

**Wednesday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 20 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

Wednesday 20 May 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the private Members' Bill ballot book is open today in the No Lobby until 6 pm. It will then be taken into the Public Bill Office and remain open for signatures until the rise of the House. The ballot draw will be held at 9 am tomorrow in Committee Room 16.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Child Protection Online

1. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): If she will take urgent steps to protect children online. [900050]

10. **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): If she will take urgent steps to protect children online. [900061]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): Ensuring that children have healthy and safe lives online is one of my top priorities. From making cyber-flashing and self-harm and suicide content the subject of priority offences under the Online Safety Act 2023 to banning nudification apps and standing up to Grok and X, I will leave no stone unturned to ensure that children are protected. Our consultation on growing up online closes next Tuesday, so there is still time to respond. I will bring forward proposals before the summer, and I intend to pass any legislation required by the end of the year.

Douglas McAllister: Many of my constituents are rightly worried about the harms that children face online, including exposure to self-harm content, online bullying and addictive platform design. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that the Government's consultation on banning social media for under-16s will result in decisive action, and ensure that any measures that are introduced are effective, proportionate and capable of keeping pace with rapidly changing technology?

Liz Kendall: Yes, that is absolutely my objective. I remind the House that our consultation is looking at not just whether there should be a ban on social media for under-16s but a whole range of other issues, including whether platforms should be required to switch off addictive features, whether there should be mandatory overnight curfews, whether there should be age or other restrictions on artificial intelligence chatbots, how age verification should be strengthened, and how to help children and parents navigate the online world and thrive. We are determined to act, and we will be prepared to act on all of those issues.

Michelle Welsh: Too often, children are exposed to harmful content online, with material promoting pornography and self-harm pushed towards them. Childhood should not be handed over to algorithms. As a mum, I know that parents are terrified that social media companies are putting profit before protection. Does the Secretary of State agree that not only should social media companies step up, but it is time to legislate to ensure that they take active steps to protect our children online?

Liz Kendall: Yes, I do agree. We have legislated, and we are prepared to go further. I have already made strangulation and suffocation in porn a priority offence under the Online Safety Act. We are determined to ensure that rules about what happens in online pornography are the same as the rules for what happens offline, and we are coming forward with proposals on that. This is something that deeply worries parents across the country. The question is not whether we act but how, and I am determined to use all possible levers to protect children online.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Big tech is a force for good, but so often it is used for bad. Is there not a fundamental conflict of interest for this Government, and even the previous Government, in that big tech companies are so embedded in Government Departments and agencies that the Government are not prepared to take the tough action necessary to protect children and the most vulnerable? Is it not the case that big tech companies are not paying taxes to this country and are avoiding substantive regulation, and that the Government now believe that big tech is too big to fail?

Liz Kendall: Not for the first time, and not for the last time, the right hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important issue. He may not be aware that we have made the decisive move to back more British tech companies, because we believe that as artificial intelligence and tech become the engine of economic and hard power, we need more sovereign control.

There are many wonderful examples of technology provided by big tech companies. I have seen that in my own constituency, with AI tutors to help poor kids catch up. We want to make sure that the benefits of technology are felt by everybody in this country, not just a powerful few, and that we shape this powerful technology, so that it works for all. I say to the right hon. Gentleman: watch this space, because there will be more to come.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): New polling commissioned by the Online Safety Act Network shows that almost 80% of the public want comprehensive laws regulating social media platforms, because otherwise those platforms will continue to prioritise their business interests over users' safety. The Government have been weak on that and had no new online safety legislation in the King's Speech. Will the Secretary of State at least move quickly to adopt the network's safety by design code, in order to deliver the comprehensive reforms that the public want?

Liz Kendall: I remind the hon. Lady that I have already made it a requirement in law that chatbots must protect users from illegal content. I banned nudification apps, through a new criminal offence. We are requiring

platforms to take down non-consensual intimate images within 48 hours, and we are requiring platforms to act faster on all those things. It is not true to say that we have not legislated to go further to protect children online. Is she right that there is more to do? Absolutely, and we will act.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The original sin underpinning many of today's digital harms is engagement-driven digital advertising. That is what incentivised the platforms to hook young people on infinite scrolling, as members of FlippGen explained to me when I met them on Monday. It is also what drives the "London is broken" misinformation that Sadiq Khan highlighted, and what rewards the fabricated clickbait AI Auschwitz images called out by the Auschwitz Museum. Will the Secretary of State take steps to regulate digital advertising, as the Committee called for in its report published almost a year ago?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is right: follow the money. I am highly aware of that, and we are determined to act. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital Government and Data is chairing the digital advertising taskforce, which is a joint effort between this Department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to look at precisely these issues, because we want to ensure that illegal and harmful content is not rewarded.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): When a child views an inappropriate image online, they cannot unsee it. I have been horrified recently by the number of parents coming to me about inappropriate ads popping up on kids' digital games. Some of the images are horrendous, and children are viewing them at a very early age. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss this ongoing issue?

Liz Kendall: I or one of my Ministers will meet the hon. Member. She is right to say that once you have seen something, you cannot unsee it. That is especially true for young minds. We all know that young children will wake up in the night and talk to us about things that they remember seeing, but do not understand because they are too young. Either one of my Ministers or I will be more than happy to meet her, see those images for ourselves, and speak to Ofcom and others about what we can do to try to stop that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Does the Secretary of State regret having been forced into a ban on social media for under-16s during proceedings on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, rather than having committed to a ban the first place, or introducing a Bill in the King's Speech?

Liz Kendall: No.

EU Regulatory Alignment: Science and Technology

2. **Charlie Dewhurst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): What discussions she has had with the science and technology sector on closer regulatory alignment with the EU. [900051]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Llywydd. Ministers from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology regularly meet representatives from science and technology communities. The UK has seized the moment on AI, quantum and semiconductors. We will keep building British sovereign strength, and alongside that, we will work with allies across the European Union.

Charlie Dewhurst: European tech leaders in some member states are concerned that the EU's approach to digital regulation is strangling their ability to compete. Will the Minister rule out binding the UK tech industry to a legal framework that could stifle growth in this vital area of the economy?

Kanishka Narayan: The feedback from UK tech businesses has been clear: Britain's share of European venture capital investment is at its highest for 16 years. IT and technology are driving productivity upwards, alongside capital from the British Business Bank and Sovereign AI. Of course, we will work on redoing what was done through the botched Brexit deal, but alongside that we will maintain British sovereign strength in technology and AI.

Digital Inclusion

3. **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): What steps she is taking to support grassroots organisations working to improve digital inclusion. [900053]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Mr James Frith): The Labour Government are the first in a decade to publish a digital inclusion action plan, to ensure that everybody benefits from our digital society. Seventy-three per cent of the £11.9 million digital inclusion innovation fund supported charities, many of them grassroots organisations. Through the digital ID work that I lead, we are supporting digital inclusion, and we are engaging expert grassroots organisations directly to ensure that we get this right, and that they are included.

Josh Babarinde: NHS Sussex found that Eastbourne, despite being the sunniest town in the UK, is one of the most digitally excluded patches of Sussex. Great organisations, such as TechResort, run by Liz Crew and Will Callaghan, help bridge the digital divide. However, they will be scuppered by the closing of the digital inclusion innovation fund; its last grant expired last month. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the reopening of that fund, and set out a timeline for that, so that TechResort can benefit?

Mr Frith: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point; I know that he has an excellent record in this area. The digital inclusion fund was designed as a one-year programme to allow us to understand what works in digital inclusion. I share his concerns. We remain committed to building a digitally inclusive society, and that includes our public services, which we are making more personalised, joined up and digital, so that everybody is included and benefits from them. We all expect our public services to be adequate, and as inclusive as they can be.

Growing up in the Online World: Consultation

4. **Fred Thomas** (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to help ensure that parents and children are able to engage with the consultation entitled “Growing up in the online world: a national consultation.” [900054]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): Making it as simple as possible for parents and children to get involved in our consultation is really important to me personally, because I know that this is an issue that so many families grapple with every single day. We have dedicated surveys for parents and young people. Almost 38,000 parents and 12,700 young people have completed the survey so far, and there are also other events that my Ministers and I have taken part in. However, there is still a week to go, so I say to anybody who is watching questions to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology: please, get involved and answer. We want to know what you think. We want your views, because we have to get this right.

Fred Thomas: I speak to parents in Plymouth on this topic regularly. Ninety-two per cent of parents are concerned about the impact of social media, but many just do not have time to take part in a lengthy consultation. I also note concerns raised about the framing of some of the questions in the consultation, including prompts to consider the benefits of social media. There is also an absence of any clear mechanism for considering evidence from medical experts and frontline professionals separately from submissions from tech companies, which obviously have a commercial interest in opposing any restrictions. There are also concerns about the use of AI to analyse responses. Will the Secretary of State confirm that those concerns will be taken into account when assessing the consultation results, and will she reiterate her commitment to taking bold and decisive action this summer?

Liz Kendall: Let me just reassure my hon. Friend on some of those points. We have had 38,000 parents respond to the surveys, which I think is good, but there is more to be done there. In terms of medical professionals, we have had a response from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, multiple individual medical doctors, Health Professionals for Safer Screens and local providers such as Cardiff children’s services. We also have an expert panel that is chaired by the eminent paediatrician Professor Russell Viner, and there are many psychologists and psychiatrists on that. We are actively seeking the views of medical professionals and parents. There is still a week to go. Many hon. Members have fed in views from their constituencies. I encourage everybody to do that in the remaining six days.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A considerable number of parents in my constituency have written to me concerned about their children’s safety and online dangers. They welcome the Government’s consultation but are concerned about the timing, and they would like reassurances about how quickly the matter will be dealt with. In the meantime, does the Secretary of State have any advice on how they can help their children deal with the threat?

Liz Kendall: We will come forward with proposals before the summer. We have already taken powers in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 to implement the results of that consultation, which I intend to do by the end of the year. In the meantime, we are not waiting. I have taken a number of steps to amend various Acts to give greater protection, and we also produced really brilliant advice for parents—“You Won’t Know until You Ask”—about how to talk to kids of different ages about social media. It is available for free online, and I have personally found it very helpful.

Artificial Intelligence

5. **Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): What steps she is taking to help ensure artificial intelligence is developed responsibly. [900055]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): There are three particular things that this Government are doing to make sure that artificial intelligence is developed responsibly, and developed here: first, we are building deep capability in Government, with the AI Security Institute; secondly, we are developing a wider AI assurance sector, so that Britain is at the frontier in this context; and thirdly, we are ensuring robust regulation at the point of use.

Iqbal Mohamed: Given the growing warnings from leading scientists, industry figures and Nobel laureates that advanced AI systems could pose existential risks on a par with nuclear or biological threats, does the Minister agree that the current reliance on voluntary commitments through the AI Security Institute is insufficient, and will he outline the concrete steps that the Government will now take to move beyond non-binding agreements, and to introduce enforceable, internationally agreed standards?

Kanishka Narayan: First, I would point out to the hon. Member that there is a series of regulations that apply to AI algorithms and systems at the point of use. Secondly, we have taken powers in the Crime and Policing Act 2026 that allow us to bring unregulated chatbots into the scope of that Act and its requirements on illegal content. Thirdly, through the AI Security Institute, Britain has been at the frontier internationally of thinking about policies and the best ways of developing our capability. This is across the mandatory regulatory contexts that I have just mentioned—and of course there are some voluntary requirements on top of that.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The AI Security Institute’s pre-release analysis of AI models did not prevent Grok’s production of over 3 million sexualised images. Even Steve Bannon, of all people, is now calling for mandatory pre-release vetting of AI models, so has the time come for the UK to review our voluntary approach?

Kanishka Narayan: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this topic, and for her deep expertise. On Grok, she will be aware that the regulatory and legal context made a number of those instances illegal. We will continue to enforce the law very robustly, and of course we have ongoing conversations on further policy.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Given the recent rapid advances of frontier AI models in areas such as identifying software vulnerabilities, and in rapid testing for those vulnerabilities in a very sophisticated way, what engagement do the Government have with those frontier companies, and particularly Anthropic? Are the Government considering making changes to the carried-over Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill to address these very real vulnerabilities?

Kanishka Narayan: On the question of engagement, I must first pay tribute to the AI Security Institute, which is one of the only labs in the world that engaged with all the frontier companies prior to the deployment of models, and in this case with Anthropic's Mythos model as well. On the broader question of the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill, a major reason why we brought data centres into scope was that we appreciate the cyber risks that apply to them. We will continue to keep that under review.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): One of the best ways to make sure that any AI developed contributes to innovation and growth is to set very high standards. We are lucky to have the British Standards Institute—the oldest standards institute in the world—and I am very lucky that it is based in Milton Keynes. Will the Minister join me in wishing it a huge happy birthday in this momentous year for it? What kind of engagement has he had with it on its work to set reassuringly high standards for AI's development?

Kanishka Narayan: My hon. Friend has been a remarkable champion for the BSI, on this and on wider issues as well. I will not sing "Happy Birthday", but I will certainly wish it a very happy birthday, and I look forward to continuing my conversations with it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Having worked across Departments and with my technology counterpart in the Lords, we have published a comprehensive paper on how Britain can thrive in the age of AI. It calls for a digital sovereign strategy and an integrated approach to AI that is bold, responsible, pro-innovation, pro-trust and built alongside industry and civic expertise. I would be happy to discuss this. We see Britain having a leading place in AI services, but we have squandered leads before, and the Government have not offered a coherent, joined-up strategy on how to do this differently, in a way that is centred on trust and standards. Where is the Government's AI Bill? Can we have guarantees that Labour's latest internal drama will not cost Britain its most important economic opportunity in a generation?

Kanishka Narayan: Can I gently point out to the hon. Lady that there is a very clear strategy? We set out the AI opportunities action plan early on, and we then built in a public dashboard, so that people right across the country can follow progress on the plan: 75% of it has been delivered, and just this week, we found out that IT and AI have driven productivity revivals for this country. We are firing on all cylinders when it comes to UK AI.

Topical Questions

T1. [900090] **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): This Government believe that Britain's national interests are strengthened, not diminished, when we work with like-minded countries. That is why next week I will be joining other G7 nations coming together as democracies to discuss how we shape tech and AI to work for all, and why I will be proud to showcase the best of Britain's AI strengths on the world stage at London Tech Week in June.

Clive Jones: Life science companies such as Becton Dickinson in my constituency play a key role in advancing the research and innovation that will help deliver the national cancer plan and transform cancer care. What is the Minister doing to increase funding on research and development for life science companies such as those in my constituency?

Liz Kendall: I know the hon. Gentleman is a powerful advocate of life sciences nationally and in his constituency. We see them as one of our greatest national assets, not only helping to save lives but drive jobs, growth and innovation. I am proud that this Government have made the largest ever investment in research and development, including in life sciences, and that we are investing £730,000 to support seven projects in Wokingham, because we know that is good for his constituents and the country.

T3. [900092] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know if I have ever told you, Mr Speaker, but Harlow is the birthplace of the fibre optic cable. I want children in Harlow to feel confident that they can get the brilliant jobs of the future that tech can provide for them. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that that happens?

Liz Kendall: We want to ensure that people from all walks of life and in every part of the country can seize the opportunities that tech and AI bring. That is why we are upskilling 10 million workers—a third of the workforce—in AI skills, why we are investing £170 million in the TechFirst programme to help young people get skills and training, and why we have launched the first ever level 4 apprenticeship in AI, so that young people in Harlow can fulfil their ambitions and we build a better country for all.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I was born in Harlow, would you believe it, Mr Speaker?

Can the Secretary of State guarantee that under Labour's EU reset, Britain will not align with any EU tech rules, including the AI Act?

Liz Kendall: This Government want to ensure that we have a closer relationship with Europe, because we see every day the terrible impacts that the Conservatives' Brexit deal brings. But I am also clear that we will continue our pragmatic, not dogmatic, approach to regulation, because Britain is the second country in the

western world in AI, and we want to retain those benefits to grow the economy and create good jobs throughout the country.

Julia Lopez: There was no clear answer from the Secretary of State. It sounds like Labour is about to trade away our Brexit freedoms on tech regulation, yet tech Ministers have been briefing behind the scenes that we must not lose Britain's Brexit freedoms on tech when it comes to AI, data and agritech. Will she now publicly admit what her Ministers have been briefing behind closed doors: Brexit was not some exercise in nostalgia pushed on us by uninformed thickos? It has given Britain a competitive advantage in the industries of the future.

Liz Kendall: Perhaps unusually, I do not listen to and never get involved in briefings, but I am very clear about the huge advantages this country has: world-leading talent and some of the most innovative tech start-ups. In the last year alone, we got more venture capital funding for tech and AI in this country than France and Germany combined. We are going to back Britain because we believe in Britain—£500 million in a sovereign AI fund and four AI growth zones in parts of the country that have been levelled up more under this Government than in 14 years under the Conservatives. We will seize this powerful technology to build a future that works for all, and I am proud of our work.

T6. [900096] **Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): My constituent Debbie Duncan set up a petition calling on the Government to tackle tragedy trolling, which has attracted over 18,000 signatures. Does the Minister agree that it is time for action, and will she support a debate to help take this forward?

Liz Kendall: We are absolutely focused on precisely those features that so many parents are worried about, including children doomscrolling and being on their phones overnight and the impact that that can have on their anxiety, mental health and sleep. The question is not whether we will act—we will. We will put forward our proposals by the summer and I intend to legislate, if required, by the end of the year.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900035] **Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 20 May.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): May I extend my deepest condolences, and I am sure the condolences of the House, to the family and colleagues of Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan, who lost her life in a tragic incident on Friday? She was an exceptional soldier and will be deeply missed.

It would be remiss of me not to comment on one of Manchester's great heroes moving on after almost a decade, so let me congratulate Pep Guardiola on all his success at Manchester City. If I could declare an interest, Mr Speaker, I would also like to say congratulations to Arsenal football club on becoming the premier league champions.

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

Kirsteen Sullivan: May I share the condolences expressed by the Prime Minister?

As a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the Iran war, people have struggled with the cost of living. In my constituency in the heart of Scotland, road travel and logistics are key to everyday life and local industry, and the Road Haulage Association is headquartered in Bathgate. What reassurance can the Prime Minister offer my constituents that this Government will tackle household bills and business cost pressures?

The Prime Minister: Families across the United Kingdom are facing the impacts of a war that we did not choose, so it is welcome news today that inflation is falling. There is more that we can do, and I can announce today that we are giving our hauliers a 12-month road tax holiday, helping to keep prices down, and we are backing drivers by extending the freeze in fuel duty for the rest of the year. This is possible because of the decisions taken by the Chancellor, making us the fastest growing economy in the G7, and she will set out further action tomorrow. This is not our war, and although Opposition parties wanted to jump into it, Labour will always protect working people.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I would like to associate myself with the words of the Prime Minister regarding the tragic death of Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan. We send our condolences to her family on this terrible loss.

I welcome some of what the Prime Minister has said about fuel duty. Yes, there is still a freeze, but we asked him about this on 11 March and 25 March and he said he was not going to do it, so I thank him for the U-turn—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members are shaking their heads—it would make more sense if they just did what we are doing, because they get there in the end anyway.

Yesterday, Labour MPs voted to ban new British oil and gas licences. Why?

The Prime Minister: In relation to fuel duty, under the plans that we inherited, fuel duty was due to go up by 5% in April. We stopped that and the Conservatives voted against it. We are now extending the freeze because of events in the middle east. I know that the Leader of the Opposition likes to claim responsibility for things that have got literally nothing to do with her—in her mind, she won Eurovision on Saturday and scored the winning goal in the FA cup final—but she never takes any responsibility for what the Conservatives did for 14 long years.

Oil and gas is coming out of the North sea 24/7. It will play an important role for many years to come. We are supporting existing oil and gas fields throughout their lifespans and we made changes in November to allow neighbouring fields to be exploited, but families across the UK are fed up with their bills going up and down because of global conflicts. The only way to take control is through renewables. We have now consented

to renewables to power 23 million households. The Leader of the Opposition wants to stick with the old Tory energy policy, which is leaving households exposed to higher bills year after year.

Mrs Badenoch: What is causing problems for British consumers is the high energy prices, which were caused by the Prime Minister's policies. I asked him why Labour Members voted for this, and he had no answer, so let me make clear what is going on: we are losing 1,000 jobs a month in oil and gas. I asked him about new licences, not existing drilling. Then, late last night, the Government snuck out an announcement that they were removing sanctions on Russian oil. Can the Prime Minister explain why oil from Russia is acceptable, but oil from Aberdeen is not?

The Prime Minister: Let me address the sanctions head-on, because we have been united across this House on these issues since the beginning of the conflict. What we announced yesterday was a strong new package of new sanctions, going well beyond existing sanctions. It is a new package. That includes new bans on maritime services on liquefied natural gas and new bans on refined oil products from Russia.

We also issued two targeted short-term licences to phase the new sanctions in and to protect UK consumers. That is standard practice. This Government have phased in sanctions in that way before, and the last Government used exactly the same technique when they introduced sanctions. When they did so, we supported them, because we could see that the sanctions were the right thing to do to bear down on Russia. These are new sanctions being phased in. This is not a question of lifting existing sanctions in any way whatsoever, and we will continue to work with our allies on further sanction packages.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Badenoch: That was a very weak set of cheers from the MPs who are trying to get rid of the Prime Minister. He does not know what he is talking about. This level of processology is not going to get him out of these difficult answers. Let me tell him what is going on: Labour is giving money to Russia, and Reform is taking money from Russia. There is only one party that is standing up to Russia, and that is the Conservative party. I cannot believe he is actually saying that he is doing something good on the war in Ukraine. What is he talking about? This morning, Ukraine's sanctions chief disagreed with the Prime Minister's approach. That is what Ukraine is saying.

In March, when the United States eased sanctions on Russia, the Prime Minister said:

"All partners should maintain pressure on Russia and its war chest".

The Prime Minister also said:

"Our sanctions remain, and there is no question about that."

What has changed?

The Prime Minister: I really think that on an issue of this importance, which is about further sanctions on Russia in relation to Ukraine, it is really important that the position is not misrepresented. This is a new package of sanctions. None of the existing sanctions are being lifted in any way, so this is not less pressure on Russia; it

is more pressure on Russia. It is more pressure than there was the day before yesterday and more pressure than there was under the last Government.

What is happening is that those sanctions are being phased in, in a way that was used by the last Government when they introduced new sanctions. We bothered to do the processology and work out what we were doing, and we supported them, because we could see that they put more pressure on Russia. Similar methods are used by other countries. They are done because of the impact on the market and to protect UK consumers. These are new sanctions putting more pressure on Russia. If the right hon. Lady had done her homework, she would actually support us on this.

Mrs Badenoch: Being patronising is not a substitute for understanding policy—[*Interruption.*] I have heard this tone before; this is the same tone that the Prime Minister used during the Mandelson scandal. Labour Members were all cheering, but then it turned out that he was wrong, wrong, wrong. He says that other countries are doing this; the EU is not doing this. Let me make it clear—I know it hurts him to hear it: he is now choosing to buy dirty Russian oil. That money will be used to fund the killing of Ukrainian soldiers. Isn't he ashamed?

The Prime Minister: I really think that to misunderstand and misrepresent what is happening—this is a very serious issue. We are working—[*Interruption.*] These are new bans—they are new sanctions. They are new maritime services bans on LNG, as of yesterday. They are new bans on refined oil products from Russia, as of yesterday. They are being phased in, in the same way that previous sanctions regimes have been phased in, exactly as the last Government did and we have done. Other countries do exactly the same. The EU has its own way of doing it. Australia and Canada have their own way of doing it. To play party politics on Ukraine, where we have stood firm! The only person who benefits when we play party politics on Russia and Ukraine is Putin.

Mrs Badenoch: That pompous tone does not cover for the fact that the Prime Minister has got his policy all wrong. I have asked him about oil and gas again and again and again. The last time, he told me that it was the Energy Secretary's job and it had nothing to do with him. That is what is destroying this country. It is not playing politics; it is speaking up for the people who are out there. The fact is that more people are buying Russian oil because British oil is not being drilled. He is sanctioning British oil but not Russian oil, and he should be ashamed. I cannot believe that this Prime Minister, even when he has nothing to lose, continues to defend banning new British oil and gas licences.

In April, Britain saw the single biggest drop in employment ever since the pandemic—and that is under Labour. Some 210,000 people have lost their jobs in the last year. What the Prime Minister is doing is going to cost thousands more people their jobs, especially in cities such as Aberdeen that rely on oil and gas, so can he tell us why he is doing everything to save his job and doing nothing to save other people's jobs?

The Prime Minister: There is drilling in the North sea. [*Interruption.*] She said that there is no drilling in the North sea—she is going to have to refer herself to the Privileges Committee. There is drilling, it is 24/7,

and oil and gas are coming out. That will be important for many, many years to come. We are supporting those existing oil and gas fields throughout their lifespan, and we made changes in November to allow neighbouring fields to be exploited, but it is because we are on the international market that our prices for businesses and households go up every time there is an international conflict. We saw it with Ukraine and we saw it with Iran, and people were fed up with the last Government not taking control of their bills. We are taking control of their bills; the way to do that is through renewables, and that is what we are doing.

Mrs Badenoch: It gets worse and worse—the Prime Minister does not understand the policy. I am asking him about new oil and gas licences, which Labour Members voted against yesterday. If they had approved those licences for Jackdaw and Rosebank like we did, we would have that oil in this country now.

Just listening to the Prime Minister, I wonder if he is okay. He is so deep in the bunker. He is importing sanctioned Russian oil, nationalising steel and imposing price controls in the supermarket—it is like the Soviets won. This country needs a Government who have got their act together. Instead, what we have is a Prime Minister hanging by a thread with fake support from his Back Benchers, too scared to take difficult decisions, and losing his moral compass by backsliding on Ukraine. *[Interruption.]* Yes, he is. The shaking of Labour Members' heads is so feeble—it is absolutely laughable. Yesterday, we saw them huddled in the corridors, talking about Andy Burnham and Wes Streeting. The fact is that the Prime Minister has a Cabinet fighting to replace him, and the worst part is that they are not getting rid of him over his terrible agenda—no, they actually like it. They just want a better salesman. Is it not the case that it does not matter who replaces him; the real problem is the Labour party? *[HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]*

Mr Speaker: I think not.

The Prime Minister: A lot has been happening in recent days, so the Leader of the Opposition may have overlooked the fact that last week, the Office for National Statistics announced that we have the fastest growing economy in the G7. Last week, we had the biggest fall in NHS waiting lists for 17 years. Today, inflation has come down more than expected. Mr Speaker, if you had offered me that and Arsenal becoming premier league champions, I would take it every day of the week.

Q2. *[900037]* **Maureen Burke** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Royal Regiment of Scotland—20 years of duty, courage and, for 23 of its soldiers, the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country. Across Scotland, more than 20 councils have recognised the regiment's service by granting it the freedom of their area, reflecting Scotland's long and proud tradition of respecting our armed forces. Earlier this month, however, SNP and Green councillors in Glasgow rejected Labour's motion to grant the Royal Regiment of Scotland freedom of the city. It is a shameful snub to our servicemen and women, and a decision that has left many Glaswegians feeling ashamed and embarrassed. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is an insult to those who serve, and will he join me in urging Glasgow city council to reconsider?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of the Royal Regiment of Scotland. I have had the privilege of meeting Scots serving in our armed forces across the world. They deserve our deepest gratitude. I cannot understand how the SNP and Greens have arrived at this decision, particularly when Glaswegians have contributed so much to the Royal Regiment. It is not too late to do the right thing, and I urge them to reconsider.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I join the Prime Minister in sending our condolences to the family of Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan, who died in a tragic accident, and to all her colleagues. I hope the Prime Minister will also join me in sending condolences to the family of Scott Hastings, the former Scottish and Lions rugby player who sadly passed away at the weekend.

In 2025, Donald Trump and Elon Musk abolished America's international aid programme. At the same time, the Government made huge cuts to the UK's aid programme. We now see a dangerous outbreak of Ebola in central Africa, which many people fear is going to spread and get much worse, yet there are rumours across Whitehall that the Prime Minister is planning further cuts to Britain's international aid programme this year. Will he rule that out entirely today?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises the important issue of Ebola and Africa, and obviously we are working on it at pace and with others. We took a decision on aid in order to fund defence spending, because we needed to increase defence spending, but we are committed to our overseas aid, and we mitigated that decision with some of the measures put in place.

Ed Davey: I am not sure if the Prime Minister completely ruled out further cuts to the international aid programme. With defence chiefs this week writing to *The Times* to say that cutting aid for defence is a mistake, I hope that the Prime Minister and his Ministers will rule that out today. If he does not, I hope that Labour party members will ask all the Labour leadership candidates their position on the future of Britain's aid programme.

In the past few days, two of those Labour leadership candidates—the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the Mayor of Greater Manchester—have ruled out any support for Britain joining the EU customs union, despite the fact that it would boost growth and help cut the cost of living. Is the Prime Minister relieved that he finally has something that he can agree with his colleagues on?

The Prime Minister: In the last two years, I have been negotiating serious trade deals that are vital for the most important sectors of our economy. These are trade deals with the EU, but also with India, North Korea and the United States. I remind the right hon. Gentleman of the value of those deals. Before the deal with the United States, I went to Jaguar Land Rover in Solihull and talked to the workforce. They were worried sick about their jobs and communities. When we agreed terms, I went back to JLR—because of the deal we got with the EU, thousands of their jobs were safeguarded. The right hon. Gentleman's approach would throw all

that away. He would have to go and see those workforces and tell them that their jobs are gone. I am not going to do that.

Q3. [900038] Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I welcome the steps taken to clean up British politics via the landmark elections Bill—the Representation of the People Bill—but we must go further. If I had received a £5 million gift from a billionaire living halfway across the world and had not come clean about what that money was for, my constituents would be furious. If the same billionaire had then bankrolled my party to the tune of £12 million, my constituents would be knocking on my door and calling for me to resign. Does the Prime Minister agree that the elections Bill must ensure that no British politician is ever for sale to the highest bidder?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case. We have already committed to a moratorium on crypto donations to political parties, and the King's Speech introduces tougher rules to protect our democracy. However, the £5 million question is: why did the Reform leader keep this donation secret? I see that he is not here to answer. What did the billionaire lining his pockets ask for in return? Those questions need to be answered—and that is why he is not here.

Mr Speaker: I call Dave Doogan.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me for my first Prime Minister's question since becoming SNP Westminster leader, following the SNP's stunning victory in Scotland. I am enjoying the sense of challenge and opportunity a new job can provide—a sense of renewal I am certain the Prime Minister will be enjoying in the weeks ahead.

This week, we saw the latest chapter of Labour infighting, in which Andy “Brexiteer” Burnham wants the UK to stay out of the EU, but Peter Mandelson's pal, the former Health Secretary, wants us to go back in. Can the Prime Minister advise us which of his potential successors he agrees with?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his new post and thank him for the calm, reasonable approach I have come to expect. My position is very clear: we have already negotiated a closer relationship with the EU, which we did last year. We will have another negotiation and agreement this year at a summit, where we will get even closer and take a big step forward in our relationship with the EU, which is in our national interest.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Vince from Harlow.

Q4. [900039] Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister will be pleased to know that I am going to ask him a question about his favourite topic: football. There are people in this House who seek to blame the Prime Minister for everything, but I thought it was a bit rich when one national newspaper blamed him for Harlow Town going into administration because he once went to visit them. I know that Harlow Town is very much the Prime Minister's second team, so he will be pleased to know that they are now out of administration and looking forward to a strong future. What will his Government

do to support important community assets like our football teams, such as Harlow Town and Roydon, who also won their league this season?

The Prime Minister: I have very fond memories of visiting Harlow Town with my hon. Friend. The point he makes is an important one: football clubs bring our communities together. They are part of our social fabric and, in some places, they are one of the last places left where members of the community can come together. That is why my Government fought so hard to create the Independent Football Regulator to protect our national game. We should remind everyone—every football fan across the country, from Harlow Town to Wigan Athletic—that it was Labour that was on the side of football fans, while the Tories and Reform opposed us every step of the way.

Q5. [900040] Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): This month's local elections saw the biggest ever gap between votes and seats in England, with five parties estimated to have won more than 15% of the vote. It is increasingly clear that the public have had enough of Westminster business as usual. Does the Prime Minister still have full confidence in the first-past-the-post system to deliver strong and stable government?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do.

Q6. [900041] Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Trump's war in Iran means that the world will have to contend with a spike in inflation throughout this year. Many of my constituents struggle to afford their weekly shop, while our farmers struggle to make a living by producing what goes on the shelves. Labour Governments should always be on the side of working people, whether they are in the supermarket or on the farm; if we are not, we will not be forgiven. Will the Prime Minister follow the example of our European neighbours, including Ireland, by bringing in a package of support to help our farmers stay afloat and protect our constituents from the worst of Trumpflation?

