in our efforts to produce more home-grown energy through renewables and nuclear.

However, another side to this issue is the environment, which I am somewhat disappointed has not featured more prominently in this debate. Ministers may be aware that the Government's national security assessment states:

"Global ecosystem degradation and collapse threaten UK national security and prosperity."

We therefore need to deal with our carbon emissions and our impact on the environment not just for the economy, but to prevent drivers of global conflict in the future. We know that our access to natural resources such as water, the way that we grow our food and extreme weather events will be drivers of conflict. We need to do more on energy for our economy and for domestic customers, but if we do not get a grip on climate change and the threats it poses to people in this country and around the world, we will see more conflict. If the Government's assessment had had the attention it needed, it would have had an impact on the strategic defence review, which talks about climate change, particularly in the High North. This is an issue that we are only beginning to get to grips with. If the Minister could take that away and raise it with his colleagues, I would be most grateful.

As we look forward, I have some reflections about the Government's first Session of Parliament. We have made significant progress in improving people's lives in this country, but it is clear that there is a great deal more to do and that people are not feeling the change we promised so profoundly. It seems that so often our frame of reference for the challenges we face is the moment that we are in, not the long-term future of the country. That is why many of the Government's measures on driving forward energy security are so important. They will take time to deliver, but they will make a difference.

5.20 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): Time and again over the past few months, and, indeed, in this debate, we have heard Ministers talk about the importance of energy independence, and they are right to do so. No country has ever succeeded without cheap and abundant energy. For energy to be cheap and abundant, its supply must be reliable. If we are dependent on energy imports from overseas, the supply of energy will necessarily be unreliable, as the disruption caused by recent events in the Persian gulf has made abundantly clear. But it is profoundly dishonest to talk of energy independence while making us more dependent on energy imports from abroad. That is exactly what the Government's plans to ban new North sea oil and gas would do. They should, at the very least, be brave enough to admit that to the public.

Ministers say that there is no point in using our vast oil and gas reserves; they say that energy prices are set entirely on the international market, which means that increasing our domestic supply would have little to no impact on the overall prices. But that is not true. Gas is a highly localised market, specifically in the case of liquefied natural gas, which is gas that is turned into liquid, loaded on to ships and transported globally. The further those ships have to travel, the more expensive it becomes to deliver. If we rely on gas imports from the rest of the world, we will need to spend more money to bring that gas to Britain.

The vast majority of homes in the UK—87%—use gas for heating. We currently import half of the gas that we consume. If we produced more gas domestically, it would be cheaper to buy gas, meaning that heating bills would, in fact, come down.

Ms Billington: I know that the hon. Lady's party is not very keen on experts, but I would refer her to Fatih Birol, the head of the International Energy Agency, who has pointed out that expansion of production of North sea oil and gas does not significantly improve the UK's energy security, will not alter the UK's status as a net importer and will take too long to affect global prices. He says that global demand for fossil fuels has changed permanently and we should, therefore, be prioritising renewables, nuclear power and electrification over further fossil fuel expansion.

Katie Lam: As I just said, 80% of houses use gas for heating. We cannot simply substitute that for renewables—it is impossible.

Returning to the issue of energy independence, producing more gas domestically would also make us more resistant to global shocks. We would be far better served if companies that provide energy in Britain were bidding on gas produced in this country, rather than gas produced halfway around the world. Not only would bills come down, but we would mitigate the risk of sudden cost increases as a result of supply restrictions elsewhere. Yet the Government are proposing a policy that would achieve exactly the opposite.

The demand for gas is not going away, much as the Government might wish that it were. Even if British homes move away from gas in the long term, it is absurd to impose higher bills on them in the short term in the name of ideology. Those on the Government Benches often talk of sustainability, but there is nothing sustainable about this situation. Families across the country are facing higher bills and extra taxes to fund this Government's ideological commitment to intermittent energy sources. Many will be forced to do things such as postpone holidays or delay moving house to be able to afford the increasing costs imposed on them by this Government.

Meanwhile, businesses are being forced to cut back on staff or shut their doors altogether, because the cost of doing business is now simply too high. That means local pubs, family farms and nursing homes all being forced to shut up shop. For industrial businesses in particular, the situation is even worse. These are businesses in sectors such as AI and high-skilled manufacturing that can provide some of the best paid and most durable jobs, revitalising whole communities and enabling people to build successful lives for themselves. While China and India fuel their industrial expansion with new

coal-fired power plants, British industry faces some of the highest energy prices in the developed world—they are the highest in Europe, and they are more than double the price paid by industrial businesses in the United States. We cannot hope to sustain an industrial base in this country, let alone grow it, while the price of energy is so vulnerable to global shocks. Why would anybody start a new industrial business in Britain under these conditions?

If this action is being taken in the name of climate change, it is proving to be a catastrophic failure. In the eight years between 2013 and 2020, China pumped out more carbon emissions than Britain has produced over the past 250 years. That is not just because China is a bigger country—per-person emissions from China are more than double those in Britain. We are sending our emissions abroad to countries such as China without making a dent in addressing global climate change, and British families and businesses are left to pick up the tab.

The Government's plans on energy policy will leave us more dependent on overseas imports and will leave the British people worse off financially, without making any noticeable impact on global climate change. If the Government genuinely want to advance our energy independence, we welcome that, but they will not do so by wrecking domestic production and leaving us reliant on imports from abroad.

5.25 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Last November, the Children's Minister and I visited St Joseph's Catholic primary school in Poole. We were there because the school was one of the first to benefit from the roll-out of solar panels under GB Energy. We met members of the Eco club, who excitedly showed us how much energy the panels were generating and how much energy the school was consuming. We joined a classroom lesson and jogged on the spot with the kids to generate CO₂ and monitor the levels so that they could practically learn about heating, cooling and ventilation. We watched them design new energy efficiency and greening measures, and they told us with pride how the solar panels enabled them to give back to their community by supplying power to EV chargers in the car park.

Children care deeply about protecting our natural environment and preserving it for future generations. They understand the need for bold action to do so better than some of the adults in this Chamber. Not only were the solar panels a valuable learning tool inspiring them, but the school was saving money—about £8,500 a year—enabling it to plough resources back into teaching. That speaks to something wider.

For many people, the promise that hard work delivers security, home ownership and a decent quality of life increasingly feels out of reach. That frustration is real, and we see that acutely on energy. Local residents and businesses in Bournemouth West tell me that heating their homes, fuelling their cars and sustaining their energy costs is becoming increasingly unaffordable. Families are tired of living at the mercy of global energy shocks that they cannot control. Every instance of international instability is felt in food bills, household bills and the anxiety that families feel when sitting around their kitchen table at the end of the month.

[Jessica Toale]

That is why I am proud of the number of measures that we have taken as a Government. We have measures in the Budget to bring down bills by £150, the energy price cap, action on heating oil, a warm homes plan, which is bringing the biggest ever public investment in homes, and record investment in clean, home-grown power. We have the energy independence Bill—a cornerstone measure in the King's Speech—to accelerate investment in clean, home-grown energy, strengthen consumer protections and bring down bills over the long term. Let me make a point clearly to Members on the Front Bench: towns such as Bournemouth and Poole stand ready to help to deliver that transition.

It is an immense source of pride for me to represent a constituency that is full to the brim of extraordinary talent, creativity and innovation. We have outstanding colleges and universities and skilled workers. A great example of that is Bournemouth & Poole college's green energy centre, which is building the skilled workforce of the future. We have natural assets on our coastline and communities eager for investment. There are huge opportunities through the Dorset clean energy super cluster, which is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton).

The transition to clean energy must not simply happen to places such as Bournemouth and Poole; it must include them. Creating a new generation of skilled workers and the opportunity for well-paid jobs in areas that have for too long been overlooked for investment is about making an economy that works again for people who feel like it has stopped working for them.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she share my view that the really important thing about the pieces of legislation outlined in the King's Speech is that they will start to drive growth and green job creation into parts of the country that have been left behind for too long and have not felt the benefits of growth and job creation?

Jessica Toale: I agree with my hon. Friend. What he did not say is that we would very much welcome Ministers visiting Dorset to support the Dorset clean energy super cluster.

Ultimately, this is why I support the King's Speech: while others offer anger, division and easy answers—or simply change their minds about important issues—the Government are choosing a path that will deliver long-term reform, economic resilience and national renewal. That work will take time, but we cannot rebuild prosperity on short-termism. This King's Speech is an important step towards building a more secure, more resilient and more hopeful future for communities like mine in Bournemouth West and across the country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To get everybody in, the speaking limit will be dropped to three minutes after Carla Lockhart.

5.30 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Having listened intently to the King's Speech, I was left with one conclusion: the Government just do not get it. We have a Government

who are completely out of touch. After recent election results and a surge in support for parties campaigning on illegal immigration, sovereignty and cost of living pressures, I would have thought the Government might have finally recognised public frustration; instead, they appear to have learned nothing. People are angry about illegal immigration, angry about the cost of living and the pressure they feel every time they fill up their car or heat their home, and angry about overstretched public services. Ordinary people are increasingly angry as they feel they are losing control over decisions affecting their lives.

The debate is about energy, and there is no doubt that is the topic around every kitchen table, yet the King's Speech had little to say to families facing those pressures. On energy security, nowhere is the gap between Westminster policy and reality clearer than in Northern Ireland. About 60% of households in Northern Ireland rely on home heating oil. Many live in rural communities where a car is not optional but essential.

Jim Shannon: One of the reasons that heating oil is so expensive in Northern Ireland is the travel needed to get it there. The Conservative party has tabled an amendment on opening oil fields in the North sea. Does my hon. Friend feel that if that was to happen, it would reduce the oil price and the price of heating oil in Northern Ireland?

Carla Lockhart: Yes, and I will come to that.

When oil prices increase or when instability sends shockwaves through energy markets, families in my constituency feel it immediately. Hauliers, farmers and many businesses are feeling the pressure too. In Northern Ireland there is no easy switch, no ready-made alternative and certainly no escaping the cost.

I have repeatedly raised concerns in the House about heating oil costs, fuel affordability and support for households uniquely exposed to those pressures. I have repeatedly pressed for practical measures that would make an immediate difference, including cutting fuel duty, reducing VAT burdens on hard-pressed householders, greater support for those dependent on home heating oil, and stronger protections for consumers exposed to volatility in the heating oil market. Those are not radical ideas for the long term; they are a practical intervention that would show a Government in touch with people's needs.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend mentioned fuel duty. Does she agree that the Government could make a contribution—even a temporary one—by announcing a cut in fuel duty rather than just freezing it? That would be a significant step, particularly as we come through the summer months and subsequently into winter.

Carla Lockhart: Absolutely. That is a practical step that would make a real difference.

Families are entitled to ask what possible justification there is for support sitting untouched while people struggle. We look at the £81 million given by Westminster to Stormont that is sitting in a Sinn Féin-controlled Department rather than reaching households who desperately need it; I ask the Minister to intervene.

Energy security means affordability and policies grounded in reality. People support protecting the environment, but they also expect realism, and that means recognising the simple truth that energy security begins with producing the energy we need ourselves. The North sea has the ability to help power our economy, support jobs and strengthen our energy resilience for decades, yet instead of backing a strategic national asset, the Government too often appear determined to turn their back on it, with a Secretary of State who is so wedded to a failing, crazy net zero agenda rather than helping those most in need.

At a time of global instability, increasing dependence on imported energy while restricting domestic production raises serious questions. That is not energy security; it is exporting jobs, exporting investment and increasing dependence on others. We should be supporting domestic production, backing strategic industries and ensuring that we are using our own resources wherever possible. We should also stop loading further costs on to households and industry through increasingly unrealistic and punitive carbon taxes, which ultimately make life more expensive for working people and businesses. The cost associated with net zero from 2025 to 2050 is £116 billion—£35 billion per year. Those are eye-watering sums and it is the taxpayer who is paying.

The election results should have been a political earthquake—a warning shot—yet the Government have not listened. Instead, they remain trapped in the Westminster bubble, with a lack of understanding of what life actually looks like outside SW1. Let us look, for example, at illegal immigration. The public were promised stronger borders, tougher action and control; instead, we are seeing expensive failure dressed up as progress. More than 200,000 people have crossed the channel in small boats since records began. In 2025 alone, more than 41,000 crossed, making it the second-highest year on record. I have repeatedly raised concerns around asylum accommodation costs. Rehousing asylum seekers is set to total £15 billion of taxpayers' money in the next decade, and in Northern Ireland, the figure is set to rise to £400 million. I know that that money would be better spent on our own citizens first.

At a time when pensioners struggle, businesses face pressure and families watch every penny, the Government are more concerned about forcing unwanted and not needed agendas and ideology, such as digital ID and net zero. That money would be better spent on our WASPI women, on our pensioners and on meaningful welfare reforms. Where was the support for businesses and farmers that sustain our rural economy and food security? Where was Northern Ireland? There was no meaningful recognition of the continuing barriers within our own United Kingdom internal market.

What frustrates people most is what was simply not in the King's Speech: antisemitism, Islamist extremism, and our veterans. And then there is the EU rhetoric. The public sent a message at the ballot box; it is time for the Government to wake up and start listening.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Making or taking interventions will deny another Member the opportunity to make a speech.

5.37 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I am grateful to be able to contribute to this debate on the new legislative programme included in this year's King's Speech. At a time when all eyes are on our Government to demonstrate delivery, we should not underestimate the impact that we can have on daily lives by improving the invisible, yet critical, infrastructure that holds our country together.

As a matter of national security, with impact for growth across all regions, it is imperative that we unlock better planning, co-ordination and investment in core services, the lack of which has been holding back our growth. Now, with strategic plans to grow capacity in power, energy, connectivity and water infrastructure, we can set this country on the path to sustainable growth.

In the face of climate change, we must adapt and improve our readiness. That is vital in the energy independence Bill, as we have heard from colleagues today, but nowhere is this more needed than in the water sector, where we have witnessed the abject failure of privatisation in the industry, leaving us with dangerously polluted water, inadequate sewage management and increasingly expensive water bills. Additionally, the effects of climate change mean that we are simultaneously seeing an increase in flooding and drought. That sounds like an oxymoron, but it is just a symptom of the mismanagement of our precious water resource, with inadequate infrastructure.

The public, as we know, are rightly angry. They are angry that the asset-stripping of water companies, and a failure to invest in our drainage and sewage infrastructure, have allowed the situation to continue for decades. In my constituency of Shrewsbury, our beautiful town is enclosed by the loop of the River Severn. It is a beautiful historical natural asset, but one that has been allowed to fill with sewage, breach its banks and pollute our homes, businesses and play areas. Bill payers are ready for change, and from an infrastructure perspective, we need assurances that our water assets are being considered holistically, from rainwater reuse to infrastructure upgrades and stronger oversight of what has become a very fragmented industry.

I welcome the clean water Bill being introduced in this Session. We could say that it is a sequel to our first blockbuster, the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which introduced criminal liabilities for polluters and banned executive bonuses for water bosses guilty of environmental damage. The clean water Bill is the much-anticipated follow-on that is needed to overhaul the current regulatory system. It is an ambitious programme of high-level restructuring, and I look forward to this vital piece of legislation. It is long overdue, and it is high time we got a grip of the problem of our polluted waterways. I have always described the Water (Special Measures) Act as the last-chance saloon for water companies to get this right, whereas the clean water Bill is surely our last throw of the dice before we move to nationalising the water sector.

5.40 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Almost 15% of people in East Thanet are in fuel poverty—significantly above the national average of 11.4%. That is thousands of my constituents who cannot afford for their energy bills to go up, but who, because of international events

[Ms Polly Billington]

completely out of their control, are now facing exactly that. Working people like them should not bear the burden of decisions made by Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin. That is why I am glad to see the Government's focus on energy and energy independence in this upcoming legislative Session.

There is no one silver bullet for achieving energy independence. It requires action to reduce energy usage, which is why the warm homes agency will be so important in order to give people trusted advice and access to grants and low-interest loans. It requires more generation of energy at home, because the more we produce domestically, the less exposed we are to volatile fossil fuel markets. It requires reform of the market and it requires diversity of supply.

However, this new international situation is different from the circumstances we were previously considering when tackling the science of climate change and the failed energy market in this country. We now live in a situation where the global context is more volatile and more unstable than it has ever been. Therefore, the legislative programme that the Government have announced is absolutely necessary, but it may not be sufficient on its own. To secure the energy independence and resilience we require, the Government need to consider their role in establishing greater international agreements on how we increase the resilience of our global economy against our exposure to fossil fuel markets. I have called on the Government to convene an international energy summit with the same boldness and scope of Gordon Brown's crisis summit in 2009 following the great financial crash. I saw at first hand then the role of Britain using its convening power to bring nations together, and we should look to do so again.