The Prime Minister: Before I answer that question, I have just been handed a note saying that I inadvertently said that we did a trade deal with North Korea, rather than South Korea. That would be breaking news and not very good. Before I am referred to the Privileges Committee, can I correct the record in that regard? It was a slip of the tongue, but a pretty unfortunate one.

In relation to my hon. Friend's question, families and farmers are rightly frustrated about being impacted by a war that the UK did not start. Protecting working people is our priority. Today, we are cutting red diesel costs for farmers by a third, delivering the lowest rate for 20 years. That is alongside a record £11.8 billion for the farming budget and a new national programme to redistribute surplus food. We will make sure that no one in this country goes hungry. I can confirm that the Chancellor will make further announcements tomorrow.

Q7. [900042] Hannah Spencer (Gorton and Denton) (Green): In Gorton and Denton, we have to pay full price for a pint, but here, for some reason, it is cheaper. Some MPs drink before voting, and that really shocked me when I came to Parliament, because this is our workplace. Does the Prime Minister agree with his own

MPs who have defended their right to drink cheap alcohol at work, or does he agree with me that MPs should not be drinking on the job, given that we vote on huge things like the climate crisis, disabled people's rights, housing and child poverty?

The Prime Minister: First, can I welcome the hon. Lady to her place, because I think this is her first question in PMQs? There will be different views on whether people should be able to enjoy a drink here or not, but I think we can agree that the majority of people in this country want an economy that works for them, public services that are there when they need them, and every child going as far as their talent or ability will take them. The only way to deliver that is through a Labour Government, as we are doing. The Greens think that their leader walks on water. It turns out that he just lives on water and does not pay his council tax!

Q10. [900046] **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): On a more serious note, sometimes we all have those meetings with constituents that really stick with us. For me, it was the lady who came to my surgery and told me about the character.ai chatbot that had groomed her 12-year-old son. The chatbot turned him against his school and his parents, made sexual advances, and even suggested that the bot and the boy might meet in the afterlife. Since this happened last year, I have been on the case with the Government, and I am pleased that we have taken new powers to regulate AI services, but more young people are still being harmed in this way every day, and they will not be safe until the tech companies can no longer access them. Can the Prime Minister tell me how and when he will act to finally make the online world a safe place for our children?

The Prime Minister: The story of my hon. Friend's constituent is deeply concerning, and I thank her for raising it. It underlines why we must and will act. We have already acted by shutting legal loopholes so that AI chatbots must abide by the Online Safety Act 2023, but we obviously have to look at what further measures we can take, including age-related bans, restricting children's use of chatbots and stronger parental controls. I am meeting parents, teenagers and civil society representatives later this afternoon to discuss further, stronger protections for children. We will make sure that my hon. Friend is updated on those steps.

Q8. [900043] **Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): At 19, I was in a coma after contracting bacterial meningitis. I lost 70% of my hearing and needed open-heart surgery. The menB vaccine has saved lives since its introduction in 2015 for infants, but there remains a gap for the high-risk adolescents who were not vaccinated under the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation guidance. Following the devastating outbreaks within this cohort in Reading, Canterbury and Weymouth, the JCVI is finally reviewing the evidence base. Can the Prime Minister tell the House what the Government's next steps will be and when they will happen? Will he make tackling meningitis a priority for his new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and arrange a meeting with Meningitis Now and me?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will do both those things, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising her own experience here to highlight the issue. The thoughts of the whole House will be with the family and friends of the young person who died. I thank all the public health specialists working in Reading to ensure that those affected are receiving appropriate treatment. The hon. Lady's question reminds us that vaccines do save lives, and we must do everything we can in relation to that.

Q12. [900048] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Littering and fly-tipping are a blight on our communities. This is not just an issue for Lewisham, but an issue for towns and cities across our country and, indeed, in rural areas. No one wants to see a dirty mattress, or cans or bottles, left beside roads or against gates. It is awful. I welcome the Government's strategy and the plans to give councils more powers to manage fly-tipping, but I strongly believe that more needs to be done. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is time for a national conversation about how we manage and deal with littering?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, because the Government are cracking down on disgraceful waste criminals through, for instance, tougher penalties for fly-tippers—including service in clean-up squads, and the potential loss of their driving licences—more powers and funding for the Environment Agency, and stronger checks across the industry to tackle fly-tipping at its source.

Q9. [900044] **Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Gallos brook in my constituency has the highest concentration of forever chemicals in the country. The BBC has reported today that the concentrations are 47,000 times higher than the environmental quality standard. However, the Environment Agency has no plan for regular monitoring.

A stream flows through the garden of my constituent Leigh. She has suffered from ill health for eight years. She took in chickens; they have died. She had a dog; it developed a tumour and died. She is concerned that she may be poisoning her neighbours when she gives them vegetables. Will the Prime Minister agree to ask the Environment and Health Secretaries to meet my constituents and me to explore what more can be done?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. I will ensure that the detail is looked at, and that appropriate steps are taken. May I also take this opportunity, through the hon. Gentleman, to mark the tragic anniversary of the devastating fire in his constituency? I know that the thoughts of the whole House remain with the families and colleagues of Martyn, Jennie and Dave, and I know that he has done a lot to support them.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): A stroke happens every five minutes: that is six lives changed in the time that we have been sitting in this Chamber. Two years ago, while I was sitting in the Chamber, my husband suffered a stroke. We know that when it comes to the right care and treatment every single second counts, and we know at first hand why the work of the Stroke Association is so important, ensuring that everyone knows the signs and symptoms, because when a stroke strikes, acting fast matters. Will the Prime Minister join

me in marking Stroke Awareness Month, and will he update the House on what he is doing to ensure that every stroke survivor receives the care that he or she needs to recover and to thrive?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. The Government are investing in our NHS to make sure that every second counts. I know my hon. Friend's husband, and I know the impact that this had on him and on her, and on their wider family. I thank her for raising such a personal issue in the Chamber to highlight this point.

Because of the choices that we have made, ambulance response times are at their fastest for five years. We are investing £10 billion to innovate technology and transformation, and the NHS is already using artificial intelligence to cut treatment time for stroke patients by an hour and tripling full recovery rates.

Q11. [900047] **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): For the purpose of clarity, does the Prime Minister agree with Andy Burnham when he says we should rejoin the European Union, or does he agree with Andy Burnham when he says we should not rejoin the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I agree with what we said in our manifesto, which we are implementing. We are closer to the EU as a result of the agreement we reached last year, and we will be closer again as a result of the agreement we reach this year. We are building on the botched Brexit deal that the Conservatives did, which did such damage to our country.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): My community has been left in deep shock and concern following allegations of serious sexual offences, forced marriage and modern slavery against members of the Ahmadi religion of peace and light. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Cheshire constabulary, Cheshire East Council and wider agencies for their response to these concerning events? Will he also commit himself to ensuring that we receive the necessary resources to deliver justice when crimes have been committed and to reassure the wider community that this Government are on their side?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to all the agencies involved in the enforcement action, including Cheshire police. It is vital that local public services get the funding that they need, and that is why we have increased Cheshire's police budget by over £15 million. We have also recruited 3,000 more neighbourhood police officers while bringing forward wide-ranging reforms to ensure that everyone has access to swift and equal justice.

Q13. [900049] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): I am sure the Prime Minister will join me in congratulating the 54 Liberal Democrats who won all 54 seats on

Richmond upon Thames council at the recent local elections, but does he agree that the first-past-the-post system that produced this result does not give our communities the representation that they voted for, and that this failure to respond to voters' preferences is fuelling disengagement with our democracy? Will the Prime Minister declare his support for changing electoral systems in the UK to ensure that every vote matters?

The Prime Minister: I am really sorry: the answer is no, and I cannot bring myself to congratulate the councillors. I apologise.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Ind): From 1997, the Prime Minister campaigned to scrap single-judge trials in Northern Ireland, yet when I opposed his Government's plan to bring in single-judge trials in England and Wales, I received hostile briefings and smears about my mental health from the lads in No. 10 Downing Street. The Chief Whip is shaking his head, but he knows about it. The Prime Minister knows that my nephew Matty took his own life as a result of work-related stress as a young criminal lawyer. During Mental Health Awareness Week, when Ministers spoke with compassion about health and wellbeing, did the Prime Minister reflect on those hostile, discriminatory briefings, which he knew about and allowed to happen?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has previously told me about Matty and the impact that that had on him. I totally understand that, and I want to be absolutely clear that nobody should be smeared in relation to mental health—nobody—on any issue, whatever they may argue on any other issue. I will do everything I can to make sure that that is the position.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): In five weeks' time, the Government will be introducing penal tariffs on steel imports into the UK and, at the same time, massively reducing tariff-free quotas. This will cause enormous damage to the UK's manufacturing base in the absence of adequate steelmaking capacity in the UK. Furthermore, the way the tariffs are drawn means that Stannah Lifts, a world-beating company based in Andover in my constituency, will face tariffs when importing steel into the UK to manufacture its products, but a competitor's imported finished product, made from the same steel, will not attract tariffs. This situation cannot be allowed to persist. Will the Prime Minister please arrange for his Secretary of State to focus on this issue and get it sorted out?

The Prime Minister: May I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this really important issue? I give him an assurance that it is not just the Secretary of State; I am also absolutely focused on this, because we are all very well aware of the consequences that would otherwise follow. I am personally invested in this, as is the entire Cabinet, because it is a very important issue, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly points out.

Processed Russian Oil Products: Sanctions

12.39 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade to make a statement regarding the Government's decision to issue general trade licences for sanctioned processed oil products prohibited under the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): Putin must never be allowed victory in Ukraine and we will do everything we can as a Government and a country to debilitate and degrade the Russian war machine. That is precisely what our sanctions regime is designed to do. We have sanctioned more than 3,300 individuals and organisations and hundreds of shadow fleet tankers. It is as tough a sanctions regime as any in the world, and we are proud of it.

I want to make it absolutely clear that our sanctions regime today is tougher than it was yesterday or last week. In fact, thanks to the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2026 statutory instrument, we will from today for the first time—for the first time—ban the import not only of uranium but of Russian oil products processed in a third country. We are not lifting any existing sanctions at all. We are, like other countries, phasing in these sanctions, which is why, in the light of the situation in the middle east, we have issued a targeted temporary licence to allow the continued import of diesel and jet fuel. These licences are temporary and targeted. We will review them regularly and repeatedly, and will suspend them as soon as we possibly can.

As a result of all the measures that we have taken, there will be less Russian oil on the market, not more, Russia will be poorer, not richer, and Putin will be weaker, not stronger.

Andrew Bowie: In their 18th packet of sanctions in January this year, His Majesty's Government prohibited the import of Russian petroleum products produced in third countries from Russian oil, obliging importers to provide proof of the origin of oil used in petroleum product production. Yet yesterday evening at 7 pm, while we in this very Chamber were debating the future of our own North sea oil and gas industry and Labour MPs were being whipped to vote against new oil and gas licences in the North sea, the Government slipped out an announcement that the general trade licence for sanctioned processed oil products now permits certain activities prohibited under the Russian sanctions regulations 2019, such as the import of diesel and jet fuel to the UK. At the exact same time that this Government have rolled back on their commitments to Ukraine and given the green light to purchase Russian oil from third countries, they were whipping their MPs to vote to shut down our own oil and gas production. It is an absolute disgrace. They should all be utterly ashamed of themselves.

What message does this send to the international community, to the people of Ukraine, and to workers in our North sea oil and gas industry, which is being crushed by the misguided eco-zealotry of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero? We are not only rewarding the thuggish and criminal behaviour of the Russian state, but punishing ourselves and the skilled workforce in the United Kingdom.

Who loses out while we signal to Russia that we are willing once again to buy its oil? It is the British people. We are seeing 1,000 job losses in oil and gas in the UK every single month, and losing out on £25 billion in tax revenue over the next 10 years, which we could be investing in our public services. Just yesterday I pointed out that Moscow would be celebrating the useful idiots opposite and today the Government have proved my point.

According to the Government website, where the announcement was made yesterday, the Secretary of State has

“the power to vary, revoke or suspend this licence at any time”,

so will he reconsider the decision? Why does the Minister believe that increased reliance on foreign imports improves British energy security? What alternatives did the Government consider? And who on earth is in charge of our energy security? Is it the Energy Secretary, the Prime Minister, or Vladimir Putin?

Chris Bryant: First, I think the hon. Member must have missed the fact that a statutory instrument that, for the first time, implements a ban on refined Russian crude oil products processed in a third country is coming into force today. It did not come into force earlier in the year. Incidentally, it did not come into force when he was in government, because when the Conservatives were in government, they allowed such oil products to come into the UK, and he personally did absolutely nothing about it.

The truth is that both sides of the House agree and, in fact, I think all parties in the House agree—well, we have not heard from Reform yet—that we need to make sure that Putin does not prosper. One of the key ways of doing that is making sure that we tackle the shadow fleet, which we have been doing very successfully. More than 500 tankers have been disrupted, and \$1.6 billion less oil will be transported this year than last year because of those sanctions.

To be precise on the hon. Member's question of whether we will review the licences, I have already said we will review the licences. They are there for a very simple reason, which is that, just as the previous Government nearly always introduced sanctions in a phased way when he was a Minister, that is precisely what we are doing with these sanctions on oil products processed in a third country. We are doing the right thing, and I would have thought that he would want to praise us. Unfortunately, I think he has tried to find a political headline rather than look into the facts.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): This package of sanctions has come to us very quickly, and I am slightly concerned about how it has been communicated today, so a bit of clarity would be really welcome. How long will the regulations made under the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 stand prior to completing the phasing in of the new package of sanctions? Will there be a gap, or will we immediately turn to the new sanctions and implementation of the sanctions regime?

Chris Bryant: There are two things here. A set of sanctions comes into force today, including on oil and oil products processed in a third country. It is the first time that the UK has gone down that route. As I say, the

[Chris Bryant]

previous Government chose not to go down that route, even though people were arguing for it. I think this will be an important new measure in ratcheting up the pressure on the Russian regime.

At the same time, partly in recognition of the instability there may be in the energy markets as a result of the events in the middle east and the war in Iran—obviously, we have chosen not to take part in it—we have decided to implement these sanctions in a phased way, as many other countries have done, including Australia and Canada. That is why we have introduced these licences for diesel and jet fuel. As I have said, I want these licences to last as short a time as is possible and necessary to manage that market instability, and that is why we will review them as much as possible.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend as our trade envoy to Ukraine. We stand 100% beside our friends in Ukraine. Indeed, the package of sanctions we have introduced this time around is the toughest of any, and I know our Ukrainian friends have supported them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Inconsistencies and U-turns have become characteristic of this Government, but this is more than just a redirection of policy; this is a betrayal of Ukraine. This Government are abandoning our European ally in its moment of need by putting more money into the pockets of President Putin to fund his war machine.

Last month, the Liberal Democrats urged the Government to implement a bold plan to keep Britain moving, which included a 10p cut to fuel duty, but also featured proposals to boost public transport by slashing bus fares to £1 and cutting rail fares by 10%. This would have taken pressure off our forecourts, but the Government sat on their hands. Instead, the Government believe that our best course of action is to abandon all morality and to indirectly fund Putin's illegal war. I would like to ask the Minister how much money will be spent on Russian oil products as a result of this decision, and will he admit that lifting these sanctions will indirectly fund Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but I do just need to explain to the hon. Lady that we are not lifting any sanctions. We are implementing new sanctions, which only come into force today. Up until now, it has been perfectly legal to import Russian oil products processed in a third country into the UK—up until now. It is only now, because of this Government, with the new sanctions that come into force today, that that will not be possible. I really do hope that the hon. Lady will withdraw her comments.

The whole of this House stands 100% beside Ukraine. I myself am probably the longest standing critic of Putin in this House. Back in 2014, when others were in government and not doing anything about the invasion of Crimea, I was saying that we should be tackling Russian aggression, because otherwise, if Putin was allowed to take Crimea with impunity, he would come for the rest. I do recognise that Liberal Democrat Members have been calling in the Business and Trade Committee and elsewhere for us to tackle precisely this

issue of Russian crude oil processed in other countries that ends up coming into the UK. Up until now, that has been a source of income for Putin, but we are the Government who are stopping this, not enabling it.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am grateful for the clarity my hon. Friend provides for us on this issue, because it has been of extreme concern for a number of colleagues. Does he think that wider global insecurity around energy requires global co-operation and collaboration, and that the UK Government could lead on that? We are hosting the G20 next year. In the process of building up to that, could we consider ensuring that global energy security is the priority for the G20 summit?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes an immensely important point on energy security, which is one reason why we are passionately committed to trying to make sure we are not reliant on oil or oil products from anywhere else in the world, and that we are able to not only meet our net zero targets, but be energy resilient for ourselves. She is also right that we need to work alongside our allies, not only—I would argue—on energy security but in relation to imposing sanctions. We must co-operate with other countries. As I say, our set of processes is remarkably similar to those of Australia, Canada—I think—and several other countries. We need to move forward together if we are to defeat Putin and to ensure we have energy security for our own households and our own businesses.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I pay tribute to the Minister, who has been tough on Russia for many, many years. He is sanctioned in Russia, as am I, and we have both previously chaired the all-party parliamentary group on Russia, so I know today's announcement will sit uncomfortably with him. I welcome the new sanctions through third countries, but I am very concerned—there will be more concern in Kyiv, quite frankly—about what he calls temporary licences. How long is “temporary”? Unfortunately, this money, through these imports, will continue to fund Putin's illegal war machine against Kyiv. It will kill women, children and men. While the Government are denying a licence to drill in the North sea, they are, unfortunately, giving Putin a licence to kill.

Chris Bryant: As it happens I am not on the Russian sanctions list, although when I raised this with the Russian—

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): You are now!

Chris Bryant: I think I might be on the right hon. Lady's sanctions list! But in actual fact, when I raised this with the Russian ambassador—I was a bit upset—he said, “Well, we have many lists, Mr Bryant.” I do not know whether I am on a target list, which is maybe slightly different.

I am not ashamed of what we are doing today. As a very stout defender of Ukraine's right to defend itself, and as somebody who argued for a very long time that we should be trying to make sure that Russian frozen assets were made available to Ukraine, I am proud of what we are doing, because we are introducing a tougher sanctions regime. The only bit we have had to take cognisance of is the fact that the situation in the middle

east means that there was a danger of a sudden spike in prices and we had to address that. I very much hope that this will be a very temporary measure. I will be keeping a very watchful eye to make sure that we are able to suspend the licences as soon as we possibly can.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to answer this really important urgent question. He will know that we must keep at the forefront of our minds our allies in Ukraine who have been fighting this terrible illegal war for many years. I am proud that many of my constituents took in many people from Ukraine at the start of the invasion. Echoing the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), I am concerned about the communication around this issue. A constituent contacted me and said:

“I am one of your constituents and have never had reason to contact you. However, on awaking this morning I am both angry and ashamed by the announcement, snuck out last night, that your government is (partially) lifting sanctions on the purchase of Russian oil.”

Can the Minister reassure me and my constituents that this will be a temporary measure, similar to the sanctions restrictions put in place by the Americans? My understanding is that they will be there for 30 days.

Chris Bryant: Mr Speaker, you will be aware of the phrase that sometimes it is conspiracy and sometimes it is something else. I just want to say that, in relation to communications, there is no conspiracy. Nobody is trying to undermine our support for Ukraine. The statutory instrument on the tougher measures was always going to come into force today. Up until today it was perfectly legal to import Russian products that had been refined in third party countries into the UK. It will no longer be legal to do so. There are several categories under that which will be banned. For instance, it will tackle carbon fibre used in the production of Russian drones, chemicals used in precision missiles, and goods used in emerging technologies such as quantum computing and AI. I want to ensure that these licences will be as temporary as possible. In 2022, along with the Foreign Affairs Committee, I visited Kyiv and Avdiivka, right at the very edge, roughly a fortnight before the full-scale invasion. We saw Russian troops and snipers pointing at Ukrainians. This battle has gone on since 2014, not just since 2022. I can assure my hon. Friend that the British Government stand 100% beside the Ukrainian people.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): For years, Ministers on the Treasury Bench have told us that oil is traded as a global commodity, so it makes no difference where in the world it is taken out of the ground and that, as a consequence, we can wind down production on the UK continental shelf—availability of supply would continue. Given what the Minister has had to announce today, is he satisfied that that argument still holds water?

Chris Bryant: Well, it has not been an argument that I myself have advanced, although obviously I stand by my Labour colleagues if that is the argument that they have been making—I am part of a team, after all. The point I would make in relation to drilling in the North sea is that I think it is a wrong argument to say that if

we were to issue new licences today that would affect the energy prices we are facing because of the situation in the middle east. What we absolutely have to do is make sure that we deal with market instability today. It was not our choice to have this war in Iran. We have not taken part in it. We think it was a mistake to enter into it without a plan. I am very aware, from conversations I have had with many of my counterparts in the Gulf—perhaps there will be more on that later on today—that these issues are at the forefront of their minds.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Can the Minister assure me that we continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our Ukrainian friends? Can he particularly reassure my Ukrainian constituents? One of them has written to me to say that

“one of the biggest issues facing civilians in Ukraine is the constant uncertainty—not only physical safety, but the emotional pressure of living with disrupted homes, schools, work, healthcare and family life.”

They are standing firm and I am sure that he can reassure me that we are standing firm by their side.

Chris Bryant: Absolutely. In Kyiv earlier this year, I was really proud to see one of the bridges, which had been blown up when the Russians were advancing in the hope of taking Kyiv immediately, that has been reconstructed with UK Export Finance support and British steel made in Glasgow—it only took five weeks to transport it out there. It was designed by British engineers, working with Turkish counterparts. I am really proud of the work we are doing on reconstruction in Ukraine. I thought it was absolutely despicable when I was there that Putin was deliberately targeting energy supplies in Kyiv, so as to freeze people into submission. That, in my mind, is a war crime.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Before the Minister pointed it out himself, I was going to acknowledge his long and honourable record of opposing the killer in the Kremlin when he was on the Opposition Back Benches. I have no reason to believe that he has changed his mind, but does he agree with me that this complex issue has been handled very, very clumsily, to put it mildly? Would it not have been better to have made a statement, rather than having to respond to an urgent question? Were the Ukrainians given this quite complicated explanation in advance? Will he not concede that if we had not embarked on quite such a doctrinaire journey against further drilling in the North sea, we might not have been put in the position of having to make such an unsavoury and unpalatable decision?

Chris Bryant: The one bit of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks that I completely agree with is that we have handled this clumsily. That is entirely my fault, and I apologise to all hon. Members, because I think we have ended up giving the wrong impression of what we are trying to do. We are trying to strengthen the regime, not weaken it. We are not waiving any sanction. From today, and for the first time, we have legislation in place that means that it will be illegal to import Russian goods that have been refined in a third country, including India, Turkey and elsewhere. I disagree with the other points he made, but I am grateful for his nice comments about me.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I listened very carefully to the Minister's explanation about what exactly we are doing, and I echo the comments from colleagues across the House about the failure to communicate this effectively in the last 24 hours. I have had very upset constituents getting in touch with me about this issue. One report—from Bloomberg—seems to indicate that there is briefing and counter-briefing across Government at the moment and that this move is a departure from our European colleagues. Can the Minister confirm whether we are in fact departing from our European colleagues on these sanctions?

Chris Bryant: It is true that this piece of the jigsaw in relation to sanctions policy lies across two Departments. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is in charge of sanctions policy, and we in the Department for Business and Trade have responsibility for trade and export licences. That is why there has been a bit of a miscommunication between the two Departments. I have to tell the House that that is entirely my fault and nobody else's, so if anybody wants to have a go at anybody, they can have a go at me.

On the question about Europe, it is true that the European Union introduced its legislation faster than we did. It did it earlier, before the Iranian conflict came into play. That is one of the reasons why there has been some difference between us. Normally, we try to align ourselves all the way with the European Union and others, but I note that the United States has only today extended its waiver for another month, and I think I am right in saying that Australia and Canada have done something very similar to us. It has been standard practice when we have introduced these kind of sectoral sanctions to do so in a phased way because, apart from anything else, that makes it possible for UK businesses to accommodate themselves.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): There is a really unfortunate supply and demand dichotomy here—and I have to remind the Minister that he is bound by collective responsibility, because while it might be a different Department, it is still his Government. On the one hand, the Government are artificially accelerating the decline in production in the North sea with no reference to domestic demand—they are only hellbent on reducing domestic production. Meanwhile, this carve-out allows Russian oil refined as fuel to come into this economy, which will result in a transaction to the place where it was refined, which will then result in a transaction back to Russia. This will allow the funding of Russia's war process against our friends in Ukraine. The Minister must concede that.

Chris Bryant: I welcome the hon. Member to his new responsibilities, though I must say that I really liked his predecessor—I got into terrible trouble when I tweeted that, so maybe I should not say it in the House either. It is good to see the hon. Member in his place. He makes an interesting argument and one that I would expect him to make. It is true that I am bound by collective responsibility. I am not trying to evade that; it is just that sometimes I do not know the answers to all the questions that apply to somebody else's portfolio.

I want to make sure that the hon. Member understands that, up until today, it has been perfectly legal for people to bring products that originated from Russian

crude oil and that have been refined in a third country into the UK. It is only now that we are changing that.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): As someone who has been sanctioned by the Russian state and worked on tackling financial crime in British business for more than a decade, it was apparent to me after only a cursory review of the gov.uk website that this is a new general licence to allow the roll-out of the new regime that the Minister has mentioned today. I thank him for coming to the House to set the record straight, but can he also assuage my constituents' fears and say that, although we have heard a lot of rhetoric and bluster in the Chamber today, this really will be a new regime and it will be strengthened?

Chris Bryant: Well, I apologise for the rhetoric and bluster, but it is my general way of doing things, so it seems a particularly cruel attack from my colleague!

The serious point to make is that I am proud of what we are doing today. I am not hiding away from what we are doing, but we could definitely have communicated it better, and that is entirely my fault.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This is somewhat baffling. I know that the Minister was not here for it, but we had a full day's debate yesterday on energy supply and no Government Minister mentioned anything to do with this particular issue—hence the need for an urgent question today. The Minister will know that liquid gas, diesel and petroleum are shipped by sea, taking a considerable period of time to get from the port to the UK. Will the Minister set out how the ships—those that have set sail already and those that may be setting off—will be treated once they get to the United Kingdom? That is the important issue that many businesses will want to know about.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. That is one of the reasons we thought it was important to phase the process. Because of the time lag, we needed to make it possible for businesses not to be caught in legal limbo, as it were, as a result of the sanctions coming into force today. It is probably best if I write to him with the details and put a copy of the letter before the House, because it might be useful to other business folk as well. We are providing additional information on the Government website so that people can understand precisely how all this operates.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I do welcome the new sanctions. My concern is over the temporary use of licence agreements, which goes to a bigger issue for the country. We keep talking about the supply side of petroleum instead of the demand side. We need to have a frank and honest conversation with our constituents and the public, as our Australian colleagues did with the Prime Minister down under. Can I encourage the Minister to have honest conversations with the public about the cost of the conflict within the middle east, and about the need to move ourselves further and faster away from petrochemicals to give us the sustainable economy we all need?

Chris Bryant: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and that is the tenor of the conversation that has been happening. He will know that the Prime Minister has

been chairing regular meetings to consider the impact of the situation in the middle east. This is undoubtedly one area where we had to take action to minimise the instability in the market so as to protect British businesses—which are already exposed to energy costs that are high enough, if not too high—and British families. He makes a good point; we should, of course, have these honest conversations with the public.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Rocketing fuel prices are hitting rural families in constituencies like mine, but the answer can never be to play directly into Putin's hands by weakening sanctions, just as Ukraine is finally pushing back against Russia's war machine. Does the Minister agree that we can both stand firmly with our Ukraine allies, maintaining sanctions on Russian jet fuel and diesel that is refined in third countries, while also supporting rural households through a temporary VAT cut on heating oil and a 10p cut to fuel duty, which could be funded through a levy on big banks' eye-watering profits?

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Gentleman wrote the first half of that question before he heard what I had to say on the subject. I want to make it absolutely clear, once again, that up until now it has been possible for people to perfectly legally import into the UK refined products that have been processed in third countries but that originated from Russian crude oil. That is changing because of the legislation we have introduced, which applies from today. We are doing this in a phased way, which is why the licences exist.

The hon. Gentleman will know that we are already taking very seriously the issues that affect many, many families, including in my constituency. The number of people who rely on oil to heat their homes is not very large, but we have already taken action, and around 3 million households across the whole UK are benefiting. I know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is looking at these issues very closely.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for clarifying that sanctions on Russia are tougher today than they were yesterday, but fundamentally the furore around licences to phase in the new regulations arises because we have an economy reliant on jet fuel, and as long as that remains the case these issues will continue to arise. What conversations is he having with others across Government to move us faster and even further away from our economy's reliance on jet fuel?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that these sanctions are not only implemented but effective. We need—I think the previous Government felt this as well—a constant ratchet or a whack-a-mole approach to tackling any new diversion there might be that Putin might take advantage of. He talked about jet fuel, and I am feeling a bit guilty because unfortunately last night I had to fly back from Strasbourg—that was just as well, because otherwise I would not have been able to answer the UQ. He made a good point, and we also need to ensure that the aviation industry in its totality is more cognisant of where it needs to get to on net zero.

Esther McVey: Can the Minister explain why the Government see fit to ban new licences to drill for oil and gas in the North sea—which would have provided the UK with energy security, affordability, reliability and tax revenue—while buying oil from Russia, which is a betrayal of UK citizens and Ukrainian citizens, and playing into Putin's hands?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady knows that I am very fond of her—

Mark Pritchard: The right hon. Lady.

Chris Bryant: I am terribly sorry; I am so fond of the right hon. Lady that I think of her in a commonplace way, or should I say a common-sense way? She was, of course, the Minister for common sense—although, despite that, she never took any measures to stop the import of Russian oil into the UK when she was a Minister. Oh dear.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I appreciate the clarity that the Minister has provided, telling us that the overall effect of this country's package of sanctions will mean that Russia is much more under the screw than it was. One of the effects of Trump's war in Iran is that the cost of Russian oil has been inflated, and that is perpetuating the war in Ukraine. Does the Minister agree that we need to redouble our efforts to enhance our domestic renewable and new nuclear production of energy so that we are less dependent on fossil fuel markets and less likely to be contributing to perpetuating conflicts around the world?

Chris Bryant: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's comments. Notwithstanding his point that every time the price of oil around the world goes up, that is a benefit to Putin—that is one of the problems and ironies of the situation in the middle east at the moment—I would also point out that Russia's economy is stagnating because of the sanctions we have imposed. Growth has slowed to a crawl; this month, Russia slashed its economic growth forecast again, and international sanctions have deprived Russia of at least \$450 billion since February 2022, which is the equivalent of four years of funding for Putin's illegal war. We need to keep that up. It is tough, but we need to do so to ensure that he does not have victory.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): No matter how the Minister tries to confuse the issue by talking about the situation up until now and the new arrangements, which are meant to tighten up sanctions today, the fact remains that we are now granting permits for Russian oil to come into the United Kingdom. He may justify that, as he has done on a number of occasions during this discussion, by saying that this is only for the short term. But does he not recognise that, as long as we stop exploiting our own resources and taxing our own oil refineries, we will be dependent on Russian oil, and we will be financing Putin's war?

Chris Bryant: I will try again. The point I am making is not the point the right hon. Gentleman thinks I am making. The point I am making is that, up until now, we have been doing precisely what he said. We have been allowing Russian oil processed in other countries to come into the UK without any impediment whatsoever. That is precisely what we are putting an end to. If he

[Chris Bryant]

had stood up last week, the week before that, the week before that, or the week before that, and called for us to put an end to it, I would have had more time for the comments he just made.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his usual clarity and candour on this issue, and I welcome the new sanctions package. Will he confirm one last time for me, my Ukrainian residents and our friends in Ukraine that this is a new package of sanctions, part of which we are introducing in a phased manner, and that there is no loosening of any sanctions that are already in place?

Chris Bryant: We have not suspended, waived or got rid of any existing sanctions of any kind whatsoever. We are introducing new sanctions. This is our latest set of sanctions. In fact, I have also been keen to try to ensure that when things are exported to a third country legally but we think they might end up in Russia, which would then be a breach of the sanctions, a licence is needed—for the first time. We are introducing new legislation for end-use sanctions controls, and we will be the first country to do so. We are determined to ensure that Putin does not win his war.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I had constituents in the Gallery today, and they will be aghast to find out that their flight back to Scotland is potentially using Russian fuel. Surely, regardless of whether that was the case before, we need to grip that issue. We also need to grip the reality of the North sea. We keep hearing that North sea oil is a declining asset, but the Norwegians do not see it that way; they are expanding their exploration of the North sea. We have untapped resources, west of Shetland. Surely we need to look again at domestic supply.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but up until today it was perfectly legal for people to use Russian crude oil that had been processed in a third country and brought into the UK. The hon. Member is inventing a saga that does not exist.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Ukrainians in our constituencies woke up to headlines about watering down sanctions. Why are the Government not prioritising measures that would permanently cut bills and reduce fossil-fuel dependence, including fully removing the renewables obligation levy and fast-tracking energy market reform?