I was delighted to hear in the King's Speech that we will be hosting the G20 next year, and I hope the Government will put energy co-operation right at the heart of that summit. This is crucial because 20% of the world's oil, 20% of global liquefied natural gas and one third of seaborne fertiliser pass through the strait of Hormuz every day. The economic pain of this has not yet hit us. People are already talking about the risk to family holidays, but there is a risk of food shortages and starvation, and of blackouts in countries that are vital to our supply chains. That is the seriousness of the situation we are facing, which requires an international solution. I am delighted that we have a deep, broad and integrated approach to tackling some of the most challenging elements of creating increased energy resilience, as outlined in the legislative plans, but the situation does need to be seen in the wider global context, and it demands global leadership from the British Government.

5.43 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Coalminers were the original victims of an unjust transition and, 40 years on, the Grangemouth oil refinery workers are the modern-day equivalent. PetroChina, the Chinese state-owned petrochemical company, and Sir Jim Ratcliffe's Ineos ended a century of Scottish oil refining because they—a foreign Government and private capital—wanted to make even more money. The closure meant: 435 jobs on site—redundant; 2,822 supply chain jobs—gone; local businesses, which needed refinery workers' custom—

hammered; £400 million a year from the Scottish economy—lost; Scotland's energy security—weakened; and Scotland's national security—compromised. The previous Tory Government were uninterested and the SNP Scottish Government were negligent. We know that when essential national infrastructure is in the hands of a foreign Government and a private company, workers, their communities and our nation's energy security will not stand in the way of shareholders getting their dividend. That is what private capital will always do.

British Steel being taken into national ownership is great news, but I ask the Minister why the same did not happen for Grangemouth oil refinery. Last Christmas my Labour Government did step in and save the UK chemicals industry at Grangemouth, with 500 jobs secured and a profit-sharing agreement reached: positive Government action for Grangemouth and for all of Scotland. That was the right thing to do—it was the Labour thing to do—and the same goes for nationalising British Steel.

Fifteen months ago, at the Scottish Labour party conference, the Prime Minister announced Project Willow, with £200 million for Grangemouth's bold industrial future. Let us get these new green, clean future industries into Grangemouth, but let us do it more quickly. It has taken far too long. Workers need jobs and the local community must see the benefit of those industries coming to Grangemouth. Scandalously, for far too long private capital has exploited the local area, extracted profits and not put anything back into the town that has given it oh so much. Let us take public ownership of these new industries and reinvest in Grangemouth—in the town and the people. It is high time that we, the working class, started to reap the benefits of our labour.

5.45 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I welcome last week's King's Speech and the Bills in it, which aim to put the UK on a stronger path for the future. My constituents have been clear with me: if we are to build a future that is fairer, in which they are not just getting by, but thriving, we need to do politics differently. It is not good enough to suggest that someday in the distant future things might get a little bit better. That is not going to cut it any more.

Today our focus is on energy security, an issue that underscores perhaps more than any other how we cannot carry on with business as usual. Looking across the north of England, we can see the consequences of deindustrialisation, the hollowing out of local economies and the impacts of austerity. It is abundantly clear that we need to view achieving energy security as an opportunity to right those historical wrongs. The inequalities they brought about have been eating away at communities and the values that once made them whole. Reframing energy security as a positive opportunity to reverse the fortunes of towns like mine is the only way to proceed.

The poverty experienced by far too many in Heywood, Middleton and the other towns I represent will not be addressed unless we accept that we need to reindustrialise in a way that safeguards our energy security. I therefore express my full support for the provisions in the Government's energy independence Bill, the next step in

tackling the totally unmanageable bills for consumers and businesses and ending our overreliance on global energy markets.

Challenges with the cost of energy are not a consideration only when it comes to how we heat our homes or power industry; as the sole Greater Manchester MP on the Transport Committee, I also want to consider how the cost of energy affects how we get from A to B. Giving local people the ability to reach employment and leisure opportunities both affordably and in a joined-up manner is something we have pioneered in Greater Manchester. We have made those arguments, taken on our detractors head-on and won, and we have done so through a vision-led approach and place-based delivery.

The delivery of the largest light rail network in the country has completely transformed the prospects of tens of thousands of people in Greater Manchester. The tram is arriving in my constituency, with spades in the ground by 2028, and we are closing gaps in provision so that the whole of Greater Manchester can benefit, including Heywood and Middleton North. We are delivering through a responsive, integrated and affordable bus service that reaches all corners of the city region, having been taken back into public ownership. On rail, I also welcome the Government's Northern Powerhouse Rail Bill, a clear reflection of our region's ambition and a firm commitment from Government to decarbonisation and delivery across the north.

In closing, I welcome the King's Speech and what it could mean for my constituents in Heywood and Middleton North. That said, I want to be completely clear: the window that we have to demonstrate that there is another way is rapidly closing. The security my constituents deserve is not a pipe dream; it is entirely deliverable, and in my view—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

5.49 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Much of the debate we have heard today I heard in the village of Eorpie on the Isle of Lewis last Saturday morning, when I visited there with Donald MacKinnon, our new Labour MSP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar. Donald fought a tremendous campaign and will be a brilliant MSP. He raced against the tide for the Western Isles and kept the Atlantic beacon alight for Labour during our summer squalls. I also pay tribute to Dr Alasdair Allan for his public service to the islands as MSP over many years. Just as the islands were at a political tipping point the other week, so too are they at the fulcrum of this debate on energy security. To the east, the Ness district looks to the mainland and over the horizon to the North sea, where much of its wealth has come from over the past decade; out to the west is the wild Atlantic, from where the wealth of wind will provide and power the transition away from carbon and renewables.

At Ness football ground, where the under-eights were in fierce competition, one parent gave me his simple political priority: to keep the North sea open. It has provided him and his family with the means to stay on the island, as it has for many other families around that pitch, although it means that many mothers are effectively single-parent families for half their children's lives. Further up the road, walking her neighbour's dog, another constituent stopped us to state her concerns and objections

about plans for a multinational 900 MW offshore wind turbine array—being less than four miles away, it is actually near-shore rather than offshore. Both those conversations reflect the concerns of many who find the scale of this transition overwhelming, or who feel that they are not being carried along on the journey to renewable energy and that the workers and the communities affected by this revolution are in danger of being left behind.

Previous Governments have not backed community energy at scale. I look forward to GB Energy and the new energy Bill enabling a big leap forward in community energy. The North sea workers are skilled engineers, mariners and experts in their field. They know the North sea is a declining field, but they also know that the technicalities of tiebacks, which this Government have not made enough of, are the quickest way to bring more oil and gas on stream. Indeed, some 2.5 billion barrels could be developed using subsea tiebacks. Those North sea guys want what the guy at Ness football pitch wanted: certainty, and an orderly transition that has their jobs at its centre.

As the Minister knows from visiting the islands and talking to community energy companies, we are at the centre of transition and produce more community-owned energy than any other place in the UK. The problem is that there is no space to get that energy out, with commercial companies dominating the 1.8 GW interconnector. I urge the Minister, as I have urged him before, not to talk to NESO, but to sit on it, and on Ofgem and on the grid operators, to find a route through and expand community-owned energy on the islands, and indeed elsewhere.

5.52 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Earlier this year I had the pleasure of welcoming the Energy Minister to my constituency, where we took part in the blessing of a tunnel underneath the Thames that formed the final part of the Tilbury to Grain upgrade of the National Grid. At the time I reflected on how that put us right at the forefront of a green energy revolution in my constituency and how Tilbury, a place on the Thames estuary, is once again playing its part in delivering and securing our nation's future.

That is pertinent to this debate on whether we continue with our slavish devotion to fossil fuels, or switch to a greener, better future for our children and grandchildren—something that makes sense for the planet and the pocket. The cost of the transition to clean energy is less than the cost incurred by one fossil fuel crisis; with the recent action in Iran and its impact on people's energy bills, we can see the crucial and pressing nature of effecting that switch as soon as possible.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions investment in green energy. Beckenham and Penge has had significant investment from GB Energy, with more than £700,000 for rooftop solar panels at NHS Bethlem Royal hospital and in local primary schools such as Harris Primary Shortlands. Does she agree that that is a win-win for everyone—it is good for the environment and good for bills, and means more money spent on patients and students?

Jen Craft: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. A secondary school in my constituency has benefited from the installation of solar panels and expects its energy bill to reduce significantly, which will have a huge impact on what it is able to deliver for its students. My constituency is already seeing benefits from the switch to green energy. I recently helped to open the Green Energy Centre at South Essex college, which is helping people to train and retrain in retrofitting existing homes so that they become bill free, reducing the price that people must pay to heat their homes and get energy into them. The Thames freeport, a large proportion of which is in my constituency, has a focus on renewable energy. It will bring lifelong jobs and careers for people who can stay local and work locally, and it could bring huge, transformational change to the lives of people in Thurrock.

I firmly hope that the new Reform council—I see that no Reform Members are in the Chamber to represent that party—will continue with that approach, engaging with the economic success that places such as the Thames freeport and its focus on renewables can bring, and that it is not blinded by sheer political ideology, hampering the progress that people in my part of the world can make. However, given that its first act in office was to remove the Ukrainian flag that had been flying outside Thurrock council's office, which had been there to show solidarity and resistance to Russian expansionism—one of the greatest threats that Europe faces at this time—I do not hold out much hope. It seems that Vladimir Putin is getting his money's worth.

Talking of malign foreign influence in our democracy, I strongly welcome the measures outlined in the King's Speech to tackle that threat through the Representation of the People Bill. Tightening the rules on foreign political donations and strengthening the role and powers of the Electoral Commission will go far. However, I fear that we are at a precipice, facing an existential threat to our democracy. Social media algorithms have a parasitic relationship with populism; both driven by outrage, anger and fear, they poison our social discourse and our public space. We know that 80 million Facebook accounts were harvested and mined to gather data on how to psychologically manipulate users in the run-ups to the Brexit vote and the first Trump presidential campaign—again, Vladimir Putin getting his money's worth. The Government must take action to stand up to big tech and urgently address this threat before the damage done to our democratic institutions is irreparable.

5.56 pm

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): As today's remarks have focused on key national infrastructure, I thought I would speak briefly on the clean water Bill outlined in the King's Speech. The water sector is another essential piece of national infrastructure that is long overdue for reform.

Like many in this House, I welcome the clean water Bill with open arms. As I see it, the Bill is our best opportunity to create a water sector that puts bill payers, water users and the environment first. For too long, it has felt as though shareholders, overseas investment banks or indeed private equity firms were the first priority of the water industry. I hope that will change as a result of this Bill, and I am pleased that it builds upon the early action already taken by this Labour Government.

To me, what is most important is that my constituents in South Dorset know that getting the clean water Bill right really matters. We are so proud of our coastline, and it is perhaps the most impressive—certainly in the south-west, if not in the whole country. Protecting it from unwanted sewage spills and failing water companies really matters, which is why this Bill matters.

Jessica Toale: I am actually quite jealous of my hon. Friend, because about four of his beaches were recently listed in *Time Out* among the top beaches. However, I visited Durdle Door with him to call for year-round water testing and for our waters to be cleaned up. Does he agree that this Bill will take further the action to clean up sewage spills that we have already taken?

Lloyd Hatton: I completely agree with my hon. Friend; the Bill certainly builds on the early progress that has been made.

To be most effective, the clean water Bill needs to include a meaningful duty on all water companies to operate for the public benefit. We all know that the current model of ownership in the water sector is failing both the public and the environment, and that instead of fixing crumbling infrastructure, water companies have been lining their own pockets and accumulating debt for far too long.

Until the big water companies have a clear obligation to deliver both public and environmental benefits, I fear they will continue to make decisions that increase their profit shares but also vandalise our coastlines. That is why a duty to operate for the public benefit is critical—it will help to overhaul the day-to-day operations of water companies and change the corporate culture at the top of many of those firms. If we look at similar sectors where that duty exists, such as public transport and buses in particular, we see that it does begin to change the culture.

It is really important that the Government use the clean water Bill as an opportunity to move the water sector towards a different way of operating, with a different model of ownership. That can only be achieved if we start to compel water companies to act in a different way, and that requires a mechanism such as a public benefit duty. The Bill is our golden opportunity to put the public and the environment first, and it is our chance to fundamentally reform the water sector for good.

5.59 pm

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to speak for my constituents in Crewe and Nantwich on the legislative agenda set out in the King's Speech. It is a programme designed to restore security, stability and control over the basics in life. For too long our people have felt the consequences of economic shocks over which they have no control and an economic model that does not work for them. Now is the time to break that model and build something new that serves every community across our great country.

You cannot improve what you do not control, and the legacy of the past 40 years is that the British state has relinquished too much control over those things that impact the pounds in the pockets and life chances of the British people. Control over the basics means

securing our everyday lives, and that starts with the energy heating our homes and powering our industry. The energy independence Bill and the electricity generator levy Bill represent a structural shift in how this country powers itself. Crucially, they will break the link between electricity and skyrocketing gas prices and invest in the clean, home-grown energy of the future, thereby permanently shielding working families from volatile global markets.

However, I must challenge the Government to go further, by restoring control over another utility: the water that flows through our taps and into our rivers and streams. We must end the private water monopolies, strip out private equity from this basic necessity and ensure that every pound spent in the system goes towards investing in infrastructure and controlling bills, not towards shareholder dividends and profits.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Connor Naismith: I will not. It is time to bring water back under public control, ensuring that this life-essential utility is managed as a secure public good, not a private commodity.

In the time I have remaining, I wish to talk about high streets. High streets are the visible heartbeat of our towns, and I warmly welcome the steps taken by this Government to date to support local authorities to intervene to fill empty shops. Intervention is only half the battle, however. We must also cultivate an environment where small businesses can genuinely succeed. Hospitality businesses are vital to that endeavour, and I call on the Government to support Hospitality Together and hospitality businesses in my constituency in their call for a sector-specific VAT cut for hospitality.

Although there is room to go further, this King's Speech delivers a comprehensive framework of security, and it tells the people of Crewe and Nantwich that the state is back in their corner—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Catherine Fookes.

6.2 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I am delighted that measures in the King's Speech will strengthen our economic security, our national security and—what we are debating today—our energy security. While the Tories and Reform want to ditch our net zero policies and our clean power targets, it is a huge relief to people in Monmouthshire and across the UK that Labour is taking clean energy seriously. Anyone hearing the speeches from those on the Conservative and Reform Benches would think that they wanted to take us back to oil lamps and candles, such is their disdain for clean energy and modern ways.

I also flag my strong support for the clean water Bill. Rivers such as the Wye and Usk are incredibly important to the people of Monmouthshire. They are polluted, and we must tackle that. I am pleased that we are doing that with the stronger regulation promised by the clean water Bill.

People in Monmouthshire are facing the realities of our dependence on global oil and gas markets, and many of us in the countryside rely on heating oil or LPG and have little choice but to pay up when prices

spike. Earlier this year, a woman in her 70s wrote to me and told me that her quote for 500 litres of oil had risen by £250 in less than a week. Others are hamstrung as their electricity bill goes up or as their commute gets more expensive.

All of that is triggered by international conflict that is out of the UK's hands. That is why Labour has delivered the biggest-ever investment in home-grown clean power in British history. Part of that is Wylfa in north Wales being included as part of the biggest nuclear building programme in half a century. We also have serious investment in tidal power off the coast of Wales. I must also point out to Ministers that there is great potential in the River Severn, which borders my constituency. It would be an amazing spot for new tidal projects, and I hope that the Minister who winds up the debate will respond to that suggestion.

The Climate Change Act 2008 has been emulated throughout the world as a leading framework for us to budget for and plan our emissions, and to hold Governments accountable for pollution. The Tories, who supported the Act years ago, now want to scrap it, while Reform backs fracking and its deputy leader actually calls net zero a “cult”. The energy independence Bill and other legislation set out in the King's Speech affirm this Labour Government's commitment to harnessing clean, home-grown power, and I am proud to back a Government who take decisions that protect our natural world, our security and our wallets. Those decisions will benefit not only my generation, but generations to come.

6.5 pm

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome His Majesty's Gracious Speech, as it puts energy security, economic security and industrial renewal back on track for the people I represent. Wolverhampton and Willenhall have a proud history of industry, innovation and hard work. From our foundries and factories to our engineering and manufacturing expertise, our communities helped to power British and global growth for generations. However, the policies of the past are taking their toll today: policies of turning the UK away from manufacturing, away from council housing and away from public ownership, all of which are being felt today by those in my communities.

One of the most pressing issues facing our country today is energy security. Recent energy crises exposed how vulnerable Britain has become. In fact, half the UK's recessions since the 1970s have been caused by our exposure to fossil fuels. The only way in which to secure true sovereignty for our country is to be in control of our own energy. That is why I strongly welcome the Government's energy independence Bill, which recognises that Britain must get off the fossil fuel rollercoaster with clean, home-grown power that we control ourselves.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sureena Brackenridge: I will not. Sorry.

The Bill takes important steps to tackle rising household bills, strengthen protections for vulnerable households, and pave the way for the warm homes plan. It also rightly accelerates Britain's drive for energy security by speeding up investment in clean power, grid infrastructure

[Sureena Brackenridge]

and modern energy networks. Wolverhampton is already positioning itself at the forefront of green innovation, with investment in advanced manufacturing, clean technologies and the green innovation corridor. By linking the University of Wolverhampton with the science park and the i54 manufacturing hub, the corridor brings together research, industry and skills.

Tata's Steel park in Wednesfield is home to the UK's largest steel processing plants, and generations of local families have dedicated their working lives to steel and manufacturing. I am calling for British-made steel to build the infrastructure of the future, whether it consists of wind turbines, railways or energy networks. Backing steel means creating apprenticeships, expanding technical education and giving young people in Wolverhampton North East the opportunity to build rewarding careers at home.

6.8 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today, because it is vital that we make the transition to a new era of clean energy, driving our nation's energy security forward, while rebuilding our public services and backing businesses to help them to grow. One of the most telling themes that emerge from what businesses in my constituency tell me at our regular roundtable meetings is the slowness of our country to create the infrastructure that its economy needs to succeed and underpin that transition to clean energy.

Of the 35 Bills mentioned in the King's Speech, many will help to build and boost economic growth and strengthen our energy security, including the energy independence Bill and the electricity generator levy Bill, which seek to break the link between electricity and gas prices by moving older generators on to new fixed price contracts.

One of the Bills particularly welcome to my constituents is the highways (financing) Bill, which will for the first time set out how the Government can use the regulated asset base funding model used in sectors such as energy to build new large-scale road schemes. Crucially for me and the people of Dartford, the new lower Thames crossing will be the first project built on this model, using private capital to get this vital scheme built. We already have spades in the ground for the preparatory work on the crossing, and the new Bill should see this long-promised project finally delivered.

Dartford regularly experiences traffic gridlock when there are delays at the crossing, with children unable to get home from school, missed appointments and a stifling effect on local businesses, without mentioning the terrible air quality impact of 50,000 more vehicles a day using the crossing than it was originally designed to accommodate. With this, the Government are backing lower Thames crossing businesses to succeed, including those in the lower Thames crossing consortium, which I chair, so improving vital links with our ports and creating the conditions for growth in the future.

While I am on the topic of transport, it would be remiss of me not to mention Galley Hill Road in my constituency, the crucial route between Dartford and Gravesend, which collapsed and has been out of use for

more than three years. I hope that, during this Session, Kent County Council will bid for and secure funding from the excellent new structures fund to get the road repaired and back open, so that local businesses such as MBC Despatch Racing can thrive again and Swanscombe can see an end to oversized lorries blocking its narrow roads. I welcome this King's Speech and the Bills in it.

6.11 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): We have been trapped in a vicious economic circle for decades, and that vicious circle is underpinned by our dependence on fossil fuels, which means lower growth, higher inflation and a higher debt burden. More than that, lower growth and lower income mean more fear, more fury and more far-right agitation for our constituents, as we see on our screens and, increasingly and worryingly, on our streets. That is why we are setting out how we are breaking out of that trap and building a virtuous economic circle of higher growth, lower inflation and a lower debt burden.

To set out how and why we are in this place is very simple. Fossil fuels are more expensive—50% more expensive even before the Iran crisis struck—than wind, solar and nuclear. What does that mean for us at home? It means less spending, which means less growth, and it means higher prices and higher inflation, both of which mean a higher debt burden. Because our debt is linked to inflation, it also means high interest payments. There is a fundamental perverse economic link between fossil fuel prices and our economic prosperity, and that is what we are now breaking.

We are breaking out of that trap by ensuring that we get lower energy prices now and in the future. In the first instance, we are providing immediate relief on bills, lowering energy prices with affordability payments, and funding that by windfall taxes. That means not only more spending, but lower inflation, and lower inflation means the Bank has more space to cut rates. At this time, when the Bank is worried about second-order effects, it is not right to borrow money to ensure those bills come down; it is right to ensure we raise the money from tax to lower bills and lower interest rates.

In the longer term, when we invest in clean energy, we know that means lower energy bills and higher growth in the future. We know that works because, although natural gas used to set our price over 90% of the time, it now sets our price only 60% of the time. We know that we can break out of this trap because we are already doing so.

Finally, I will close by saying that this is about more than just affordability or bills; it is about the way we cohere and live together as one. We cannot expect people in this country to have a stake in it if we do not have a stake in them and do not show that we can make life affordable for them. Only then can we build a country, and by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we do alone.

6.14 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I welcome the package of Bills in the King's Speech.

By accelerating the transition to renewables and by producing energy for the UK here in the UK, we will strengthen our energy resilience and make bills lower. For that to succeed, another barrier must be addressed.

Time and again, manufacturers in my constituency tell me that they are being held back by the constraints on our grid infrastructure, which is stifling expansion and the creation of new jobs for people in Amber Valley.

The combined double burden of high energy prices and insufficient grid capacity has been keenly felt by Denby Pottery, which has sadly gone into administration. I was shocked to learn that for years it had been forced to switch off its solar panels at weekends, rather than sell excess power back to the grid—a cruel irony, given the circumstances. The Minister for Industry, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), will be acutely aware from our many meetings on this subject that I will not stop pushing for support for the energy-intensive ceramics industry, and I will not stop fighting to save Denby Pottery unless and until the doors close for the very last time.

National Grid's plans to upgrade the network are central to increasing capacity across Amber Valley, which in turn will support local businesses. However, I know many residents are deeply concerned about the proposed pylon route, which is set to run through my constituency from top to bottom. I am working hard to ensure that the final route minimises impact and intrusion for residents, schools and businesses.

In Amber Valley, our communities have consistently stepped up to support our nation's infrastructure, from open cast mining to our ironworks, and that contribution must be recognised. The community benefit fund can be used to support local priorities, such as healthcare, education and skills. No level of funding can fully offset disruption, but it is none the less essential that the communities most affected see a fair and proportionate return. I have raised this issue directly with the Minister for Energy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who knows that I will always fight for what is right for my constituents. That is why I want to take the opportunity today to reiterate that, given that Amber Valley is once again being asked to contribute more than others to this nationally significant project, it is only right that my constituents receive a ringfenced and proportionate share of the community fund.

Some in this place seek to use energy policy as an opportunity to play culture wars, but my constituents know more than most that this is not a game. The measures in the King's Speech will make our energy resilience stronger and our energy supply fairer, while preserving and creating jobs, and making bills cheaper. For my constituents, that cannot come soon enough.

6.17 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment, set out in the King's Speech, to drive innovation in the energy sector and deliver clean and more secure energy for future generations. Gravesham is stepping forward to meet the challenge. The Northfleet Green Hydrogen Project was one of 11 successful projects as part of the UK Government's first hydrogen allocation round designed for its ambition of supporting 10 GW of green and blue energy by 2030. For Gravesham, that means it would decarbonise a paper-making process for much beloved household brands such as Andrex at Kimberley-Clark, which has been a part of Gravesham's businesses for over 70 years.

Now the science part. Having taught it in the classroom in Northfleet schools, we will now be able to see it in action in Northfleet. Hydrogen will be generated through electrolysis—don't worry, I'm not going to go through electrolysis with you all—that will generate steam to work through the paper manufacturing process. This will be a hybrid process, so it can run on hydrogen or natural gas. That will enhance our energy security, reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and provide clean energy. Not only that, it is about good quality jobs for Northfleet and the wider Gravesham area.

This particular project, which has had £90 million capital investment nationally, has unlocked £400 million in private investment. There is, however, a critical risk, which relates to connection to the national grid. I will therefore be asking the Minister to meet me to discuss how we can ensure this project stays on track. Looking less than a mile down the River Thames, the lower Thames crossing is in my constituency. Gravesham already faces congestion linked to the Dartford crossing, affecting daily life and air quality. Parts of Gravesham have air quality management areas, with increased nitrogen dioxide levels linked to transport.

The fear is that the increased capacity of the lower Thames crossing will lead to increased congestion in and around Gravesham, so it is essential that the delivery is linked to forward-looking transport solutions that genuinely benefit local communities. That is yet to be truly felt by my constituents and local businesses, so there is a lot more work to be done.

The Thames estuary itself can be used to transport people, as with the Gravesend to Tilbury ferry. I encourage the Government to explore sustainable transport modes such as hydrogen or electric-powered ferried across the Thames, removing congestion on roads. Continuing to rely solely on roads is not a viable long-term solution, and more balanced, community-focused transport is essential to getting people around.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have three speakers remaining and we have gained a few minutes. The last three speakers can have five minutes each if they do not take interventions.

6.20 pm

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I have cut my speech down so much I do not know if I can fill five minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In the King's Speech, His Majesty set out a clear and sober assessment of the challenges facing our country. He reminded us that energy independence is now a matter of national security, not just environmental ambition. His Majesty warned that recent events in the middle east have once again shown how global instability can reach directly into the homes of families across the country. That is why the Government have committed themselves to an energy independence Bill designed to scale up home-grown renewable energy and protect living standards for the long term.

If we are to deliver on the significant commitment to build an energy system that is secure, clean and resilient, then we must learn from the evidence. The reality is that we will not win the argument for clean climate action unless people feel the benefit. Energy independence cannot be something that happens to communities; it must be something that happens with them.

[Elaine Stewart]

The transition of clean energy is already shaping our energy landscape. Renewables are reducing the number of hours when gas sets the price of electricity. New technologies are emerging as the backbone of a modern energy system, and the grid, long overdue for investment, is finally being reimagined for the 21st century.

Faced with decades of deindustrialisation, communities like Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock need to see and feel real benefits, such as lower bills, good jobs, and investment in local services, otherwise support for the transition will erode—and if support erodes, we risk losing the wider public argument on climate change altogether. In Scotland, delivering those real benefits means Governments working together. The clean power mission is an objective shared by both the UK and Scottish Governments; it is important to acknowledge constructive co-operation, and encourage more of it where possible.

As we debate energy security, we must place community benefit at the heart of our approach, not as a voluntary gesture or token payment, but a core principle of how we build the energy system of the future. In Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, the 9 Community Council Group administers large amounts of community benefits, with over 60 young apprenticeships, alongside other fantastic community support, creating an ongoing legacy to my communities. I invite the Minister to attend a meeting with that group.

However, we must go further. Community ownership—giving local people a real stake in the energy produced on their doorstep—should be a core feature of the transition. When communities share in the profits, they share in the purpose. When they have a voice, they have a better reason to support change, both locally and nationally. It is about not just fairness but effectiveness, because the fastest way to lose public trust is to impose changes without their consent. The fastest way to build trust is to ensure that communities are partners and not bystanders.

Finally, I will touch on the Scottish Government's continued opposition to new nuclear development in Scotland. Their stance was clearly shaped in a different political moment, but today it means that Scotland risks standing apart from what the King's Speech rightly called

“a new era of British nuclear energy”.

By ruling out nuclear energy entirely, Scotland risks losing out on long-term skilled jobs and major inward investment. At a time when the UK is moving to expand nuclear, Scotland risks being left behind, missing opportunities that could support communities and contribute to the secure, clean energy mix that we need for decades to come.

6.25 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I will start by addressing comments made by Members on the Opposition Benches, in particular the hon. Members for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), who decried Government policy on energy as ideological. I hold my hands up and say that, for me, it is ideological: making the UK more secure and making people better off is at the very core of my ideology. I would class that as ideological.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sean Woodcock: You were very clear about taking interventions, Madam Deputy Speaker. Although I do normally appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's contributions, this time I will not—[*Interruption.*] As he asked so nicely, I will let him.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He prioritises energy security, and of course the transition to cleaner energy and affordable energy is what we would all wish for. However, this country is going to burn through billions of barrels of oil and gas between now and 2050, even if we meet net zero in 2050. On what basis does he support Government proposals to stop us producing that oil and gas to the highest environmental standards here in the UK, and instead importing it from abroad, with much higher emissions attached?

Sean Woodcock: I think the right hon. Gentleman unintentionally misrepresents Government policy, as it is my understanding that we will continue to use oil and gas, and it will play a key part in the just transition.

Events in the middle east have made it very clear and have reminded us that national security and energy security go hand in hand. When global events destabilise supply, it is families here at home who feel the impact on their energy bills. We must therefore prioritise energy independence, which is why I welcome the ambition set out in the King's Speech to do exactly that.

This is not just some abstract idea; in my constituency, we are seeing what that can look like in practice. I refer to Southill solar farm in the town of Charlbury, which is not a corporation but a co-operative set up by local volunteers who wanted to make a difference. Since 2016, they have been generating enough clean energy to power around 1,500 homes. Then there is Hook Norton Low Carbon, which is doing brilliant work to keep household energy bills below the price cap, which it does by teaming up with another local solar farm and an anaerobic digestion plant—another practical, community-led solution to a national and international challenge. What these projects show is Britain at its best. It is people stepping up when they are given the opportunity to do so because they want not just greener energy, but control, stability and the sense that they are no longer at the mercy of global markets.

If we want to see more of that across the country, we have to address the barriers that are holding progress back. Too many brilliant community energy projects are stuck in limbo, not because they lack ambition or funding but because they simply cannot get connected to the grid. In some cases, they are waiting years just for a connection. Not only is that frustrating, but it is holding back our entire transition to cleaner energy. We need to modernise our grid infrastructure and streamline the planning system. If we do that, we can unlock a huge wave of locally generated renewable power.

However, that is only part of the picture. If we want a truly secure energy system, we also need reliable, consistent power. That is why I welcome the nuclear regulation Bill. By making the process more efficient without compromising safety, we can finally start moving at the pace we need and usher in a new chapter for British nuclear energy.

Energy security is not just about how much power we generate; it must also have a positive impact on people's lives. That is why the energy independence Bill and the £15 billion warm homes plan are so important. Helping people to insulate their homes properly is one of the most effective ways that we can cut their bills, because when families save money on energy, that money does not disappear; it gets spent in local shops, cafés and businesses, supporting jobs and strengthening local economies. That is why it is not just good environmental policy, but good economic policy. That is how we build a system that is more secure, more resilient and fairer for the people we represent. That is why I am so pleased to support the King's Speech.

6.29 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): After the increase to the time limit, I think I will buy a lottery ticket tonight, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Having worked in energy, I am all too aware that it has not always been high on the political agenda, but since the invasion of Ukraine, it has of course seized the headlines, and it is in the news once again because of President Trump's distraction plan in Iran. I welcome the Government's focus on energy security, but I hope that we will not narrow our view of what energy security and clean energy mean. Reliance on fossil fuels is a growing drag on our economy, so the Government are right to push for electrification where viable, alongside home-grown renewable energy to get us off that rollercoaster, but zero carbon renewable gas should also be a critical part of our plan for energy independence.

Many aspects of the energy independence Bill are fantastic, such as new obligations on landlords to invest in renewable energy and beefing up Ofgem with new powers that will enable it to step in where consumers have been ripped off. When it comes to the warm homes agency, I welcome the huge investment that will be going into insulation, but remain concerned about the direction of travel on electrification for almost all homes.

Since I first entered the energy industry just over a decade ago, the zealotry in the London-based civil service around heat pumps has not waned, despite years of evidence that the roll-out and cost reduction of heat pumps has not matched optimistic estimates. I say this as somebody who got a heat pump last year. The total cost of my installation was over £14,000 beyond the £7,500 boiler upgrade scheme payment. I am in a fortunate position, but I cannot say to my constituents that they should spend their savings or get themselves into heaps of debt to get a heat pump. With the way things are right now, the vast majority of people in Cannock Chase cannot afford one, and I have not seen anything about the warm homes agency that will fundamentally change that reality.

If we are serious about helping struggling households, we have to ensure that the agency's immediate mission is to bring bills down. Let us ensure that the energy independence Bill lives up to its name by also kickstarting a revolution in renewable gas production. A boost to biomethane production could support farmers to handle organic waste better and to secure a reliable income stream; it would bring down emissions in sectors that cannot easily electrify, including the potential for carbon-negative gas through the usage of carbon capture

and storage; and it would ensure that we are masters of our own destiny when it comes to a critical fuel that will remain part of our energy mix for decades to come.

The extension of the green gas support scheme to 2030 is welcome, but like all energy investment pipelines, producers and investors need longer-term certainty on the Government's position. I have heard similar concerns from the hydrogen industry. Although there is widespread support for the Government's investment in CCS and the first round of hydrogen investment, we still do not have the hydrogen strategy. All these strands need to be knitted together as part of a balanced approach on reaching net zero, supporting our constituents and businesses along the way.

In the Government's focus on clean energy and the jobs of the future, let us not lose sight of the promise of biomethane and hydrogen as other examples of home-grown clean energy. Above all, let us always be on the side of our constituents who want to do the right thing in decarbonising their homes, but worry how on earth they will afford it.