Chris Bryant: I thought that the Liberal Democrats were in favour of moving towards renewables. Sorry, I may have misunderstood the question; if so, the hon. Member may wish to grab me afterwards. As I said, the problem about the headlines this morning was that some journalists saw half of the story, and not the whole story. That is entirely down to me, and is my fault.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The sanctions on Russian gas and oil were put in place for good reason, as we know, but I seriously question how environmentally friendly it is to import supplies of gas and oil, when we have one of the largest sources of

natural resources just off the coast of Scotland. The Government continue to refuse to allow it to be further explored. The madness of the pursuit of net zero is exposed by the fact that there is more pollution involved in importing these products, instead of drilling for our own, which would also create jobs and revenue for the Exchequer.

Chris Bryant: We are putting an end to the import of these products from Russia. We want to debilitate and degrade the Russian war machine. The point I would make to the hon. Member is that even if we were to grant licences today for further exploration, that would not solve the problem that we have today, arising from the instability in the energy market because of the war in Iran.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Picking up the theme of mishandled communications, and the anxiety that they caused many of our constituents, the *Financial Times* is still reporting an easing of sanctions, as is the BBC. Those are not outlets known for hyperbole. Perhaps the Government could issue a correction to major media outlets.

Chris Bryant: I am trying to do that here, now, live. Indeed, I went to see the BBC earlier and gave it a clip. Just to be absolutely clear, we are not suspending any sanctions. The sanctions regime in the UK is tougher today than it was yesterday, a week ago, or a year ago. I am certain that as I in the Department for Business and Trade and my colleagues in the Foreign Office continue to look into the constant diversion and subversion of our sanctions regime, the regime will get even tougher as the months and years proceed.

Mr Speaker: That brings us to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I would hate to be deprived of a question. I thank the Minister very much for his sincere and helpful answers. May I say this gently to him? Many of us believe that there is a very clear solution to this problem. If this Government want true energy security, then instead of forcing British businesses to navigate complex legal loopholes in order to import foreign energy, and instead of pressing ahead, through the energy independence Bill, with a permanent ban on our using our own resources, they must scrap the ideological roadblocks, approve crucial domestic projects, such as development of the Rosebank and Jackdaw oil and gas fields, and unleash the full potential of British North sea production. Will the Minister please discuss that with Cabinet members, and demand that common sense and energy security be prioritised over what any single Government Minister says on the subject?

Chris Bryant: All roads lead to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), Mr Speaker; certainly, all urgent questions do. I was not here for the debate yesterday because I was in Strasbourg, but I feel as if I am hearing some of what was rehearsed then, and I do not want to repeat the arguments. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments about my sincerity on this. The only point I would make to him is that I am desperate to make sure that the Ukrainian people are able to assert their freedom and defeat Putin. We will do everything in our power to secure that outcome.

Point of Order

1.20 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The west bank village of Khan al-Ahmar is under threat at the moment and is being forcibly evacuated by Israeli forces and illegal settlers. Will you advise me on whether there is some way that we can persuade a Minister from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to come to this House and make a statement about the Foreign Office's attitude to those illegal forcible evacuations, and of course the continued military support for Israel that is enabling Israel to take those actions?

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I have been expecting a statement today; I am hoping for a statement tomorrow. If that does not happen, I am sure that somebody might be able to ask an urgent question. Who knows what that might bring?

Debate on the Address

[5TH DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 19 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.

Defence Readiness

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment (o) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, which will be moved at the start of the debate, and amendments (l) in the name of the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), and (p) in the name of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), which will be moved at the end of the debate.

I call the shadow Secretary of State for Defence.

1.22 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I beg to move amendment (o), at the end of the Question to add:

"but respectfully regret the absence of a Defence Readiness Bill from the Gracious Speech, and the 10 month delay to the publication of the Defence Investment Plan; call on the Government to bring forward both as a matter of urgency; further call on the Government to raise defence spending to 3% of GDP by the end of this Parliament; further regret that the Gracious Speech commits to re-starting inquests into Northern Ireland veterans; and also call on the Government not to progress with the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill and the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 (Remedial) Order 2025 to protect veterans and improve the morale of all who serve in the armed forces."

It is an honour to open the final day of debate on the King's Speech on behalf of the Opposition. Today's debate is on defence readiness. May I begin by expressing how saddened I was to hear of the death of Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan from the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery? My condolences, and those of the whole Opposition, to her family, both personal and regimental.

Before turning to the defence-related matters that were or were not included in the Government's programme for the next legislative Session, I pay tribute to the men and women serving in our armed forces right now across the globe, whether they are on board our nuclear submarines, which provide a continuous at-sea deterrent, or deployed in the middle east to defend our overseas bases. I thank them for their service and unwavering professionalism.

I also pay tribute to our brave Ukrainian allies, who continue to defy those original expectations of an early Russian victory. When we take steps to publicly show our sympathy for Ukraine's heroic struggle—for example, by wearing badges, as I have done every day since the invasion, or by flying the Ukraine flag from local and national Government buildings, we do so not just to show solidarity with a democratic nation under brutal

[James Cartlidge]

attack by a dictatorship, but because it is firmly in our national interest to assist Ukraine in keeping Putin's military in check. When newly elected councils make it their first priority, on entering office, to pull down the Ukrainian flag, we are entitled to ask if the party in question cares about the fate of its people, and understands the implications for our national security of Russia triumphing.

Finally, I pay tribute to all those who served our country in the past: our brave veterans. That brings me to Labour's plans, as set out in the King's Speech. Of all Britain's military capabilities, few are more important to our defence or more widely admired, particularly by the United States, than our special forces, yet at a time of war on two fronts, Labour is ploughing on with a Bill that will reopen vexatious legal actions. That not only threatens our veterans, but would undermine the morale of all who serve today, particularly in the special forces. Those special forces include the Special Air Service, and those in the regiment that was on duty in Loughgall in 1987, and who shot IRA terrorists who were driving a digger with a bomb in its bucket towards a police station, and firing machine guns into the building as they approached. I believe that those soldiers were acting to defend our society from terrorists intent on mass murder. Whatever one's view, surely going back almost 40 years to events that took place in a split second makes no sense.

Crucially, in October 2023, coroner Justice McAlinden declined to list a new inquest into Loughgall precisely because of the cut-off date set by our legacy Act, which therefore did its job of halting such cases and genuinely protecting our veterans from endless litigation. However, in his comments, Justice McAlinden added that preparatory work for the inquest should continue, because there would be a general election the following year, and that might affect how the legislation was implemented. He had a point, did he not?

Fast-forward three years, and with war now facing us, not just in Ukraine but in the middle east, the Government of today remain intent on repealing the protections that we put in place for veterans. It goes without saying that Labour's plans will harm our veterans, once again keeping them awake at night with the fear that they will be hauled before our courts.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the shadow Minister for bringing this matter forward. He is right to put it on record; it is very much part of this debate. However, this goes further than the veterans who cannot sleep at night, and the families who are worried about what will happen to their father, brother or sister. Does he agree that this is affecting recruitment? Those who want to join the Army are saying, "If we join and get involved in a battle to protect this country, we could find ourselves being persecuted for it, or taken to court." Does he agree that, for that reason and others, the Government must be fair, when it comes to legislation, and must listen to the points that he put forward?

James Cartlidge: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his very good interventions. He has hit the nail on the head. This is not just about veterans, as important as they are; it is about the wider impact on

recruitment. Indeed, hon. Members do not have to take my word for it, or his. In November last year, nine former four-star generals wrote:

"This lawfare is a direct threat to national security...The Troubles Bill achieves nothing—and ongoing lawfare risks everything."

I say this to Labour MPs: when considering the troubles Bill and the issue of lawfare, surely the overriding factor to consider is the threat that we face as a nation, and the impact of the legislation on our ability to defend ourselves. Do they really think, in their heart of hearts, that this is what they should be prioritising, when we need our soldiers more than ever? I put this challenge to all those who intend to stand in Labour's leadership contest. Will those candidates seeking to become our next Prime Minister recognise that the first duty of any leader is defence of the realm, and that it is therefore in the national interest to scrap the troubles Bill and back our brave veterans?

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): Will the shadow Minister acknowledge that no party and no victims' group in Northern Ireland supports the Conservative party's approach to the past, and that even the Dillon judgment last week did not in any way rule it legal? Would he not agree that soldiers following the rule of law is a matter of recruitment, too? No soldier wants to be painted with the brush of not having followed the rule of law. Would he care to tell the House how many of the 300,000 soldiers who served under Operation Banner in Northern Ireland have faced judicial proceedings? It is in the very low two figures.

James Cartlidge: I respect the hon. Lady, and I respect the strength of her view on this matter, but we have to deal with what is certain. In my view, it is extremely unlikely that any new cases would lead to prosecutions. It is, however, certain that were this process to recommence, it would damage the morale of our armed forces at a time of war on two fronts, and that would not be in the national interest.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Having served in Northern Ireland, I have spoken to many veterans I was there with and others who were there before, and there is a scintilla of a real question mark about how they will be treated. The vexatious nature of these complaints will, of course, eventually drag them back into the courts. That is the fear. They are sure that they are innocent, but by the time the courts have finished with them, innocence would not matter at all, because their life would have been destroyed. Does my hon. Friend not agree?

James Cartlidge: I do not need to add a great deal to that, because my right hon. Friend served in Operation Banner and speaks with great authority. He has always been passionate on this issue, and he hits the nail on the head. As so many veterans have said to me, it is the process of the lawfare itself that is so punishing. It is so damaging, it is not in the national interest and it will damage the British armed forces.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, the then Defence Committee did two reports into this question, and in the course of those inquiries, we interviewed four eminent professors

of law, including one particularly famous left-wing one. We did not ask them what they wanted to happen; we asked them what could legally be done about a statute of limitation. They all agreed, however reluctantly, that it would be legal to have a statute of limitation provided that it was coupled with a truth recovery process that met the requirement for an investigation to occur. Their other key condition was it should be applied to all people involved in the conflict. The Government could pursue the line that those four professors of law took, but they do not want to do so. They are happy to shelter behind court judgments that they could appeal against but will not.

James Cartledge: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and he is absolutely correct. Our legacy Act was based on what happened in South Africa. We may not like it, but if we want peace and reconciliation, any changes in the law that favour those who may have been guilty have to apply to both sides. It is simply a statement of fact. As I think I just showed with Loughgall, our Act of Parliament—the legacy Act—did indeed stop an inquest that would have been damaging to the armed forces but which I do not believe would have led to any prosecutions.

Turning to what was not in the King's Speech, the strategic defence review promised that:

"A new Defence Readiness Bill should provide the Government with powers in reserve to mobilise Reserves and industry should crisis escalate into conflict."

With war on two fronts, surely such legislation should be the absolute top priority of this Government, but alas, there is no defence readiness Bill in the King's Speech. Why not? The defence readiness Bill is not ready. What else is not ready? The defence investment plan is not ready, of course. We know that the Government are working flat out—[HON. MEMBERS: "At pace!"]—and at pace, but the Secretary of State promised from the Dispatch Box almost a year ago that the defence investment plan would be published last autumn. It is now 10 months late, so when the Minister responds, can he tell us exactly when we are going to get the defence investment plan?

Most importantly, we are bound to ask why we still have no defence investment plan. The DIP is meant to set out the detailed procurement decisions intended to implement Labour's strategic defence review, so what do the authors of Labour's SDR, appointed by the Prime Minister, think about the failure to publish the DIP and the impact of that on delivering the SDR? Each of the three key authors—Dr Fiona Hill, General Sir Richard Barrons and Lord Robertson—has absolutely slammed the Government for their failure to deliver. Lord Robertson, a former Labour Defence Secretary and former Secretary-General of NATO, stated:

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

We agree 100%. The fact is, the current Prime Minister bottled it on welfare reform, U-turning repeatedly despite a majority of more than 160, and failing to make even modest changes to working-age benefits while removing the two-child benefit cap.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): To be charitable to the Government, there is actually £34 billion that could be spent in defence, given that they had

another U-turn on the Chagos deal. Maybe there is a delay in the plan because they are trying to decide how to spend that money, or can my hon. Friend think of another reason?

James Cartledge: My hon. Friend has remarkable foresight, because I will be coming to the Chagos issue.

This is the key point: had the Prime Minister held his nerve and reformed the benefits system, toughening the rules for working-age benefits and keeping the two-child limit, as was his previous position, he could have found the billions to fund defence rather than entrenching welfare dependency even further. Given this total failure of nerve from the Prime Minister, he had some brass neck to use his response to the King's Speech last Wednesday to accuse us of "defence austerity". Let me remind the House that last year the Government insisted on £2.6 billion-worth of reductions to the Ministry of Defence budget. This year, they are insisting on a further £3.5 billion of cuts. They will say that they were the last Government to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence, in 2010, but they always omit the caveat that when that same Labour Government came to power in 1997, they inherited defence spending from us at 3%.

Indeed, in talking about so-called austerity, this Government also conveniently forget that the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, had Labour won the election in 2010, it was planning to cut 25% from the defence budget. At least their Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the time had the good grace to leave a note confessing that there was no money left, once again relying on us to clear up the mess of a Labour Government who had run out of other people's money, not for the first time in history.

The worst thing about Labour's resorting to history is that it is completely irrelevant. I have repeatedly accepted that defence spending fell under successive Governments since the end of the cold war. That is irrefutable, but it was because the world we lived in was one where we thought peace would last. Today, however, the threat is completely transformed and, instead of looking back, the public want us to confront the challenges we face right now, to be ready for battle and above all to be honest about the choices needed to find the cash for defence. That is why we have started to set out fully funded steps towards spending 3% of GDP on defence, as was last achieved under a Conservative Government.

Let us take the example of Chagos, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) did in his very good intervention. Labour Members may delude themselves that, like the parrot in the Monty Python sketch, their Chagos deal is merely resting, and pining for the archipelago, but we know that the deal is dead. It is an ex-treaty. Even if they disagree, with no treaty legislation in the King's Speech, it must be clear even to them that the hundreds of millions of pounds due to be sent to Mauritius during this Parliament, primarily from the Ministry of Defence budget, must now be available to be spent elsewhere.

That is why, earlier this month in Portsmouth, the Leader of the Opposition and I set out that we would use Labour's Chagos cash for a better purpose: accelerating the construction of the 13 frigates being made in Scotland that we ordered when we were in government. The fact is, there is no other way to address the serious shortage of surface ships in the short term than by accelerating

[James Cartlidge]

the build of those 13 fantastic new warships. Indeed, just a few days after we set out our policy to do exactly that, lo and behold, HMS Iron Duke was withdrawn from service, confirming the urgent need to act on defence readiness and to be willing to divert cash from elsewhere.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that, had his Government not got rid of shipbuilding in my city but instead put some plans into place, we may well have been able to continue to build ships there? Instead, they decimated it and left us with three incompetent Portsmouth Ministers.

James Cartlidge: I think the hon. Lady would be better focusing on the Type 45 destroyers. The former Labour Government were meant to order 12 Type 45s, but they slashed that order in half to just six. Worse than that, in an act of genius they inserted an engine that did not even work and we had to spend years trying to replace it through the power improvement project.

On the issue of welfare and defence funding, we have been the first party to explicitly set out how we would reduce benefit expenditure to increase defence spending, with confirmation that we would restore the two-child benefit cap and use the savings for our military. We have also set out plans to move £2 billion a year of research and development funds from other Government Departments to fund drones and drone tech across the board. However, if we are to become the world leader in uncrewed warfare that I still believe we can be, not least after our extraordinary support for Ukraine, we do not just need our services to have the cash to test and train; we also need to invest billions into transforming our defence industrial base.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con) *rose—*

James Cartlidge: I give way to my right hon. Friend, who is an expert on the industrial base.

Mark Pritchard: While I welcome the Type 26 global combat ship, as I am sure my hon. Friend does—that is an important naval deal with Norway—will the timeline of its delivery not give the first ships to Norway rather than to the United Kingdom? If I am wrong, that is great, but if that is the case, there must be a discussion in the MOD about extending the life of the existing—

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard) *indicated dissent.*

Mark Pritchard: If I am wrong, great—I am used to being wrong on many occasions, but I am happy to be wrong on something we need to get right.

James Cartlidge: I am aware that timelines are an issue on a couple of dimensions in the Chamber at the moment, so I will come to my conclusion shortly. My right hon. Friend asks a fundamental question about the Royal Navy when we know we have shortages of surface ships. I hope the Minister will set out exactly how many Type 26s we will order irrespective of the Norway deal. I support the Norway export deal. How many will we be ordering in addition to that? The

written answer he gave me was very ambiguous. We need to get that extra money into the industrial base, which is why our alternative King's Speech has a sovereign defence fund Bill.

There is one other important Bill in our alternative King's Speech: our promise to repeal Labour's terrible Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. It is not enough to oppose Labour's lawfare; we would restore full legal protections for our veterans, boosting morale and sending a signal that we will always have the back of those who serve. The public know that it is madness at a time of war for the UK Government to be prioritising putting our soldiers back in the dock for serving their country. That is why our motion today calls on this House to reject Labour's plans and scrap the troubles Bill. We will always defend those who defended us.

1.41 pm

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I know Members across the House will join me and the Prime Minister, who did so earlier, in sending our condolences to the family and friends of Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan, a gifted soldier and horsewoman who died on Friday—a young leader, a young life taken too soon.

His Majesty opened his Gracious Speech with a warning:

“An increasingly dangerous and volatile world threatens the United Kingdom”.

As we debate our response in this Chamber, our armed forces are on missions across the world, facing down those threats, strengthening our alliances, defending our overseas bases and overseas territories, and preparing for missions to the High North, the strait of Hormuz and a post-ceasefire Ukraine. Our armed forces are working around the clock, protecting our homeland, our allies and our interests, equipped with some of the most advanced capabilities in the world.

The effective closure of the strait of Hormuz is hurting all our constituents right across this country. They see it in their newsfeeds, feel it at the petrol pumps and pay for it through rising bills. This Government are determined to do all we can to end that pain as soon as we can. We have stepped up to lead a multinational response. The Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary have built and co-chair a new 40-nation coalition, united in our mission to secure the strait of Hormuz as soon as a lasting ceasefire is in place. The UK's armed forces are leading the way, deploying advanced autonomous minehunting equipment and new uncrewed boats and drones, and working alongside the heavy metal of HMS Dragon deploying to the middle east with its cutting-edge Sea Viper counter-drone system. That is because innovation, hard power and the ability to sustain it are the currency of our more dangerous and unpredictable age. Hard power is the essential building block of effective deterrence, and our deterrence is our insurance policy against the growing threats we face as a nation. That is why this Government are investing in hard power—investing over £270 billion in defence over this Parliament. Defence innovation is working twice: once for national security and once for British industry. That is the Labour way.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Minister makes a strong case for hard power, and we on the Liberal Democrat Benches support the investment

in British defence. However, he also knows that generals on both sides of the Atlantic have made the case that investment in development is necessary to prevent conflict. In fact, they say that prevention is better than military intervention. Will the Minister take this opportunity to assure the House that there will be no further cuts to the international development budget in the forthcoming period?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Member knows as well as I do that we have a commitment to get back to 0.7% of GDP on international aid when we can, but I remember his party in government cutting defence spending as well. I appreciate what he is trying to say, but let us unite now in understanding that the threats we face today require investment in defence and an increasing defence budget, and that is what this Government are delivering.

Investing more in our armed forces and those who wield the hard power is this Government's approach; investing more in our defence industry that develops and sustains it is this Labour Government's approach; and investing more in our alliances which multiply that hard power is this Labour Government's approach.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for how investing in our armed forces and defence, after 14 years of Tory neglect, is imperative to get Britain growing and for our defence preparedness, but does he agree that these capabilities must always be exercised in the right way? Thirty UK arms licences to Israel were suspended in September 2024, but in the light of the Iran war that he mentioned and the fact that 72,000 Palestinians have now been killed in Gaza, could Ministers revisit this? I know that this worsening situation means many constituents want to end all arms sales with the Netanyahu regime.

Luke Pollard: This Government have called for a ceasefire. We have called for increased aid to get to the people who need it. We have introduced arms export controls against those weapon systems that could be used in Gaza. We of course keep all export licences under review, but I think the whole House, whichever party we are in, wants to see a lasting peace and a two-state solution, so that the people of Gaza and Palestine can live side by side with a secure Israel. That is the effort that this Government are making in that respect.

The Conservative equipment plan that we inherited in July 2024 was overcommitted, underfunded and unsuited to the threats we now face. This Labour Government are rearming and renewing our armed forces and ending the Tory hollowing out and underfunding that we inherited. Our strategic defence review and our defence investment plan will put that right. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) was listening to the Defence Secretary's speech last night, he would have heard him say that it is getting close.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): When is the plan going to happen? I represent the constituency with the highest proportion of veterans in the UK. They take a keen interest in what goes on in our armed forces. We look across Portsmouth harbour to ships that are sat stationary, not going anywhere, and see a

defence industry that is being undermined at every step. When will the Government actually put their words into action?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Member, like me, represents an area with a lot of military personnel and a lot of veterans. That is why I know that she will welcome the fact that veterans spending is at a record high under this Labour Government. We are working to deliver the defence investment plan, but that has not stopped us from investing in new capabilities, which I will come to in a moment.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I follow the Minister's words, as always, with much interest. Has he had a conversation with the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who last Thursday spoke of dither and delay, and does he relate that to the extraordinary delay in the defence investment plan?

Luke Pollard: I always welcome recruits to our armed forces and defence debates, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) is absolutely welcome in our defence debate today. I say politely to the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) that I focus a lot of attention on the hon. Member for South Suffolk, who left an unfunded and hollowed-out armed forces, but he too was a Minister in that Government that hollowed out and underfunded our armed forces. While I welcome his intervention and expertise, he cannot escape his record of underfunding our armed forces. We are now working to deliver that funding to our armed forces.

We are on a path to warfighting readiness by 2030. We must be mission ready by 2030 against a peer adversary. That means investing in our armed forces. That mission is backed by our commitment to the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, backed by our ambitious programme of defence reform—the most ambitious in 50 years—and by the defence industrial strategy, a funded strategy. That is unlike the document worked on by the hon. Member for South Suffolk, which was unfunded and left on a shelf to gather dust.

We are fuelling defence as an engine for growth, creating good jobs up and down the country. Because we are still getting on with the job of defending our country, this Government have signed more than 1,200 defence contracts since the election, nearly nine in 10 of which have gone to UK-based firms.

Dr Luke Evans: I posed this question to the Minister's colleague, the Minister for the Armed Forces, when he was last at the Dispatch Box: where is the DIP stuck? He seemed to point the finger at the Treasury, but can I get an update on where the DIP is actually stuck?

Luke Pollard: I am a big fan of Lukes—even Lukes with new beards, as the hon. Gentleman now is—but I am not going to give a running commentary on the DIP. We are working flat out to deliver it and it will be published when it is ready.

Mark Pritchard: The Minister is right to focus on procurement and on defence kit and equipment, but all of that is nothing without defence personnel. I do not know if he is going to come on to personnel in his

[Mark Pritchard]

speech, but may I pivot his thoughts towards that subject? When they are redeployed to different countries, or even when they are moved between different local education authorities in this country, a lot of our armed forces personnel who have children with particular special educational needs and disabilities find it difficult, because there is a patchwork of quality in SEND provision, if I can put it like that. In the national interest, and in the interest of those individual children and families, will the Minister commit to ensuring that there is uniformity in SEND provision and recommendations when our servicemen and women are redeployed with their families?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Minister responds, I can tell that the question is incredibly serious and the right hon. Gentleman needed to give detail, but we are very short on time and over 40 people wish to contribute, so interventions and responses must be short.

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman was wrong in his first intervention about Type 26 frigates, but he is right in this one. It is important that we do that, and that is why this Government are putting the armed forces covenant fully into law. If it is an issue that he feels passionate about, I can arrange a meeting for him with the Minister for Veterans and People, so he can discuss this important issue further.

Jim Shannon: I welcome everything that the Government are putting forward with the spend in Northern Ireland. The Minister has committed himself to that and there have been lots of visits to Northern Ireland to make it better, but the UK spend per head on the mainland is £400 and the UK spend per head in Northern Ireland is £80, which means there is a big difference in what has to be done. What steps will be taken to improve procurement and defence contracts for businesses in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can have equality?

Luke Pollard: We have a brilliant defence industry in Northern Ireland. That is why this Labour Government backed it with a £50 million defence growth deal that I announced only a few weeks ago in Belfast. We will continue to support businesses large and small in Northern Ireland.

In the past week alone, this Labour Government have deployed advanced autonomous minehunting equipment, backed by £115 million of new investment for minehunting drones and counter-drone systems for the strait of Hormuz, and signed a £1 billion contract to equip the British Army with new remote controlled artillery. We have equipped our Typhoon jets with the advanced precision kill weapon system, which will make shooting down Iranian drones cheaper and easier for our RAF, and we have announced funding for 13 new defence unicorns. We are a Government that are backing UK jobs as we rebuild our armed forces, and we are also delivering for our people.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con) *rose—*

Luke Pollard: I give way to my constituency neighbour.

Rebecca Smith: I have a simple question for the Minister. He keeps stating that 1,000 or so contracts have been signed, nearly all with companies based in the UK, but what percentage of those companies are small or medium-sized enterprises compared with the primes?

Luke Pollard: I will get the hon. Lady the full details, but we are backing an increase in defence spending for SMEs, with a target of increasing it by 50% in the next two years. It is our mission to do so and that is why we have stood up the new Defence Office for Small Business Growth. I will get the percentages that she asks for, based on the latest figures.

We are backing our people. We have given our armed forces the biggest pay rise in 20 years, we have extended free childcare and we have introduced the first ever independent Armed Forces Commissioner to improve service life. We have ended the Tory privatisation of defence housing, and we have made a £9 billion investment to tackle the scourge of the dreadful military homes that we inherited by refitting or rebuilding nine in 10 military homes. We have turned around the Tory retention and recruitment crisis that we inherited: outflow is now down 8% and inflow is up 13%. That is what a Labour Government are delivering.

As the geopolitics shift, it is important that we, across this House, renew our support for Ukraine. It is important that we all stand together. That is why the Defence Secretary now chairs the Ukraine Defence Contact Group and why the United Kingdom now chairs, with our French allies, the coalition of the willing. Just as it is important to call out those parties that seek to take down Ukrainian flags, it is more important that we challenge them on what they would do to support Ukraine. I ask Reform Members, what will their party do to support Ukraine? Taking down the flags is a backward step, but I am interested in hearing what are the positive steps.

I say to Conservative Members, I am interested in restoring the cross-party unity on Ukraine that we used to have, which seems to be fraying because of the party politics they are playing, so will they say when was the last time the Leader of the Opposition backed the UK's leadership on the coalition of the willing? I cannot recall one occasion, but I am interested to know when that was. We need to ensure that the message goes out clearly from this House that we back Ukraine and we will continue to back Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Mark Pritchard: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: No, I need to make progress. Madam Deputy Speaker is clear that I have to finish in a moment, but I thank the right hon. Member for his interest.

We know that in a more dangerous world, we need to spend more on defence. Turning to the legislation, I have heard the nonsense about there not being any defence measures in the King's Speech from the usual armchair generals on social media, so let us look at what is in there. The Armed Forces Bill will further strengthen and improve service life, strengthen our armed forces and strengthen our strategic reserve. A new regulatory Bill, with measures to expand drone testing and use, is good news for our forces and good news for defence

tech firms in Swindon, Plymouth, Poole, Portsmouth and across the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Troubles Bill will repeal a law that was found to be unlawful and replace it with a new Bill that has new protections for veterans, which we are working closely with veterans and veterans groups to deliver.

I hear the Opposition squealing about the defence readiness Bill—a Bill they never thought of, a Bill that they never implemented and a Bill that they only complain about. The shadow Defence Secretary will know that we are continuing to work on the defence readiness Bill and it will be introduced later in this Parliament, assuming that the usual processes allow. We are consulting with people, but he will know that it is a sequential Bill. We are improving readiness in defence with the Armed Forces Bill and we are working on new measures, but all he has to offer to this debate is complaints—no apology for the underfunding, the cuts or the armed forces housing with black mould that our people are forced to live in. It is not good enough.

This Labour Government are investing in our people, providing the largest pay rise in 20 years and refurbishing or rebuilding nine in 10 defence houses. We are establishing an Armed Forces Commissioner and investing in our infrastructure. Billions of pounds will be spent on new housing and new docks. In our industrial relations, we will deliver five defence growth deals. We will deliver five defence technical excellence colleges in England, hopefully two in Scotland and one in Wales. We announced a £182 million defence skills package and 1,200 contracts have been signed.

In capabilities, we have new artillery, new missiles, new drones and new ships that are being built in Scotland. We have done new deals with Cambridge Aerospace for interceptor missiles and with Norway for new commando insertion craft. We will create new munition factories and 23 new medium helicopters are being built in Yeovil. Proteus, the first autonomous UK helicopter, has made its first flight, and we will have new defence warehouses, homes and facilities.

There will be more exports, a bigger defence industrial base and more alliances. There will be investment in the coalition of the willing and a new Ukraine Defence Contact Group, chaired by the Defence Secretary. We have a new deal with Germany, the Trinity House agreement, a fresh Lancaster House agreement, and a new deal with Norway, the Lunna House agreement. This Labour Government are delivering for defence and delivering for Britain, backing our allies and backing our forces, and I commend His Majesty's Gracious Speech to the House.

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

1.57 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): If His Majesty's most Gracious Speech was meant to show that this Government have grasped the scale of the danger facing Britain, it fell a long way short. We live in a more dangerous world than at any point since the end of the cold war. Vladimir Putin is waging war in Europe, and Ukraine is fighting not just for its very survival, but for the security of our entire continent. Across Europe, we are seeing sabotage, cyber-attacks, disinformation,

intimidation and hybrid warfare. Further afield, the world order is being tested by the rise of China, by instability in the middle east and by authoritarian regimes that are watching very carefully to see whether democracies still have the resolve to defend ourselves.

At the same time, we can no longer assume that old certainties will hold. The United States remains a vital ally, but President Trump has shown just how quickly long-standing alliances can be weakened, questioned or taken for granted. That is the reality facing Britain. This should have been a King's Speech that had national security at its heart. It should have been a moment of seriousness, urgency and ambition. Instead, once again, we got more delay and more warm words that are not backed up by action.

We all know that the Conservatives hollowed out our armed forces, but this Labour Government cannot simply point to the failures of the past and pretend that is enough. They now have the responsibility to act, but so far they are moving far too slowly.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the devastating record of the Conservatives, but does he share my sadness and frustration at the role played by the Liberal Democrats in hollowing out the size of our armed forces and waving through Budget after Budget that cut defence spending in this country? Will he own up to that sorry record?

James MacCleary: As has been pointed out, defence spending has been reduced by successive Governments over a very long period of time, so focusing on the Liberal Democrats' record alone is somewhat unfair, to say the least.

Dr Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman remind the House which party it was that insisted we delay the replacement of the continuous at sea deterrent by two full years as a condition of the coalition?

James MacCleary: The right hon. Member enjoys raising the coalition quite a lot. You are talking about the nuclear submarines, aren't you? That is what you asked about.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I was not talking about anything. Please do not use the words "you" or "your".

James MacCleary: The Liberal Democrats have reaffirmed our commitment to our nuclear deterrent repeatedly, and we will continue to do so.

The defence investment plan is still not published. Industry is still waiting for certainty, and our allies are still waiting for clarity. Our armed forces are still waiting for the investment that they need, so it was deeply disappointing that the promised defence readiness Bill was not included in the King's Speech. It speaks volumes that the Government's own Bill on readiness is itself delayed. That matters, because defence cannot be switched on overnight. We cannot rebuild capacity in industry at the flick of a switch. We cannot train personnel, repair readiness, modernise equipment, strengthen supply chains and restore deterrents with vague promises or "working at pace".

Jim Shannon: One thing that the Government need to improve and be better at is drone technology. For every one Ukrainian soldier killed, drones have killed 14 Russians. With that massive move in technology, does the hon. Gentleman feel that it is time for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to have a partnership with Ukraine? The technological advances that it is making could be part of our work.

James MacCleary: Learning from Ukraine has been very important. To be fair, the Government have made some steps in that direction, but we can always do more to learn from our friends who are testing this technology in the field day in, day out.

Defence takes time. Industry needs a demand signal, our allies need confidence and our adversaries need to see resolve. That is why the Liberal Democrats call on the Government to commit to spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2030 at the latest. That is not a slogan or a press release, but a serious plan to make Britain safer.