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

6.33 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank all the speakers and contributors to this afternoon's debate. I especially thank and welcome the contributions from my right hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) and for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes); my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) and for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam); and the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan). He is not in his place just yet, but he mentioned the Dungeness nuclear power plant. I agree with him that the potential at that plant is huge for new nuclear, especially small modular reactors, and I can very much recommend the fish and chips—or fission chips—they sell at the Pilot Inn just outside the gates of that power plant, if anybody is looking to visit.

I also pay tribute and welcome the comments from the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), who seemed to suggest that we are all here because of a lack of positive votes for any of us individually. I am not quite sure how that will go down at the next parliamentary Liberal Democrat party meeting, given that is what he thinks of his colleagues, but it was a very enjoyable contribution none the less.

Across this House, we all recognise that we live in a turbulent world and that our energy security is being tested at every turn. Russia seeks to exploit vulnerabilities in our subsea infrastructure, Iran is weaponising the supply of oil and gas from the Gulf, and China is seeking to access our critical national infrastructure. It was therefore incredibly welcome to see that a Bill will be introduced to strengthen the United Kingdom's energy security: an energy independence Bill. Finally, we thought, they get it. Finally, they have listened to the academics, the trade unions, Scottish Renewables, Tony Blair and Jürgen Maier. Finally, the Government are going to take the action necessary to secure our energy future, secure jobs and deliver much-needed revenue to His Majesty's Treasury.

[*Andrew Bowie*]

Or so we thought. Sadly and predictably, the Government have not listened. They have not acted. In fact, they are doubling down: doubling down on making this country poorer, on making this country weaker, and on callously abandoning the high-skilled workers and people of Aberdeen and north-east Scotland.

Dave Doogan: I would never accuse the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, of being a rank, rotten revisionist, but the problem is that in the last 10 years of his Government, oil and gas jobs in north-east Scotland went down by 100,000, and just in the two years that he was a Minister, including in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, they went down a further 10%. Why is he now manifesting as some sort of caped crusader for oil and gas workers? It is difficult for many of us in north-east Scotland to believe.

Andrew Bowie: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who represents a party that for the best part of 10 years had a presumption against oil and gas, for now seeking to be a champion for that industry. There was a global oil price crash in 2014. What did we do? We implemented a policy of maximum economic recovery. We cut taxes and stemmed job losses—the exact opposite of what this Labour Government are doing in the North sea, where they are accelerating the decline, making thousands of people redundant.

It is frankly offensive to call the Bill that will be introduced the energy independence Bill. It is an energy dependence Bill, which will make us more dependent on foreign imports, more dependent on China and more dependent for gas on Norway, which drills it from the very same sea that this Government are banning Britain from exploiting. That is insanity. Once again, the Secretary of State has put his ideological fantasies before doing what is right for the people of this country.

The only people who will be cheering this on are those in Moscow, Tehran and Beijing who, to be fair, will probably themselves be incredulous—unbelieving of their luck—that they have such useful idiots in the form of this Labour Government, cheered on by the SNP, with their decade-long presumption against oil and gas, and the Liberal Democrats, who have a different position depending on which part of the country they happen to be in at the time. All are choosing to make the UK poorer, colder and more vulnerable to outside influence.

Let us be absolutely clear: the position of this Labour Government on oil and gas is downright dangerous. By proposing to legislate for a ban on all new licences, they might as well be hanging a “closed for business” sign over the North sea. I—and it is not just me—do not understand the logic of these actions. The Secretary of State, his Ministers and the current occupant of No. 10 repeatedly tell us that oil and gas will have a role in the UK for years to come. They are right: roughly 85% of homes in the UK rely on gas for heating and more than 90% of vehicles in the UK rely on fossil fuels, so this will not end overnight. All that this legislation will achieve is our increasing reliance on shipments from abroad, at higher cost, with higher emissions and with fewer jobs here in Britain. I—as well as the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow Secretary of State for Energy, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey

(Claire Coutinho), and others—come to this House time and again to highlight the damage that this Government’s approach is causing to communities in and around Aberdeen and north-east Scotland.

Sir Edward Leigh: The Secretary of State claims that he is leading a moral crusade, but he is simply exporting emissions. It is like saying, “Lord, I will not sin, but I am quite happy for people to sin on my behalf.”

Andrew Bowie: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are exporting emissions and exporting jobs, and that is having a detrimental impact on our economy and communities up and down this United Kingdom, not least in north-east Scotland. I see that every time I go home. One thousand jobs will be lost every month under this Labour Government, and we will lose out on £50 billion of investment. Pubs, restaurants and shops are closing up in the granite city under this Labour Government. The impact is being felt across the country—it is true—but it is in Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland that the pain is most acute.

Harriet Cross: I wonder whether my hon. Friend could help me, because I do not understand why the Labour Government think that there is a need to ban new licences. They keep telling us that there is nothing left in the North sea, but if they thought that there was nothing there, why would we be banning ourselves from looking for anything?

Andrew Bowie: My hon. Friend puts it better than I ever could. She is absolutely right; it is completely nonsensical.

In Aberdeen there will be a referendum on this Government’s approach to the North sea in just a few short weeks. On 18 June, the people of what was until recently the oil capital of Europe will have their say on how they feel this Government have treated them and the industry of which they are so proud.

It is not just the production of oil and gas that is being driven to extinction by this Government’s policies. Nor is it just Aberdeen that is being affected by the Government’s anti-growth, anti-business policies: Lindsey, Mossmorran, Grangemouth, Denby, Pembrokeshire, glassworks and metalworks, potteries, refineries and chemical plants—heavy industry is being crushed by the cost of energy. Yet rather than trying to prevent that, this Labour Government are interested only in accelerating the industry’s decline.

The Government’s headlong rush to renewables may be well intentioned, but it is utterly bereft of common sense. This Labour Government are rushing towards a power system that depends on the weather rather than firm, reliable baseloads, exposing us to blackouts, just like the one we saw on the Iberian peninsula last year. Avoiding such blackouts and providing that energy baseload is exactly why the roll-out of new nuclear is an absolute priority. I am pleased that there is consensus on this and that the Government recognise the important role of nuclear in our future energy mix. That said, and as I have said before in this House, sadly this Government’s ambition for nuclear pales in comparison to that of ours when we were in government.

This Government’s failure to commit to a third gigawatt-scale reactor in Ynys Môn is a huge disappointment, not just for us on the Conservative Benches but for industry

and the people in Ynys Môn too. The roll-out of small modular reactors is good, yes, but it curtails the possibility of gigawatt-scale power at Ynys Môn. A cynic might suggest that the decision was made to rush out the announcement in some desperate and hasty attempt to salvage the Welsh Labour party. Well, it is safe to say that that failed.

Back to ambition, the decommissioning of the UK's stockpile of petroleum, the selection of only one small modular technology, and the refusal to follow our ambition of 24 GW of new nuclear is just not good enough.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The shadow Minister talked about his party's ambition for new nuclear in this country, but can he remind the House how many new nuclear plants his party opened during their tenure in charge?

Andrew Bowie: I could run through the list of what we achieved in office on nuclear, as the Minister has heard me do many times, but let me remind the hon. Member that the Labour party has never opened one nuclear power plant in all the years it has been in office—a record that will probably continue over the next three years.

This act of national self-harm has to come to an end. There is only one party that has a plan to cut bills, support industry, protect jobs, and make Britain energy secure. Energy costs are stalling growth, deindustrialising the country and weighing down on families and businesses.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the shadow Minister give way?

Andrew Bowie: No, I will not.

That is why Britain needs a serious plan to cut bills. With the Conservatives' cheap power plan, that is exactly what Britain would get: a £200 cut to energy bills. It could be delivered right now if this Government prioritised the people of this country rather than wacky, unrealistic ideology. But we would not stop there; we would go much further and much faster. To make this country energy-secure, to protect British jobs, grow tax revenue and welcome billions of pounds of investment, we would tell the world that the North sea is open for business. Our "Get Britain Drilling" Bill would end Labour's ban on new licences to unlock the gargantuan supply of opportunity that lies beneath our seas.

Alex Sobel: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Andrew Bowie: I will not.

We would back our world-class oil and gas industry by scrapping the ban on exporting technologies and welcoming the £5 billion of exports that that would create.

Kirsty Blackman: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Andrew Bowie: I am sorry, I will not.

The North Sea Transition Authority would be rechristened the North Sea Authority and tasked with one noble mission: to maximise North sea oil and gas drilling and raise billions of pounds more in tax cuts for the British people. The Conservatives would scrap the energy profits levy—the anvil around the neck of the industry—which Labour extended and increased as one of their first acts in government.

A profitable, attractive and investible North sea would strengthen public services and our energy security and grow our economy, making Britain a stronger country. If hon. Members agree with that, if they agree with us that a brighter, more secure and more prosperous future is possible if we fight for it, I urge them to vote for our amendment tonight.

6.44 pm

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): It is a privilege to close this debate on the Gracious Speech. It has been a pleasure to sit here all afternoon and listen to all the contributions in what turned out to be a far more wide-ranging debate than one just on energy policy, and I thank all Members for that.

I will respond to a few specific points raised in the debate in due course, although I will single out a few contributions from Members on the Labour Benches at the outset. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) was absolutely right in a number of areas of his speech, particularly in saying that we should be very cautious about taking any advice from the shadow Secretary of State lest she change her mind, as she has done so often in this policy area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) spoke quite rightly about her pride in Blyth and the workers there. I was really pleased to be there a few months ago to celebrate the 25th birthday of offshore wind, which of course was started in Blyth. My hon. Friends the Members for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins), for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale), for East Thanet (Ms Billington) and for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) all made important contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton), who I had the great pleasure of joining in Stornoway recently, rightly congratulated Donald MacKinnon MSP. I also put on record my congratulations to Donald on his fantastic election as the Member of the Scottish Parliament for the Western Isles.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West gave a fantastic sales pitch for her community and the role it is playing in the clean power transition. She also mentioned the Dorset clean energy super cluster, which I would be delighted to visit.

Contributions from hon. Members on all sides of the House were interesting. I particularly welcome the consensus on nuclear, which is hugely important. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) gave a wide-ranging lecture—an important contribution—on the economy. I completely agree with his points on skills. We need some balance in how we approach the future of skills development in the country, so that we have the skilled workforce we need to do all that we want to do.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), who I think is no longer in his place, made a bizarre argument in which he said the last Government did a fantastic job and did everything right, but that we should now do none of the things that they did into the future. That was slightly odd.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), stole my thunder with his remarks on the speech by the hon.

[*Michael Shanks*]

Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord). I particularly enjoyed the intervention from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin), who essentially said that nobody really likes any of us and it is all the fault of first past the post. That was a great contribution!

I want to single out the contribution of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who gave an excellent speech. He emphasised absolutely rightly that Britain is not broken but that we must be better. That was a really important charge for us all. This debate has shown that the whole House agrees on the need to strengthen our energy security as we respond to the second fossil fuel shock in less than five years.

Graham Stuart: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will make a bit of progress.

Where the House diverges is on how we respond to that shock. For Members on the Labour Benches, the overriding lesson from both Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the present crisis in the middle east is that every day we spend exposed to fossil fuels, which we can never control, is another day of insecurity. It is another day of being buffeted by conflicts that we had no part in starting, and of working people opening their energy bills and finding the cost of someone else's war. It is another day of Britain's future being held back by a global market in which we are and will always be price takers.

The Opposition say that they too have learned a lesson from the second fossil fuel price shock. They have studied the evidence and weighed up the options, and their conclusion—their amendment to the Humble Address—is that the answer to a fossil fuel crisis lies in more fossil fuels. I like to give credit where I can, so I will give them this: it takes a particular kind of courage to stand up in this House at this time and make that argument with a straight face.

Dave Doogan: The Minister will know that Scotland has almost all the oil in the United Kingdom. We have the vast majority of the gas. We have the most onshore renewables and the most hydro. And yet, under his watch, his constituents and mine in Scotland pay the highest electricity bills anywhere on these islands. What does he say to our constituents?

Michael Shanks: I say that the Scottish National party's plan for independence for energy was the flimsiest of flimsy documents. It had no plan for how independence would bring down bills, because the truth of the matter is that independence would tear apart any argument on energy security and drive up bills for people right across Scotland. That is why people rejected it in the referendum 10 years ago.

The Tories and their former friends and colleagues now sitting on the Reform Benches want to solve a dependence problem by becoming even more dependent. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State outlined earlier, we will not be taking that course. This is the moment to end our reliance on fossil fuels, to electrify the wider economy and to speed up our transition to clean, secure, home-grown energy, which does give us energy sovereignty. That is the road to national security.

Along the way, we seize the economic opportunity of the 21st century, with 400,000 extra good energy jobs and billions of pounds in investment by 2030 alone.

Graham Stuart: I wonder whether the Minister will agree to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst). The Atwick gas storage site in my hon. Friend's constituency is a critical part of our energy infrastructure, but at 47 years old, it is nearing end of life. Does he have plans to ensure that our gas storage is maintained, and will he meet me and my colleague to discuss the issue?

Michael Shanks: We are consulting on the future of gas storage. I have made it my policy to meet every MP who wants to meet me, and I have always had—[*Interruption.*] The shadow Minister says, "Even him?" I have always had very good conversations with the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart). He is in the wrong party—they all hate him. [*Laughter.*]

Now is not the time to look away from the biggest long-term threat we face: climate change. It is a threat that we can no longer ignore, so we will build the energy system of the future. Since we came into power, we have had two record-breaking renewables auctions after the catastrophic failure of AR5 under the last Government. Despite the shadow Secretary of State's advice to cancel AR7, we have secured clean, home-grown power for the equivalent of 23 million homes. That is power that, since the middle east crisis began, is saving the country millions of pounds every single day in gas that we no longer have to buy. But good is not enough; we are determined to go further and faster. That is why we are bringing forward the next auction round to July, and why the energy independence Bill will accelerate the build-out of grid infrastructure by reforming planning and getting clean power built at the speed that the moment demands.

We have the biggest nuclear building programme in half a century, not vague promises that never materialised for 14 years—or the endless rounds of consultation that the shadow Minister loves to tell us about so much—but actual nuclear being built. With a nuclear regulation Bill, which is genuinely pro-nuclear and pro-nature, we will cut costs and timeframes without cutting corners on safety. That is regulation reform that the Tories now claim they would have loved to have done, but just never found the time for during 14 years in government. Well, we are going to get it done. We have to be honest about what we inherited. The environmental impact assessment for Sizewell C ran to 44,000 pages and it still left nobody happy. That is not caution; it is paralysis dressed up as paperwork. This Government will end it, so that we can get Britain building again and deliver the energy independence that people have waited for.

As we build for the future, we also have to protect people right now. Six million families are receiving the expanded warm home discount. We also have the £15 billion warm homes plan—the largest upgrade programme in British history—and, as a result of actions that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor took in the Budget, the price cap fell by £117 in April.

Kirsty Blackman: On protecting people right now, my constituents are losing jobs. Thousands of jobs are being lost every few months in the north-east of Scotland because of the Government's continuing to keep the

energy profits levy: Labour's tax on Scotland's jobs. Will the Minister make a commitment to move from the EPL to the oil and gas price mechanism in order to protect jobs for my constituents?

Michael Shanks: I will come to jobs in the North sea in just a moment—a section of my speech is about that, given its importance. I have to say that I am absolutely incredulous: I can almost understand it from the Tories—thinking that a moment of windfall profits was the moment to cut taxes on oil and gas companies—but now we have a partnership of the SNP and the Tories who believe that now is the moment not to help people with their energy bills but to cut taxes for the biggest companies. That is an interesting lesson that we have learned.

The energy independence Bill is about how we go further. A number of hon. Members have raised fuel poverty. Fuel poverty in this country is not a misfortune; it is a scandal. More than a third of school pupils have told their teachers that they are cold at home. In one of the world's largest economies, a third of children go to school to get warm. We must bring this to an end with new minimum energy efficiency standards for renters, a new warm homes agency to ensure that high home grades are not, as they have been for too long, the preserve of just the well off, and a strengthened Ofgem with the powers of a genuine consumer champion, not just a regulator in name. That is what fighting the corner of working people looks like.

Let me say something about the people who power this country. I speak at industry conferences regularly and I always talk about my pride in the North sea, not as a Minister reading from a brief, but as someone who has friends and family who work offshore and as a Scottish MP who knows more than many about what the sector means. It is about people right now doing skilled, dangerous and vital work—work that this country has depended on for decades, and which does not get taken for granted—[*Interruption.*] We are not taking it for granted, actually; that is just nonsense.

The question in front of us is how we secure those people's long-term future. The answer is not, as some on the Opposition Benches have suggested, to pretend that the North sea is not a maturing basin in natural decline. It is not about nostalgia for some new age of discovery. We are neither a “turn off the taps” nor a “drill every last drop” party. Neither is a credible plan. We will introduce transitional energy certificates, as industry has called for, to enable tiebacks and manage existing fields for their lifespan; for the first time, we will give the North Sea Transition Authority a statutory responsibility to consider workers, communities and supply chains; and we will launch a new North sea jobs service to support people through every stage of the transition. This energy transition only works if we bring people with us on what we are building next, and that is already taking shape.

Harriet Cross: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I do not have time; I am sorry.

That system is already taking shape, whether through nuclear engineers in Ynys Môn following in their parents' footsteps, apprentices learning to weld in the Aberdeen energy transition zone or wind turbine blades being forged

in Hull—tens of thousands of jobs, record investment, real communities, real wages and a real future. The North sea made Britain an energy nation; the Bill ensures that it will remain one.

Sometimes, in the noise of this place, we lose sight of what is actually at stake. Half of Britain's recessions since the 1970s were caused by fossil fuel shocks—not bad luck, not acts of God, but the predictable, repeated consequence of building our future on an energy source that we can never have control over. What we have heard today is that Opposition parties have not only chosen to ignore what is going on all around us, but they actively want us to go even further, to risk even more and to gamble with the futures of every single one of our constituents. The warning signs were there in 1973, in 1979 and in 2022, and they were ignored. The warning signs are back now, and it is right that we learn the right lessons.

Just a few weeks ago, 98% of our electricity came from clean sources. It was for a small period of time—I recognise that—but 98% of our electricity came from low-carbon sources. This country, when it commits to something, is capable of achieving extraordinary things. This is not ideology; it is the most basic duty of Government to protect the people of this country from dangers that we can see coming. The energy Bills contained in the King's Speech are the path to a stronger future for Britain: energy security that no blockade can threaten; warm homes for families who have gone cold for far too long; good jobs in communities that have faced deindustrialisation for decades because of Governments who just did not care about industrial strategy; and a climate that we can hand to our children without shame. I commend the King's Speech to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 108, Noes 323.

Division No. 1]

[6.59 pm]

AYES

Allister, Jim	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Anderson, Stuart	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Andrew, rh Stuart	Evans, Dr Luke
Argar, rh Edward	Fortune, Peter
Atkins, rh Victoria	Fox, Sir Ashley
Bacon, Gareth	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Freeman, George
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	French, Mr Louie
Barclay, rh Steve	Fuller, Richard
Bedford, Mr Peter	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Bhatti, Saqib	Garnier, Mark
Blackman, Bob	Glen, rh John
Bool, Sarah	Glindon, Mary
Bowie, Andrew	Grant, Helen
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Griffiths, Alison
Brandreth, Aphra	Harris, Rebecca
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Hayes, rh Sir John
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Hinds, rh Damian
Cocking, Lewis	Hoare, Simon
Cooper, John	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Costa, Alberto	Hollinrake, Kevin
Coutinho, rh Claire	Holmes, Paul
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Huddleston, Nigel
Cross, Harriet	Hudson, Dr Neil
Davies, Gareth	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Davies, Mims	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Davis, rh David	Jopp, Lincoln
Dewhurst, Charlie	Kruger, Danny

Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil

Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:

**David Reed and
 Rebecca Smith**

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard

Burke, Maureen
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna

Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 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
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah

Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Graham
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena

Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, rh Jo

Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

**Jade Botterill and
 Imogen Walker**

Question accordingly negated.

7.13 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed tomorrow.

PETITIONS

Banking Facilities in Cupar

7.14 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): A recent petition in Cupar calling for face-to-face banking services has now been signed by 585 local residents—a sign that there is a real strength of feeling in Cupar about its banking services. The petition

“Declares that everyone should be able to access cash and banking advice when they need it...that this should not be restricted by poor mobile or broadband connectivity”

or by

“not having easy access to a phone, or preferring to do transactions face to face; further declares that although...14,000 people live in the area surrounding Cupar and the town serves many more”

in the villages around it,

“Cupar is served by just one building society following the closure of multiple local bank branches...The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the banking industry to deliver a cash or banking hub for Cupar.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of North East Fife,

Declares that everyone should be able to access cash and banking advice when they need it; further declares that this should not be restricted by poor mobile or broadband connectivity, not having easy access to a phone, or preferring to do transactions face to face; further declares that although almost 14,000 people live in the area surrounding Cupar and the town serves many more in the surrounding villages, Cupar is served by just one building society following the closure of multiple local bank branches; further declares that it is not feasible for many people to travel outwith Cupar to neighbouring towns such as St Andrews in light of cuts to bus routes; and further declares that a cash hub would allow consumers and businesses to access and bank cash safely and a banking hub would provide vital face to face services and advice for the community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the banking industry to deliver a cash or banking hub for Cupar.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003199]

Antisocial Behaviour in Holton Heath

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I rise to present a petition about antisocial behaviour on behalf of the residents of Holton Heath Park in my constituency. The petitioners and I ask the Government to note that those residents have been experiencing an unacceptable level from antisocial driving, joyriding, racing, and excessive speeds from cars and motorbikes late at night and on weekends. We call on the Government urgently to roll out acoustic cameras and fund increased patrols by police to re-establish peace, quiet, enjoyment and safety. The petitioners request that the House of Commons ask the Government to take action to support relevant authorities in Dorset to tackle and prevent further antisocial behaviour.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole,

Declares that the residents of Holton Heath Park have been experiencing an unacceptable level of antisocial behaviour caused by dangerous motor vehicle driving in this area; further declares that this has been a major issue in the area for many years; and further declares that urgent traffic calming, surveillance and speed reducing measures should be implemented in the area to re-establish peace and quiet for Holton Heath's residents.

[Vikki Slade]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take action to assist the relevant authorities in Holton Heath in tackling and preventing antisocial behaviour caused by dangerous drivers around Holton Heath Park.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003200]

High Speed 2: Impact on Communities

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

7.16 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Over many years, the issue of HS2 has consumed many hours of debate in this House, and many hon. and right hon. Members have needed to highlight the unacceptable impact the project has had on thousands of constituents. Today I must do so again. HS2 has had a never-ending impact on communities across my constituency of Beaconsfield, Marlow and the south Bucks villages, an impact compounded by perpetual incompetence and indifference from its management. That is why I have opposed HS2 since I was elected MP for the constituency in 2019.

Roads in Buckinghamshire have been destroyed over the past few years by the weight of HS2 lorries, with local council taxpayers having to pick up the bill.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): On roads, the precedent was clearly set by East West Rail, which fully resurfaced 21 roads that its heavy goods vehicles had trashed. Does my hon. Friend agree that HS2 should follow that precedent and fix that which they have broken in our communities?

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. HS2 should follow that model; that would go a long way towards repairing community relations, because HS2 could not have cared less about the roads and communities it destroyed. Communities in Buckinghamshire and beyond have been blighted by the inconsiderate construction that has taken place, and HS2 just could not have cared less. Take Denham, for example. That community has borne the brunt of construction disruption: years of upheaval, constant noise, dust and heavy machinery that have transformed its once-peaceful neighbourhoods into an industrial corridor.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I am also grateful to her for coming out to help us to campaign in the local elections—she helped Tommy Balaam to win his seat in Harefield. Does she recall, as I do, the ongoing strength of feeling among people in that village, which is right next to Denham, about the continued consequences of that construction work—the late-night noise and disruption and, in particular, very large and heavy vehicles occupying what are otherwise suburban transport routes, causing risk and concern to people on the school run or going about their normal business? This is not just about the damage that those vehicles do to the roads; it is also about the risk and disruption that they cause for other road users in our neighbourhood.

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Our constituencies border one another, and I remember visiting him in his constituency at Dogs Trust. I remember the vibration, noise and disruption from HS2. We could feel the vibrations when we were there. It is about not just the construction, but the noise pollution and disruption to residents in Hillingdon and Buckinghamshire. Our communities were completely disrupted because of HS2 construction. Until my hon.

Friend's council took HS2 to court—that was a great moment—little regard was given to the amount of countryside, land and green belt being destroyed by HS2.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Does she not agree that the United Kingdom has become so entangled in planning delays, legal challenges, environmental regulation and bureaucratic red tape that we are now struggling to build even the most basic strategic infrastructure in a reasonable timeframe? Lessons have to be learned UK-wide from that failure.

Joy Morrissey: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for saying that, but I also pay tribute to the first person who radicalised me on the importance of fighting HS2: the former MP for Chesham and Amersham, Cheryl Gillan. Before I even became a Member of Parliament, she made sure that I knew, as she did, the importance of fighting against HS2 and of the need—no matter who was supporting HS2—to stand up for our residents and put them first. Cheryl knew it would be a terrible blight on Buckinghamshire, and she was right. She was ahead of the curve there.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I also have fond memories of Cheryl Gillan, who I stood against in 2005. The hon. Lady knows my seat well, and the things she describes have a lot of resonance with Wells House Road, NW10, which I think is the most blighted road in England. An email from a resident there today said:

“We were told to expect six years of disruption. Now they are asking us to live with 16.”

They point out that while the cost of HS2 has tripled, the community funds have not. Buckinghamshire is a recipient, as is Euston, but Ealing and Old Oak Common are not at all. Does the hon. Lady not agree that that is a travesty?

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Lady for that excellent point. I know her seat very well, and she has fought for her constituents, including in Old Oak Common, for many years. It is fair that compensation be given continually for the disruption in Old Oak Common. It is a difficult area, because it involves not just Ealing, but Hammersmith, Fulham and several other areas that intersect. It creates a problem where no one takes leadership, and no one ensures that those residents are taken care of. The hon. Lady has long advocated for that compensation.

We stand here in agreement that HS2 has not cared about our residents or the compensation. We have seen other infrastructure models that have given the compensation that residents need and want.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): The hon. Lady is being generous with her time, and I thank her for bringing this important debate to the House. She has expertly described the ongoing impacts in communities like ours. Residents in West Ruislip and Ickenham in my constituency live day in, day out with the consequences of HS2 works. As she rightly points out, residents often ask what compensation and support exists. It is frustrating in that regard that the community and environment fund and the business and local economy fund, which were allocated across the country, remain

significantly unspent. Millions of pounds are still unspent, despite our communities being blighted. Does she agree that that is frustrating for our communities and local organisations, who could benefit from that money but are shut out of those funds? Does she also agree that the geographical remit needs to be widened slightly and that we need to do more nationally to ensure that those funds get to communities?

Joy Morrissey: It is incredibly frustrating that those funds are not open and available, particularly when as Members of Parliament we have come forward with good ideas for how they could be spent on road infrastructure, such as paving potholes on roads destroyed by the lorries that have passed through. It is very difficult to access that funding, but it would go a long way towards bridging the community relations that have broken down anywhere that HS2 has started.

Another issue is that, in the old days, HS2 would take over a property without paying for it and then occupy it indefinitely.

David Simmonds: Does my hon. Friend agree that a good example of how the money could be better used is to support the Hillingdon Outdoor Activities Centre, which sits directly on the border between our constituencies, and which our constituents have used for many years. As a result of Hillingdon council's proactive work in granting planning permission, there is now the possibility of creating a new facility, but we need to ensure that funds are available to keep the centre running so that it can provide opportunities for young people in the future. Might the Government be able to give HS2 a steer and suggest that the money should be allocated for that purpose?

Joy Morrissey: That is an excellent example of an issue—in this case, the final payment and settlement for the relocation of the centre—that has been the subject of an ongoing dispute with HS2, and a different sort of leadership has taken control. There have been other instances in which it has been a problem to get the final payments over the line for community centres, roads and infrastructure, for individuals who still have not been paid compensation for what has happened to their homes.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): So far this has been a very southern-centric debate, so may I take the hon. Lady up to Staffordshire? In Newcastle-under-Lyme we continue to feel the very worst effects of the HS2 debacle. Does she share my outrage at the fact that my constituents Mr and Mrs Kettering, of Madeley, have been waiting years for the compensation due to them for the compulsory purchase of their land? They have been forced to declare bankruptcy because they have been waiting so long. The financial strain that they have been put under stinks, and the sooner HS2 is held to account, the better.

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I thank him for advocating for his residents.

The failure to purchase land has forced residents into bankruptcy and caused relationship breakdowns. It has meant that they cannot move forward, for instance by selling or renting their properties, and that has caused a

[Joy Morrissey]

huge breakdown in community relations with HS2. When highways have been built, compensation has been offered and other gestures have been made that have allowed community relations to be restored. The problem with HS2 is the level of statutory ability it had, as an arm's length body, to put these things into action, which meant that it did not have to follow through on the community relations side. I think that all of us, on both sides of the House, agree that if this project moves forward, there could be real benefit in the restoration of relations between communities, MPs and councils.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The communication element is certainly important. Villagers in Greatworth and Radstone in Northamptonshire have been massively isolated by the works that have been carried out, while the active travel route that Brackley residents wanted has not been possible because it is bypassed by HS2. Does my hon. Friend agree that communication and integration with the community is vital, and that HS2 must ensure that it happens?

Joy Morrissey: Communication can be very poor in certain regions, and they it may improve, but then it may become even worse. There will be isolated incidents when one constituent has been left out in the cold and is being forced into bankruptcy, and feels desperate. Until an MP gets involved, such people may feel that there is no hope, and that is a terrible feeling to have when we should be able to find a solution. This has also had a negative impact on green spaces and green corridors. In my patch, the Colne Valley Regional Park was opposed to the project because of the impact that the construction would have on wildlife, and on this sanctuary that constitutes a green corridor separating us from London.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being very generous with her time. She talks about green spaces. My constituency is in a section of the route that has now been cancelled, and is in the process of being removed from the Bill. We still have planning safeguards in place, and uncapped boreholes from ground investigations. Our situation mirrors that of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge), in that we have void properties, as does the constituency of my neighbour, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). Ours have been void for a long time, and HS2 is not letting them; it is just leaving them empty. Does the hon. Lady agree that there needs to be a proper winding-up plan for the sections of the route where construction has not started and will never start because it has been cancelled?

Joy Morrissey: Absolutely. A winding-up contingency plan for areas where HS2 is not continuing needs to be put in place. Seeing properties just sitting there, when everyone knows that they will not be used, is maddening for the entire community. It also depletes property values and causes wildlife and conservation issues. These are ongoing problems, so residents need some reassurance, and I think that across the House we agree on that.

In Colne valley, for example, HS2 was building a 3.5 km concrete viaduct that will blight the natural beauty of my area and Hillingdon.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): The hon. Member is being very generous with her time, and I appreciate that. In south Staffordshire we have had massive problems with HS2, and particularly with the route that it has had to take. It is on a very wide arc around the city of Lichfield, but because of the speeds it has to go at, the corners cannot be too tight. So there is a really significant piece of engineering work, with a tunnel having to go under the A38, a railway and a canal—all at different heights. That was specifically because it could not be moved further away, so it had to go under two slip roads as well as the main carriageway. It has been an absolute nightmare. That recently led to the closure of the A38, with 70,000 vehicles a day pushed on to my local roads, which has been really difficult. That is specifically because of the speeds this thing was designed to go at, so mitigations could not be put in, and it had to go through areas of outstanding natural beauty. It could not avoid problems, and that has led to some of the cost overruns. Does she agree with me that the decision to try to make it the fastest railway in the world was a mistake when it was made, and that it was a mistake not to unwind that sooner?

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Member for that point. I think it has been a mistake not to work with local communities, because there would have been a point when most of us across the House would have worked with HS2 to find a solution that did not destroy our areas of natural beauty or our pre-existing infrastructure. However, there was no give and take; there was simply take, from our areas and our communities. I think the frustration that Members feel across the House is palpable.

I have brought forward this debate because time is running out for HS2's planning powers, which expire in February 2027. Those powers may expire, but the legacy of community destruction and environmental vandalism will continue long into the future. HS2's failure to resolve specific issues with residents now faces a ticking clock, and that is why I urge the Minister to support my constituents and those of other Members across the House, and to get urgent resolution of the issues that HS2 has left unresolved for all of us.

Greg Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is patently absurd that the Secretary of State casually said at the Dispatch Box earlier that the overall bill for phase 1 will breach £100 billion—I predicted that years ago—yet even though the taxpayer will keep bailing out phase 1, there is no money to fund the mitigation projects that were actually promised to our communities, such as fixing our roads. It seems that the taxpayer will bail out everything else, but not the community impact.

Joy Morrissey: I think the community impact and the mitigation are key to the project moving forward successfully, because that is how trust can be restored. Community faith in this project and a trustworthy relationship have broken down, and that is the best way to restore them. If hundreds of lorries are passing over our roads, we must ensure that we can have the potholes filled and our roads fixed. We must also ensure that there is compensation for communities in the areas blighted by HS2, whether that is parks and green spaces, or extra funding for infrastructure. I think that is a fair and reasonable request, so that everyone can benefit, not just all of us who have had this forced on our constituencies with absolutely zero benefit.