We must also understand that Britain's defence does not begin and end at our border. That is why forcing a choice between spending on defence and international development is entirely false. Just yesterday, former senior British officers wrote in *The Times* about the danger that cuts to development pose to our security and described aid as the "first line of defence" for the UK. The Government must urgently reverse course on the cuts, which only undermine this country's security and soft power around the world.

Last year's strategic defence review highlighted the need for an urgent injection of cash into our armed forces. That is why the Liberal Democrats call for the immediate launch of defence bonds, which would raise £20 billion over two years to support immediate, capital-intensive defence investment.

James Cartledge: The hon. Gentleman is always very generous in giving way. He says that the Liberal Democrats would issue war bonds for the extra defence spending, which is just other borrowing. He has also said that he would maintain aid spending at 0.7%, which is a huge increase in spending. How would that be funded?

James MacCleary: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that defence bonds, as with all bonds, would be borrowing. We have spoken before about the need to increase defence spending through cross-party talks, and a reversal in aid spending would be part of an overall package of how we would budget in the future. One way of doing that, which we have looked at and will propose later today, is rejoining a customs union with the European Union, which would generate increased spending.

Those bonds would help to modernise our armed forces, strengthen our sovereign capabilities and support British defence firms, including the small and medium-sized businesses that are so often at the cutting edge of innovation. That would also give the public a direct stake in the defence and security of our country. This is about spending better, not simply spending more. For too long, defence procurement has been slow, bureaucratic and wasteful. Too many programmes have been delayed and too many costs have spiralled, and too often British industry has been left without the certainty it needs to invest, hire, train and grow.

If we are serious about national security, we must also be serious about industrial security. That means backing British manufacturing, investing in research and development and supporting apprenticeships and skilled jobs. It means ensuring that defence spending strengthens communities across this country, not just the balance sheets of a handful of prime contractors. It means recognising that in the modern world, defence is not just about the number of tanks, ships and aircraft that we possess, important though they are; it is about cyber, space, drones, AI, secure supply chains, energy resilience and the ability to move quickly when threats change.

Climate change is causing global instability. Melting ice opens up new flashpoints in the Arctic, and stress on food and water resources drives displacement and conflict. Our armed forces need the tools to fight the wars of the future, not just to patch up the gaps left by the past, but Britain cannot do this alone. If the last century has taught us anything—and if recent years have taught us anything—it is that our security is bound up with that of our allies. That is why we must be unwavering in our continued support for Ukraine. We must strengthen NATO, deepen co-operation with Commonwealth allies such as Canada and Australia, and rebuild a serious defence relationship with Europe.

The Liberal Democrats have called for a new European rearmament bank and for UK participation in the Security Action for Europe rearmament programme. That would allow Britain and our allies to mobilise investment at the scale required to ensure that our defence industries lead the next generation of technology, while also generating the economies of scale needed to reduce costs over the long term. This is not about choosing between Britain and Europe; it is about recognising the obvious truth that Britain is safer when Europe is stronger, and Europe is stronger when Britain leads.

National security should not be subject to short-term political games. That is why we have called on the Government to urgently convene cross-party talks on how we reach 3% by 2030. Our adversaries are not waiting for us to get our act together, and our armed forces should not have to wait either. Defence requires all of society to be involved. Being ready to defend our nation means also building our national resilience.

The Government must move faster and show far more ambition to involve the public in defence and security. Should the worst ever happen, having 70 million of us ready to come to our nation's defence would be the most powerful weapon of all, but that requires leadership from Government, which has so far been absent, despite promises of a national conversation. That means learning from our friends in the Baltic and elsewhere about how we can harness the talents of the British people to become a more resilient and prepared country. The best way to prevent a war is to prepare for it.

The choice before us is clear: we can continue with managed decline, delayed plans and underpowered commitments, or we can choose seriousness. We can publish the defence investment plan and the defence readiness Bill, commit to 3% by 2030, launch defence bonds, back British industry, rebuild our armed forces and strengthen our alliances. We can send a clear and unambiguous message to Putin and to every other authoritarian regime watching us that Britain will defend

itself, its allies, its values and its way of life. That is the ambition that the King's Speech should have shown and the action that this country needs, and that is why Liberal Democrats will continue fighting for it.

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

2.7 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): His Majesty the King opened his Speech by noting:

"An increasingly dangerous and volatile world threatens the United Kingdom".

We have seen unprecedented military action and instability internationally, with the conflict in the middle east being only the most recent example. Closer to home, we have continued concerns about the security of Ukraine, deterring further Russian action on the European continent and creating a resilient society that is ready to support our Government and armed forces if we have to respond.

As I have previously noted in this House, the United States—our once dependable ally—is withdrawing from its historical role as the protector of democracy in Europe. It has become increasingly clear to us on the Defence Committee that there is an overreliance on the USA, both militarily and for access to its defence industrial base. When we see the US delaying deliveries and increasing the cost of Patriot missiles already sold to Switzerland as a result of the Iran war, we must examine our own dependencies, as it is becoming increasingly unclear how far they are sustainable.

In March, I warned that Russia is already operating in the grey zone against the UK, notably in sabotage and cyber-operations against the infrastructure that supports our prosperity. Furthermore, we know that Russia, China and others are arming at pace and increasing their readiness for war, yet many UK capability targets are measured in years and decades, rather than months. Neither the Government, our military, nor our society are yet prepared or resilient enough to cope with a large-scale conflict. As His Majesty warned us a week ago,

"Every element of the nation's energy, defence and economic security will be tested."

The UK's armed forces need to both improve their current readiness and adopt new technologies at pace and at scale. The Government have consistently recognised that our armed forces are hollowed out, and both the strategic defence review and the national security strategy committed the Government to improving the UK's warfighting readiness. However, our credibility has been harmed in recent months. The lack of available frigates and destroyers to carry out the tasks that we have set ourselves and, often, that we have agreed with NATO, is merely one example of the difficulties faced. The US is carrying out a NATO audit, and it is looking hard at us. Our European partners are questioning whether we can deliver on the commitments we have made to NATO as part of the defence planning process, and whether we continue to deserve our leadership role in NATO.

In the Defence Committee's report, "The UK contribution to European Security", we warned that

"Time is short, given the urgency of the threat and the work required to respond appropriately."

We raised questions about both the sufficiency of the capabilities we provide to NATO and those with which we could protect our homeland. We questioned the Government's progress on engaging the population about both the threat and how we respond to it. We have also looked at long-term procurement programmes, completing the previous Committee's work on the global combat air programme and undertaking a new inquiry into AUKUS.

We are well aware that decisions taken today, particularly those that delay programmes or lead to the loss of sovereign capability, have a huge impact on our future ability to defend our nation and deter adversaries, so we await the defence investment plan. We know that the delay is damaging both our domestic industry and our international credibility. We do not have empty factories, spare components or a surplus of welders sitting around, waiting to jump into action once the Government decide what they want. Companies do not have warehouses full of supplies waiting for the Government to put their order in. The defence industry needs to increase capacity, which means building production lines and training people so that they can build the products. That is particularly relevant if allies and partners are buying the same things at the same time, which we have seen as a result of the war in Ukraine.

Most importantly, we do not know at what rate the Government intend to reach the target of 3% of GDP being spent on defence—hopefully in this Parliament—or the NATO target of 3.5% by 2035. All the various defence financing options need to be rapidly considered, with some implemented as soon as possible. I have asked the Prime Minister whether he will publish a timeline, so that industry can plan based on when that additional funding will arrive. He refused to give certainty beyond 2027, and we need that certainty. The US and the EU are looking at our defence industrial base and working out how best they can tempt our companies to move to their countries, so that they can benefit from British innovation, while we fail to provide a reason to stay here. In our European security report, the Defence Committee warned that establishing capacity takes time, and if the Government decide to just turn on the tap at the last minute, a lot of taxpayers' money will be lost to defence inflation, leaving the MOD with very little to show for it.

Let me now move on to the defence readiness Bill, which should have featured prominently in the King's Speech, but alas, the Government have not included it. The purpose of the defence readiness Bill is to give the Government

"powers in reserve to respond effectively in the event of escalation towards a war involving the UK or its allies",

and to "facilitate external scrutiny" of the UK's ability to defend itself. The Government are determining which additional legal powers they need and looking at

"measures to...better protect our Critical National Infrastructure, provide for the mobilisation of wider Defence capability in crisis, and ensure Parliament's ability to scrutinise warfighting readiness."

We were told that this work would include engagement with key stakeholders—including other Government Departments and the Committee—during 2026 as specific measures are developed. Drafting will then

"take place following robust evidence-gathering and policy development."

All of that is welcome, but we need a timeline.

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

It has now been more than two years since the end of the last Parliament. The Government have demonstrated again and again that they understand the problems; what they have failed to do is implement a transformative solution. We need to fund defence properly, with a timetable showing precisely how and when we will reach the agreed 3.5% NATO target. We urgently need a defence investment plan, published before the summer recess, that shows what is being invested where and, crucially, where the disinvestments are, and what the subsequent changes to the structure of the UK's armed forces will be. We need a defence readiness Bill to be published in this Session, and we need a commitment that it will undergo pre-legislative scrutiny. As the Prime Minister has talked about, we need to engage the public in a national conversation about spending more on defence and what the public's role in our nation's security is. The Government are rightly wary of panicking the public, but the best way to avoid that is to ensure that the public understand what is required of them as individuals and communities, and to ensure that our brave armed forces have the necessary capabilities to defend us.

2.16 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). He will recall that I voted for him to hold his position, and I will come for payback later on. It is also very good to see my area neighbour, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), in the Chamber. I will listen with great interest to what he has to say, and I hope that the Labour party finds another use for him through its talent spotting, if I can put it like that.

Before coming to the topic of defence in this debate on the Address, I want to touch on another issue that has arisen. My brilliant assistant, Alice Stuttford, spotted yesterday something that tells me that we have a slight problem with the Government's commitment to the legal position on the use of slave-made products by Great British Energy. In answer to a question from Politico about whether they were implementing what, thanks to many Labour Back Benchers and many Opposition Members, is the law—my amendment passed and became law—and applying it to the producers as well, a spokesman for the Government said:

"We have strict procurement controls in place to ensure that any solar panels"—

it is not just solar panels, but all elements to do with net zero—

"are free from forced labour, as far as possible".

That is not the law. There is no caveat to the law. Everybody rebelled on the Labour Benches, and Opposition Members also voted for it, and we implemented an absolute, which is that it is not for Great British Energy to use any products that have been produced using any kind of forced labour. I know that this is not the speciality of the Ministers present, but I ask them to raise it, because I also saw that the Gracious Speech contained very peculiar commitments to using immigration as a way of tackling forced labour. That is not good enough.

We need to reinforce the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and make it an offence for any company to import or use any items or goods that were made using forced or slave labour. That should be a unifying factor across this House, and I do not know why the Government have now watered down their intention. Madam Deputy Speaker will know this full well as she has been party to it: this cause goes to the root of one of the issues I will come on to, which is the threat that we face from places such as China. If we go on strengthening such places by buying their slave-made goods, then we do our own defence no good at all. What is needed is a wide-ranging commitment through the Modern Slavery Act to ban all products made by slave labour.

This debate is on defence, and we are now facing the greatest threat to our freedom across the western world since the 1930s. I do not believe that the threat is less than it was during the cold war; in a way, it is a greater threat, because at least during the cold war we already knew and recognised what war was about, why we had to be prepared for it, and what we were defending. We have lost lots of that. Many people out there do not fully understand how the threat has changed and grown.

The reality today is that one shipyard in China makes more naval ships than the whole of the United States in one year. China has over 130 times the capacity to build naval ships than Europe and America have at the moment. I say to people who do not think that this is a threat: do not necessarily listen to what those totalitarian states say; go and have a look at what they are doing. They are producing and preparing for war. I am not, I hope, scaremongering, as I believe this to be a reality.

China is reinforcing and supporting Russia in its brutal invasion of Ukraine. Without China, Russia could not have continued this war. Russia was running out of ammunition, but China brokered an arrangement with North Korea, which now produces millions of rounds of ammunition for Russia, and even provides soldiers who, once used, abused and wounded on the battlefield, are then assassinated so that they are not a source of shame when they go back.

This is about totalitarian states. The Government should not use the phrase authoritarian states. They are totalitarian states, and there is a difference. Authoritarian states are about dictators and others who have risen to power and at some stage have to be brought down. Totalitarian states are ones where every element of how people live their lives is controlled, run and spied on—with people arrested as a result—by the state organs, regardless of who is in charge. Communism is the key here; those states are communist.

There are other extremist versions of such states. Iran is part of that alliance. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is an extremist organisation, and I do not understand why the Government have failed to proscribe it. It really is high time, as it is present in our country stirring up violence and hatred. We should deal with that and say it is a criminal act for the IRGC to be here.

To that extent, how the Government respond to this challenge in defence terms is critical. I am one of those people who has argued since the end of the cold war that we made a mistake in reducing defence. Nobody listened to me then, and there is no reason why they should listen to me today, but I tell the Minister that I am going to keep on saying it. I hope Members on the Government Benches and others will ask that question.

I know what the restrictions are, and that the Treasury dictates to Departments and says, “We can’t afford this. We won’t do it.” People at the Treasury are the last people in the world to ever recognise a threat to anybody, at any time, from anything. The Treasury continues as if all was sweetness and light because it does not want to make any changes. It is for Defence Ministers to make the point about the threat.

Why in heaven’s name have we not published the defence readiness Bill? It is the Ministry of Defence’s greatest weapon in the fight with the Treasury. Every other Department—Health or whatever—know what I am talking about. It is always a fight, but it has to be, because we are facing what is likely to be our greatest threat since the 1930s. To face that threat, Ministers need to make it clear to the Treasury that we cannot skirt around this any longer; we have to spend that money and commit.

The Government have talked about being committed to 3% in due course, but that will not be enough. When I was serving, we were committed to 5% of GDP to face down the Soviet Union. We will need the same again, because I believe we are about to face an even greater threat. Ministers will know that the Conservatives will give them our full support if they are prepared to fight for that.

Let us get the defence investment plan published right away—that is really important. Those totalitarian states do not face the restrictions that we do. We have those restrictions for a good reason: we believe in democracy. But freedom is the most expensive thing that we will ever try to own, and it can be taken away with just a wish. The Government’s job is to stand firm and say that the No. 1 priority is to defend the realm from threats, internal and external. If we do not do that, we will have failed in our obligations, failed the British people, and failed our allies and friends, who look to us for leadership.

We can only lead, however, if we have the equipment to show our allies that we have the endeavour. When we took the Falkland Islands, we had 53 frigates and destroyers available to us. We could not do that today. That is the measure of how far we have gone under both Labour and Conservative Governments. The Ministry of Defence must tell the Government, “Enough is enough. We are going to publish this Bill and the defence investment plan—and, by the way, where is the China audit? Let’s publish that too”.

2.26 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I begin by joining others in expressing my condolences to the family of Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan. It is a pleasure to follow my parliamentary neighbour, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), despite our best efforts to retire him at the last general election.

The test of any of us in politics is: did we leave things in a better place than we found them? Thanks to the choices made by this Labour Government, the NHS is on the road to recovery. Waiting lists fell by 110,000 in March—the biggest fall in a single month outside of the pandemic for 17 years. Ambulance response times for heart attacks and strokes are now the fastest in five years, patient satisfaction with access to general practice has

gone from 60% to 75%, and at a time when public trust in politicians is low, we hit our target of recruiting 8,500 more mental health workers three years early.

On social care, I am proud that we are investing an extra £4 billion; that we have delivered the biggest expansion of carer’s allowance since the 1970s; that the extra £150 million in the disabled facilities grant is providing more dignity, freedom and independence to thousands more disabled people; and that the first ever fair pay agreements will be delivered in social care, because the people who care for our loved ones should never care for their own. That was all made possible thanks to the efforts of the entire NHS and social care team.

In the four and half years that I have led for Labour on health and social care, I have met the best of them: the ones who ran towards danger in Southport and fought to save those children; the ones who scrubbed up and went to work during the pandemic, while the rest of us retreated to safety; the ones who bring new life into the world; and the ones who hold our hands at the end. Leading that team has been the greatest joy of my life.

The depth of love and gratitude I have for the people I have worked with is beyond words—the brilliant team of Ministers and officials at the Department of Health and Social Care, particularly my private office, NHS England, the best team of special advisers in Government, and the leaders and frontline staff across this remarkable system. I am rooting for all of them, as well as for my successor as Health Secretary as he takes on the best job in Government.

I will not pretend that leaving Government has not been an emotional wrench. The scars that I bear on my abdomen from my cancer treatment are a daily reminder to me of a time in my life, not so long ago, when I was thinking not about politics, but only about survival—and the NHS was there for me when I needed it. Walking through the doors of my Department every day as the person entrusted with protecting the very service that saved my life has been a massive responsibility and the most enormous privilege, and not one that I gave up lightly or hastily.

I left the Government because we are in the fight of our lives against nationalism, and it is a fight that we are currently losing. Unless we change course, we risk handing the keys of No. 10 to Reform, and I do not want that on our consciences. For the first time in our history, nationalists are in power in every corner of the United Kingdom. Scottish and Welsh nationalism represents an existential threat to the future integrity of the United Kingdom. Reform UK represents a threat to the values and ideals that have made this country great—values and ideals that are written into the DNA of the national health service that it would dismantle, given the chance, and whose very existence is an act of courage as well as conviction: that healthcare should be provided based on what each of us needs, not on what any of us can afford. It is a reminder that, even in our darkest hours, this country is capable of doing big things. It is our responsibility to defend that promise and the values that it represents, not just for the NHS or even for the survival of this Government, but to win the battles that we thought were long since won: of progressives against reactionaries, of patriots versus nationalists, of hope over hate. That is our fight. It is Andy Burnham’s fight in Makerfield, and it is Labour’s fight for the soul of our country.

[Wes Streeting]

For too long and too often, patriotism in Britain has been left to the loudest voices and the narrowest arguments, as though love of country belongs to one tribe, one party or one point of view, but the Britain that I believe in is bigger than that. Patriotism is not about who you exclude; it is about who you stand beside. It is not rooted in fear of change or suspicion of difference; it is rooted in solidarity—in the belief that we rise or fall together. That is the best of our country's story: a Britain where people from different backgrounds, different faiths, and different nations and regions, still see themselves in one another; a country where the son of Indian pharmacists can become our first Hindu Prime Minister without having his Englishness questioned; a patriotism built not on blood and soil but on shared values, shared institutions and shared responsibilities.

I understand that SNP and Plaid Cymru Members will not see themselves in the English nationalist politics of the party whose Members sit on the Bench behind them. But nationalism is not progressive, and nationalism and patriotism are not the same things. Nationalism says, "Look inward. Protect your own. Turn away from the others." Patriotism says, "This country is strongest when we are confident enough to be outward looking, generous and united"—united, but not always the same. On the Labour Benches, we believe in a stronger Scotland and a stronger Wales as part of a fairer United Kingdom.

Twenty-eight years ago this week, the people of Northern Ireland took a leap of faith and voted to endorse the Good Friday agreement—the triumph of hope over bitter enmity, and a reminder that a bigger and better politics is possible when people have courage. That is why we must reject the politics that tries to divide us—whether that is dividing the countries of the United Kingdom or the people who call Britain their home. The nurse from Nigeria is not the enemy of the factory worker in Newcastle. The family fleeing war is not responsible for the cost of living crisis. Division is the oldest trick in politics, and Britain deserves better than that.

The future of this country will not be built by setting neighbour against neighbour; it will be built by renewing the bonds between us, with decent jobs, strong public services, safe communities, a place we can call home and a sense that everyone has a stake in Britain's success. That is the patriotism we need today—not a brittle nationalism built on grievance, but a confident British patriotism: decent, fair-minded and internationalist, bound together in common endeavour with the conviction that our greatest strength has always been one another. We need to mobilise that spirit as we face the gathering storm.

The war in Iran may be over for now, but this fragile peace has not resolved the crisis in the strait of Hormuz. Even if it were resolved tomorrow, the long-tail consequences for the global economy and the British people will be stark. The tragedy for this Government is that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has been delivering the fastest growing economy in the G7, falling inflation and lower interest rates, but her hard work has been undermined by the consequences of a war we did not choose. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for keeping us out of it. It will be painful for the British people, who have weathered crisis after crisis: some imposed on us, like the wars in Iran and Ukraine and

the pandemic; and others, like austerity, Brexit and Liz Truss's joyride with the British economy, the result of poor political leadership.

When I gave my maiden speech 11 years ago, I argued that none of the problems facing our country would be solved by leaving the European Union. Today, in the dangerous and volatile world we find ourselves in, dominated by an unpredictable superpower in the USA, a rising superpower in China and a failed superpower in Russia, it is even more clear that we would have been better off leading Europe than leaving the European Union—not despite our sovereignty and the need to control our borders, but to enable those things. That is why I argue for a new special relationship. It is also why I welcome the assurances that the Government are strengthening sanctions on Russia to underline the rock-solid support that we have given President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people. The frontline in Ukraine is the frontline for our freedom and democracy. We are meant to be the party of internationalism and solidarity. It is only too disappointing to see Reform councillors taking down the Ukraine flag when the British people want to fly it in solidarity. It is truly, truly shameful.

NATO's Secretary-General is right to warn today that our alliance has an "unhealthy" reliance on one ally. We need to invest more heavily in our defence, and more rapidly. I know that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary and his team do not need persuading on this—nor do they need lectures from Conservatives, who ran down our capability and now have the audacity to heckle from the sidelines like the arsonist complaining that the fire brigade has not turned up fast enough. I am with the Secretary of State and his team all the way.

James Cartlidge: Bankrupting the country has consequences.

Wes Streeting: The shadow Secretary of State mentions "bankrupting the country." I think he is thinking about Liz Truss and the joyride that he was no doubt cheering on. A period of silence, or at least an apology, might be welcome from those on the Conservative Front Bench.

We need to recognise that a nation draws its strength from the condition of its people. A recent survey of 16 to 29-year-olds suggested that around half of all young people in this country would not be prepared to fight for it. I am not so sure about that; I think they would be every bit as brave and self-sacrificing as their grandparents and great-grandparents were, or as their contemporaries holding back the Russians in Ukraine have been. When the cause is just and the need is urgent, they will step up, regardless of what they might have told opinion pollsters.

I know that because, when this country was facing a dire threat—from covid—young people did step up. The generation least at risk gave up the most to help the rest of us keep safe. And how did Britain repay them? By short-changing them on their education, layering on debt, making it harder to get on the housing ladder, and failing to protect them from the AI jobs apocalypse. This generation is the first left totally exposed to the time-sucking algorithms and perils of social media. The Education Secretary and I have raised our concerns about the impact of this on their learning and their wellbeing, but I also wonder what it is doing to their sense of connection with community and country.

But patriotism is not a lecture that the old deliver to the young; it is a relationship. For generations, Britain understood that relationship as a social contract: you work hard, you play by the rules, you contribute to society, and in return you can build a decent life, a secure job, a home of your own and a family if you want one, with the hope and conviction that your children will do better than you did. A generation ago, the average home cost around four times average earnings. In many parts of Britain today, it is eight, 10 or even 12 times average earnings. Private rents consume vast proportions of household income. Millions of young people who work hard and do the right thing cannot see a path to home ownership or security. Today, nearly a million young people are not in education, employment or training. Many are trapped in insecure work, unable to move out, delaying starting their families and postponing adulthood itself.

Layered on top of this economic insecurity is a new technological anxiety. For generations, people believed that there was a ladder of advancement, with an entry-level job, skills acquired over time, promotion, security and progress. Now, many young people fear that artificial intelligence may remove the lower rungs of that ladder altogether. They ask what skills will still matter. Will there still be routes into stable, middle-class lives for kids from working-class families like mine? Will deindustrialisation be replaced with reindustrialisation and the jobs of the future? Will opportunities extend to our towns, rural and coastal communities, or will inequality become entrenched? Those are not irrational fears; they are rooted in real economic change. Unless mainstream democratic politics can answer those questions, others will exploit that vacuum—they already are.

Defence is about hard power and capabilities, but it is underpinned by the soft power that binds a country together: pride, belonging, shared activities and institutions, and hope. We need to rebuild those things for modern times. This is the calling of the Labour party, which was brought into existence to champion the interests of the working man and woman—for the many, not just the privileged few. It gave me—this kid from a council estate in Stepney in east London—the chance to realise my potential, to go to a great university, and to spend my career tackling the injustices that hold back other kids from backgrounds like mine.

The greatest tragedy of Britain today is that the next generation, for the first time in our modern history, faces worse prospects than the last. The question is not whether young people would fight for their country, but when their country is going to fight for them. This is our generational challenge: not only to deal with the immediate issues of affordability, small boats and NHS waiting lists, but to face up to a turbulent world being remade by climate change and the biggest and fastest industrial revolution in the history of the world; to make sure that no one is left behind and no one is held back—that is our job now, as the old economy of the 20th century finally gives way to the AI revolution of the 21st; and to tackle the crisis facing the next generation as an emergency, with the urgency that the moment requires.

Never waste a minute: that has been my mantra in government, and it is why I do not believe our party has time to waste treading water. The thing about emergencies is that they make the impossible possible. Look back at

the crises we have confronted: we could not vaccinate against the deadly virus—until we could; we could not nationalise the banking system—until we could; we could not reorient our entire manufacturing base towards building aircraft—until we could; we could not build hundreds of thousands of homes fit for heroes—until we could.

In times of greatest peril, our country has been capable of doing big things. We still can. Britain used to punch above its weight in the world. We still can. Each generation used to provide a better future for the next. We still can. Another member of the cancer club, the late, great Bowelbabe, Dame Deborah James, famously said:

“take risks; love deeply; have no regrets; and always, always have rebellious hope.”

It is with that in mind—and with the belief that we can and must do better, with deep love for my party and my country, with no regrets, and with rebellious hope—that I have left the Government. The Labour party was elected to deliver real change. We still can.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): After the next speaker, we will go to a speaking limit of seven minutes.

2.45 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): May I genuinely congratulate the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on a remarkable speech and wish him well in his future ambitions? His speech and its content were, I am afraid, not as germane as the contribution of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who chairs the Defence Committee. I agree with everything that he had to say; I only regret that I could not put it as elegantly as him.

The resignation letter of the right hon. Member for Ilford North is worth reading, and I am sure that Members on the Treasury Bench will have read it closely. He wrote on Thursday that

“where we need vision, we have a vacuum. Where we need direction, we have drift”,

and that should worry the Government. I agree with him, and I am thinking in particular of the defence investment plan, which we have not seen. I am conscious that the defence readiness Bill, which we were expecting in this King’s Speech, has yet to materialise, and that is of deep and profound concern.

In the 1930s, we arguably faced a similar situation to what we are up against now, and the Government of the day decided about five years in advance of the outbreak of the second world war that they must gear up our defence industrial base for the future. They created things such as shadow factories, initially with opposition from industry. Those were centred largely, at least initially, on the automotive industry and the production of aircraft, but went on to extend much further than that. It was a truly co-operative venture that led eventually to this country being able to turn out more aircraft in those early years than Germany could.

I would have thought that this Government would have learned those lessons and now be bringing forward, as a matter of urgency, its own defence readiness Bill.

[Dr Andrew Morrison]

The Government have missed an opportunity, and I am sorry about that, because there is no shadow of a doubt that industry is being held back, as has already been mentioned this afternoon, in its ambition to partner with the Ministry of Defence and with Ministers to get things going, whether that is reprovisioning what we have rightly sent to Ukraine or fitting our armed forces for the future.

Some have already mentioned hollowing out. It is worth saying that in 1989, every country in the western world was taking a peace dividend. It would have been extraordinary had they not, and they would have been punished by the voters, but that was then. The big lesson I have learned from what has happened in the years since 1989 is that Governments can afford to titrate what they provide in order to defend this country against the threats facing it—although that is never popular electorally—but they must do nothing to reduce the armed forces below an irreducible minimum, so that armed forces can regrow rapidly, as happened in the years immediately preceding 1914 and 1939.

Governments must also do nothing that will damage long-term projects, because procurement is not something that can be turned on and off like a tap—procurement takes decades. I think we have learned from that mistake. One of the mistakes that the previous Government made was delaying the Dreadnought class. That was because, as I referred to in the intervention that the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) generously allowed me to make, of pressure from our then partner in the coalition Government.

Right now we are facing the prospect of our principal ally, the United States, backing off in terms of its support for us and our European allies. We can no longer entirely rely on that on which we previously relied heavily. If, as seems likely, the United States proceeds with this particular course of action, we will be the only provider of a nuclear deterrent declared to NATO, and it is therefore important that in the defence readiness Bill—when we see it—we have a reaffirmed commitment to reprovisioning the continuous at-sea deterrent apace. Much work has been done in respect of infrastructure and at the Atomic Weapons Establishment, but we are still facing a rundown Vanguard class that is obliged to go on patrol for upwards of 200 days, with a consequent impact on the men and, now, women who man the submarine service. Of all the pinch point trades in our armed forces, it is those in the submarine service that should keep us awake at night. It is imperative that we accelerate that programme.

I also ask Ministers to look at the F-35A provision, and to agree with me that providing 12 airframes is hardly sufficient given the threat that we now face. I need to know, I should like to know, and I am sure the whole House would like to know when the F-35As will be operational, as opposed to the provision of training airframes. Is it the intention of the Government to expedite that programme? Is it the intention of the Government to exploit the option that they have kept open to have more than 12 of those airframes, and will Ministers confirm that they will be nuclear-enabled?

I strongly urge Ministers to consider the sovereign defence fund Bill in the alternative King's Speech, which would repurpose the National Wealth Fund to overhaul

our vital defence industrial base. Governing is about difficult decisions, and it seems to me that defence is a more urgent priority right now than using the fund—in the words of the Government—to help tackle climate change, and, indeed, a more urgent priority than ramping up welfare, as Lord Robertson has made very clear. The defence industrial base will be pretty useless if it is not populated by men and women with the skills that are necessary to deliver what is needed in order to keep this country safe.

The youth opportunity Bill, which also features in the alternative King's Speech, has the kind of imaginative content that I would have expected from an incoming Government who had 14 years to think about these matters. Unfortunately not: all that we had from the Prime Minister on young people on Wednesday was a load of waffle. Time and again, it is as if he is a passive observer rather than an active participant. The youth opportunity Bill explains how genuine investment in our young people will power and grow the economy, delivering a virtuous circle from which everyone benefits. It will cap state funding for pointless, work-irrelevant, badly taught degrees from third-rate institutions that are perpetrating a fraud on a generation, and will grow well-focused apprenticeships such as those offered by Wiltshire College in my constituency.

Let me now say a few words about special forces. We must approach these issues with a great deal of care. I am extremely concerned by the messaging that has gone out from this Government in relation to the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill—not so much the case that has been put before the House by the Northern Ireland Office and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as the way in which it has been received. The Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who is sitting next to the Secretary of State for Defence, will know very well—because his contacts are probably better than mine—that this messaging has caused a degree of disquiet, particularly among units that are crucial to this country's defence and security. They will perceive that, in years to come, a future Government may decide that what is happening now, and what is acceptable now, is no longer acceptable.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: This business with what is going on over Northern Ireland is not alone, because it builds on a perception and on the gratuitous pursuit of soldiers involved in Afghanistan and Iraq—partly by the Prime Minister in a previous life, but certainly by lawyers knowing full well that what they were pursuing were in fact complete untruths. That has made those former soldiers wonder what is the point. If politicians will not stand up for them, who will?

Dr Morrison: My right hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I absolutely agree with him. This is about more than Northern Ireland, because Northern Ireland has a read-across to a number of theatres where our men and women are actively engaged or could be in the future. The exodus from some of these units will cause irretrievable and irrecoverable damage to our ability to protect the men and women of this country.

I have no doubt that Ministers are acting with the best of intentions, but I urge them to look at the messaging that is being given to the men and women of our armed forces, many of whom I have the honour and

privilege to represent, and to decide what they can do to address this legislation. I would say “Scrap it and start again”, but if they cannot do that, I ask them to consider what they can do to prevent the idea from gaining penetrance among those units that the Government are simply not on their side, and in any event even if they were, that Governments in the future might, by the standards of the day, decide that what is being done at the moment in the name of the state and in the King’s name was no longer acceptable. Lawfare is a real and present danger to the men and women of our armed forces, and, knowing him as I do, I feel certain that the Secretary of State is cognisant of the threat that it poses.

Conscious of the frog in your throat, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall end my remarks there.

2.57 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). It is clear that when it comes to defence readiness, there is much on which we can all agree. Let me also—before he leaves the Chamber—pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). The former set out in powerful terms the challenges that we face as a country, but it was the latter who set out, also in powerful terms, the hope and the determination that we must show in government in order to meet those challenges in a way that the country deserves. As ever, my right hon. Friend showed great courage and strength in leading from the front.