David Simmonds: On that point—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Lady has been incredibly generous in ensuring that everyone can get in, but the debate has to conclude at 7.46 pm. It is her time, but she may wish to consider leaving some time for the Minister.

David Simmonds: I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. Does she agree that there is a positive that could come out of this process, and from her trenchant efforts to secure an upgrade to the status of Colne Valley Regional Park? Granting the park a higher degree of planning protection would be a significant win for our constituents and others. Perhaps the Minister might consider putting a little pressure on Government colleagues to secure that positive benefit for future generations to enjoy.

Joy Morrissey: Across the House, we all want extra protection for Colne Valley Regional Park, and to mitigate the impact of HS2 and all other infrastructure projects.

I want to share one poignant and difficult example to demonstrate why I have brought forward this debate. My constituent Luke Oldfield has been struggling in a dispute with HS2 for 12 years. Mr Oldfield has a home recording studio business that pre-dates the white elephant that is HS2. From the outset he raised concerns about the impact of construction and future rail noise on his business. Although he secured assurances that HS2 would address noise concerns, his view is that monitoring methods failed properly to capture the noise affecting his studio. HS2 later privately accepted that there would be an impact and the only viable solution identified has been to construct a new replacement studio. Despite years of design work and cost assessment, the Department for Transport has repeatedly delayed progress and pushed back on cost. What is clear is that Mr Oldfield—I am sure he is not alone in this—is the victim of a national infrastructure project that does not care and has not been subject to sufficient independent oversight. It will soon be too late, so the Government must act.

I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could confirm in her reply that the Government will: urgently take up with me the case of Mr Oldfield and secure a final and just resolution to the building of a new studio, so that he can carry on his business; and urgently set out a timeline for the final resolution of all disputes outstanding along the HS2 line, so that my constituents, and those of Members across the House, can finally put the nightmare of HS2 behind them.

HS2 is a project that should never have been, but now we must act to bring the nightmare to an end for people such as Mr Oldfield. I urge the Minister to do just that.

7.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for securing this debate, and grateful to other hon. Members for their contributions. I will try to address the points that she and others have raised.

I want to begin by fully recognising the change and upheaval that major infrastructure projects such as HS2 bring to the communities they pass through. I understand the concerns raised by hon. Members on behalf of their constituents. As my right hon. Friend the Transport

Secretary set out to the House earlier today, taxpayers, passengers and communities along the route have been let down by years of mismanagement on HS2. The failures of the past mean that HS2 will now cost more and take longer to be delivered. The most important thing we can do for communities now is to get a grip on the programme so that the job can be done and the disruption brought to an end.

Over the past year, the Government have been working closely on a full reset of HS2 to bring effective oversight and start rebuilding public trust. HS2 has faced significant challenges, but this Government have been clear that infrastructure development is at the heart of our strategic missions and priorities. It will deliver significant benefits once delivered. While those benefits are undeniable, we know that they come at the cost of disruption caused by construction. We have to do right by the residents who are impacted, through a range of programmes made available to them. I appreciate that right now HS2 construction is at its peak in many areas and, regrettably, so too is the level of disruption. That includes road closures, lorry movements and other visible and audible signs of construction in affected areas.

Both the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) mentioned the damage done to the highways. HS2 has put in place measures to address that with the establishment of a highways deterioration fund, which should resolve some of those issues quickly and easily.

Inevitably, there are some unwelcome impacts on local people when there are major projects. The Rail Minister is determined to ensure that HS2 Ltd does its utmost to reduce impacts as much as is reasonably possible. HS2 Ltd must be a good neighbour to affected communities and treat them with respect, even if that has not always been the experience of residents whom Members present are representing. HS2 should listen to local concerns and be accountable for its actions at all times.

We expect communities affected by the construction of the railway to be at the heart of the delivery plans of HS2 Ltd. I know that both the Rail Minister and the chairman of HS2, Mike Brown, are taking a personal interest in those issues. They want to ensure that residents, who have sometimes endured very lengthy periods of disruption, are treated with fairness and respect, and that the issues around compensation are resolved as promptly as possible. We want to see HS2 Ltd leaving a positive legacy for communities, such as through the community and business funds, which have already provided millions of pounds in support for local projects, from sports clubs to children's play facilities.

The hon. Lady raised the specific case of one of her constituents who runs a music studio and his experiences. My officials have briefed me on the situation, and I appreciate it has been a long-standing case that has been difficult to resolve. I am pleased to hear that, based on these discussions, HS2 Ltd and the hon. Lady's constituent are on a path to resolution. My Department is committed to resolving the situation, while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer and fairness for her constituent.

The long-term solution that HS2 Ltd is focused on is facilitating and funding an alternative studio in the grounds of the constituent's property. I appreciate that this is taking some time and that there may be a difference in expectations between HS2 Ltd and the

[Lilian Greenwood]

hon. Lady's constituent as to what constitutes a reasonable replacement of the existing studio. However, we are committed to doing the right thing and delivering this at pace. There is a further onsite meeting planned shortly, and I am hopeful that an agreement on the way forward will soon be reached.

Alongside that, HS2 Ltd has made further commitments in recent weeks to carry out any vibration-causing works earlier in the day, in order to avoid the times that would be most disruptive to the constituent's business. Frankly, I have great sympathy with the constituent in question. Disruptive works have continued longer than anticipated, and the issue has taken longer to resolve than we would wish. We hope to find resolutions that will expedite future cases.

I will turn to more general concerns about compliance with undertakings and assurances. The Secretary of State takes compliance with HS2 undertakings and assurances very seriously. There are rigorous structures in place to manage compliance and the performance of HS2 Ltd is monitored closely by the Department. In the vast majority of cases, compliance has been good: out of nearly 5,000 undertakings and assurances on HS2, compliance has fallen short in less than 1% of cases, but that is 1% too many. However, the Department remains confident that people can rely on the commitments that were made to them. Those commitments and assurances were given by the Secretary of State to Parliament

during the HS2 Bill process, which is why HS2 Ltd's delivery of them is overseen by the Department and why the Secretary of State is ultimately answerable to Parliament in these matters.

I really regret that we have very limited time to answer these questions. I want to assure the hon. Member for Beaconsfield and other hon. Members that there are layers of independent scrutiny. HS2 Ltd is held to account by the Secretary of State, who has the independent statutory appeal function between HS2 Ltd and other parties. It is notable, I think, that only one assurance compliance case—the one the hon. Member refers to—has been escalated beyond the Department to Mr Speaker, as the representative of Parliament. We need to ensure that these cases are dealt with properly, so that people have a fair outcome.

I am very conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me just say that we recognise the impact of the construction of HS2 on communities living along the route and we thank them for their patience. We understand how frustrating this prolonged disruption is. We will ensure that all the issues that have been raised by hon. Members today are considered by the Department and will continue to do the job of holding to account HS2 Ltd, monitoring its performance and ensuring that, where it falls short, it does better in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

7.45 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 19 May 2026

TREASURY

National Savings & Investments: Bereavement Claims

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): I am today updating the House on the steps being taken to address historic failures in the handling of some bereavement claims by National Savings and Investments.

On 26 March, I informed the House that NS&I had identified a population of cases where, following notification of a customer's death, holdings were not fully settled in a timely way. These failures relate to past tracing and operational processes and do not reflect current practice. I recognise the distress and inconvenience that these shortcomings may have caused to those that have suffered bereavements.

The Treasury has instructed NS&I to put this right swiftly and fairly, requiring a delivery plan detailing how it plans to do so to be published during May.

NS&I has now completed extensive work to understand the affected population and to design a remediation approach. Today NS&I is publishing the delivery plan that it will follow to ensure proactive timely contact, payment of outstanding holdings, and appropriate compensation.

The current remediation population is estimated at up to 34,000 cases, with a total value of approximately £367 million. These figures have reduced since my announcement and are likely to reduce further.

We are committed to making the process for reuniting estates with their money as easy as possible. NS&I will contact all affected estates with holdings of £10 or more to reunite them with the full value of those holdings that should have been returned to them earlier. To ensure estates have not been disadvantaged by the delay, this will then be adjusted upwards to include either the higher of the interest accrued since the error occurred or the Bank of England base rate plus 1 percentage point, in line with Financial Ombudsman Service principles.

The de minimis threshold is being set lower than seen in some redress cases reflecting the priority we attach to returning funds to those affected while avoiding creating disproportionate administrative burdens and disturbance in the cases of the smallest holdings.

Contact will be made with estates through executors or personal representatives. Beneficiaries will not be contacted directly except where, as is often the case, beneficiaries are themselves executors or personal representatives. Where solicitors or professional executors dealt with the administration of an estate they will be contacted and it will be for them to contact beneficiaries. All cases will be subject to proportionate tracing checks to ensure payments are made safely and to the correct party.

Remediation will be delivered in phases. NS&I will begin contacting the first cohort next week, with payments made shortly after contact. NS&I aims to return holdings

to their rightful owners as swiftly as possible and expects to have completed this remediation programme in the first half of 2027.

I have committed to helping bereaved families avoid disproportionate disruption and administrative costs that could result from the inheritance tax consequences of rectifying previous tracing errors. To achieve this I am confirming today that there will be a full inheritance tax exemption for the holdings of the remediation population affected by the NS&I tracing error which are returned to the estates to which they rightly belong. To further ease the administration of estates, the personal representatives or executors will not be liable for any income tax ordinarily due in their role on interest accrued before death or in the administration period. HMRC is working with NS&I to ensure that executors, personal representatives and beneficiaries do not incur any unnecessary administrative burdens or costs where tax is not due.

Beyond individual redress, NS&I has strengthened its bereavement processes to ensure these tracing errors do not reoccur. While this has driven an increase in processing times, an additional 100 people have been hired to ensure this is temporary. NS&I is also exploring broader improvements to the bereavement journey, including alignment with cross-Government services such as Tell Us Once.

As I committed to the House, Sir Jim Harra, acting chief executive of NS&I, is leading a wider review into the background to the tracing problem and what lessons must be learned. This will report before the summer recess and be shared with the Chairs of the Treasury and Public Accounts Committees. The Treasury has also started the process to recruit a permanent chief executive.

Further information for anyone who believes they or loved ones may have been affected is available on the NS&I website and its contact centre is open seven days a week.

[HCWS44]

Public Service Pensions: SCAPE Discount Rate

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): SCAPE—superannuation contributions adjusted for past experience—is the process for setting employer contribution rates at valuations of unfunded public service pension schemes. As part of the SCAPE process, the SCAPE discount rate is used alongside many other factors such as earnings changes, changes to life expectancy and demographic assumptions to determine the appropriate employer contribution rate. Valuations as at 31 March 2024 are currently under way and will result in new employer contribution rates, which will be implemented from April 2027.

The current methodology for setting the discount rate, based on the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast of long-term GDP growth, was adopted in 2011, with a commitment to review its methodology every 10 years. A review under the previous Government, from 2021 to 2023, maintained this methodology.

The SCAPE discount rate to be used as part of the ongoing 2024 valuations will therefore be based on the expected long-term GDP growth figures, published by the OBR in July 2025. Based on these figures, the new SCAPE discount rate is CPI+2% p.a.

[HCWS37]

High Value Council Tax Surcharge: Consultation

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

In the 2025 Budget, the Government announced the introduction of a new high-value council tax surcharge—HVCTS—on owners of the most valuable 1% of residential properties in England. Today, together with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, I am launching a consultation on the detailed design of this new surcharge.

Households living in lower value homes often pay more council tax, relative to the value of their property, than those in the most expensive homes. For example, a Band D home in parts of the north can face a higher annual council tax bill than a property worth many millions of pounds in parts of central London. The HVCTS will change that, implementing a significant reform to improve fairness within England's property tax system, ensuring that those with the most valuable properties pay their fair share.

From April 2028, owners of residential properties valued at £2 million and above will be liable to pay the HVCTS, in addition to their existing council tax bill. Fewer than 1% of homes in England are expected to be affected. Properties will be valued for the purpose of the HVCTS and placed into one of four value bands, with fixed annual charges uprated in line with inflation. Council tax bands will remain separate to this new tax.

The consultation seeks views on the design of the tax including scope, support for those who cannot pay, how the tax will be administered and how owners can challenge and appeal their bill. The consultation also includes detailed information for local authorities, who will collect the tax on behalf of central Government. The revenue will be used to support funding for local government services. Local authorities will be fully compensated for any additional administrative burdens.

We welcome feedback on the detailed design set out in this consultation from local government, homeowners, tax experts, legal professionals and those in the property industry about the technical design and impact of the tax. The consultation will close on 14 July.

The consultation is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/high-value-council-tax-surcharge>

[HCWS35]

UK-Isle of Man Social Security Agreement

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

A new social security agreement relating to national insurance contributions with the Isle of Man was agreed on 18 May 2026. It modernises the provisions in the 1977 agreement which determine where workers and employers pay their national insurance contributions, so that they operate in line with the social security agreement the UK has with Jersey and Guernsey, as well as those with other countries. The text of the agreement has been deposited in the Library in both Houses and will be made available on gov.uk.

The agreement will come into effect on the first day of the month after the UK and the Isle of Man have exchanged written confirmation that they have complied with their domestic requirements. The agreement will

have effect in relation to the tax year beginning on or after 6 April next, following the date on which the agreement comes into effect.

[HCWS38]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Television Selection Services and Electronic Programme Guides: Regulation

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): Following the statement I published on 24 February 2026, I can now confirm to the House that my Department has today laid the following statutory instruments before Parliament:

The Television Selection Services (Designation) Regulations 2026; and

The Regulated Electronic Programme Guide (Prescribed Description and Transitional Arrangements) Regulations 2026.

The Television Selection Services (Designation) Regulations 2026

This SI specifically designates those television selection services that will be captured by the new prominence regime introduced by the Media Act 2024.

To support the future sustainability of our public service broadcasters, the Media Act introduced a new prominence regime into the Communications Act 2003 that will require particular TV platforms—referred to in the Act as “regulated television selection services”—to carry and give appropriate prominence to designated public service broadcaster video-on-demand apps. Once commenced, this new regime will ensure that UK viewers can continue to find the public service media content they value on-demand.

In order to be captured by the new prominence framework, a television selection service must be designated by the Secretary of State via statutory instrument, following advice from Ofcom. Ofcom issued its draft advice on 22 July 2025, which it consulted on, and then issued its final statement on 16 December 2025. I confirmed on 24 February that, having thoroughly reviewed Ofcom's advice and considered all stakeholder responses, I was minded to agree to Ofcom's recommended list of designations set out in its final report. I am now bringing forward this SI to make those designations.

This SI marks an important milestone in the implementation of the Media Act 2024 and concludes the Department's work on the designation of which television selection services are in-scope of the new prominence regime.

The Regulated Electronic Programme Guide (Prescribed Description and Transitional Arrangements) Regulations 2026

This SI was announced in the same February statement referred to above, along with the On-demand Programme Services (Tier 1 Services) Regulations. The SI updates the meaning of a regulated electronic programme guide (EPG), extending vital audience protections and accessibility requirements to newer TV guide services, such as Sky Glass and Freely. Any TV channel that can be accessed through a regulated EPG will also be within Ofcom's remit and therefore required to have a broadcast licence.

Furthermore, the regulations will address a regulatory loophole in the existing framework whereby some TV guide services fall outside regulation despite being easily accessible through regulated services.

[HCWS33]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Bill Select Committee Report: MOD Response

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): The Ministry of Defence welcomes the Select Committee's special report on the Armed Forces Bill 2026, HC 1712.

The Department continues to support the appointment of a Select Committee for Armed Forces Bills, recognising that their work ensures transparency and proper scrutiny of the legislation.

I am extremely grateful for this Committee's thorough and constructive consideration of the Bill. The report reflects the Committee's support for the improvements that this Government are seeking to make through this Bill: to deliver better housing, better support and better protections for our armed forces personnel, and to provide for the expansion and earlier mobilisation of the strategic reserves.

The Committee's conclusions and recommendations have been considered, and detailed responses have been provided in the attached MOD response. A copy of the MOD response has also been placed in the Library of the House and published on the Armed Forces Bill 2026 page at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/armed-forces-bill-2026>

I am pleased that the vast majority of the Committee's recommendations are supported. This includes the two at paragraphs 20 and 65, which recommend minor amendments to the provisions for the covenant legal duty extension and to protections orders respectively. The Government intend to bring forward amendments to make these changes.

There are, however, a small number of recommendations that the Department does not support or is unable to accept in full. For these recommendations, a detailed explanation of the Department's position has been provided or an alternative approach has been set out, as appropriate.

Given the Committee's considerable interest in the practical implementation of the armed forces covenant legal duty, and for transparency purposes to aid discussions during the remaining Bill stages, the Ministry of Defence is also publishing today on gov.uk a draft version of the statutory guidance. This guidance has been developed collaboratively across Government to ensure it is fit for purpose, and feedback on it will continue to be sought from a wide range of stakeholders.

I look forward to continuing to engage with Members across the House as the Bill progresses through its remaining stages in the Commons.

Attachments can be found at <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-05-19/HCWS41>

[HCWS41]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Maternity Adviser

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (James Murray): I am today announcing the appointment of Michelle Welsh MP as a maternity adviser to the Department of Health and Social Care.

Improving the safety of maternity and neonatal services and the experiences of women and their families is a key priority for me as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and for this Government. We are committed to acting with urgency, transparency and accountability to drive improvements in care, working closely with families, clinicians and stakeholders. A central part of this work will be tackling the unacceptable inequalities in outcomes that persist across maternity and neonatal services.

Michelle Welsh MP will provide me, and my Department, with independent advice to support the Government aim of improving the quality of care for women, babies and their families in NHS maternity and neonatal care, and to reduce the stark inequalities faced by so many.

The new DHSC maternity adviser will support my Department to deliver for maternity services by:

Providing advice on improving the quality of care in maternity and neonatal services, including addressing inequalities in outcomes and access to care. This will include supporting the Department to agree priority areas and deliverables to support improvement, drawing on the experiences of women and families, available evidence, stakeholder views and her own experience and expertise.

Supporting and driving forward the work of the national maternity and neonatal taskforce, including by chairing the parliamentary and mayoral panel and as a member of the taskforce.

Engaging with stakeholders, including families and under-represented groups, to ensure that a wide range of perspectives inform the Government work to improve maternity and neonatal care, particularly those experiencing health disparities.

This appointment, alongside the membership of the national maternity and neonatal taskforce, and the expert reference groups that feed into it, bring together the depth and breadth of expertise and experience needed to truly drive forward the taskforce's urgent work to improve maternity and neonatal care.

The taskforce will oversee the development of a new national action plan based on the findings and recommendations of the national maternity and neonatal independent investigation led by Baroness Amos, and by holding the system to account for implementation of the action plan and for improvements in care and experiences for women, babies and families, and for the experiences of staff.

The action plan will also consider any recommendations from other reviews and inquiries that have national implications, including the independent review of maternity and neonatal care at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust. It will tackle the systemic issues in maternity and neonatal care, providing clear priorities for action so that the workforce is supported to ensure that women and families are listened to and provided with safe care, and so that truth, accountability and learning take place when things go wrong.

Transparency on how the national maternity and neonatal taskforce is delivering the necessary change is important for public accountability. To support this, today my Department will be publishing the taskforce's terms of reference, ways of working charter and summary note of the first meeting on gov.uk. We will also be publishing the names and organisations of those involved in the expert reference groups which support the work of the taskforce.

The appointment will take effect from Tuesday 19 May 2026 and is an unpaid role.

[HCWS42]

Mental Health Strategy for England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): I am today informing the House of the Government's plans to develop a new, once-in-a-generation, cross-Government strategy for mental health in England, which will be published later this year. The strategy will be informed by a call for evidence, alongside wider engagement, including through the ongoing independent review into prevalence and support for mental health conditions, ADHD and autism, and the modern service framework for severe mental illness. The call for evidence launched on Friday 15 May and will close on Friday 10 July.

Good mental health is central to our overall health, wellbeing and ability to participate fully in education, work and community life. Yet far too many people are experiencing mental health problems and distress, with over a quarter of young people now estimated to have a common mental health condition such as depression or anxiety.

The Government have already taken significant steps to improve mental health services. We have taken through landmark reform of the Mental Health Act 1983 and met our manifesto commitment to recruit an additional 8,500 additional mental health staff three years early, and we are expanding mental health support teams to reach every school and college by 2029. This is backed by a record £16.1 billion forecast to be spent on NHS mental health services this year.

However, we know that there is more to do, within and beyond the NHS. Demand for mental health support has risen rapidly, with long waits and too many people unable to access the right support when they need it. Despite sustained investment, systems remain too often reactive, fragmented and variable, with outcomes that fall short of what people and communities need.

It is time to go further and take a new approach. We want a mental health system and society that respond earlier and more proportionately to need, providing the right tools and intervening before distress escalates to crisis. We want a system organised around participation, not thresholds, where people can access timely, practical support that matches their needs and circumstances, and where support is joined up, with no wrong front door.

The 10-year health plan set out an ambitious vision for reform of the NHS, centred around three strategic shifts: hospital to community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention. The mental health strategy is the next stage of this Government's programme of reform,

and it will be informed by the independent review into prevalence and support for mental health conditions, ADHD and autism. This review, chaired by Professor Peter Fonagy and engaging with experts in the field, including people with lived experience, will make recommendations on how to shift from a system that responds late and is overly focused on diagnosis to one that responds earlier, more proportionately, and with improving participation in education and work in mind.

The Government have launched a call for evidence to build on the 10-year health plan engagement and collate practical implementation evidence with a focus on how we can turn our vision into action.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/informing-the-mental-health-strategy-for-england>

We welcome examples of good practice, from across the UK and internationally, and from across sectors, including schools, workplaces and community settings. Input is encouraged from the mental health sector and beyond, clinicians, local leaders and parliamentarians.

The mental health needs of autistic people and people with ADHD will also be reflected within the mental health strategy. We know that autistic people and people with ADHD face a much higher risk of developing a mental health condition, and that there is a need for integrated and equitable access to mental health services and support that is responsive to their needs, including appropriate adjustments to how services are designed and delivered.

Separately, we will develop and publish a new cross-Government autism strategy, as required under the Autism Act 2009. This will be informed by all relevant evidence, reviews and reports, including the recommendations from the House of Lords Autism Act 2009 Inquiry Committee report and the ongoing independent review into prevalence and support for mental health conditions, ADHD and autism. As part of this work, we will consider and seek the views of stakeholders as to whether the new autism strategy should be extended to cover ADHD.

The strategy will be aligned with relevant modern service frameworks and the suicide prevention strategy for England.

Transforming the mental health system will take time, but we are committed to delivering a new approach that enables people to stay well, participate fully in society and access the right support at the right time.

[HCWS36]

Hantavirus Outbreak Response: Regulatory Changes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): On 10 May, the UK Government safely returned all remaining British nationals on board the MV Hondius. With some passengers having returned to England earlier than this, and with the arrival for monitoring of a number of individuals from UK Overseas territories who had contact with passengers, I would like to inform the House that, as of Monday 18 May 2026, the following amendments have been laid and come into force:

The Health Protection (Notification) (Amendment) Regulations 2026 amend the Health Protection (Notification) Regulations 2010 to include hantavirus disease, including

hantavirus pulmonary or cardiopulmonary syndrome and haemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome as a notifiable disease in schedule 1 (“Hanta virus” is already included within the list of causative agents in schedule 2).

The National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 2015 have been amended to include hantavirus in schedule 1. They have also been amended to exempt overseas visitors from NHS charging for schedule 1 diseases, where the person was brought to the UK in agreement with the UK Government for treatment or quarantine for a schedule 1 disease.

The public health assessment remains that the risk to the public is very low. I would like to pay tribute to the staff from across the health system, particularly regional health protection teams, for their ongoing efforts to support the hantavirus response and protect the public’s health. The amendments that came into force yesterday will support the UK Health Security Agency and our health partners to swiftly identify, treat and control the disease, and reduce potential financial barriers to overseas visitors in England who require NHS-funded secondary care services in relation to hantavirus.

Health Protection (Notification) Regulations 2010

As of 6 pm on 18 May 2026, hantavirus disease—including hantavirus pulmonary or cardiopulmonary syndrome and haemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome—is a notifiable disease and there is now an explicit legal duty on doctors in England to notify the proper officer of the relevant local authority if they see a patient who they suspect of having hantavirus disease. While we believe cases have been reliably notified to date, this amendment puts beyond doubt the legal obligation of doctors to report cases of suspected hantavirus disease. Placing a legal duty on doctors to report suspected hantavirus disease and provide the relevant patient information—as set out in the regulations—will strengthen our understanding of the virus and its transmission within the England and, if required, support the implementation of timely infection prevention and control measures.

There is already a legal duty on laboratories to notify the UKHSA if they identify hantavirus when they test a human sample in England, as “Hanta virus” is already included within the list of notifiable causative agents at schedule 2 of the regulations.

National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 2015 (“the charging regulations”)

NHS charging regulations require providers of NHS-funded secondary care to make charges to people not ordinarily resident in the UK—overseas visitors—except where an exemption category applies.

We acted swiftly, and as of 6 pm on 18 May 2026, we ensured that, should an overseas visitor in England need NHS-funded secondary care services in respect of hantavirus disease, hantavirus pulmonary or cardiopulmonary syndrome and haemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome, they will not be charged. Providing such services without charge removes a potential financial barrier to overseas visitors presenting for NHS-funded secondary care, therefore ensuring that the risk to the public’s health from infected visitors is minimised. This brings hantavirus disease into line with most other infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and covid-19.

The inclusion of hantavirus disease in schedule 1 of the charging regulations means that overseas visitors will not be charged for the diagnosis and treatment of

hantavirus disease. We have also amended the charging regulations so that any charges already incurred for hantavirus disease since 1 May 2026 must be cancelled or, if paid, must be refunded.

We have also amended the charging regulations so that diagnosis and treatment for a disease in schedule 1 will remain exempt from charging, provided that the overseas visitor travelled to the UK by means of transport that has been agreed with, or funded by, the Secretary of State for supported repatriation or travel to the UK for the purposes of quarantine. This amendment will apply to all schedule 1 diseases.

[HCWS43]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Biometrics Commissioner Valedictory Report: 2024-25

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones):

I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today publishing the valedictory report of the Biometrics Commissioner, Francesca Whitelaw KC.

The Biometrics Commissioner is appointed under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 and provides independent oversight of the retention and use of biometric material by the police and other authorities.

This report covers casework data from January 2024 to March 2025 and includes reflections on the commissioner’s interim tenure from July to October 2025. It provides transparency on the oversight of national security determinations and applications made under section 63G of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and sets out recommendations for operational improvements.

The report does not contain material requiring exclusion for reasons of national security or public interest.

The report has been laid before the House and will be available from the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

[HCWS39]

HMICFRS Inspection Report: National Crime Agency’s Effectiveness and Efficiency

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The National Crime Agency is an intelligence-led crime fighting agency that leads and co-ordinates the UK law enforcement operational response to serious and organised crime and protects the public by targeting the highest harm groups and networks.

His Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services has finalised its first graded inspection of the agency as an organisation, following previous inspections examining thematic areas of the agency’s work. The inspection assessed the NCA’s effectiveness and efficiency in fulfilling its statutory crime reduction and criminal intelligence functions, and the extent to which leadership, strategic direction and the culture within the NCA contribute to the discharge of those functions.

I welcome the findings of the inspection. I have asked HMICFRS to publish the report. It will be published today and will be available online at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk> I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inspectorate graded the NCA as “good” for achieving its strategic priorities, investigating SOC and leading collaboration; “adequate” in understanding SOC threats; and “requires improvement” for managing finances and building the workforce.

HMICFRS found that the agency collaborates effectively with a wide range of partners and maintains a strong global presence. Inspectors also recognised innovative practice in the use of child protection advisers, which has improved investigations and accelerated responses from partners in sensitive cases.

However, the inspectorate also reported that the NCA must urgently strengthen its IT capability and strategy, identifying this as a cause of concern. It highlighted the need for substantial investment and co-ordinated action to transform the agency’s IT. To address this, the Home Office has supported the NCA in significantly increasing its capital departmental expenditure limit budget from £173 million in 2025-26 to £224 million in 2028-29—which should enable the NCA to address its technology debt and advance its transformation programme, delivering greater efficiencies and productivity gains. The inspectorate also noted that more could be done to support, develop and retain a highly skilled workforce. The spending review settlement will support this process as the agency’s core revenue departmental expenditure limit will increase from £619 million in 2025-26 to £715 million in 2026-27.

Overall, the inspectorate has made three recommendations linked to one cause of concern and 10 areas of improvement. These recommendations will support the agency’s continuing work to enhance its IT and address the challenges identified. The agency accepts the findings and steps are already being taken to address the challenges highlighted during the inspection. I want to thank HMICFRS for this vital inspection.

I have asked my officials to work closely with the NCA and HMICFRS to deliver the necessary changes and ensure recommendations align with the proposals I set out in the White Paper on police reform on 26 January. This included plans to create a new national police service which, in its final state, will bring together national and cross-border policing capabilities, including the NCA. The new national police service will drive efficiencies, reduce duplication and deliver the capabilities needed to respond to national and international threats. The necessary legislative provisions to establish the national police service will be included in the police reform Bill announced in the King’s Speech on 13 May.

[HCWS40]

High Streets Organised Crime Unit Launch

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I am today announcing the launch of the Government’s high streets organised crime unit, a new cross-Government unit designed to strengthen our response to money laundering, tax evasion, illegal working and other forms of organised criminality taking place on our high streets.

The criminal exploitation of the high street has a significant impact on local communities, undermining the vibrancy and safety of neighbourhoods and eroding public trust in legitimate businesses. It undermines competition, discourages investment and contributes to the decline of once-thriving high streets. Residents feel less safe, while honest business owners struggle to compete against those circumventing the law.

The National Crime Agency assesses that it is likely that at least £1 billion is laundered through a wide range of high street businesses in the UK each year. Despite significant operational efforts currently under way across law enforcement and local partners, action has too often been fragmented and reactive in nature, with no single mechanism to drive a coherent, system-wide response.

To address this gap, the high streets organised crime unit has been convened to deliver a unified, strategic and system-wide response. The unit will bring together key Government Departments, policing partners and local authorities to deliver long-term policy solutions to high street organised criminality, enhance intelligence sharing, and support both communities and legitimate businesses to prosper.

In line with the commitment made at the autumn Budget, the work of the unit will be supported by £10 million of funding to enhance the operational response to money laundering and related organised crime on the high street. This funding will provide for:

- An increase in National Crime Agency officers dedicated to tackling high street money laundering and associated criminality;

- Dedicated operational activity by Greater Manchester police, West Midlands police, and by a joint Kent police and Essex police unit;

- An annual national multi-agency crackdown on money laundering through the high street and associated criminality;

- Increased local authority capacity to strengthen trading standards and wider business compliance on the high street;

- An HMRC-led targeted surge against tax evasion and illicit finance on the high street; and

- A communications and compliance campaign aimed at high street businesses, focused on raising awareness of illegal working.

Through this funding, the Government are empowering law enforcement agencies, local authorities and community partners to protect our high streets, disrupt criminal activity and support thriving local businesses. As a result of the funding, I expect to see:

- A surge in enforcement targeting organised crime’s exploitation of high street businesses;

- Local authorities, regulators and police equipped with the necessary tools, data and co-ordination to identify, investigate and disrupt high street criminality; and

- Communities experiencing fewer harms and feeling more confident in their local high streets, supporting thriving businesses.

Tackling organised criminality on the high street is only one component of a larger strategy to revitalise the UK’s high streets. As such, this unit supports the work of the Government’s high streets strategy to protect communities and create resilient, thriving high streets, led by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I will update the House on progress as the unit develops its strategic policy recommendations.

[HCWS32]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Access to Work Backlog

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden) The Access to Work scheme plays an important role in supporting disabled people and people with health conditions in, and into, work. The core ambition of the scheme is to ensure that disability is never a barrier to, or in, the workplace. The scheme is highly valued by the many disabled people it supports, disabled people's organisations and employers.

Demand for Access to Work has risen sharply since the pandemic, with more than double the number of applications in 2024-25 than in 2018-19. Alongside this, we inherited a substantial backlog of around 57,000 cases awaiting a decision beyond the expected timescales.

I know how frustrating these delays are, and the impact they can have on the recruitment and retention of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions.

That is why we have already increased the number of staff working on Access to Work by around 30%—from 500 in March 2024 to 657 in March 2026—and continued to prioritise applications where a customer is due to start work within four weeks.

Thanks to the action and hard work of our colleagues, we have eliminated delays in making payments and cleared around 96% of cases where a customer was due to start work in four weeks within 28 days.

This is important progress, but there is more to do.

Today I am announcing a clear plan of action to clear the backlog in applications by September 2027.

We will recruit an additional 480 case staff to process the higher volume of applications. When recruitment is complete, we will have more than twice as many staff working on Access to Work as in March 2024. The recruitment process has already begun, and new case managers will receive extensive training to handle complex applications with confidence. This will ensure that disabled people and people with health conditions can receive timely support to secure and sustain employment.

This comes alongside wider work on Keep Britain Working, where Government are partnering with employers and stakeholders to develop practices and approaches to better support disabled people and those with health conditions in the workplace.