Today’s debate rightly focuses on defence and national security, and it could not be more timely given the challenges that we face. However, that sense of security comes not just from investment in defence, although that is clearly important and I will say more about it shortly, but from investment in the broadest sense—investment in our people, in the creation of strong, resilient, enterprising and cohesive communities. That is what will ultimately keep us safe.

The Armed Forces Bill and the national security Bill are important steps forward, and, given the disgusting and horrifying extremism and antisemitism that we have seen rising here in Britain, the tackling state threats Bill will also be a welcome response to the threats that we face on our own soil, including those from Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Having called for it, I welcome the legislation that is coming, and will be following developments very closely.

However, we cannot make meaningful progress on defence without the defence investment plan. While I know that the Secretary of State and his team are working incredibly hard on producing the plan, the delay in its production is having real-world consequences, and we need it to maintain our international credibility. In my role as the UK’s trade envoy to Italy, I know how important collaboration is for the global combat air programme, which will unleash opportunities and defence investment.

In my region, the north-east, our defence sector is a major employer, supporting thousands of jobs and a wide network of small and medium-sized enterprises. We could do even more, but we need certainty and

security about what is coming down the track in order to protect our supply chains and the big contractors that we know are still waiting. Without the investment plan, we risk undermining defence manufacturing and sovereign capabilities, both in my region and across the country, and domestic production is not something that we can gamble with.

We have such a strong story to tell in Newcastle. The opening of the North East Space Skills and Technology Centre at Northumbria University has added a new dimension to our regional capabilities by supporting apprenticeships and graduate programmes, helping to build the next generation of skilled workers. We know that defence investment does not just impact one industry; it boosts skills, innovation and opportunities across our whole economy. We need to know the details of the plan so that businesses can provide real, tangible support for our young people, and so that those young people can access high-quality training and employment.

As a northerner, I am pleased to see the northern powerhouse Bill included in the King’s Speech, but it must be backed by genuine investment. The north cannot possibly endure yet another round of broken promises, especially after the catastrophic management of High Speed 2 by the previous Government.

The small business protections Bill will offer long-overdue protection for sole traders, freelancers and family-run businesses, which we know have been ignored by large companies for far too long. I know that many small businesses will welcome the Bill, as it could genuinely save livelihoods, particularly in retail and hospitality.

On the subject of retail and hospitality, the north-east is home to some of the best—Newcastle upon Tyne North is the home of the Greggs sausage roll, after all—but many in the sector are concerned about the impact of the overnight visitor levy Bill. I urge Ministers to keep an open mind as evidence emerges, because we need to ensure that our hospitality industry thrives. For many businesses, it is too often a question of whether they will survive. I urge the Chancellor to do everything possible to support our businesses, especially in retail, leisure and hospitality, because those are the sectors that give so many of our young people their first foot on the career ladder. Without them, we know that the costs to the state and to those individuals would be so much higher.

Too often businesses feel like the odds are stacking up against them, so we as a Government need to all pull in one direction. It is in all our interests to make sure that opportunities for jobs, investment and community cohesion reach far and wide, because they do as much for our national security as investment in rotary blades and electronics. I will continue to monitor this issue in my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for youth employment.

Finally, the energy independence Bill and the nuclear regulation Bill are both welcome. They will strengthen our energy security and our national security, and they will accelerate home-grown renewable energy. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on warm homes, I want to see really ambitious energy production, and I will continue to monitor the progress made on warm homes and on the retrofitting of homes, because that is how we will help households to manage the rising cost of living.

[Catherine McKinnell]

So much in this King's Speech will be welcomed by my constituents in Newcastle upon Tyne North, from the commonhold and leasehold reform Bill to the social housing renewal Bill, but we have to ensure that they feel it, that they understand it, that they come with us and that they see the vision, so that we can help people to build better lives and stronger communities right across the UK.

3.4 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) has such a sunny personality that I always feel cheered up after listening to her contributions, even when she is the bearer of somewhat disappointing news about the economy. I was also impressed by the speech of the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who is just about to escape from the Chamber. However, it did leave me wondering what my headline would be if I were a parliamentary sketch writer. I think it would be, "Why on earth did he resign?" It sounded much more like a manifesto in a leadership campaign than a trigger for calling one, but there we are—we all have our own motives.

The right hon. Gentleman made a point that is of great relevance to this debate, which I promise I had already written down before I heard him make it: the comparison between the terrible experience of the pandemic and the terrible experience of a country involved in a full-scale war. There were, of course, casualties during the pandemic, and there was the determination to learn from it. The outcome is that we are a lot better prepared for the future, should another deadly virus attack us. As a result of the lessons learned during the pandemic, we will be in a much better position to develop effective vaccines far more quickly.

However, I am afraid the real parallel is not a very happy one. It is a fact that if someone had said before we knew we were going to have the pandemic, "You need to invest a considerable sum of money in developing a system that enables you to develop vaccines quickly in response to the emergence of a new deadly virus," we probably would not have done it. That is where the parallel lies with wartime situations, because for many years, defence-minded Members on both sides of the House have been urging successive Governments to spend a lot more on defence.

If those warnings go unheeded and this country ends up in a full-scale armed conflict with a peer adversary, we will not be talking about spending 3% or 4% of GDP on defence; we will have to spend 30% or 40% of GDP on defence. We do not wish to get to that situation, because it would lead to not only economic loss—think of the human cost. If, by investing in defence in peacetime, we can deter a potential enemy from starting a war, we not only save the treasure; we save the blood that is otherwise shed so copiously.

As we know, Russia is spending something of the order of between a third and a half of its gross domestic product on military power. In the past, the Defence Committee has looked at the question of what this country has spent historically. In a report entitled "Shifting

the goalposts?", and a second report entitled "Shifting the goalposts: an update", the figures show that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) was completely correct. He said that in the mid-1980s, when he was serving, we were spending something of the order of 5% of GDP on defence. In fact, the figure given in 1983-84 was 4.4%, and in 1984-85 the figure was 4.5%. In reality, however, that was because we had higher criteria than the other NATO powers for what counted as defence expenditure, and we adopted their lower standards later. Looking back, we can see that the figures were actually 5.3% in 1983-84 and 5.5% in 1984-85. Those are very big figures.

People talk about the way in which the peace dividend was taken, but as the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), pointed out, 1996-97—the year in which Tony Blair took over from the Conservative Government—was already at least half a dozen years after the end of the cold war, if we understand that to have taken place in 1991 rather than in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin wall. At that time, we were still spending 3%.

That was the figure then, so as the current Chair of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), rightly said in an admirably objective speech, given that Russia is preparing for conflict now, we are responding too slowly and "time is short", given the urgency of the situation. When we talk about achieving figures of 3% in a few years' time and 5% in a few more years' time, I would ask the House: does the killer in the Kremlin intend to give us that time? If we want to deter him from taking a step that would be to the detriment of the world, we need to invest now and, as in the case of the pandemic, find the money now. If a war broke out tomorrow, we would find the money at once, so let us find it today and diminish the chance of that terrible conflict happening the day after.

3.11 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): I welcome any debate that has the collective security of the British people at its heart, because I believe one of the greatest threats to our security is the economic system governing this country, which has consistently failed working-class people and communities, and which will undoubtedly be made worse still by the illegal and ill-planned war in Iran. Now more than ever, we need a radical restructuring of priorities and policies: more council housing, a total end to right to buy, and the nationalisation of our industries that were sold off and gutted by Thatcher, including water and energy.

In 2026, no one in Britain should be going hungry, so I welcome the Government's recognition in the King's Speech that there is a food poverty crisis in the UK. However, the redistribution of surplus food will not begin to end the food insecurity faced by over 14 million people in this country. It is a sticking-plaster over a gaping wound. We need a solution that acknowledges the sheer scale of hunger across the UK.

Over the last five months the Right to Food UK Commission, which I am proud to be part of, has travelled across these islands from Liverpool and Knowsley to Newcastle and Northumberland, and from Cardiff

and Aberdare to Belfast, with Glasgow and London to come next month. It has listened to the people this country too often ignores—not economists in boardrooms, not corporate lobbyists, but working-class people in working-class communities. They understand better than anyone the scale of food insecurity in this country, and how it is impacting the lives and health of people who are living with hunger every single day—and living with its consequences.

The commission has gathered evidence for what I believe will be the defining report of our generation—a road map to finally making the right to food the law of the land. In one of the richest countries on Earth, millions of our people are going hungry, and that should shame every single one of us in this place.

I say this truthfully because what I have heard over the last few months has left me absolutely devastated. I have sat with parents who skip meals so their kids can eat. I have listened to disabled people tell us that they are sitting in freezing homes, deciding whether to put the heating on or to buy food—let alone a treat, a day trip or, God forbid, a holiday. I have met workers in full-time jobs relying on food banks to survive. That is the scandal of modern Britain, because these people are not failing: Britain is failing them.

We heard evidence from Public and Commercial Services Union members that civil servants are using food banks because of low pay. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union reports that the very workers who make our food cannot afford to put it on their own tables. We should think about how obscene that is, and about how flawed our economic system must be if that is the result.

We must stop pretending that this happens by accident; it does not. This is the result of political decisions: 40 years of neoliberal economics have seen people and communities disempowered and left behind, industries destroyed, trade union power weakened, public services hollowed out, and wages and incomes driven down while wealth has flowed upwards—and after all that, people are told to be grateful for charity.

Food banks were never supposed to be part of British life. They are the clearest sign that our economy and society are broken, but an entire generation of children are growing up believing that they are normal. That is not normal or acceptable, and it is not inevitable, because hunger in Britain is not caused by a lack of food; it is caused by poverty. That is the truth at the heart of this debate: it is not about scarcity, but poverty—low wages, insecure work, sky-high rents, a broken security system, and an economic system that protects wealth while punishing the poor.

That is why I say gently to Ministers that surplus food redistribution is not a solution to hunger. Yes, any support for struggling families matters—of course it does—but we cannot build a just society on leftovers. We cannot normalise emergency charity as permanent public policy, and we cannot allow food banks to become the fourth emergency service of the British state. Because if we do, we are accepting managed poverty instead of ending it, and I reject that completely.

Earlier this week the Mayor of Greater Manchester spoke about the damage done by 40 years of neoliberal economics, and he was spot-on because everywhere the commissioners travelled there was a sense deep in communities that people have been abandoned. In Northumberland, one woman said something I will

never, ever forget. She said, “Don’t you dare call us disadvantaged; call us asset-stripped.” My God she was right. That is exactly what has happened to working-class Britain—asset-stripped, hope-stripped, industry-stripped, security-stripped—and then those very communities are blamed and demonised for the consequences of political choices.

But despite everything—despite all the hardship—those communities still fight for one another. That was the beautiful thing we witnessed everywhere we went. Solidarity is still alive in this country. Working-class people feeding each other, looking after each other and organising together show more humanity in church halls and community centres than many have ever experienced from Government. That is the spirit, and that is what the right to food campaign is built on, because people do not want charity forever; they want dignity, they want security and they want to know they can feed their families without fear.

Hunger is a political choice, and if hunger is a political choice then ending hunger must become a political priority. That means universal free school meals. It means wages people can actually live on. It means secure work and stronger trade unions. It means proper enforcement of a legal right to food, and it means investments in community kitchens and local food programmes. It means finally rebuilding a welfare state that protects people instead of punishing them, and, yes, price caps on essential items.

These are not extreme demands; they are the bare minimum standards of a civilised society, because in 21st-century Britain nobody should be going hungry. In the communities we have visited, everybody agrees that food is our most basic human right. Good food should be a fundamental human right for all, and a right to food would place this at the very heart of Government decision making. History will ask all of us in this House a very simple question: when millions of children were going hungry, what did you do about it? I know what side I am on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call my constituency neighbour, Mike Martin.

3.18 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker, you do not normally introduce me like that, so thank you very much. It is an honour to share a constituency border with you and to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), who made a heartfelt and powerful speech.

Wars are raging in Europe and in the middle east, and there are extreme tensions in the far east. Moreover, these regional conflicts are starting to knit together: Russia and China supported Iran in the middle east, and North Korea supported Russia in Ukraine. This knitting together of regional conflicts is what we saw in the 1930s in the foothills of the second world war, so there is an argument that we are now in the foothills of another global war.

It is undoubtedly true that the threats we face are increasing, yet at the same time, day by day, UK military capability is decreasing. We must rapidly rearm to narrow this gap; it is the only way that we can deter conflict. Despite that, the King’s Speech contains no programme

[Mike Martin]

of rearmament. The Government speak the language of urgency yet refuse even to introduce the necessary policy and legislation. As has been mentioned by Members from all parts of the House, we have been waiting for the defence investment plan since last autumn, and we were promised a defence readiness Bill in this King's Speech, but where is it?

As an island nation, our Navy is of the utmost importance, but it is also on its knees. While HMS Dragon took a week to deploy to the Mediterranean, the French sent an entire carrier group—an aircraft carrier, eight frigates and a submarine. How did they do that? On paper, France and the United Kingdom have comparable fleets, but in practice France achieves about 80% availability for its escort vessels, while we achieve only 50%. Through better maintenance, France achieves a better outcome. Capability on paper is worthless if it cannot deploy.

It gets worse. We started this year with seven frigates. HMS Richmond will be decommissioned this year, and HMS Iron Duke was withdrawn from service this month. That leaves us with five frigates. Furthermore, three build slots in Glasgow intended for new frigates have been ceded to Norway, because of the lack of guaranteed investment due to delays in the defence investment plan. That is a real-world example of Government inertia affecting our defence.

Putin exploits weakness, and he shies away from strength. It pains me to say it, but our Navy does not project strength, and Putin will continue to mount increasingly flagrant violations of our territorial waters until our Navy is strong enough to make him think twice. Will it take the severing of a data cable to cause us to act?

Moving from the sea to the land, the Ministry of Defence was unable to confirm to the Defence Committee whether it is able to deploy a battlegroup—1,000 soldiers—to the continent of Europe. That comes back to my point about projecting strength. Putin knows that if he were to test article 5, the 900 British soldiers in Estonia would be at extreme risk. We have no ability to deploy reinforcements, and the King's Speech does not do anything to change that. There is a gaping hole in our deterrence, and every day it goes unaddressed, the risks to our forces already deployed and our nation at home grow.

Our artillery systems have halved in number since 1997. Our precision deep-fire capability has been cut by a third. We have just 14 155 mm artillery systems, although I note that the Government have recently announced a new order. Poland donated 100 systems to Ukraine and rebuilt its own inventory at the same time. It donated and replaced; we just donated, which is why we have 14 artillery systems left.

Meanwhile, warfare has changed, and the UK has not adapted. During a recent NATO training exercise, a British brigade was effectively wiped out by four Ukrainian drone operators. That is not an indictment of our soldiers, but a reflection of modern warfare. We cannot allow that situation to become a reality.

The picture I have painted is one of systematic underfunding across all domains, and unless we rapidly rearm, we will be unable to deter. If we want to deter and to lead in the security of the Euro-Atlantic area, we

probably need an Army of about 100,000, with reserves of 50,000, a fleet of 50 ships and about 250 combat aircraft, with crewed systems surrounded by autonomous systems and one-way effectors. That is the capability we must be talking about if we want to lead and deter in the Euro-Atlantic.

Dr Murrison: I am following the hon. Member's remarks with a great deal of interest. He mentioned the reserves, and I am a reservist. Would you give the Government credit where it is due for carrying over the Armed Forces Bill, which will advance the age of retirement for reserves to 65, and agree with me that we can probably go further in looking at people, especially the reserves, who are skilled in particular areas and may be able to help us address the challenges of the future, rather than those of the past?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Dr Andrew Murrison, you know better than to use the term "you".

Mike Martin: I served on the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, and as well as increasing the scope of who can be called up, it creates a consolidation of different types of reserves and allows zig-zag pathways for specialists who can come in and out of the reserves, so it is absolutely a step in the right direction.

One thing that is missing at the moment might create the political space for an increase in defence spending. I was slightly waylaid by the right hon. Member who intervened, but I should have said that to lead and deter in the Euro-Atlantic area, we are talking about a 50% increase in defence expenditure, not £1 billion here or £2 billion there. A 50% increase in defence is the scale we are talking about.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Martin: I will not, if that is okay, because we are short on time.

To create the political space for some of these trade-offs, because that is a huge amount of money—£30 billion extra every single year—we need to have the national conversation on defence that was announced in the strategic defence review, but has been notable by its absence. That is why I, together with the hon. Members for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) and for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) and Field Marshal Richards in the other place, have formed the all-party parliamentary group on rearmament. We hope to raise public awareness not just of the threats, because I think the public understand the threats we face, but of the lack of capability, and the diminishing capability, in the UK military.

I recently went to a school in my constituency to talk to sixth-formers, and I have asked this question in several schools since, but they all assume we have a fleet of about 50 or 100 ships. When I tell them that we have 14 frigates and destroyers—surface combatants—they are shocked. The general public do not know the state of the British military, which is entirely incommensurate with the threat we face.

In conclusion, because time is very short, our military is a paper tiger. Sooner or later, we are going to be found out, and when we are found out and the battlegroup

in Estonia is overrun or an aircraft carrier is sunk, Suez will pale into insignificance. This King's Speech falls far short of what is required.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

3.26 pm

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): My belief in the importance of national defence is rooted in the single, simple idea that the United Kingdom is a nation inherently worth defending—not because of tradition or nostalgia, but because of the values of decency, respect, hard work and community that continue to define our society and can never be taken for granted. Sadly, these values are not universally held, and when we look beyond our borders, we see a world that is increasingly dangerous, worryingly unpredictable and more divided than I can remember.

That is why I welcome the Government's steadfast commitment to improving Britain's defence readiness, through both their pledge to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP and the various measures outlined in the strategic defence review. However, the scale of the challenges we face today is unprecedented, and our job is to meet them. Our approach to boosting Britain's defence readiness cannot be focused on spending alone. Instead, we need to think about how to strengthen the industries that support our military capability, whether by streamlining procurement or empowering defence-focused SMEs to better respond to global conflicts.

Gideon Amos: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Alaba: I apologise, but I will not give way, because I am conscious that other Members want to speak.

All too often, we hear from SMEs in the defence sector that access to funding is limited, slow-moving and difficult to secure. All too often, we see innovative British companies sell up or even relocate overseas. Take Ballistic Dynamics for example, an SME that is passionate about boosting the UK's defence capability, but whose founders report facing structural barriers such as a lack of consistent funding opportunities and frustratingly opaque tender processes.

In these troubling times, when our adversaries are increasingly bold in their challenges to our stability, home-grown industries will be a key component of what some are calling our pre-war phase or, in some cases, our grey zone. That pre-war phase must include the full utilisation of our highly trained and highly disciplined reserve forces who are too often undervalued in defence planning. I am glad to see the Government's efforts to improve the recruitment process for reservists, and I would encourage even greater investment in the facilities, institutions and training that support them.

I also appreciate the focus on the reserve forces more generally, but it has to be noted that the very limited reference to the active reserve forces in the SDR is causing concern among some sections of the armed forces community. The strategic reserves as a concept is seductive, but it relies on many optimistic assumptions to be realistically relied on as part of any defence plan, whereas the active reserves exist now.

Preparing the United Kingdom for the potential of future conflict is a monumental task and it will require

collaboration throughout Parliament. I urge Members across the House to work together to protect the security of the country, its citizens and our shared values.

3.30 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. and gallant Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba). He made some very important points about being prepared and the importance of the reserve.

I want to focus on the actual threats to this country as we stand here today. To a certain extent, the threats we face on a day-to-day basis get overlooked. A lot of people think a Russian invasion of the country would see missiles and bombs coming down, but there is a long, long way to go before we get to that sort of war. In fact, in many ways, we are already at war with Russia. Let us not forget that in 2017 Russia launched a chemical weapon attack in this country. If it had not been for favourable weather conditions, it could have killed thousands of people. In such circumstances, would article 5 have been triggered? In conversations I have had in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly at the North Atlantic Council, the general thought is that it would have been triggered. Whether accidental or not, a chemical weapon attack using one of the deadliest chemical weapons in the world was launched in this country.

Let me outline what the wrapper of hybrid warfare includes. Yes, there are cyber-attacks, which I will come back to. We also see sabotage across Europe, as well as arson, vandalism and terrorism. The destructive acts that we see on railway networks throughout Europe are almost certainly coming from the Russians. The chemical weapons attack I mentioned is not the only example of an assassination attempt on our soil. We know that malign finance, despite Governments' praiseworthy efforts to crack down it, also takes place.

One thing that people perhaps do not realise takes place daily is information manipulation, or cognitive warfare. The Russians are brilliant at it and are well embedded in it, as are the Chinese. We have all described people who go down the rabbit holes of social media and the internet, but that is where it starts. They are monitoring people's clicks. They are monitoring what you look at first of all. They are building a psychological profile of what you are, and then they identify your psychological vulnerabilities. They then feed that line. Why? Because they are trying to get this country, among lots of other countries, not to see the need to invest in defence.

I am sure that most Members will have first-hand experience of people saying to them that the war in Ukraine is NATO's fault and Ukraine's fault; that they represented a threat to Russia and Russia had no choice. Let me remind the House and the wider public that the only threat Russia felt was when the people of Ukraine said, in the purple revolution of February 2014, "We don't want a dictatorial president," and booted him out. They said, "We don't want to look to Moscow; we want to look to Europe, because that is where they have the freedom of choice that we want to have." That is what Russia saw as a threat. It could not let that happen and immediately invaded Crimea. It is to the shame of all of us that that was not taken as a warning at the time.

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

I am once again very pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) spoke before me, because he brings such experience to these issues. He spoke widely on that issue at the time. He makes the point that the money we were spending in the '80s involved huge figures. That is the point we have to get back to.

We must get the public to recognise the threats that we are under. Today Marks & Spencer announced a £131 million loss from the cyber-attack it suffered. People saw empty shelves at Marks & Spencer, so they went to Sainsbury's or Morrisons, but they did not see that a cyber-attack had emptied those shelves. They do not see that a software upgrade mistake can knock out the NHS for 24 hours, as happened a couple of years ago. That is what these threats represent.

Probably the most unpopular thing we can say to the public is that we must cut the budgets for other things to pay for defence. But the services that people want their money spent on will be gone if we do not pay for defence. They will not work. The biggest threat in the first 24 hours of any attack would be the knocking out of the power grid. Cyber-technology is embedded in a lot of areas, and we have to make sure that we can deal with that threat. Cyber-warfare has to have a whole-of-society approach to it. Governments cannot tackle it all on their own; they need companies such as Jaguar Land Rover and Co-op to protect those areas. It is going to cost an enormous amount of money but—in the old and well used phrase—the best way to have peace is to prepare for war. There are credible threats, so we have to spend huge amounts of money.

To deviate slightly from our policy, I think GDP percentages are a nonsense. It was ridiculous when NATO went there. We talk about what we were spending in the '80s, but let me remind Members that the 2% of GDP came about in this century. The GDP figures of the past were what it cost. I urge the Government to look carefully at our proposals on reducing the welfare bill. Look at what Lord Robertson said about the welfare bill. The threats are real. We must have the deterrents in place so that an attack is not worthwhile, but the cost is an enormous amount of money, and the cognitive warfare that is taking place is making our citizens not recognise why we need to spend it. It will be a brave decision by the Government to spend that money, but as we have made clear, we would support them in it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): There is now a six-minute limit.

3.37 pm

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), who I know is a vocal champion of tackling antisemitism, which I will focus on in my remarks.

In Tower Hamlets last week, a young man was filmed saying the most chilling antisemitic words:

"The Jews, you're going to be beheaded one by one, you dirty Jews."

He has been identified and arrested, and I thank the Met police for their action. I have picked that as just one example of the crisis we face on antisemitism. From the Golders Green terrorist attack to the Hatzola ambulance arson attack, these incidents continue to rise. What is behind this antisemitism? What radicalises individuals to act in this way? Who is responsible for these attacks?

It should not need saying, but I will spell it out. Jewish people in the UK are not responsible for the actions of the Netanyahu Government, and antisemitism did not start on 7 October. Israel had not yet begun its operations in Gaza in response to Hamas's attack when the deputy leader of the Green party filmed a video saying that people should

"support the right of indigenous people to fight back".

Antisemitism is often called the oldest hatred. I welcome His Majesty the King's specific mention of antisemitism and the need to take urgent action to ensure that all communities feel safe. I welcome the commitment that the Prime Minister himself has shown in tackling antisemitism, both in our party and in government, including through the recent summit in Downing Street with the Jewish community. I further welcome the £25 million in additional funding to help protect Jewish communities, bringing the total to nearly £60 million.

I agree with the Board of Deputies, which calls for an end to incitement at pro-Palestinian protests, where antisemitic hate speech frequently takes place. It has also called for the use of public order powers to restrict and ban marches where necessary. If we look at the marches last weekend, speakers from one of the march organisers, Palestinian Forum in Britain, told the crowd that Israel is a "Zionist cancer". Meanwhile, across London at the other, far-right march, a banner was proudly displayed that read, "End the Zionist occupation of Britain". Perhaps they could have saved the taxpayer the £4.5 million policing bill by combining their marches.

Let us be clear: there is another major driver of antisemitism in this country, and that is the Islamist regime in Iran. The group Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya claimed responsibility for the ambulance arson attack among others. The US Department of Justice now believes that it was a front designed to carry out terrorist attacks at the behest of the IRGC and its proxies.

Meanwhile, we have Iran's PressTV as well as its Spanish mouthpiece HispanTV. Its UK based show "Palestine Declassified" has regularly platformed conspiracy theorists and targeted Jewish schools in Britain as well as charities and individuals. I repeat my call for financial sanctions to be placed on them, as the US, Australia, Canada and the EU have done. That would close a legal loophole that currently allows them to pay UK nationals and operate through intermediaries without restriction.

Connected to that is Rad Media World, a company with links to Iran that *The Sunday Telegraph* just reported is using the skilled worker visa scheme completely legally. I hope that the Foreign Office will revoke that ability as well as track individuals who came here through that scheme.

There is also the issue of the charities that the Shawcross review has linked to Iran. In the interests of time, I will not repeat what I have said before, but I agree with the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North

East (Damien Egan) for the Charity Commission to have extra resource to go after those charities and close them down.

Along with other colleagues across the House, I have been campaigning for proscription of the IRGC for some time. I was therefore delighted to see the announcement in the King's Speech of the tackling state threats Bill to give the Home Secretary new powers to clamp down on foreign states and organisations posing a threat to our national security. I hope that will come alongside further and faster action to tackle the Iranian threat to us—as we have tried to do with Putin—including against its vast property empire in London and against its spreading of hatred and disinformation on social media, which is designed to sow discord and division in the UK. Are we robustly analysing the Companies House register to ensure that Bank Melli and its many subsidiaries are not dodging sanctions simply by changing their names at Companies House? Should we also be talking more about the VAJA—Iran's intelligence agency—and its activities in the UK?

I urge my Government to ensure that as soon as the new law is passed, it will be immediately acted on. By that I mean that our intelligence officers must fully understand the powers available to them through not only the new legislation but existing legislation. This week, I had the pleasure of hosting Jonathan Hackett, a US marine veteran and expert on counterintelligence and intelligence operations. He made the point that, sometimes on the ground, some of our intelligence officers are not fully aware of the powers available to them. It is crucial both that they are aware of the powers they have to take action and that they have the resources and capabilities to do so.

3.42 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I represent the constituency of Cheltenham, which is the home of GCHQ, where thousands of people work every day to keep us safe. They work quietly and never ask for our thanks. In this House, it is right that we acknowledge that whenever we can. I strongly agree with the points made earlier about the urgency of investment in defence. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on rearmament, I commend the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin).

I also echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) about the need to reintegrate with Europe as soon as we possibly can—if not on the economy then for defence alone. Almost 10 years ago, this country voted to leave the European Union, but it is now clear that whether you voted leave or remain, you did not get what you voted for. Has Brexit made us wealthier? No. Has it made us healthier? No. Has it made it easier for businesses to grow, as we were told by the Conservatives? No. Has it lowered our taxes? No. Has it helped us protect our environment? No. The faeces flowing into our rivers suggest strongly that it has not helped our environment.

Has Brexit helped us run a more effective immigration and asylum system? No! The gangsters profiting from small boats are laughing all the way to the bank. On the subject of today's debate, has it made us more secure, and has it boosted national resilience? No! We are

reliant on an unstable United States, run by an unpredictable leader who many now think is mad, with a deputy who is intent on fomenting discontent on our streets. Who is responsible for the abject failure of Brexit? It is certainly not the people of this country.

We all know in this House who is responsible for the failure of Brexit, and we all know that they are currently getting away with it. While the rest of us are undeniably poorer as a result of Brexit, there are 5 million reasons why the Reform party must keep claiming that it has been a huge success. We all know what those reasons are. Reform Members are deluded, and so are their pals in the Conservative party. They must, en masse, take responsibility for the fact that this country is now poorer and less secure as a result of their disastrous Brexit.

Our Government have a responsibility to be so much bolder in reversing the damage caused to this country. Every Labour Back Bencher and Minister knows that rapid reintegration with Europe is the only way to increase prosperity and security and boost business too. Apparently, the Mayor of Greater Manchester used to know it, but he is not sure for the next few weeks while he fights that awkward by-election. The good news is that the departed Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), is wildly pro-European again, which may or may not have something to do with the Manchester Mayor's current travails. Who knows?

Such a moment of national challenge demanded a King's Speech offering significant change to reintegrate with Europe for the sake of our economy and defence, but regrettably, the Prime Minister has offered us more of the same. Politics is about ideas, and the ideas that inspire me and those of us on the Liberal Democrat Benches are liberalism and internationalism. That will not change. The challenge facing our nation today can only be met by those ends.

At home, communities are crying out for real empowerment, yet this Government's devolution agenda delivers only the illusion of local control. To achieve growth, including in our defence sector, Whitehall's grip must be loosened to devolve real power and funding not just to distant regional centres away from our communities, but to towns and cities. Those include towns such as my constituency of Cheltenham, which stands ready to help, supporting the work of GCHQ and building on it at the Golden Valley cyber park, which is supported by this Government. I welcome that and commend the Government's decision to do so.

The King's Speech also ignores the new reality in British politics. The two-party system of the red team and the blue team shouting at each other is now over. That undermines our ability to have a thriving economy. It undermines our ability to make long-term plans to invest in the long-term defence and security of our country. It is a pity that Andy Burnham has changed his mind on proportional representation. That makes at least two U-turns before he has even rejoined this House, but let us hope he does a 180-degree turn when he gets back here.

This Government now face a stark choice. They either embrace proportional representation or usher in a future Reform Government propped up by the Conservatives to give us more of the same that they gave us before: the failure of Brexit, the lack of security and the failing economy. Sadly, this King's Speech will

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not do what is needed to fix our relationship with Europe, to make us safer or to empower communities, and it will not change politics for the better. It is a crying shame that with a massive majority, the Government have a massive lack of ambition.

3.48 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): National security should be the primary duty of every Government, and so I have been pleased to be present in this House while listening to the contributions made on defence readiness as part of the King's Speech debate. When the world today is more dangerous than it has been for a long time and when too many people are struggling with the cost of living and young people are finding employment prospects particularly difficult, the speech highlighted this Government's plan to create a stronger, safer and fairer Britain.

Last week, I had the privilege of presenting the award for overall apprentice of the year at the Juniper Training awards in my constituency. What struck me at that event was not simply the talent in the room, but the determination, resilience and ambition shown by those young people. They are proof of the potential that lies within our young people and we have a duty to invest in their futures. Juniper Training is an example of an organisation that provides a credible alternative to traditional school or college pathways for young people who would otherwise be at risk of not being in employment, education or training. Its programmes offer not only qualifications for young people but confidence, resilience and a sense of purpose, providing a route into secure employment.

Our young people deserve our full support, which is why I am pleased to welcome the Government's new deal for young people as part of our wider youth guarantee. I am especially proud that my constituency sits within the new west midlands trailblazer area, where young people are already beginning to benefit from these initiatives. Through funding provided by the Get Britain Working programme, more than 800 young people across the west midlands have already taken their first steps on to the career ladder, with a further 1,200 expected to benefit from the £10 million committed so far by the end of 2027.

In Wolverhampton itself, our youth guarantee trailblazer proposal is focused on structured work experience and transition support, intervening early to provide that crucial support. The "Wolves at Work" open door programme supports the youth trailblazer initiative and has placed more than 135 residents into work experience, and more than 50 of those individuals have already gone on to secure paid employment. Behind each of these numbers lies a young person whose life has been changed—someone who has gained confidence, stability and hope for the future. This is an achievement that my city of Wolverhampton can be proud of.

More broadly, I am proud of the work that this Government are undertaking nationally to support young people into work. The expanded jobs guarantee, now set to support an additional 35,000 young people, will provide vital opportunities to those on universal credit while helping people to get back into employment,

thereby reducing long-term welfare dependency. Moreover, this Government are expanding youth hubs across the country to ensure that young people looking for work can access the advice and support they need to find employment. Through a £725 million investment in apprenticeships, we are backing our small and medium-sized businesses by covering their full apprenticeship costs for eligible young people. In doing so, we are also supporting our businesses to create the wealth that this country so desperately needs. This Labour Government are providing security and control to working people, and I am proud to support that mission.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Mark Pritchard.

3.52 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] I usually get cheering at the end, not the beginning, but I appreciate it. Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you for calling me; it is a lovely surprise.

I want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). He is not in his place right now, but I have notified him that I will be possibly condemning his leadership bid. In 21 years in this House, I think his was one of the best speeches I have heard. We need to hear more from both sides of the House about uniting this nation. Whether the speech unites the Labour party is a matter for Labour Back Benchers, but at a time of nationalist and extreme talk on the left and right of British politics, we certainly need more people in all parties to stand up for the common good, for common purpose and for those things that unite us as a country rather than those that seek to divide us. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Whether you are from the left or right, whether you are gay or straight, whether you are Muslim or Christian and whether you are enlightened and educated, it is about British values—or, as certain Members suggest, whether it is because you have British values that you are not enlightened or educated. It is those values that unite us, whatever our party, and we all have a responsibility to stand up and be heard on these issues.

I also pay tribute to the former health Minister, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed). He, too, is not in his place, but I have emailed his office. He has answered more questions more quickly and more substantively than any other Minister during the period I have spent in this House apart from one other, who went on to be Prime Minister. That is my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak)—just to be clear, that is Richmond, Yorkshire. Richmond, Surrey—or London—has the 54 Lib Dem councillors, but that is not the case in Richmond, Yorkshire, and hopefully never will be.

I think my speech has already gone out the window, but—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I know, it comes as a great relief. I want to pay tribute to all our armed forces on what is Defence day for the King's Speech, including all those at RAF Cosford in my constituency—the second largest RAF base in the world—all those at the Royal Irish Regiment in Clive Barracks at Tern Hill and all those in MOD Donnington. All of them contribute to our national security.

As I mentioned earlier, yes, this is about defence procurement, kit and equipment, but without defence people, without personnel—we have the Minister responsible for personnel here today—the national defence falls apart. The Minister was not here earlier, but his colleague, the Minister of State for Defence Procurement, has volunteered a meeting with myself and the Minister about the important issue of the children of our armed forces personnel, in particular those with SEND needs. I have come across quite a few cases where armed forces personnel have redeployed and relocated from, say, the United States back to the UK or from Scotland to England, and yet there has been no SEND support or even SEND information when the children are redeployed with their parents. I hope that the Minister responsible for defence personnel will meet me and look at this issue because we have to look after not only our defence personnel, but their families.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): Does the right hon. Member agree that there should be a national SEND programme for armed forces children throughout the United Kingdom to support them in changing schools so often?

Mark Pritchard: The hon. Member is absolutely right. There is a patchwork of quality, if you like, and it is different depending on the local education authority, so there is an argument at least to look at whether there should be—forgive me—uniformity between Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and England when looking at the particular needs of children with SEND within the armed forces.

May I go a little bit more parochial and welcome the investment of Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land into my constituency? As the Minister will know, we are currently building the Challenger 3 tank. I am grateful that the Government listened to my representations and those of many others within the Wrekin, Shropshire and the borough of Telford and Wrekin to ensure that the gun barrel factory, which is a real strategic asset, was put into Shropshire. I want to recognise all those working so well on the Boxer vehicle programme—an absolutely vital asset for this country—and pay tribute to all those defence engineers, men and women, and those apprentices, who are doing such a great job in keeping us all safe.

I will now pivot back to a more strategic comment. Some weeks ago—colleagues may or may not remember this—I completely fluffed my PMQ about the strategic missile threat to this nation, but thankfully I had my notes on the side. Of course, we do have a counter to cruise missiles and to many other types of missiles, but this country has a strategic shortfall when it comes to ballistic missile defence. Of course, the Minister might say, “Well, we have certain capabilities on certain ships,” and I know what they are, but unless the ships are in the right place at the right time, should a ballistic missile come to this country we are, quite frankly—as I have said previously to the Defence Secretary—a sitting duck. That is not acceptable. It is the first duty of any Government to keep this country safe. How can this country be kept safe when we have direct threats from Russia with ballistic missiles, which are a proven technology, as we have sadly seen in Ukraine, and yet we have no real plan, despite the strategic defence review, to implement that need?

Finally, I say thank you to all our armed forces who keep us safe and keep our interests safe all around the world.

3.59 pm

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) on his speech; I will touch on some of the same themes.

I am only really going to refer to the tackling state threats Bill today. This new legislation honours Labour's manifesto commitment to follow the Jonathan Hall review and to introduce new powers that allow us to proscribe state threats, specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Many of us from across the House have been advocating for this for a long time—and I, for one, am grateful to the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Security Minister for enduring my questions on the subject, both in this place and in private.

The Bill could not be more timely. We know that the IRGC directs Tehran's terror networks abroad and brutally crushes dissent at home. It oversaw the sickening repression following January's protest movement in Iran, which saw 30,000 people murdered. That repression continues to this day, while the conflict goes on, with torture, sham trials and executions all being used to try to beat the Iranian people into submission, and we are only getting a small amount of information out of Iran because of the internet blackouts.

We know that the IRGC is responsible for funding and arming terrorist proxies, including Hamas, Hezbollah and others across the region who seek to hurt our allies and destroy the world's only Jewish state. The new head of the IRGC is an internationally wanted terrorist, implicated in the 1994 attack against the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires that killed 85 people; he was also the Interior Minister in 2022, when Iran cracked down brutally on the Woman, Life, Freedom protest.

Of course, all of what I am saying is about Iran—a foreign country—and today's debate is about defence readiness in this country, but unfortunately the IRGC seeks to wreak havoc on our shores. In November, the director general of MI5 linked the IRGC to no fewer than 20 potentially lethal threats here in the UK in the last year alone. The threat has only grown. The Chief Rabbi has said THAT British Jews and Iranian dissidents here are facing a

“sustained campaign of violence and intimidation”.

We have all seen this. We saw that the ambulances belonging to Hatzola, a Jewish charity serving the whole community, were targeted. We saw the Finchley Reform and Kenton United synagogues attacked. We saw Jewish charities, the Israeli embassy and the Iranian media all targeted. Most horrifying of all, we saw two Jews stabbed on the streets of London simply because they were Jewish. All this, the police and security experts suspect—there are ongoing investigations—is the work of paid proxies and criminal gangs on behalf of Iranian-backed terror groups, directed by the IRGC.

Since coming to office, this Government have continued to ramp up sanctions against the regime and individuals. Travel bans, asset freezes and disqualifications from

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directorships are all very welcome and very useful in the fight against this activity, but these sanctions cannot and have not curtailed the IRGC's nefarious actions in the UK. That is why we need the proscription-like tool now being legislated for by the Government, and why we need it now.

We do not know the full detail of what is being proposed, which is why I am here to say that the Government must ensure that IRGC members cannot be active in any respect in the UK, and that includes attending or speaking at meetings. The new power must make it a criminal offence for anyone in the UK to associate with the IRGC, profess support for it, share any materials from it or attend any meetings with IRGC representatives. It must require all IRGC online material, be it propaganda or otherwise, to be removed from the internet.

I call on the Prime Minister to keep his promise from just a few weeks ago, stating that this legislation will be prioritised and accelerated through this parliamentary Session. We need to see it as soon as possible. I also urge the Government to build further on this legislation, and to take further action to protect our national security and the Jewish community. First, the Iranian embassy has been using social media to incite violence on our shores. Both the ambassador and the supreme leader's representative in the UK should be expelled. Secondly, the regime is using soft influence networks across the UK to advance its objectives, under the cover of cultural, academic, charitable and media activity. These must be identified and dismantled. Thirdly, the Government's "Protecting What Matters" strategy, the announcement of which was extremely welcome, needs to be implemented in full and quickly.

The Iranian regime is one of the world's worst abusers of human rights. It menaces our allies in the region with its support for terrorist proxies. It threatens the safety and security of the British people, including our Jewish community here at home. I commend the Government on the seriousness with which they treat this danger, as underlined by this new legislation. We now have to get on, pass these new laws and proscribe the biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world. It is time to proscribe the IRGC.

4.5 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards), who clearly understands the topic. He spoke passionately and gave a great speech.

I want to turn the attention of the House to the following countries: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Norway, the US, Denmark, Greece, Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands. What do all those countries have in common? Well, last year they all funded their defence with a higher percentage of their GDP than the UK did. To put that in perspective, only two NATO countries spent more on defence than we did in 2021—so there has been a significant change.

I ask myself, "What do those countries know that we do not?" I am fortunate to be a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I have spoken with representatives—Ministers and other parliamentarians

—from every one of those countries, and they realise that the world is changing. We face probably the most volatile geopolitical situation in over 80 years; as I have continually said, I do not believe that the world is going to go back to how it was and how we have seen it within our lifetime.

Those countries understand that the world is rearming. They look at the threats they face from China, Russia, Iran and North Korea, which are trying to break down democracy and destabilise the world—and we just heard a great speech from the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley about the impact this situation is having on the streets of the UK. So what do those countries see in the UK? Many believe that we are leaving the room—that we are not standing up on the international stage anywhere near as much as we did. I will back that comment up.

One of my proudest moments on the cross-party NATO Parliamentary Assembly was in 2022 in the Latvian Parliament. The Defence Minister there said to the UK and the US, "Hold your head up high. You have led the world in this—you have funded and you have led—and we need to follow." That was a really proud moment. I have fed this information directly to the Secretary of State, but in the same cross-party forum last month, a NATO Defence Minister—I will not say which country he was from—said, "With all due respect, the UK are not leading; they are not even in the room, and they are not funding as they were." I could not disagree with him. That was one of my saddest days at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

We need this investment in defence. We need to clearly chart a course so we can ensure that we are funding where we need to be. I am saying this out of respect for Defence Ministers; I believe that there is a credible set of Defence Ministers, but the argument is not currently being won. We have dropped in the rankings. The NATO average for defence spending is about 2.76% and we are averaging about 2.4%, give or take. The argument that we have the largest sustained defence funding since the end of the cold war is a bit of a mockery, because we are comparing a peacetime situation to the most unstable geopolitical situation of our time. They are not comparable.

If we look at the facts, we see that in 2019-2020, spending went up by 0.2%, which is similar to the situation now. I called that out at the time. The Defence Committee was united in the last Parliament six and a half years ago, after I got into Parliament, when we said that we needed spending of 3%. That was the cross-party position then. We need to get to that position now. We need our ships funded, we need more troops, and we need drone warfare—we have seen what is happening in Iran. We must expand our technological approach to defence. The shape of defence is changing, and we need to look at this issue really seriously if we are to be able to stand on the world stage.

Our military strength has always been the bedrock, and our global soft power has given us authority and a platform to stand up for British values, but on the world stage at the moment, that authority is waning and our platform is shaking. As we chart our course, we have to have a serious response today—I am not interested in what has happened over 10, 20 or 40 years. As we have heard from hon. Members on all sides of the House, defence funding was significantly higher many years

ago. It has been very hard to put that across to the public, but that conversation is getting easier. When they see the impact on fuel prices of what is happening in the middle east, they ask, “Will I be able to fly away on holiday in the summer?” All those equations are coming to the forefront, and people are asking those questions. When I used to speak at dinners or events, every so often, someone would talk about defence. Now, almost every question is, “Can we defend ourselves, and can we rearm?”

I am pleading with the Ministers to win the argument, because I know that every single one of them wants more funding for defence. I am pleading with them to do whatever it takes so that we can rearm and have the armed forces we need, and can stand on the world stage with our head held high.

4.11 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) in what has been a constructive debate with a lot of cross-party consensus. I welcome the Minister’s speech about the measures that were included in the King’s Speech, such as the Armed Forces Bill and the commitment to support drone testing, which is something that—as we have heard from Members across the House—is very much required.

I will make three points in my speech, which are about defence priorities, the threats that we face, and the need for long-term thinking. We heard from the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), who is no longer in his place, about the need for the British people to understand the threats that this country faces and what warfare looks like in a modern context. I am one of those who believes we are already in a conflict with Russia and should take action along those lines; indeed, I believe that in the High North, not only are we in that conflict but we are a frontline nation. Just this week, we have seen the threat we face in reports of Russian submarines in the north Atlantic and attacks on energy infrastructure, and indeed the threat to subsea cables. Those are things that I see and hear about all the time as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Estonia. I was privileged to visit Estonia earlier this year to see some of the work it is doing to prepare not only its military, but its society.

This week, there was an article in *Foreign Policy* by Franz-Stefan Gady that I highly recommend everyone reads. It was regarding the threats and weaknesses that NATO faces, not only on the military front but on political decision making. In that article, Mr Gady describes how he defeated NATO while playing a war game. It was not actually about military strength; it was about the need for quick decision making. He describes the UK forces in Estonia as well as other NATO forces in Lithuania. When the Secretary of State sums up, will he provide some reassurance about Cabrit and the fantastic British forces in Estonia, the speed of their response, and the operational decision making that is in place to make sure we are not delayed by political stasis in the event of Russian aggression through hybrid warfare? Russia’s experience in Ukraine indicates that once Russia controls the battlefield, that makes a counter-attack by NATO or anyone else very hard.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): My hon. Friend speaks passionately about Estonia. Britain has troops deployed in Estonia providing a tripwire, as he well knows, having no doubt spent some time with them recently. Will he join me in encouraging the Government to make every effort to arm and equip those troops with the capabilities necessary simply to survive? Does he agree that at the moment, those troops do not provide much deterrent force at all, and will not do so until we give them the technologies that have been standard in modern warfare for multiple years now?

Graeme Downie: I totally agree with my hon. Friend that if we are to have an effective deterrent in the Baltics, it must be operationally ready to fight the threat that he identifies, not just look good on paper.

I will move on to the role of information and how we are informing the British public of the threat. I have made the point before that we must trust the British people with more information about the threat that they face, whether that is in relation to cyber-security or subsea cables and energy infrastructure. Unless the British people fully understand the threat that they face, they will not put the necessary pressure on Government or give us licence to act more quickly, as all of us in the House know we must, to defend ourselves.

I believe that information breeds teamwork and togetherness, and a lack or a void of information creates speculation and misinformation from our enemies—and, indeed, from some in this House. We must ensure that the British people are the ones keeping us on our toes, and that we are defending them in the way that we should. I point to the recent cyber-attacks on Jaguar Land Rover and the retail sector, as have been mentioned. These are all threats that the UK is facing, and we must be much more up front, straightforward and trusting with the British people about that information.

I move on to talk about some of the priorities for the long-term defence of the United Kingdom, which I am afraid requires uttering the initials DIP. I do not want to revisit the arguments that we have already had, but I urge Ministers to ensure that the defence investment plan looks at long-term planning as well. When the document is published, we should not focus only on some of the more immediate things.

In my constituency, we are looking at the work that needs to be done around our submarine fleet, as was also mentioned by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). For example, work needs to be done on contingent docking facilities at Rosyth to ensure that a lack of infrastructure does not delay or curtail the operation of Dreadnought-class submarines in the future. I know that Defence Ministers are aware of the threat that poses. When we get to that position, Dreadnought must be able to enter service immediately and fully, taking the pressure off Vanguard.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I put on record my support and recognition of the bold and principled speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) earlier today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for his support of the Government’s defence agenda. Does he share my deep disappointment that British manufacturing scale-up Aeralis has gone into administration? Aeralis was potentially about to

[Alan Gemmell]

create the UK's replacement to the Red Arrows' Hawk jet, and with its loss, we may see our beloved Red Arrows no longer being British.

Graeme Downie: I know how closely my hon. Friend worked with Aeralis to ensure that it was considered. Having visited RAF Valley earlier this year, I saw how pressing the need was to replace the Hawk as a trainer aircraft—and it is a need that must be met quickly.

I am aware that I have taken more interventions than other Members, so I apologise Madam Deputy Speaker. I urge Ministers to consider, in the DIP and more generally, the submarine recycling project, which the Minister for Defence Procurement is well aware of. As submarines continue through, we need to ensure that we have the space to manage and recycle them effectively and safely. At Rosyth, the HMS Swiftsure pilot project is coming to an end, which has seen the dismantling of one submarine. That steel has been recycled and used in the Dreadnought programme, which is an incredible way of ensuring that we are reusing materials—holding down costs and securing hundreds of jobs in my constituency.

It is those kinds of projects that we must focus on for defence. We must ensure that we are aware of the threats we face, that we inform the British people about them, and that we plan for the long term so that this country remains safe.

Michelle Scrogam (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Graeme Downie: Very quickly.

Michelle Scrogam: I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful contribution. The work of the Defence Committee involves a lot of private briefings that some Members in this Chamber and the public do not have the privilege of hearing. When I asked the Chief of the Defence Staff recently why we do not tell the public more, he said, "We don't want to alarm people." Does my hon. Friend agree that the public are grown-ups, and that they should probably be a little more alarmed than they already are? That way, they could come with us on this journey and say, "Yes please, spend more on defence."

Graeme Downie: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. We must bring the British people with us on this journey and trust them with that information. Only by moving together as a country can we defend ourselves against the threats we face.

4.20 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Less than two weeks ago, the SNP secured a landslide, record-breaking Scottish election victory, including the election of two constituency MSPs who have left this place for Scotland's Parliament. I know that regardless of political difference, there is a significant level of respect across the parties for their contributions in this Chamber and to the wider work of Parliament. That experience will stand them in good stead for what lies ahead in Holyrood.

Much more respect for Scottish voters is required from the UK Government. While the Labour Government here in Westminster have floundered month after month, failing to address the cost of living crisis affecting all my constituents, the SNP has offered a message of hope for what Scotland can and should be, with its vast natural resources, its strategically important geographical position in the world, and the incredible talents of its people. It is particularly notable that in Scotland, support for independence is now consistently polling above 50%, and that Scotland's voters have elected a significant majority of MSPs who support independence—more than ever before—with a clear mandate from the Scottish electorate to pursue an independence referendum.

The theme for today's King's Speech debate is defence readiness. Many Members will focus on defence spend, defence procurement, national security threats and other direct defence issues. I agree with many of the points that have been made by hon. Members in the debate this afternoon; many of them were extremely well made. However, I contend that for around 4,500 personnel across three significant bases in my constituency and probably the same number again in family members; around 1,000 permanent defence contractors and their families; and an estimated 12,000 veterans and their families—a total of over 30,000 people with a defence connection—there are many issues that contribute to defence readiness.

I turn first to the cost of living crisis. Like every other resident in Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey, our defence community are struggling to cover bills and are having to cope with more month than there is money. Defence personnel posted to the north of Scotland from elsewhere in the UK will experience an amazing place to live and work, but they will also experience among the highest energy prices in Europe, caused by a regulatory system that is hugely discriminatory to the north of Scotland. Labour MPs promised that people would see a £300 reduction in energy bills, but people there are projected to see a more than £400-a-year increase. There is little to nothing in the King's Speech that seeks to reverse that £700-plus difference from Labour's manifesto promise or that would remove the discrimination faced by households and businesses in the north of Scotland—discrimination that has gone on for decades, with no action to address it by the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and now Labour.

Up until yesterday, there was no plan from the Westminster Government to address growing food costs—something that the SNP is tackling head-on. Seemingly, the Chancellor is now looking to do similar, but, critically, not in a compulsory way. I very much welcome the Government's late acceptance of the SNP's wisdom in this matter, but if the Government are going to do it, I strongly urge them to do it properly.

There is no plan to cut fuel costs. There has been a promise not to increase tax further, but there is no plan to reduce it. In constituencies like mine, where car use is necessary for accessing basic services and education, leisure and employment opportunities, that is especially disappointing. People in the north of Scotland deserve better than to be punished by Westminster just for living where they live. Defence personnel, who are often hundreds of miles from their family, also deserve better than having to incur substantial costs when they drive home.

When it comes to energy and net zero, a sector that has always been a strong destination for retiring forces personnel, and which is very much suited to the skillsets of many who come from a military background, the current Government are intent on repeating the mistakes of the past by accelerating the decline of one sector, in this case oil and gas, at a rate that does not match either demand changes or the growth of the renewables sector. That is simply Thatcherism all over again, which saw the tearing apart of coal and steel communities in Scotland. It is also a betrayal of North sea workers and those in the vast supply chain associated with those jobs, from skilled parts manufacturing jobs to the hospitality staff across the north of Scotland—taxi drivers, cafés and corner shops—who are seeing their revenues eroded to an unsustainable level.

The Government's policies are eroding the opportunities available to defence personnel, too, and the Conservatives are no better. Their answer is simply to push the cliff edge further away, rather than embrace a managed transition, which is what the industry wants to see. Neither of those scenarios is acceptable to Scotland or to my constituents.

That brings me back to the theme of today: defence readiness. It is not attractive for people to join the military when jobs and opportunity are being eroded around key bases. That stifles transition opportunities for personnel leaving the services and erodes the vitality of the communities of which those bases are an integral part. Defence spending needs to be significantly increased, we need a better offer for new military personnel, and we absolutely need much stronger defence resilience in a more challenging world—where dictators such as Putin are prepared to threaten peace on a shocking scale and threaten the infrastructure that is critical to our economic and social wellbeing.

At the heart of this issue are the defence communities that are embedded in their wider communities. Those defence communities have the same aspirations, and want the same opportunities for themselves, as their surrounding communities and regions. Getting these fundamentals right supports that bigger community, aids recruitment and retention in our armed forces, and provides the opportunities that our veterans deserve when they exit service.

4.25 pm

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): Things feel insecure right now, whether that is because of the war in Iran, the cost of living pressures on families or the sense that systems are not working quite right. In Clwyd North, I hear that all the time. When families are struggling and young people do not feel that they have a fair chance, it erodes their trust in the belief that things can start getting better, and it creates a feeling of insecurity.

Building up that trust starts with clearly defining what we have put in place in our first two years of Government, and how our future actions will improve people's lives. I know from speaking to people in Rhyl, in Colwyn Bay, in Abergele, in Denbigh and in communities across Clwyd North that my constituency is full of decent people trying to do the right thing day by day. I want to make sure that those people know that they are heard and that things can and will get better.

We must be honest about the challenges, but focus on what matters to people: building something that works better. In Wales, that means a relentless focus on building a stronger and fairer future, helping families with the cost of living, strengthening our communities through better connections and opportunities, and improving our energy and, crucially, national security. It is about making sure that progress is felt in everyday life, especially in communities that have been historically left behind. It is about recognising how rich and varied Wales is with our cities, countryside and coast, and recognising that that requires a tailored approach to reflect different needs.

This Government have already delivered significant achievements, passing 50 Acts in our first parliamentary Session. Behind every piece of legislation are real people and real lives. Among that legislation is the Employment Rights Act 2025, which strengthens protections, improves pay and tackles exploitative practices for people across Clwyd North. The removal of the two-child limit is set to benefit around 69,000 children in Wales, including 3,100 in Clwyd North. That is not an abstract number; that is families feeling more stability. When it comes to safety, the Crime and Policing Act 2026 responds to local concerns about antisocial behaviour, introducing tougher action to improve our town centres.

These changes matter because of the difference they make to everyday life, with fairer work, stronger families and safer communities here at home. The need to feel secure is important to us all. In this King's Speech, we are taking crucial steps to strengthen security, because people deserve to feel safe. The Armed Forces Bill delivers a long overdue boost to defence spending, strengthens reserve forces, improves the service justice system and puts the armed forces covenant into law, which my local veterans have said is much needed.

Security also means stronger communities and shared purpose. Cutting bureaucracy, increasing police presence and introducing a national digital ID system will help people feel safer and better supported. That feeling of security also means tackling the root causes of the high cost of living, not just the symptoms. The energy independence Bill will reduce reliance on volatile global markets and deliver more secure, home-grown energy to stabilise and lower bills for households in Clwyd North. Changes to commonhold and leasehold will tackle the unfair ground rents and rising service charges about which I have heard too often in my constituency. For local businesses, the commercial payments Bill will crack down on the scourge of late payments, which is currently leading to the closure of a shocking 38 businesses a day. Taken together, those changes will ease pressure on families, support local economies, and build long-term resilience against rising costs.

Security means better connections too. The railways Bill will unify track and train under one body, and give the Welsh Government a stronger role. Backed by a £14 billion plan, it will improve connections, support 12,000 jobs, and make journeys across north Wales more reliable.

Given that such an ambitious plan has been set, we need all hands on deck to put it into action. I promise to play my part and to make a tangible difference to lives across Clwyd North, delivering real improvements and lasting change for the communities that I am proud to serve.

4.31 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): You will almost be bored with hearing me say, Madam Deputy Speaker—as will the Secretary of State—that I represent Gosport, which has one of the highest proportions of veterans in the UK, but we also have fantastic servicemen and women at sites such as HMS Collingwood, HMS Sultan, the Institute of Naval Medicine and, across the harbour, Portsmouth naval base, as well as thousands more who work in the defence industry.

Although we have such a proud history of serving the nation, many of my constituents already feel deeply disillusioned and let down by this Government. Why? Quite simply, because of their failure to deliver. Inaction could be their strapline. There is a total disparity between what is said and what is done, and defence is a perfect example of that. The Government talk of defence spending, but the Secretary of State knows that, as we speak, every single corner of our armed forces is being asked to find cuts—and where is the defence investment plan, the clear signal that defence companies in my constituency need in order to make spending decisions to protect jobs and livelihoods? It is nowhere to be seen.

This theme of over-promising and under-delivering extends to a range of other sectors. Because I chair the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I want to say a little about that sector, which contributes 16 times more to the UK economy than defence manufacturing. Formula 1, for example, is a global British brand that is worth £12 billion to the UK economy. However, our world-class major events sector is being held back by gaps in legislation—and what do the Government do? They come forward with the Sporting Events Bill announced in the King's Speech, which was a brilliant idea, but the Bill has very limited scope. It does nothing to address the wider needs of the major events industry, which is so valuable to the British economy. In particular, cultural and business events are vital to our economy, our communities and our international standing. All words, no action.

Then there is the lack of ambition in relation to ticket touts. The ticket tout ban Bill was announced in November. The Government promised a “ready to go” Bill that would put fans first, but they have relegated that promise to a mere draft Bill, kicking the can into the next parliamentary Session at the very earliest. The longer it takes for the Government to act, the longer touts will be able to rinse fans in my constituency and throughout the country to the tune of approximately £145 million, most of which goes to overseas operators. All words, no action.

Then there is touring in the EU. In the ongoing psychodrama gripping the Labour party, I note that the subject of Brexit is back on the agenda and is a hot topic, but there is so much that the Government could do for our creative industries without reopening that can of worms and starting to renegotiate Brexit. They could revisit their decision to cut orchestral tax relief for EU touring. They could ensure that A1 forms are processed without delay, so that artists do not have to make double social security contributions. They could help with the cost of ATA carnets, which the Association of British Orchestras says adds about £10,000 to an orchestra's budget. All words, no action.

Let us look at school and community sport. The King's Speech contained absolutely no new measures to improve physical activity. There has been no resolution

of the stand-off between the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport over cuts to physical education funding. If we are serious about getting our country more active, we need action, not words. That needs to begin with legislative changes to increase participation, to increase investment in the facilities on which communities rely, and to require schools to prioritise physical education alongside academic attainment. The case is clear: a more active nation is healthier, more productive and, ultimately, more prosperous. Once again: all words, no action.

There is nothing in the King's Speech for young people. The Culture Secretary has made her national youth strategy her stated legacy in the Department, but as far as I can see, all the Government have done is rip up the National Citizen Service. They have overseen the exodus of youth workers from the third sector and replaced them with nothing but a slogan. The Culture Secretary says that young people want

“somewhere to go, something to do and someone who cares”, but it is all words. There is no action.

Do this Government care at all? They must begin to back up words with deeds. The King's Speech does not even begin to provide the ambition necessary to maximise the potential of our culture, media and sport, or to back our veterans and those who work so hard in constituencies like mine in the service of our nation. Meanwhile, the British economy, people's livelihoods and jobs are suffering.

4.36 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. This King's Speech makes it clear that defence readiness is changing. It will always be about the strength and professionalism of our armed forces personnel and their families, but it is also about energy security and digital capability—new challenges in a new era.

The threats that we face are rapidly evolving. Hostile cyber-activity, damage to critical infrastructure, global instability and climate pressures increasingly affect our national security, our economy and our resilience as a country. Defence readiness today is digital as well as physical, and I welcome the measures brought forward in the Armed Forces Bill and the work of the Ministry of Defence team. Labour Ministers, many of whom have first-hand experience, are actively listening and working to implement the changes that our military communities have been calling for: improved housing, better protections for women and girls, and fully enshrining the armed forces covenant in law. This is a Government of service and delivery, and in South East Cornwall we understand that deeply.

The strategic defence review rightly talks about a whole-of-society approach to national resilience and warfighting readiness. That means recognising that defence capability depends not only on military sites, but on the civilian infrastructure, workers and communities that sustain them each and every day. My constituency has a proud and long-standing connection to our nation's defence, with over 6,000 households home to at least one veteran. That amounts to nearly 15% of households in my constituency—over double the UK average. We are home to HMS Raleigh in Torpoint, one of the Royal Navy's key training establishments, through which thousands of recruits pass each and every year. Across

South East Cornwall, many local families are directly connected to defence through their military service, veteran communities, dockyard supply chains and skilled employment. My community is also closely linked to the nationally significant work that is carried out at HM Naval Base Devonport and by Babcock International. In fact, 23% of Devonport workers live in South East Cornwall.

The long-term investment going into Devonport is hugely welcome and is important for Britain's future, particularly as we strengthen submarine support and deliver major national defence programmes, but that capability does not stop at the dockyard gates—an important point that I want to stress today. The workforce sustaining nationally significant activity at Devonport do not come from just one side of the Tamar river, and we in South East Cornwall are firmly part of the wider defence ecosystem that supports Devonport every single day. Thousands of workers regularly use the Tamar crossings for employment that is linked directly or indirectly to defence, including engineers, apprentices, contractors, dockyard workers and military personnel. We are a proud part of the wider Plymouth travel-to-work area and our connectivity across the Tamar is essential to sustaining that defence workforce and unlocking regional growth.

I have consistently raised the importance of those crossings in the House, yet they are still sometimes treated as purely local infrastructure. As investment in Devonport and long-term defence capability continues to grow, the pressure on those links will only grow. As the Government rightly invest billions of pounds in strengthening Britain's defence capability and long-term readiness, and as South East Cornwall helps sustain nationally important defence activity, our local community must feel the benefits of that investment.

We recognise the reality that energy security is national security. Recent years have shown the risks of overexposure to volatile international energy markets. Secure home-grown clean energy strengthens resilience, supports economic stability and reduces vulnerability to external shocks. Climate resilience rightly forms part of this Government's understanding of what defence readiness means to communities like mine. Extreme weather and environmental instability increasingly affect infrastructure, supply chains and operational capability across the world. Preparing for those risks is part of preparing Britain for our future.

Finally, defence readiness in the modern world must include cyber-resilience and digital capabilities. Protecting critical infrastructure, communication systems and national networks is fundamental to protecting our country, because the future of defence will depend not only on ships, submarines and military assets, but on secure systems, skilled workers, resilient infrastructure and strong communities like that of South East Cornwall.

When we talk about strengthening Britain's defence capability, we recognise the places and the people helping to sustain it every day, because defence readiness begins long before a ship leaves port; it begins with resilient infrastructure, secure energy, strong digital capabilities and communities like mine. So I welcome this new era of defence readiness, and South East Cornwall is proud to play its part in supporting that national effort.

4.41 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd).

The first duty of any Government is to keep the public safe. This duty must shape everything we do in this House, and it must shape how we think about defence. There is no doubt that Britain today faces profound defence challenges, as we have heard in this debate, from international instability to cyber-threats and increasing pressure on our energy and supply chains. But if we are serious about defence, we must also recognise that the types of threats that we face are changing. In debating security, we must also look at whether our most vulnerable people are protected from extreme heat, whether our communities can cope with flooding, and whether we can secure food, water and energy in an increasingly unstable world.

Today, the Climate Change Committee published its report on climate adaptation, and its warnings could not be clearer. We are on a path to 2°C of warming by 2050. That means that in just a couple of decades or so, nine in 10 of our homes will be at risk of overheating. Peak river flows may rise by 45%, water supply shortfalls may exceed 5 billion litres per day, and 40° heatwaves will become the new normal across the UK, potentially leading to an additional 10,000 heat-related deaths per year. The CCC is also clear that without action, warming of up to 4° by the end of this century remains a possibility, which would be catastrophic, with temperatures in the UK nearing 50°, infrastructure pushed beyond what it was ever designed to withstand, and profound consequences for public health, economic stability and social cohesion.