It is also important that we consider wider changes to the Access to Work scheme. We are keen to ensure that the scheme remains fair and sustainable. I know how important Access to Work is to the people it supports, so it is important that we take the time to get reforms right to deliver real improvements.

I have taken the time to consult widely and to collaborate with and gather evidence from disabled people, employers and representative bodies. I am now considering the insights from the collaboration committee process, the recent National Audit Office report and work with the independent disability advisory panel to help shape potential wider changes to the scheme.

This announcement is a great step to help deliver an Access to Work that is timely and efficient and can meet the new levels of demand. It will restore confidence in the capability of the scheme to award the right support at the right time, and sets a pathway towards wider improvements.

[HCWS34]

Petitions

Tuesday 19 May 2026

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Compensation Following South East Water Outages

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.—[Presented by Mims Davies, *Official Report*, 28 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 870.]

[P003195]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

We recognise the serious disruption caused by recent South East Water outages, and the impact these outages have had on businesses in East Grinstead, Uckfield and the surrounding villages. The Government also note concerns that the compensation offered to date has not been adequate, and that current arrangements do not always reflect the end impact on businesses where landlords, rather than businesses themselves, pay the water bill.

All customers of water and sewerage companies are entitled to guaranteed minimum standards of service, known as the guaranteed standards scheme. GSS is designed to provide swift, automatic compensation where standards are not met, recognising disruption and inconvenience.

Where a company fails to meet any of the standards, it is required to make a specified payment to the affected household or business customer. The Government announced a major update to the GSS as part of its initial package of water sector reforms in July 2025. This represented a step change in the level of compensation available to businesses during prolonged outages, reflecting the impact that loss of water can have on business activity.

For household customers we have increased the minimum payment from an initial payment of £20 and an additional £10 for each subsequent 24 hours where the supply is not restored, to an initial payment of £50 and an additional £50 for each subsequent 12 hours.

For business customers we have increased the minimum payment from an initial payment of £50 and an additional £25 for each subsequent 24 hours where the supply is not restored, to an initial payment of £100 and an additional £100 for each subsequent 12 hours.

The total value of GSS payments made by companies in England was £6 million in 2024-25. Companies publish the total value of GSS payments in their annual performance reports. We therefore expect to receive data for 2025-26 in summer 2026.

To strengthen how complaints are handled in the sector, we will establish a new water ombudsman, which will be approved and overseen by the regulator. It will have powers to ensure that all customers, including businesses, can access legally binding resolutions if water companies fail to effectively and fairly resolve complaints.

The Government published their “A new vision for water” White Paper on 20 January 2026, setting out once-in-a-generation reforms to the water system that will secure a fair deal for customers and the environment, and rebuild public trust in the system.

The White Paper set out plans for a new, powerful single regulator and a chief engineer, as part of stronger, prevention-first regulation and a whole-sector approach. This will ensure that there is nowhere to hide if there is poor performance, including failures that lead to prolonged outages affecting households and local businesses. These reforms build on action already taken to ban unfair bonuses, secure record levels of investment and introduce tougher laws across the sector.

This will replace the current fragmented system with one regulator that is capable of integrated management of the water system. It will be able to deliver better services for customers, joined-up regulation and a cleaner environment for nature and the public. Its core mission will be to deliver fair and effective regulation that protects and improves public health, safeguards the environment and drives investment—ensuring trust, accountability and value for all. It is intended that the new regulator will be established as soon as possible following Royal Assent of the future water reform Bill.

We have taken decisive action through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which delivered immediate measures to tackle poor performance, including banning unfair executive bonuses. More than £4 million of unfair bonuses were rightly blocked by Ofwat for 2024-25. In light of the recent unacceptable outages, South East Water’s chief executive rightly confirmed to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in April that he will not be receiving a bonus for 2025-26. Subsequently, he has confirmed that he will be stepping down after a successor is found. This follows the announcement on 1 May 2026 that Chris Train, the chair of South East Water, would be stepping down.

Through these reforms, we are addressing the causes of poor performance in the water sector, and strengthening protections for customers and businesses, following incidents such as those experienced in East Grinstead and Uckfield.

River Brue and water regulation

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glastonbury and Somerton,

Declares that the River Brue is a valued ecological area that supports local trout, eel and other fish populations; further declares that the River Brue was polluted by

sewage 203 times in 2025 lasting 2,716 hours; further notes with concern the high phosphate levels in the Brue; further notes the work done by groups such as the Brue Crew, Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Somerset Eel Recovery Project to campaign for the River Brue's health; further notes the use of the River Brue for recreational use and wild swimming; further declares that the Government should replace Ofwat with a stronger unified regulator; further declares that there should be full transparency on sewage discharges including mandatory reporting of volume as well as duration; further declares that there should be a shift to public benefit models for water companies that are mutually owned by customers and professionally managed to ensure profits are reinvested into infrastructure; and further declares that action should be taken to close loopholes that allow water company executives to avoid bonus restrictions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take further action to save the River Brue catchment, starting with replacing Ofwat with a stronger unified regulator, and enforcing full transparency on sewage discharges.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Sarah Dyke, Official Report*, 22 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 405.]

[P003189]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

Main Response:

We have begun rebuilding the water network to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas. In one of the largest infrastructure projects in this country's history, £104 billion is being invested to upgrade crumbling pipes and sewage treatment works across the country.

Water companies are investing over £10 billion, a record amount, to improve nearly 2,500 storm overflows across England by 2030.

By 2050 we are expecting £60 billion of investment to have been delivered across England—this figure is set out in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs impact assessment for the storm overflows discharge reduction plan. Guided by the plan, improvements in this price review are being front-loaded in the most urgent areas. We are expecting water companies first to tackle the worst-polluting and most harmful storm overflows, prioritising those discharging near designated bathing waters and into or near high-priority sites.

Customer bills earmarked for investment must now be spent on new sewage pipes and treatment works, not spent on shareholder payments or bonuses. The Government have taken decisive action through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which delivered immediate measures to tackle poor performance, including banning unfair executive bonuses. More than £4 million of unfair bonuses were rightly blocked by Ofwat for 2024-25.

We are aware that concerns have been noted about a lack of transparency regarding reporting of executive pay in the water sector. The Government will not tolerate any company attempting to circumvent the bonus rule by introducing salary increases to offset any bonus losses, such as via new financial vehicles, payments through parent companies, or any other mechanism. Ofwat has consulted on tightening requirements. Companies are now required to publicly report the total remuneration

received by each director and a breakdown of the different elements of that remuneration—for example, base salary, performance-related pay and other benefits—including explanations of what each element of pay relates to, across regulated, group and parent companies.

The Environment Agency attends pollution incidents in the Brue catchment. Where there is significant harm to the environment, the EA will not hesitate to take the appropriate enforcement action.

Under AMP8 (2025 to 30) of the water industry national environment programme, Wessex Water is undertaking the following measures within the Brue catchment:

Investigation of 11 storm overflows identified as frequently spilling, to determine the contributing factors and to identify measures to reduce spill frequency and associated environmental risk.

In agreement with the Environment Agency, delivery of innovative nature-based treatment trial solutions at three storm overflows by March 2030. The trials are intended to reduce the environmental impact of these discharges and to ensure no ecological harm to the River Brue.

Installation of event duration monitoring at 13 wastewater pumping stations that hold permits only for emergency overflows, in accordance with regulatory requirements.

Upgrades at seven wastewater treatment works to achieve compliance with tightened phosphorus permit limits.

Upgrades at Shepton Mallet wastewater treatment works to meet a new zinc improvement limit.

The EA, between April 2025 and March 2026, has inspected 60 of Wessex Water's 84 permitted sites in the Brue catchment. Where the EA found issues, it required Wessex Water to improve its sites and operations. This was part of a national programme to increase scrutiny of water companies. The EA will return to previously inspected sites to confirm that improvements have been made.

To fund its tougher inspections and enforcement regime, the EA has increased its water quality charges to £149 million from 2025-26, ensuring that water companies pay the cost of regulating the sector. In March 2026 the EA hit a key milestone, completing over 10,000 inspections of water company assets in the last 12 months.

The White Paper sets out our intention to establish a new powerful single regulator, bringing together the relevant functions from the existing regulators into one new body, as part of stronger, prevention-first regulation and a whole-sector approach for tackling water pollution and protecting the environment and public health. That means nowhere to hide poor performance, building on action already taken to ban bonuses, to ensure that bills are fair and affordable, to secure record levels of investment and to introduce tougher laws in the sector.

It is important that water companies fit the most appropriate type of monitors to ensure that we gain valuable information on sewage discharges. Installing the type of monitor required to accurately and reliably measure the volume of a sewage discharge would require significant investment and provide limited additional insight into the impact of a discharge. Instead, we are choosing to focus on the roll-out of continuous water quality monitoring, starting with CWQMs at 25% of storm overflows and wastewater treatment works by 2030. CWQMs will help quantify the local water quality impacts of sewerage undertaker assets on our water courses, increase public understanding of the same, and inform regulatory action and improvement programmes.

Supporting this approach, the Independent Water Commissioner acknowledged that measuring the impact, rather than the volume, of storm overflow discharges is the best approach to ensure that the effect on the environment is understood.

Regarding ownership models, the Independent Water Commission's final report found no link between ownership model and performance. Any mandatory changes in ownership would be costly and complicated, and would not deliver a material benefit to the public and the environment. As detailed in the White Paper, we are making it easier for a company's owners to change their ownership model, by ensuring that the new regulator has a transparent process to assess whether a change should go ahead.

River Wye pollution

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the River Wye has been in the headlines since 2020 as one of the UK's most polluted rivers, and that phosphate pollution is especially severe in the Rivers Lugg, Arrow and Frome; further declares that the Environment Agency's plan for reducing pollution levels in the river falls short of what is needed to fix the problem and restore the health of the river; and further declares that introducing a Water Protection Zone would formally identify all sources of pollution, specify who should do what and by when to reduce and prevent pollution, and restrict or ban certain polluting activities with penalties specified for polluters who fail to take the necessary action.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take further action to save the River Wye catchment, starting with formally evaluating the option of introducing a Water Protection Zone across the entire River Wye, as a mechanism to address phosphate pollution and restore the river.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Ellie Chowns, *Official Report*, 23 March 2026; Vol. 783, c. 113.]

[P003172]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):

The Government recognise that the levels of water pollution in the River Wye and its tributaries, including the Rivers Lugg, Arrow and Frome, are unacceptable. We recognise the strength of feeling expressed by the petitioners regarding the health of the River Wye and its tributaries and thank them for raising these concerns.

The River Wye is one of the UK's most important river systems, designated as a site of special scientific interest and a special area of conservation, reflecting its ecological value and the consequent need for careful, evidence-based management to protect and restore its habitats and species. The Government further recognise the value of the River Wye as a tourist attraction and important cultural and social asset for the people who live nearby.

Cleaning up our rivers, lakes and seas is a priority for this Government, and we know that this cannot be achieved without addressing agricultural pollution. This ambition is reflected in the recently published environment improvement plan, which sets clear goals and targets to

improve the quality of our environment, with delivery plans to meet each of our ambitious Environment Act targets. This includes an ambitious interim target to reduce total nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment losses from agriculture to the water environment by at least 12% by 2030, and by at least 18% in catchments containing protected sites in unfavourable condition due to nutrient pollution, such as the River Wye and its tributaries.

The Government are developing the strongest programme on record for tackling water pollution from agriculture by using all the levers available to us. These include:

Increasing regulatory compliance by doubling the funding to the Environment Agency farm inspections and regulatory enforcement team. This will enable them to conduct at least 6,000 inspections a year by 2029 and to work with farmers to raise standards, building on the 1,092 improvement actions issued over the last four years, covering practical improvements such as slurry storage and nutrient management planning.

Simplifying and strengthening regulations. Effective regulation is critical for addressing agricultural diffuse pollution and delivering our Environment Act target. As we announced in the water White Paper in January 2026, we will consolidate the agricultural water regulatory framework into a single, clear and robust regulation and strengthen standards where necessary. We will continue to work with farming and environment groups in developing those changes.

Providing high-quality advice to farmers. Catchment sensitive farming (CSF) is designed to address the specific needs of each farm, offering local expert advice, training, and grant support. Grants provide support for capital items that benefit water quality, such as fencing to prevent livestock from entering watercourses, and improving drainage systems to manage run-off more effectively.

Funding farmers to take action to reduce water pollution. Funding for environmental land management schemes will increase by 150% from £800 million in financial year 23/24 to £2 billion by financial year 28/29 and we are working actively to target this to help address water pollution, protect nature, and support thriving biodiversity across our landscapes. Further action being taken specifically targeted at the Wye Valley includes:

Delivery of the diffuse water pollution plan for the River Wye special area of conservation produced by the Environment Agency and Natural England. This sets out the evidence base, priorities and an action plan to address nutrient and sediment pressures, alongside ongoing monitoring, regulation and partnership delivery. To improve river health, they are working with local authorities, water companies, farmers and environmental groups.

Delivery of practical research into the causes of pollution in the catchment, and to identify effective measures to improve water quality. The UK and Welsh Governments recently appointed a consortium, led by UWE Bristol, which will deliver the £1 million research programme. The team will work alongside farmers, land managers and local communities to understand agricultural challenges impacting water quality in the River Wye catchment. They will identify and test the most effective, practical interventions to reduce agricultural pollution entering the River Wye, and to produce evidence that Governments and farmers can act on. Researchers at UWE Bristol will work directly with farmers through a series of living labs on real working farms where practical solutions to agricultural pollution can be developed and tested with the people who know the land best.

As part of our water reforms, the Government are also seeking to introduce regional water planning to galvanise action to tackle the most urgent challenges across the water system, such as water quality in the River Wye and its tributaries. Regional planning will aim to bring councils, water companies, farmers and developers together to deliver joined-up local plans to tackle river pollution and protect water supply. The Government recognise the importance of local communities ensuring that local needs and circumstances are taken into account in regional water planning. That is why we

have doubled funding for catchment partnerships, to enable greater stakeholder engagement and the identification and delivery of cost-effective and nature-based solutions.

Our priority is to work with farmers, business people, environmental groups and other stakeholders in the Wye Valley to increase regulatory compliance under the existing regime, identify solutions and drive action to deliver them, which is key for water quality in the River Wye and its tributaries to be improved. We will keep this under review and if an application for a water protection zone order is made, this will be duly considered by the Secretary of State.

Upton Heath

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Upton Heath is a vital natural asset to the people of Mid Dorset and North Poole; notes that Upton Heathland is a protected Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation; and further declares that local people oppose the use of Upton Heath for mineral extraction, which could damage biodiversity in the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take action to secure the preservation of the whole of Upton Heath as a public natural asset.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Vikki Slade, *Official Report*, 16 April 2026; Vol. 783, c. 1084.]

[P003186]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):

Protecting our most precious natural habitats is a priority for this Government. Upton Heath is a nationally and internationally important site, designated as a site of special scientific interest, a special protection area and a special area of conservation, and it is right that local people have taken action to protect it for the future.

I am pleased to note that Dorset Wildlife Trust has recently secured the purchase of a key parcel of land at Upton Heath, supported by Dorset council, Bournemouth,

Christchurch and Poole council, and a remarkable public fundraising effort that raised over £100,000 in just two weeks. This is a significant and welcome step, and the immediate risk of mineral extraction on that parcel has been removed.

However, I recognise that this acquisition does not fully resolve the concerns raised in the petition. DWT previously managed the land, but that arrangement was not renewed by the previous owner and the condition of the heathland has since been in decline. Records from the last 20 years show that Upton is one of the heathlands most impacted by fire in all of Dorset. There has also been unregulated use of motorcycles and BMX bikes, causing erosion and a loss of habitat, and preventing restorative actions. Restoration work is needed to reinstate heathland, deliver conservation benefits and improve public access.

The absence of active management has increased the vulnerability of the site. Without grazing to manage vegetation, fire risk is significantly elevated, and without a single landowner, it has not been possible to install firebreaks or restore the hydrology of the former mineral workings. As the majority landowner, DWT is now best placed to do that.

Natural England, as the statutory body responsible for protected sites, has already contacted Dorset Wildlife Trust to discuss the long-term management of Upton Heath, and is supporting it and other partners, including Dorset council, BCP council and the Dorset Heaths Partnership, to develop a restoration and management plan for the heath.

Funding for the ongoing work is likely to come primarily through Countryside Stewardship, a Government scheme that supports landowners and managers in their actions to manage habitats, protect wildlife and improve public access to the countryside. Another potential source of funding is the Dorset heathlands planning framework, a fund contributed to by housing developers, which can cover things like wardens, visitor management and physical improvements to the site. The remarkable public fundraising effort to save Upton Heath also presents a valuable opportunity to engage the community in caring for and using the heath responsibly in the years ahead.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 19 May 2026

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