Those are not distant projections, Madam Deputy Speaker. My constituents and yours are already having to live with the consequences of climate breakdown. We see it in the thousands of deaths caused by the increasingly regular heatwaves, in the communities repeatedly devastated by flooding, and in rising food prices, rising insurance costs and growing pressures on the services and systems that people rely on every day.

None of this should come as a surprise. Earlier this year, the Government's own Joint Intelligence Committee warned that biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse pose serious risks to national security, threatening food and water supplies, disruption to infrastructure and supply chains, increased flooding, risks to public health and wider economic instability. It also warned of the cascading effects of displacement, conflict and competition for resources. Yet despite the scale and seriousness of warnings by the Government's own advisers, and despite repeated calls for parliamentary time, this House has still not been allowed a dedicated opportunity to debate its findings or scrutinise the Government's response.

Our children will have to live with the consequences of inaction. It would be a dereliction of duty to let political dramas around by-elections and leadership contests distract us from this most fundamental responsibility. The evidence is clear, and we are not without options. Today's report sets out practical, costed solutions: better cooling for hospitals, schools and care homes, so our most vulnerable are protected during extreme heat; stronger flood defences and investment in natural flood management for our communities; a serious

[Adrian Ramsay]

approach to water security, so shortages do not become routine; support for British farmers, so British food production remains viable under changing conditions; retrofitting homes so they are fit for a warmer climate; and infrastructure built to withstand climate impacts rather than fail under them. The economics are equally clear. The cost of action is about £11 billion a year, but the cost of inaction could rise to between £60 billion and £260 billion annually.

This must be a turning point. We can no longer treat climate adaptation as a secondary environmental issue; it is a matter of national defence, a matter of economic security and, above all, a matter of protecting people. However, it needs to be far higher up the agenda for the Government and for Parliament. That is why I am calling for a dedicated climate protection unit in No. 10, with the sole purpose of working across Departments to fund and drive forward the recommendations in this report. I am also supporting amendment (g) to the King's Speech on the threats that nature collapse poses to national security. Defence is not about responding after disaster strikes; defence is about reducing risks before crisis becomes catastrophe. If the first duty of Government is to keep people safe, climate adaptation cannot sit at the margins of the King's Speech, but must be placed firmly at its heart.

4.46 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I have spoken in this Chamber at some length about defence and the urgency of rearmament, and I was proud to join the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) and Field Marshal Lord Richards in creating the all-party parliamentary group on rearmament.

Before I turn to what the Government are doing about defence readiness, I think it is worth pausing, as we always should, on how we got here, because context always matters. A century ago, the Member for Epping—one who understood well what it meant to watch a nation sleep while danger gathered—described the period of neglect and lost opportunity in defence as “the years that the locust hath eaten”.

I think we can apply the same epitaph to the years of stewardship of defence of the previous Government and the coalition Government. The locusts were busy: armed forces' pay was cut in real terms in nine out of 14 years; forces housing was in such a state of disrepair that complaints reached a record 13,000 in a single year; troop numbers fell to the lowest level since the Napoleonic era; frigates and destroyers were cut by a quarter, minehunters reduced by half and ground-based air defence spending was slashed by 70% in their final years in office; and the defence industrial strategy sat on a shelf gathering dust, with a commitment on paper, but nothing in practice. They certainly were the years that the locusts had eaten.

That is the inheritance Defence Ministers have to contend with. I have spoken before about the urgency of rearmament, and I will not repeat myself, but I will say that I am incredibly proud of the Government's Front-Bench Defence team. I believe they have brought coherence, great industry and a genuine patriotic determination to sort out the mess they inherited, and they deserve to be recognised for that.

I am glad that the Government are investing over £270 billion across defence during this Parliament—not as an accountancy exercise, but as a genuine strategic commitment to rebuilding our national security from the ground up. As we meet our commitments made at The Hague NATO conference to reach 3.5% in the future, I understand that there will be difficult discussions to be had, just as there were difficult discussions about foreign aid. However, there is no magic bullet when we are talking about increasing defence expenditure, and pretending that one thing will solve the issue is simply not realistic. In the two previous periods during which this country had to rearm significantly—the 1930s and the 1950s—it was a combination of increased taxation, increased borrowing and difficult choices about public expenditure that did it. I am not convinced by wishy-washy words about how just cutting welfare will sort it all out.

Crucially, something else this Government understand and the previous Government never grasped is that defence spending is not just a cost. It is an investment and an engine for growth. We spend £32 billion annually with industry, equivalent to £460 for every person living in this country. UK defence supports 463,000 high-quality, well-paying jobs—one in every 60 jobs across the UK.

Gideon Amos: In the south-west where I come from, 96,000 jobs relate to defence, so it is a huge sector. In my town, SMEs are key to those jobs. Despite welcome changes, with the Defence Office for Small Business Growth from the MOD, portals are still unnavigable for many small businesses. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the MOD should do more to make contracts available for our small businesses and SMEs?

Tim Roca: I was in Bristol recently at the National Armaments Director Group, the renamed defence Government support group, and I was glad to hear that it is doing more on SMEs. Maybe the Government Front Bench will comment more on that later, but it is right to recognise that SMEs are crucial and that, in the hon. Gentleman's area of the country, they are really important. These are livelihoods, communities and the kind of good skilled unionised jobs that those of us on the Labour Benches have always stood for.

I want to acknowledge the other work the Government have done: last year, £1.5 billion was committed to building the factories of the future, including the first energetics factories in two decades, creating over 1,000 jobs in our industrial heartlands; the £8 billion deal with Turkey sustaining a 20,000-strong workforce across Scotland, Lancashire and Bristol; and the Type 26 frigates selected by Norway which were mentioned earlier in the debate. I was disappointed to see Sweden choose France over the UK in its frigate decision today, but we will just leave that to the traditional UK-France enmity. There is a genuine defence dividend that is measured not in press releases, but in real jobs in real communities the length and breadth of this country.

Turning briefly to something I hope will receive the attention it deserves, the SDR rightly made several important recommendations on strengthening home defence and resilience in the context of a whole-of-society approach to national security—several hon. Friends have talked about that today. The threats we face are not confined to the battlefield. They reach into our infrastructure, our supply chains and our communities.

Resilience must be built across the whole of society, not just within the wire fences of our military establishments. With that in mind, I was reassured to hear the Minister, at the beginning of the debate, say that Ministers are working hard and that we will in due course see a defence readiness Bill. The legal and institutional framework for defence readiness matters and I think we all want to see that Bill come forward.

I am by temperament an impatient person when it comes to defence—as you will be impatient for me to finish the speech, Madam Deputy Speaker—but the threats are not waiting for us. I am a fair person and it is only fair to say that in my view the Government are doing serious and sustained work for the renewal and rebuilding of our armed forces, restoring our industrial base and making Britain once again a country capable of defending itself. I certainly hope that the years the locusts have eaten are behind us.

4.52 pm

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): We have had a very interesting debate, with interesting speeches from many Members. I, too, am fully behind the rapid increase in funds for defence and I wish to add my thanks to our serving personnel.

Defence readiness requires a whole-society response and sovereign capability. Across a wide range of issues in our technologies, defence, infrastructure, housing and regulation, the same pattern keeps appearing. Services and systems that are set up to serve the public gradually drift away from having purpose to simply extracting rents and our time, all wrapped up in a bureaucratic mess. The overriding demand for quarterly profits and denial of early intervention, instead rationing resources at the point of maximum need, has driven perverse outcomes in strategic change. We are renting our entire economy to ourselves. We are wasting it on our own bureaucracies, while too often the gains are captured elsewhere.

We need to move back to something much more fundamental: an economy and a set of systems that we build, understand and control. That means having real capability on sovereign technology, UK business and intellectual property, and a resilient defence and security. But this is not abstract. It is directly connected to whether this country is affordable, liveable and works for the people in it.

Ultimately, this is about the social contract. My constituents need to know that the systems that they rely on—public services, housing, business, using buses and trains—have purpose to the people and are not just bottom lines to fill. They need to know that they are designed in their interest and will continue to work for them over time.

I want to use one example: the Palantir contract with the NHS. That example demonstrates, in one place, how we have got it all wrong. We have a major national system that handles highly sensitive personal data where the procurement model is subscription-based, not delivery-based, and where the intellectual property is wrapped up in “know-how”, as much of what is built does not sit clearly with the public. If we become dependent on a single supplier over time, that is not just a procurement question but a question of control, resilience and long-term cost. From a systems perspective, it creates lock-in.

From an economic perspective, it allows value to flow out, rather than being built here. From a national perspective, it raises the question: what happens if that capability is withdrawn, restricted or simply becomes too expensive to change?

We have British firms, British engineers, and a strong, open-source capability that could deliver these systems, so the issue is not capability but choice. We cannot make the same mistake with the new single patient record in the forthcoming health Bill, announced in the King's Speech. That should be transformational, allowing access to patients' details wherever they originate, and it must be a sovereign capability.

The same principle applies to business more broadly. Markets should reward value creation, but too often now the incentives cause value to be extracted instead, whether through monopoly positions, weak regulation or misaligned incentives. This is where the Government have a role—not to replace markets but to make them work properly again.

In sector after sector we see systems that continue to function but no longer serve the people they were designed for. That applies equally to defence and security. Resilience is about not just spending levels but design. It is about ensuring that we do not build national capability on systems that can fail at a single point—whether that is a supply chain, a digital platform or a dependency on external actors. Sovereign capability is not an abstract concept. It is the practical ability to continue operating when conditions are difficult. It is the ability to serve our country and our constituents through thick and thin, whatever the weather.

What links all of this is simple. When incentives drift, when control is lost, when systems become extractive, the social contract begins to fail. We have talent in this country, and we have capability. The question is whether we choose to use it. In the end, I want to see systems that work and a social contract that people can trust. The King's Speech does not sufficiently address sovereign capability, and it lacks ambition. The Government need to go further and faster for us to truly be defence ready.

4.57 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Earlier this month I joined the workers, apprentices and management at the Methil yard in my constituency, where they christened the Seahorse barge. At 85 metres long, 25 metres wide, weighing approximately 1,400 tonnes, Seahorse is an impressive achievement and will play a critical role in enabling the construction of the Royal Navy's three fleet solid support ships.

The sun was shining on Methil that day, the Forth was sparkling, and it was fantastic to join the workers, who are rightly proud of delivering this project on time and on budget. It was particularly good to hear from the apprentices at the yard about the skills and experience they had gained from being involved and about their hopes for the future. It was a day of pride and joy for the workers—and what a contrast it was to my first visit at only a few days after I was elected to this place. Then, Harland & Wolff had fallen into administration, and the future of the yard and its skilled workforce was under very real threat, but it was Labour Ministers who stepped in and worked with Navantia UK to save Methil and three other yards across the United Kingdom.

[Richard Baker]

Methil has reaped the rewards. Where there was once a bleak future, now there is investment and opportunity in a community where too many people and too many families are still struggling. Since acquiring Methil, Navantia has grown the workforce from 180 to 260, and it is now on a recruitment drive to fill a further 110 roles. That includes recruiting 50 more apprentices to join the existing 54 apprentices at the yard—brilliant opportunities for young people from the local area for the future.

Navantia UK has invested £27 million in upgrading the yard and its facilities. That investment has turned around the fortunes of the yard, which has won a further two contracts for marine infrastructure that the workforce will deliver in the coming months. The transformation means that the yard is ready to play a key role in the delivery of future defence contracts. Methil is a living example of what can be achieved through defence investment as an engine for growth. Of course, growth and growing our economy is at the heart of the King's Speech.

Yesterday, I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary set out the measure of that ambition in his speech to the Good Growth Foundation. He made it clear that our increased defence spending will bring investment into the British defence sector. Scotland shows the difference that that can make with a £10 billion deal with Norway for frigates to be built on the Clyde, supporting 2,000 jobs until the end of the next decade and a further 2,000 jobs in the supply chain. How often we have talked about nostalgia for the great days of the Clyde and fearing for its future? The Government are delivering contracts that make the future bright. For Fife, with the yard at Methil and the yard at Rosyth, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) is a doughty champion, as Ministers know, the defence investment plan will be vital for the future of our local area and our defence businesses.

I am as impatient as anybody for the plan's publication, but I understand how important it is to get it right and ensure that it is ready with the right strategy when it is published. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is aware of my view that a key part of getting that plan right is securing work for Methil and for Belfast through Programme Euston, to deliver new dry docks for Faslane. My experience of working with the workforce, the management and the unions at Methil is that the case for investment in British yards, in British businesses and in our workers is not only about the benefits it brings to our economies and our communities; it is because the skills, the capabilities and the experience in our defence industry is second to none across the world. That is why taking forward this strategy is right for our economy, for our armed forces and, at a time when we face so much global uncertainty, for our national security. I hope that it is one that the Government will continue to pursue.

5.2 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): We have heard plenty this afternoon about the lack of a defence readiness Bill in the King's Speech and lots about the yawning delay of the defence investment plan, which has been rehearsed over and over again. I want to

remind Ministers of why that is important. It is important because SMEs right across this country are waiting for the detail to be set out so that they can plan for the future, to provide the skills and jobs that the country needs. We have already heard from the Minister that contracts have been awarded since the Government came into power, but that is not good enough, because they are not providing reassurance and security, particularly to SMEs. That is incredibly serious, whether to constituents of mine working in Portsmouth or to businesses in my constituency who tell me that they are waiting with bated breath for the DIP. However, I want to focus on two things: the regulating for growth Bill and the challenge that manufacturing is facing around the steel industry.

The King's Speech included a regulating for growth Bill. We might argue that that is a misnomer as regulations usually have the opposite effect and stifle growth, but I appreciate what is trying to be done here—it is something that I have long been calling for. Plymouth has been named the centre for marine autonomy by the Government. That is a welcome designation, but that means nothing if we cannot change regulations to enable these businesses to do what they have set out to do and deliver for our defence industry. I have raised this issue here time and again. I have met key stakeholders, local businesses, industry experts and the Marine Management Organisation. I have also spoken with relevant Ministers and I know that they have been aware of the issue for a considerable amount of time. I have to say, though, that I am disappointed with the speed at which things have moved. At the end of the day, marine autonomy waits for no man—it is progressing quickly down the river, so to speak—and we are not doing the industry any favours with the amount of time this is taking.

The matter requires primary legislation, which is why the Bill is welcome. However, the Government were able to push through the removal of the two-child benefit cap, which was never on their programme, so that highlights their priorities. That is why I tabled an Autonomous Maritime Vessels (Regulation) Bill in March this year, because I was keen to force the conversation. That seems to have had the desired effect, so I will take some credit for the regulating for growth Bill.

I am pleased to see that, within the Government's write-up of the Bill as it stands already, there are illustrations from overseas. I was recently at Oceanology International at the Excel centre, where I met Canadians from Nova Scotia who already have the regulations that we need here, which, in about six weeks, enable equivalent marine autonomy businesses to get the right permissions to test and develop and put the development of the new vessels into practice. Similarly, I recently met an American company whose ambition to manufacture unmanned ships would not yet be deliverable in this country purely because of our out-of-date regulations.

Local businesses such as MSubs, ZeroUSV and ACUA Ocean—I know the Secretary of State is familiar with many of them—are all cutting-edge and desperately in need of the legislation to fully deliver on their ambitious potential, a part of which is the developing of test sites. I believe the coast off Plymouth is the perfect place to pilot that, and we do not need to wait until it is ready for everyone at the same time. Turnchapel Wharf and those behind Team Plymouth are keen to get going, and I would be delighted for us to be that pilot, if that were helpful.

I call on the Government to make the Bill a priority, and let us see Second Reading soon after the Whitsun recess so we can get moving. Please, let us also keep the Bill agile and flexible in its drafting to avoid a repeat situation where regulations cannot keep up with technology. Let us make sure this legislation is as good as it needs to be.

Tomorrow sees the debate on the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill. Before that even begins, however, we have another steel-related issue that has the potential to significantly damage UK manufacturing and, by association, our defence readiness. The new UK steel regime kicks in on 1 July. Plymouth is home to Plymouth Manufacturers' Group, which is a cluster of manufacturing businesses ranging from Alderman Tooling, Lang and Potter, Olympus Algram and Plessey to Rittal CSM and Kawasaki Precision Machinery. All those businesses have been part of a system of manufacturing in Plymouth that was set up after the war when the dockyard was seeing a decline, so naturally, we have this hub there. Yet ultimately, the new regime that will come in on 1 July means those businesses are already seeing costs going into the hundreds of thousands—in one case, there are additional costs of at least £2 million a year—simply because of the steel quotas.

I think you will agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that while I understand what the Government are trying to do to promote British industry, if we impact British manufacturing inadvertently—I am sure it is not deliberate—where the supply chain cannot always buy purely British steel, we ultimately hinder the Government's aims to see growth, jobs, skills and manufacturing, particularly around the industrial strategy.

I therefore urge the Ministers here to listen to manufacturers. Letters have gone to the Secretary of State about the issue, but it is vital that we do not tie another hand behind the backs of these manufacturing industry professionals, who want to help and make a difference and who are passionate about what they do. If we start giving them additional costs on top of the challenges they have had around employment, we will see the end of manufacturing in this country, and I am sure no one in this Chamber wants that.

5.8 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Today's debate theme is defence readiness, and I am pleased that we heard in His Majesty's Speech the Government's clear commitment to a sustained increase in defence spending. I also welcome the announcement of several Bills aimed at boosting national security, notably the tackling state threats Bill, intended to create a tougher operating environment for foreign intelligence services and their proxies. I also welcome the national security Bill to target those inciting terrorism—whether Islamist, linked to another religion, extreme right-wing or in any other form—and extreme violence online. We know that many of those threats are arriving from overseas, and their prevention is a key part of our defence. The establishment of a defence housing service, as laid out in the armed forces Bill, will be of huge benefit to the many military families in my constituency. We have to look after the people who devote their lives to serving our country.

On housing more broadly, I am pleased to see the commonhold and leasehold reform Bill. Leasehold tenancies are a huge problem for so many in my area, and I look

forward to a fairer system that limits ground rent as well as protecting my constituents from being exploited by poor managing agents. We need greater transparency over service charges and more powers for residents to challenge them. I have also had constituents approach me who have been victims of domestic abuse and have been unable to remove their abuser from their joint social tenancy due to a gap in legislation. I am therefore delighted that the Government have listened to representations on this and set out plans for the social housing Bill to address that issue. That will be a real change for my constituents who have had to live in fear and uncertainty, and it ties into the Government's ambitions to tackle violence against women and girls.

On that note, I raised a serious issue during the debate on the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill last year around taxis and private hire vehicles. The ability of many private hire vehicles to be licensed in any authority in the country yet operate far away from the authority that licenses them is creating an environment that allows shopping around for lower standards. This is affecting passenger safety and driver security, as well as penalising those drivers who do the right thing and register where they actually work. We have started to tackle this issue through the national minimum standards being brought in through that legislation, and I am pleased to see in this King's Speech measures to go further. The taxi and private hire vehicle Bill announced in the King's Speech will specifically deliver on the recommendations of the Casey report on child sexual exploitation and abuse, such as clear licensing requirements and stronger, more consistent enforcement powers. That will be a real positive for both passengers and drivers.

I am going to focus the remainder of my speech on the regulating for growth Bill, which I hope will have significant potential to support British business and innovation and make us much more competitive on the international stage, including in defence. I am pleased that the Government have explicitly referenced this Bill being used to enable better testing of next-generation defence technology. Having a background in life sciences, I am keenly aware of the ever-faster progress our researchers are making in developing new drugs, therapies and medical technologies to fight disease.

British science is often world-leading, and for good reason, but translating conceptual research into clinical trials and eventually into products and services is too difficult. That problem will increase as we move further into the world of personalised medicine, where we are using genetic data to create hyper-specific therapies that will specifically target individual patients' cancers. This Government laid world-first regulations last July to make access to these therapies easier once approved, allowing them to be manufactured closer to patients so that they can be delivered far faster and save more lives.

The appetite is there, but the regulatory environment needs an overhaul. That is not an attack on our regulators either. In my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group known as the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee—the oldest APPG, set up in 1939—I regularly engage with research scientists and professional bodies, and we had a very well-attended discussion meeting as recently as Monday this week. They often express a lot of support for our life sciences regulators, most of

[*Sam Carling*]

whom get it, fully back our growth agenda and very much want to be facilitators rather than blockers, but there is too much fragmentation for that to work effectively.

To name just a few regulators, we have the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency looking at safety and efficacy; the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence examining cost-effectiveness; the Health and Safety Executive examining hazardous substances and genetically modified organisms; the Human Tissue Authority regulating human tissue use; the Health Research Authority making assessments around ethics; the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, which needs to sign off on some stem cell research projects; and the projects that require animal studies need to go to the Animals in Science Regulation Unit in the Home Office.

That is not an exhaustive list, and I have not even touched on the plethora of NHS bodies that have to give approval for data sharing and usage, should research studies need that, as many do. These bodies all look at different and important features, but this is a crazy number of regulators. It is not that we need to deregulate; rather, we need to bring together regulators to streamline decisions without compromising on standards, and I hope that the Government will use this Bill to do that.

The individual regulators usually have reasonable decision-making timelines, though some are prone to delays, but in totality, having to get so many decisions slows down research and innovation enormously, particularly when researchers have to apply for clearance from them sequentially in most cases, although this Government have taken the first steps to reduce that through a new combined pathway between NICE and the MHRA. Regulators often ask for very similar information in slightly different formats and timetables. That wastes time and money across industry and academia for knowledgeable people who want to be cracking on and actually doing their research.

Why can we not have a single front door for approvals? There could be a unified approvals application process that collects all the relevant information in one go, so that researchers could submit one application and then have the regulators work out which of them needed to make the decisions, ideally doing so in tandem rather than each waiting for the previous one. We could also look to merge some of the regulators, and I would not object to that either, provided we can keep their expertise. I will be closely following how the legislation progresses.

5.14 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a privilege to speak in this debate on defence readiness. Like others, I am disappointed by this Government's delay in bringing forward the long-promised defence readiness Bill, both because of what that means for the security of our nation and the implications for the hundreds of my constituents who work in the defence sector. I want to talk, however, about readiness more widely.

The Government are right that energy security is national security. A country that cannot power itself cannot defend itself. I represent a constituency that has the potential to deliver a great deal of clean power to

support that security. However, this Government are not delivering on that promise. Ministers often speak of a golden age of nuclear and name Sizewell C, Hinkley Point C and Wylfa. I remind Ministers, as I have done in previous debates, that any honest list of that golden age must include Oldbury. Oldbury sits in my constituency, and has a community that knows nuclear and a site ready for the next generation.

But nuclear on the horizon does not help constituents struggling with their bills today. Energy prices are crippling households and the businesses that employ people. In the past two years, we have seen the loss of hundreds of manufacturing jobs in my constituency with the closure of the Beko factory and Billington steelworks. The remaining businesses tell me that our energy prices are deterring them from expanding. Decisions taken in the last Session have made running a business harder, not easier, and there is little sign in the proposed Bills of the Government changing that. We cannot build resilience in defence or anything else if the industrial base that sustains it is hollowed out. Without local supply chains, we will be vulnerable to interference in our energy grid and other forms of parallel warfare.

More needs to be done to ensure that we have a skilled workforce to support that industry. Thornbury and Yate has no dedicated technical further education provision. Young people who want to train as electricians, welders, nuclear technicians and wind turbine engineers at a further education college must travel out of the area, often by buses that do not run when they need them. The south-west aerospace and defence cluster on our doorstep, employing tens of thousands in skilled, well-paid jobs, stands ready to absorb the local talent we are not yet training. A constituency that sits between a nuclear site, a tidal estuary and one of the country's largest aerospace and defence clusters should be exactly the right place for fresh technical skills provision. Put the clean energy jobs of the future in young people's hands and let them tackle a challenge from their own community.

Industry needs infrastructure to support it, too, whether that is investing in a permanent solution for the old Severn bridge, which HGVs are not currently allowed to cross—which is having a massive impact on hauliers—or investing in the redevelopment of Yate station in what is a closing window of opportunity, as the adjacent land has become available. I have raised this point with the Prime Minister and I raise it again today, and I would welcome a meeting with the Rail Minister.

We also need resilience in our public services, like education and health. I have spoken a lot in this House about SEND issues, so now I will talk about health. My constituents are not waiting for structural reform to the NHS; they are waiting for a GP appointment, for an NHS dentist taking new patients and for elective procedures that would let them go back to work. Structural reform is necessary, but it is not by itself sufficient. I urge Ministers to direct the savings to our constituents in a visible way.

I will judge this Government by results in my constituency. Can a young adult get a bus to a technical college and train for a clean energy job? Can a local business afford to hire people after its energy bills, business rates and tax costs? Can a constituent access the medical care they need when they need it? Can Oldbury be part of the golden age that this Government

have promised? Sadly, the Government's proposals in the King's Speech represent more incrementalism at a moment that calls for seriousness—more fiddling around the edges, with consequences not just for this Government's reputation but for my constituents' living standards and the security of the country that we are all sent here to defend.

5.19 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is always a privilege to speak in this House and to represent the people of Portsmouth, a proud naval city built on service, innovation and hard work. As Portsmouth marks 100 years of city status, and as the city bids to become the next and the first ever southern city of culture, there is a real sense of pride, ambition and resilience.

Defence readiness is not just about the hard shiny stuff—it is about everything. In Portsmouth, defence is not an abstract Westminster debate but part of our identity. It is in our dockyards, our naval bases, our engineering firms, our supply chains, our communities and our homes. Generations of people in my city have helped to defend this country, and they continue to do so today, but people in Portsmouth also know what happens when Governments fail to back British industry properly. Under the Conservatives, Britain's and Portsmouth's shipbuilding capacity was absolutely hollowed out. Skills were lost, opportunities were missed and too many communities like Portsmouth were left behind, despite the enormous contribution that they have made and can make to our national security.

This decline did not happen overnight, and reversing it will require long-term commitment, serious investment and tangible action. That is why the second King's Speech of this Labour Government matters. We have delivered real and lasting change for our armed forces community in our first two years, with the largest pay rise for the armed forces in 22 years and £9 billion of investment to upgrade thousands of forces homes, making them fit for service personnel and their families—changes that I have seen at first hand. These changes—alongside providing a named housing officer for every service family to improve the repairs process, and updated rules that allow families to decorate how they wish and keep pets without seeking permission—go some way towards giving back.

We have established the independent Armed Forces Commissioner, with powers to investigate general service welfare matters; we have put in place new targeted retention measures to keep those with valuable experience in the forces; we have expanded the early years childcare funding overseas to match the offer available in England; we have invested in cadets; and we continue to support specialist mental health and homelessness services for veterans. I am proud that, through my persistence, I have secured an Operation Valour centre in my city. A lot has been done, but there is so much more to do.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Lady on being a strong spokesperson for the forces, particularly the Navy. She referred to cadets. We have a strong cadet force in Northern Ireland; all we need is a bit of extra money to ensure that thousands of extra cadets can be recruited. Most of the officers in charge work for a small fee or in a volunteer capacity. Does she agree that, when it comes

to cadet forces, a lot more could be done for a lot less, but that the benefits and dividends would be incredibly great?

Amanda Martin: The hon. Gentleman makes some valuable points.

This second King's Speech provides an opportunity to go further to continue to renew our contract and commitment to our armed forces, to strengthen British industry and to ensure that defence investment delivers real benefits to communities like mine.

I welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) and by the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) about the necessity of NATO and the threats—both visible and invisible—that we face as a country. At a time when the world feels more uncertain and dangerous, working together to strengthen our armed forces and national resilience is not optional. Our commitment to NATO and to closer working with our allies is crucial, as is the need for a public conversation about the threats and our priorities, so that, like our Nordic allies, we can have reasoned and sensible conversations in households, schools and community spaces, and do not leave the internet and the right-wing press to scaremonger.

Portsmouth has huge strengths in defence, aerospace, maritime engineering and advanced manufacturing. Companies such as Portsmouth Aviation, Accuracy International, Harwin, and Griffon Marine are already delivering world-class expertise and highly-skilled jobs. Alongside primes such as Airbus and BAE Systems, they demonstrate the depth of talent that exists in our city. I particularly welcome the new partnership between Airbus and the Solent Growth Partnership—a collaboration to create the UK's first ever space and defence apprenticeship matching programme. This new initiative ensures talented young people who narrowly miss out on the highly competitive Airbus apprenticeships are supported into alternative, quality opportunities with local SMEs. In just two months, the partnership has already begun to support 50 young people, helping them to gain the advanced skills needed for brilliant careers in defence. This is exactly the kind of workforce development we need more of. If Britain is serious about defence readiness, then we must invest not only in equipment, but in people, skills and industry.

Portsmouth has not always received the level of investment that it deserves, and after decades of neglect, many local businesses want to see clearer signs that opportunity is coming their way. The Government have done much work to unlock defence investment and opportunities for finance, but my local businesses tell me that more needs to be done. We must have the defence investment plan, and we need other opportunities for partnership and finance so that our SMEs can be agile and innovative in their research and development, and manufacturing. I look forward to enabling and working with the Department and the Treasury to unlock this investment.

I was really disappointed to see that none of the Government's defence manufacturing construction colleges were awarded to Portsmouth or our surrounding area. Our city has the industrial heritage, skills base and defence experts to play a leading role. I would like to explore with the Department how we can access this

[Amanda Martin]

opportunity further and close the gap. Portsmouth businesses and Portsmouth people do not want special treatment; they just want a fair chance to survive.

As a proud naval city, Portsmouth understands the sacrifices made by our armed forces, veterans and military families better than most. We also understand the enormous contribution made every day by the workers, engineers, apprentices and small businesses that help to keep our country safe. One of the greatest strengths of Portsmouth is its people, and the way that people from all faiths and backgrounds stand together. At a time when many faiths and communities have felt under attack or targeted by division and hatred, we must continue to work together to protect tolerance, respect and community cohesion across my city and this country.

As we begin this new Session of Parliament, my focus remains solidly where it has always been: on working hard for Portsmouth North, championing local businesses, and ensuring that our city plays a full and leading role in building a fairer, stronger and more secure United Kingdom. As a Member of Parliament, I am going to pull every lever possible in this Government to ensure that these are not just words on a page, but tangible actions.

5.26 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), who gave a very powerful speech. I want to use my time to address the issues that matter to the defence of our country and its future from a very domestic perspective. If I have time, I will touch on the historical waste in the defence industry.

Following what was said by the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), sadly around 50% of young people today say that they would not defend our country. The question is, why? Is it because we do not build a strong country by making poor people poorer, and we do not build a strong Army from an unhealthy, under-educated and economically broken population? The two things are not in competition; they are connected.

An argument has been made today that we must sacrifice welfare for warfare—strip the safety net to fund the military—but my argument is this: the things that make people feel safe at home are exactly what make us worth defending. We talk endlessly about threats abroad, but the things that lead to instability—poverty, inequality, failed public services and communities being left behind—are right here. Just this weekend, on Saturday, at the march to allegedly “Unite the Kingdom”, we saw vile Islamophobic rhetoric and shouts, with organisers and speakers on stage calling for Muslims to be deported from this country and from this place where we sit. Members of parties across the board were openly told to go back home, despite being born and brought up here. These are the things that are going to destroy our nation; these are the things that we really need to worry about.

I would also like to highlight the colossal waste of money in previous defence projects, given that many people jump to say that we must spend on defence and sacrifice welfare, which they say is such a waste of

money. The Ajax armoured vehicle programme costs £5.5 billion; it is still not ready and is running over a decade late. The Bowman radio cost £2.5 billion; it was 25 years late and still does not work properly. The Type 45 Daring class destroyers are £1.5 billion over budget, and the majority are now being maintained in a dock, despite being less than 15 years old.

I turn now to the economy and, more specifically, the businesses that sit at its heart. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of British prosperity. In my constituency of Leicester South, as in constituencies across this country, the employers, the innovators, and the anchor institutions of our high streets and industrial estates, are being hammered by the increased cost of living, whether it is energy and business rate rises, increased costs to staffing budgets, or national insurance contributions. The Office for Budget Responsibility found that the changes to national insurance contributions caused a 2% hike in payroll costs for employers last year alone, while the confidence of chief executive officers has fallen more in recent years than during the pandemic.

The Government's spending on defence must come from the bottom up. We must invest in the future rather than pile costs on to our own businesses, and thereby allow corporations to run riot. That is why it has been very pleasing to hear many Members speak about apprenticeships, which are a perfect example of investing in the future. I welcome any ambition to expand opportunities for young people, but warm words must be followed by structural change. University was once the most favoured destination for economic growth, but for many, that is economically out of reach. Still, the journey of an apprenticeship is a renewed ticket to economic growth and the skilled defence workforce this country urgently needs, including engineers, manufacturers and technicians. We cannot build frigates or maintain fighter jets with a generation who have been left behind.

I will quickly turn to an example that illustrates precisely what backing businesses ought to look like in practice, and where Government procurement could—if the Government choose—make a transformative difference. I have spoken to local textile business owners in Leicester, the city that used to clothe the world. At one stage, it was the second richest city in Europe because of its industry; unfortunately, it is now on its knees because contracts are being given to foreign companies, such as those in China, instead of to young, hard-working British entrepreneurs. Awarding defence uniform contracts to Chinese manufacturers is not simply an economic error, but a strategic one. It creates supply chain dependency on foreign nations at the precise moment when the Government are asking us to take defence seriously. Leicester's textile sector exists, the capability exists, and the security case for buying British has never been stronger.

The NHS is the largest employer in the country and one of the largest procurers of textiles, from uniforms to bedding and from surgical gowns to staff clothing. The potential is enormous. Not only would a targeted commitment to NHS procurement from UK manufacturers—and Leicester manufacturers in particular—support local jobs and local supply chains; it would reduce carbon emissions from long-distance shipping, strengthen our supply chain resilience, and build exactly the kind of productive, skilled employment base that the Government say they want to create.

5.31 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I am very grateful to be making a contribution to the debate on the King's Speech. It touched on what, in my view, is the core foundation of the nation's future, which is defensive readiness. My remarks will focus on what is a real part of our national defence: the defence of our democracy and our communities from hostile foreign influence.

One might be forgiven for thinking that defensive readiness is about the quality of ships, aircraft, cyber-systems and military capabilities, but it is also about whether our elections are secure, whether our public debate is protected, and whether communities in this country can live free from hatred and fear. There is no doubt that foreign interference is a threat. The Rycroft review made clear that this country

“faces a persistent problem of foreign interests seeking to exert influence on, and to interfere in, our politics.”

That should be of concern to every Member of this House.

Our elections are the foundations of our democracy. If hostile states can use online disinformation and covert influence to shape our political debate, they are attacking the public's right to decide the future of this country freely and fairly. I am proud that this Government are rightly strengthening rules on political finance, including through tighter requirements on company donations and measures aimed at preventing foreign actors from using companies to influence UK politics. Some of that influence is well known, such as the millions of pounds from Thailand and the curious friendship between the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) and the world's richest man.

The Community Security Trust records antisemitic activity, which is now at record levels. I welcomed the eloquent speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) and for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards), neither of whom are now in their seats. Not every antisemitic incident is foreign-directed, but it is clear that hostile foreign actors amplify hatred online and use it to further divide our society. That is why the threat from Iran and the IRGC matters so much. The Security Minister stated that the UK has responded to 20 Iran-backed plots since the start of 2022, presenting potentially lethal threats to British citizens and UK residents. That clearly presents a foreign policy and domestic security issue, and I strongly believe that the Government must tackle it head-on.

What can we do to ensure defensive readiness? We must ensure strong election security, strong action against foreign online interference, and robust protection for Jewish communities facing real and sustained threats. My constituents, and communities across the country, rightly expect democracy to be protected and all their neighbours to be safe.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a trademark excellent and well-thought-out speech, which is what we expect from him. I know he is a champion of the BBC World Service, so will he take a moment to mention the important part it plays, along with BBC Monitoring, in our soft power and the defence of our nation?

Peter Prinsley: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention and agree that the BBC World Service is almost the best example of our country's soft power. I welcome the extra investment promised by this Government to support its work, but I would like it to be greater. We will do all we can to support the World Service.

The duty to protect democracy is a sacred duty of this House. It is a simple wish, and something I am sure we can all do.

5.36 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I extend my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan, who sadly died on Friday following an incident at the Royal Windsor horse show.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) and I thank him for his powerful speech. I am delighted to speak in this debate on the Gracious Speech.

Rural Britain is home to nearly 10 million people. It produces our food and is critical to delivering net zero. It is also host to much of the infrastructure our defence depends on. From naval air stations and training estates to solar manufacturers and helicopter production lines, to the farms and energy networks that keep the country running, rural Britain is not a backdrop to national defence; it is the backbone of it. The rural economy, however, is nearly 20% less productive than the national average. That gap is not, and should not be, inevitable. It is a product of policy choices, and those choices matter for defence readiness as much as they matter for growth.

Glastonbury and Somerton sits at the heart of Britain's defence industrial base. RNAS Yeovilton—HMS Heron—is home to the Fleet Air Arm, Wildcat and Commando Helicopter Forces. In Templecombe, Thales Group designs and manufactures the sonar systems that are the eyes and ears of the Royal Navy's submarine fleet, and it was awarded a £1.85 billion contract two years ago to keep doing so for another 15 years.

My constituency is also home to companies that are important to the defence supply chain, such as Needles and Pins Aerospace based in Somerton, which provides precision textile engineering for aviation and defence. Just over the border in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance), Leonardo helicopters employs around 3,300 people, many of whom live in my constituency.

Leonardo is the UK's only end-to-end rotary wing manufacturer. I welcome the new medium helicopter contract that was finally awarded in March, but the path to that decision should worry every Member of this House. This is no way to run a defence industrial strategy. The defence investment plan was promised in autumn 2025; it is now May 2026, and the delay has created a credibility issue with industry and our allies.

Releasing a plan is not the same as funding or delivering one. The Liberal Democrats have been clear that this Government must commit to 3% of GDP on defence by 2030, and we have called for cross-party talks to agree the route to get there. We have also proposed a £20 billion defence bond programme to kick-start investment in the capital-intensive assets the strategic defence review identified, because, as the IFS itself suggests, borrowing

[Sarah Dyke]

to invest in defence can support economic growth, particularly when spending is investment heavy. We must also restart negotiations to rejoin the EU's €150 billion SAFE rearmament programme so that British defence firms, including those in Somerset and the south-west, can compete for European contracts and the UK can play its full part in collective European rearmament.

Defence readiness also depends on how we treat those who serve. As chair of the APPG on women in defence, I believe it is crucial that we see at least 30% female representation across the defence enterprise by 2030. Last night we held our summer reception, which was well attended by hon. Members, members of our armed forces and the wider defence community. In conversation with the managing director of NP Aerospace, I was shocked to learn that women are 7% more vulnerable than their male counterparts on the frontline simply because they are wearing body armour that does not fit. The Ministry of Defence has said that it could deliver new armour plates from 2029, but that equipment cannot come soon enough.

We are increasingly at risk of international and geopolitical shocks, rising prices and food chain disruption. The obvious solution, one would think, is to incentivise farmers to grow enough food here at home, yet England is the only country in Europe that does not financially support farmers to produce food, stymieing food production and innovation in the food and drink sector. The omission of a good food Bill is a massive missed opportunity to back British farmers, improve public health—

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Dyke: I will not, I am afraid, due to time.

A good food Bill would also give our food system the long-term framework it badly needs. A national food strategy is needed now more than ever. Ignoring the largest British business sector is short-sighted—the rural economy cannot grow while its largest sector is left without a plan.

To conclude, defence readiness is about not just the frontline, but whether the country behind the frontline is resilient. Rural England is not a backdrop to national defence; it is its backbone. If this Government are serious about defence readiness, they must be serious about backing rural Britain, backing British industry and backing the men and women who serve our country.

5.42 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of His Majesty's Speech and to call for our Government to take bolder action on many of the challenges faced by our country, and indeed our world. We are living through global instability on a scale not seen for decades. The power shifts are real. Now more than at any time since world war two, we must stand up and defend our values on the international stage. To do that, we need more hard power—much more—but we should also protect and wield our soft power.

After 14 years of Tory neglect, our Government's commitment to defence investment is vital not only to our national security, but to communities like mine in

Fife. From the £340 million invested in Rosyth dockyard to support for Methil-based Navantia, now with 120 new jobs and 20 new apprenticeships, this investment is creating skilled jobs and driving the local economy. It comes alongside a new Government support package for defence sector SMEs such as Viper Applied Science in Aberdour and PowerPhotonic in Dalgety Bay. UK Government backing is helping to strengthen our local economy for the future. After two decades of wilful neglect by the SNP on defence skills, Fife and Kirkcaldy in particular stand ready to play our part in rapidly scaling up the next generation of workers in the defence industry.

We must heed the warnings on the defence investment plan and rapidly make it a reality—I am sure the Defence Secretary will agree with that. As we strengthen our nation's ability to protect our people, we must work with our allies and form new relationships, including stronger relations with our European allies and friends. Our collective defence is a cause of the utmost urgency, but so is the defence of our common values: democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Make no mistake—they are under attack.

We must act faster to build the UK's national resilience, too. Our country and our people are not yet ready to face the kinds of turbulence and crises—even conflict—that may lie in our future. Comparable European nations are well ahead of us in building their resilience, and it is time to turbocharge that work in the UK. As we build our hard power and our own resilience, it would be a mistake to allow our soft power to fall away. DFID, a proud achievement of the last Labour Government, is a body that we miss today amid so much conflict and global health crises, such as the latest Ebola outbreak.

As defence chiefs said this week, recent cuts to the aid budget are a source of deep pain to many of us, but to no one more so than the children going to bed hungry because of them. In north-east Nigeria, where I once served as an aid worker, more than 1 million people affected by the conflict with Boko Haram risk being cut off from food and nutrition support because of cuts to the World Food Programme. What happens when the world cuts aid at a time of greater global conflict than any other since world war two? Already displaced people will be further displaced. They will migrate in search of survival.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an informed and well-made speech. Does she agree that we need to look at not only how we can expand international aid to deliver for the world's poorest, but how we can regain moral leadership? A crucial part of that, as she and my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) have said, is the BBC World Service. Those frequencies have been taken over by Russia and other anti-democratic nations. The World Service must be a key part of supporting that goal, not just in the future, but right now.

Melanie Ward: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about soft power and why it is such an important complement to hard power.

It has become common to say that the rules-based order is dead or dying, but we must stand with our allies to preserve and defend all that was built to protect humanity from evil in the ashes of two world wars and

the cold war. Data shows that since 2012, there has been an increase in the number of countries where mass atrocity crimes are occurring, and action is needed. Let us remind ourselves that we are talking about genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity from Sudan to Sinjar. These are the most heinous crimes that exist—mass identity-based violence. Where is the UK Government's strategy to work with like-minded countries to prevent that? There is not one. We need to change that, and fast. Doing so would be an obvious complement to the important work that the Foreign Secretary is doing on women and girls in Sudan.

The United Nations and the International Criminal Court—two imperfect but vital institutions designed to protect humanity and respond to it at its worst—are under enormous pressure, not least from the US Government, whose sanctions are designed to hobble the ICC. Our Government are supporting the UN and the ICC, but we should be making the case for them loudly and globally, working with like-minded allies to protect and defend their very existence. It is time to act at the pace required by global events. The time for incremental micro-steps is over. We must act at a scale appropriate to the urgency of the moment we are in. On Iran and Ukraine, the Government are doing the right thing, but the world can see for itself what is happening in Palestine and Lebanon. Experts say that there has been genocide in Gaza. Israel continues to bomb and kill, including doctors, hospitals and aid workers in Gaza and Lebanon. Israeli settlers in the west bank are trying to ethnically cleanse Palestinians with the support of their Government.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a thought-provoking contribution, and I thank her for her leadership on international aid, both before she came to this place and now. With Gaza in mind, does she agree that although the cameras have turned away, we cannot? As a British and UK Labour Government, we have a moral responsibility to continue to provide whatever medical assistance and expertise is required in that area.

Melanie Ward: My hon. Friend is right. He is a doctor himself, and I know how well he understands and how much he feels the need for the world to do better—to make change in this area, and stop just talking about making change.

It is time for much bolder action from our Government. It is time for them to stand against what is happening, and to influence events. We need not more words, but more action. To start with, we need comprehensive sanctions on Israeli officials who are responsible for human rights violations and the denial of aid, we need a ban on settlement trade, and we need to outlaw the funnelling of money to settlements by British charities. It is not good enough to say that it is difficult to do these things. Civilians need us to act, and both history and the public are judging us now. Incremental change does not cut it in this time of massive global shifts. We must be bold in our global action, just as we must be bold here at home.

5.50 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) on her passionate and compassionate speech.

There is much in the King's Speech that I can support in principle, and the Liberal Democrats will engage constructively, but not uncritically, with its proposals. Too often, however, this Government's instinct has been to prevaricate rather than to lead, and nowhere is that more apparent than in their dithering over our relationship with Europe. Any measure that rebuilds even a fraction of what the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) undermined and the Conservatives demolished deserves support, and on those narrow terms I welcome the European partnership Bill, but let us be candid: the Government are not proposing an ambitious reset. This is at best tinkering, not the full-bodied re-engagement that our economy desperately needs and that the public are demanding.

Debate on this issue is too often conducted as though opinion froze a decade ago, but the country has moved on, with two thirds of the public now favouring proper re-engagement with the EU. Sadly, the current Prime Minister has tied himself down with red lines that make that impossible, while the leading contender to take over from him has already U-turned on his EU commitments, along with his U-turns on proportional representation and the fiscal rules. Andy Burnham does not just turn and U-turn; he spins.

The National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that Brexit has reduced UK GDP by at least 6%, with business investment running nearly 20% lower than that in comparable economies, and both employment and productivity down by roughly 4%. That is why I am urging every Labour Member who wants to grow our economy and fund our armed services properly to vote for our amendment, which simply calls on their Government to begin negotiating a new customs union with the EU.

The world today bears little resemblance to the one in which Brexit was conceived. Putin's Russia is four years into a land war in Europe, has sent warships into British waters and has poisoned British citizens on British soil, while NATO is under threat from an American President who treats collective security as a transaction rather than a commitment. The case for building our European partnerships, rather than forsaking them, has never been stronger. The new UK-EU security and defence partnership is consequently welcome, but aspiration must be matched with urgent commitment. The threats gathering on our continent will not wait while Labour indulges in another psychodrama like those that plagued the previous Tory Government.

The proposal to deepen co-operation with Europol, Frontex and the European Migration Network to combat people-smuggling is overdue and welcome. The sharing of biometric data, criminal records and intelligence on people-smuggling gangs should never have ended, notwithstanding Brexit. However, we need to go further. The EU is transitioning to a new migration and asylum pact, and we, like other non-EU countries including Norway and Switzerland, should be involved in that arrangement.

As my party's Northern Ireland spokesperson, I welcome the European partnership Bill's provisions simplifying food and plant movements between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but let us not pretend that the Windsor framework has delivered the "frictionless" utopia that was promised. Despite the purported benefits of the

[Mr Paul Kohler]

green lane, nearly 60% of Northern Ireland businesses report challenges, and one in three have ceased trading with Great Britain entirely. The tensions come from the fact that Northern Ireland has the advantage of access to the EU's single market while the rest of the UK does not, and the only durable way to manage the complications that arise is to bring the rest of the UK into closer alignment with the EU.

Finally, I turn to amendment (o), tabled by the Conservatives. Although we support the need to increase defence spending and join them in calling for urgent publication of the delayed defence investment plan, their cynical amendment fails to make reference to the Tories' responsibility for the hollowing out of the armed forces. Their call to abandon the remedial order that remedies defects in the Tories' flawed legacy Act disingenuously implies that veterans who served in Northern Ireland are currently protected from prosecution, despite the fact that the provisions in the Act that purport to confer such immunity were never brought into force and were subsequently declared unlawful by the UK courts.

I ask the House to vote for our amendment but not the Conservatives' one.

5.55 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): In the two years since the last King's Speech, and my maiden speech, the world has changed dramatically. The global insecurity we face was always real, but now the insecurity has come to our shores. It is felt in our economy, our homes and our everyday lives, and we are living in a global tinderbox. The voters spoke in the local elections: they sent a clear message that they do not trust the current Government to defend their interests or to create resilience, stability and growth, which are key to our nation's defence.

In Harpenden, Berkhamsted, Tring and the villages, families feel the instability every day, with many struggling to pay their bills and wondering how they will pay their fluctuating mortgage or rent. They see the high costs of childcare and worry about their children getting the right education or staying safe online, all while costs continue to rise. Parents, such as Louisa from Wheathampstead, are worried about getting their kids into the right school. Her child, who has specific SEND needs, has already been through failed placements. She says:

"It is only in a specialist school that they feel safe, settled and able to learn."

The younger generation look at the broken system, and it is no wonder they question whether they should pay into it. Hannah, a sixth-former from Harpenden, says:

"I've never considered living in Harpenden in the future because it'd be far too expensive to buy a place to live."

Despite the official definition, new build homes are nowhere near being genuinely "affordable", given that they cost half a million pounds.

The older generation, who worked hard and paid into the system, have not got what they were promised. One of my constituents says:

"I started work at 15, and the deal was that I would finish working at 60."

Another says:

"I struggle with poverty and exhaustion, and I was told to carry on working until I was 66. I have been plagued with health issues ever since."

In the middle, the young and middle-aged professionals are squeezed. The path laid out before them has shifted beneath their feet. They were told, "Buy a house, have kids if you want to, and work in a job that you love. You will have more wealth and freedom than your parents did." However, each generation now faces less wealth, less freedom and fewer opportunities. No wonder politics is being turned on its head, all while people scroll through a picture-perfect world that falls apart with every news headline.

The businesses in our communities—the backbone of our economy—are finding it harder, more expensive and more challenging. Darren, who runs Faire at 190 in Berkhamsted, is a serial entrepreneur who knows what he is doing. He is finding the costs and burdens unsustainable. He says that the continuing rise in staff costs is killing the hospitality sector, and goes on to say:

"This Government is driving experienced entrepreneurs away, quietly draining the UK of the people most likely to build, hire and invest again."

Our communities feel again and again that they are done to, not worked with. There is no greater example than completely undemocratic top-down development plans that bypass local communities, who understand the need for housing but not on a scale that the local infrastructure cannot handle. Like many people, Lucy from Tring is genuinely concerned about the impact on our communities and landscapes. Liz from Redbourn says that the legacy of this Labour Government will see the death of our villages. She says:

"The effect on wildlife and the chalk streams will be immense."

For our communities and our country, the time for action is now. This King's Speech could have been an opportunity to reset the direction of this country. Although I welcome the action to tackle energy costs and sewage, and to end unfair residential leaseholds, such measures do not go far enough. Where is the urgent action to end the social care crisis? Where is the "good food" Bill to back British farmers? Where is the commitment to spend 3% of GDP on defence by 2030? That is vital to keep our borders safe. Where is the digital sovereign strategy? Where is the defence readiness Bill? And where is the ambitious EU reset Bill that we desperately need to grow our economy? That would empower our communities and make us richer and safer.

This country is at a crossroads. Our current Government are not delivering. The two old parties are finished. The populists and extremists want to burn things down. Millions of people want change, which is about building things up. That is the kind of positive change that the Liberal Democrats are offering—change that brings people, communities and our country together, and which makes us ready to face the international insecurity that rocks our borders. We believe in a better, stronger trade and defence relationship with Europe, one that truly delivers for Britain. I believe in collaborative sovereignty that values our resilience through prosperity, production and partnership, backing British domestic strength while working with our allies to be stronger, whether through military sovereignty, digital sovereignty, energy sovereignty or food sovereignty, but being stronger as a nation and being stronger partners internationally.

As politicians, we must turn up again and again. We have to turn up in the messiness but be honest about what needs to be done. And with that comes hope: hope for a better future, for growth and for prosperity. So the time is now. The moment for us to be radically reasonable is now. It is time that the system worked for local people.

In my maiden speech, I shared that my mother came to this country in search of opportunity, and through everything that I do here, I want to ensure that same opportunity is available for all who seek it. That means a bolder vision for our Great Britain, and that needs to start now.

6 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I start by acknowledging the dedication to public service of all who serve and have served or who support those in our armed forces and our wider defence industry.

There are opportunities, as well as glaring omissions, in what the Government have put forward for this Session. I am certainly glad to see new legislation coming forward on two of the biggest issues facing us in North Norfolk: getting our NHS back on its feet, and getting sewage out of our rivers and seas. I hope the forthcoming Health Bill will be another step towards rebuilding our NHS after the appalling damage done by successive Conservative Governments. I am keen to see how the Bill can tackle some of the rural inequalities we face in North Norfolk, however, which are about not only health access, but health outcomes, and that is one reason why we will not back down over Benjamin Court, a vital rehabilitation resource for people leaving hospital that was closed down by Norfolk county council under the Conservatives.

Elsewhere, I am pleased that the clean water Bill will be coming forward, but I do have serious worries that it will be yet another piece of weak, watered-down legislation that does not place proper pain on water companies when they behave badly. I am delighted that our years of campaigning have helped secure £83 million of investment from Anglian Water, which has already brought down sewage spills by 95% in some parts of North Norfolk, but there is still much to do and I will not rest until sewage spills are a thing of the past. The Government must also take steps to make our chalk streams UNESCO natural heritage sites and recognise and protect the unique character of chalk streams, such as the Glaven, the Stiffkey and the Bure in North Norfolk.

The forthcoming education for all Bill will be cautiously welcomed by parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities in our area. It recognises that the system is broken and is failing schools, local authorities, parents and, most significantly, children. But many parents have told me they are worried about how the rights of their children will be affected and how access to adequate support will be guaranteed for them. The Bill also needs to ensure that reform of the SEND system includes equal access for the whole country and ends the continuing postcode lottery. I have heard concerns from constituents about how underserved some of our coastal communities are and how far young people have to travel just to get to a setting that suits their needs. I have also spoken to parents with primary schoolchildren who are worried about what is happening right now in our overstretched schools. They worry that these reforms will be too late for hundreds of SEND children who need help now.

I am also awaiting the digital access to services bill with interest. The Government missed a lot of opportunities with last year's Data (Use and Access) Bill to legislate for a more data-driven Government who are better at doing things digitally. Part of this is about ensuring people who do not do things digitally can still access those services, yet just weeks after assuring me in Committee that existing legislation would cover this, the Government announced their ill-fated digital ID pet project. So despite believing that digital transformation is a key ingredient in fixing what is broken in our country, I will be pushing them again, as I did last year, to enshrine in law a right to non-digital ID to protect the elderly and vulnerable people in North Norfolk or those who simply do not want to use it.

Frustratingly, there are still some important omissions from the 35 Bills put before us. On defence readiness, I am disappointed to see no concrete action on financial transparency in the overseas territories. Offshore tax havens are simply hiding places for dirty money, oligarch wealth, rogue states and corporations dodging their responsibilities while ordinary people pick up the bill. We know these gaps can be closed, so why are the Government not prepared to bring forward legislation to close them once and for all?

Meanwhile, many young people are worried about how their careers will be impacted by AI and older, vulnerable people are worried about how criminals can misuse AI to defraud and scam them. We have to keep up with the times. We have to ensure that AI is providing benefits to all, not just concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a few select tech barons and foreign states. The economy used to be powered mainly by people, but it is increasingly powered by software. It is therefore regrettable that the King's Speech did not make provision to adapt the tax base to accommodate the hyper-concentration of ownership of tech firms, starting with a digital services tax.

It is clear to me from speaking to people at the thousands of doors I knocked on during the local elections and the many emails I receive every day that change is not coming fast enough. People feel the Government are dragging their feet, and that the machinery of the state has little interest in delivering the radical change this country needs. There are green shoots in this Government's programme, but little more. My hon. Friends and I look forward to scrutinising, pushing and challenging the Government to do more over this Session.

6.5 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Today, we have been talking about defence readiness, and I commend the members of the armed forces and, indeed, the veterans who live or are based in my constituency. However, our defence comes in various forms. Farming and food security were not mentioned in the King's Speech, and this was surely a major omission.

Today, I am wearing a WaterAid tie that I was given 35 years ago when I started working with it in Tanzania. Aid is a major part of our soft power. It not only helps to save lives and helps people withstand climate change, but it allows us to stand tall for all the good things that we do around the world. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State confirmed that UK aid will not be

[*Brian Mathew*]

cut further to just 0.1% of gross national income. This is doubly important now that the spectre of Ebola is haunting Africa.

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

6.6 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is an honour to wind up the final day of debate on the King's Speech for His Majesty's loyal Opposition. We have heard many sterling speeches from Members across this House, and I will turn to some of them shortly.

First, however, I want to pose once more the central question of this debate, and ask every Member to answer it honestly: is our national defence truly ready? My honest assessment is no, it is not. War is no longer a matter of history. The international order we have all lived under is fracturing. War has broken out across multiple continents, and rapid technological advancement and the accelerating consequences of climate change are compounding an already dangerous volatility. The world is not as it was, and we cannot afford to govern as though it is.

While it is encouraging that so many Members are engaging with this epoch-defining issue, it is equally clear that there is a "corrosive complacency" at the heart of this Government. Those are not my words; they belong to Lord Robertson, a former Labour Defence Secretary and a former NATO Secretary-General and one of the most distinguished voices in this country's defence establishment. He did not use them lightly, and he directed them squarely at this Prime Minister and this Chancellor. When a man of that stature speaks in those terms about his own party's Government, this House would do well to listen. More than that, there should be no politics in acknowledging the reality that stares us plainly in the face. Where politics legitimately begins is in the harder questions about where the money comes from and how and what we choose to spend it on.

Turning to the speeches, opening the batting was the Chair of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), and I think we can all agree that he made quite a brave and powerful speech. He laid bare the holes in the Government's approach to defence in a constructive way, as I have seen him do repeatedly in his work as Chair of his Committee. It was also good to see him wearing his Royal College of Defence Studies tie.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) made an excellent speech, as is to be expected. He touched on the supply chain issues and reliance on China, and I will come back to those points later.

The right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) is no longer in his place, but it was quite intimidating to see the Streetonian praetorian guard out in full force. He articulated the weighty issues we face as a country and I seriously hope that defence issues are front and centre of his coup d'état attempts.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) illustrated lessons from world war two, and what we need to learn and act on without delay, points that were reinforced by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis).

I think we can all agree that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) is doing a fantastic job as trade envoy to Italy. She called out some of the supply chains that she is seeing in her work with Italy around the Global Combat Air Programme and pointed out the Government's dither regarding the slow release of the defence investment plan.

We also had strong contributions from the hon. Members for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) and for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), my right hon. Friends the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) and for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), the hon. Members for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor), for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards) and for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie), and my hon. Friends the Members for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith). There were many more contributions—too many to mention, Madam Deputy Speaker—but it was great to see so many of my constituency neighbours from the south-west. As the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry has championed repeatedly, it is a region that will play a decisive role in our defence readiness going forward.

Like many in this House, I am utterly tired, if not bored, of asking when the defence investment plan will be published, and I am not even going to bother asking about the planned defence readiness Bill. The Government set their own deadline last autumn and 10 months on it is still nowhere to be seen. For the large prime contractors, those too big to fail, the calculation is simple: they leverage their workforce and industrial base to force the Government's hand. But for smaller companies in the supply chain, the picture is far bleaker. With a meagre number of contracts being awarded, they are being starved of work. If they have not already gone out of business, many are reaching the same conclusion: if you want to grow, you have to go. And go they will. The United States and European defence markets are rising to the moment. Companies and finance will follow the business. The Government's indecision and delay is placing British defence at the back of the queue at precisely the moment when the queue has never mattered more.

That leaves me to challenge a phrase used too freely by Defence Ministers: sovereign capability. For many of the areas where we most want to excel, true sovereignty is a myth. The best AI needs the best chips, and we do not own the means of production. Our options are either our American allies or China. I know which one I choose. The Government talk a good game on drones, but most small aerial drone systems depend on neodymium magnets and China controls over 90% of global supply. That is not a supply chain problem; it is a strategic vulnerability. What is truly in our national interest is to identify these dependencies—a point reinforced by the Chair of the Defence Committee, whose Committee is looking at this—and swiftly partner with allies who can help to address them. I do not see that joined-up work happening across the Government.

That leads me to the structure of our public defence establishment. We have roughly 55,000 MOD civil servants, yet we recently struggled to deploy a single, partially

functional destroyer to protect our sovereign base area in Cyprus, a point expanded on by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells. There are many fantastic civil servants in the MOD—I have personally had the privilege to work alongside a number of them—but I cannot believe I am alone in seeing the imbalance in that equation.

Lastly, I turn to our service personnel and veterans. At every UK training establishment, the law of armed conflict is rigorously instilled into every recruit and officer cadet. That legal framework underpins a service person's conduct throughout their career and on operations. I speak with the lived experience as a former Royal Marine. Where someone transgresses from those rules, they are investigated and if found guilty the full weight of the law is brought to bear, and rightly so.

However, the Government must confront an uncomfortable truth. By dragging veterans through the courts decades after the event, as will likely occur under the Government's Northern Ireland troubles legislation, the process becomes the punishment. Indefinite legal jeopardy, with no discernible end, causes profound and lasting mental anguish. Apply that logic to serving personnel operating in unimaginably violent environments: hesitation in the heat of battle, borne of legal fear rather than military judgments, can cost lives. For most of us in this House, it is impossible to truly comprehend what that means, but we must try. We owe it to the people who place themselves in harm's way on our behalf to give them the assurance that this House has their back.

I want to extend a hand of co-operation to the Government—an olive branch offered by the Leader of the Opposition and carelessly dismissed by the Prime Minister. In this new era of geopolitical instability, we want to support the Government in delivering the defence readiness that this country deserves. The shadow Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), has set out the Conservatives' proposals clearly. We will continue to work on them, and I hope the Government will receive them in the spirit in which they are intended.

Our country needs politicians who can rise to the moment. This is that moment. With that, I wish the Government Godspeed in this new Session, for it is not their party's fortune that depends on it but our nation's security.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the Secretary of State, I would like to say that, while I appreciate that I am preaching to the choir, because every Member present is indeed present, perhaps the message can get back to colleagues who are not present that page 4 of the guide to Chamber courtesies indicates that if you have contributed to the debate, you must return for the wind-up speeches. I call the Secretary of State.

6.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): I begin by paying tribute to Lance Bombardier Ciara Sullivan of the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery, who tragically died at the Royal Windsor horse show. She was a brilliant young soldier, and her commanding officer described her as a "fearless and gifted horsewoman."

I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with her family and comrades as they come to terms with her loss.

I also want to pay tribute to our armed forces personnel for their professionalism and dedication. Right now, we have servicemen and women keeping us safe 24/7 in the most difficult circumstances at home, under the sea and around the world in over 30 operations. I offer them our profound respect and gratitude.

It is a privilege to close this debate on the Gracious Speech on behalf of the Government and to do so at the special request of the Chief Whip. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out a legislative agenda to strengthen Britain's economic, energy and national security—a decisive break from the failed past. We are a Government who will cut bills, back workers, lift children out of poverty, reform the NHS, control borders, rebuild ties with Europe, accelerate clean energy and invest in defence.

Over the five days of this King's Speech debate, we have had speeches from 297 Members, including 37 from Back Benchers in the debate this afternoon. I had the privilege of opening the last King's Speech debate 22 months ago, and I quoted then what the then Chief of the Defence Staff said to me on my first day in this job: "You are taking on this role at the most extraordinary time in my 35 years of service." Events since have only reinforced that judgment.

Putin's aggression is growing across Europe. He is escalating his attacks in Ukraine, increasing air incursions into NATO airspace, and reopening cold war bases in the High North. Only today I revealed details of the dangerous interference with the RAF Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft—an unarmed surveillance aircraft—by two Russian jets over the Black sea. We have demarched the Russians over this totally unacceptable act.

We have war in the middle east, with Iranian airstrikes threatening British lives, British interests and British partner nations across the region. Here at home, we have defended ourselves from Russian spy ships and from subs in our wider waters; we do so daily in the face of cyber-attacks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who chairs the Defence Committee, said that Russia is already operating in the grey zone. The right hon. Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) both said that people do not know what threats we face, and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said that the world is more dangerous now than it was during the cold war.

At the same time, the US has rightly challenged European nations to step up and take on more responsibility for European security. We are, and we will do further. This, therefore, is undeniably a new era of threat that requires a new era for defence. In the coming years, we will ask more of our armed forces personnel. It is only right that they expect more of their Government and their nation.

We were elected on a promise to renew the nation's commitment to and contract with those who serve and the families who support them. Through the Armed Forces Bill, we are in part delivering on that promise, extending the armed forces covenant into full legal force, delivering better defence housing, and providing

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better protections for those who serve through reforms to the service justice system. Through the Bill, we will bolster our readiness by introducing new legal powers to bring down unidentified drones over UK military bases.

We will also expand the pool of our British reserves. That point was made so strongly by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), who is reserve himself. He said that the focus must be more fully on our reserves. We have made a commitment to grow our reserves by 20%.

Jim Shannon: I speak as a former member of the reserves and a part-time soldier for 14 and a half years back in the '70s through to the late '80s. In that time, we could recruit plenty of reserves, but today there seems to be a problem with recruitment. I am reminded of that '60s song, which I am old enough to remember, "The Times They Are A-Changin'"—and we understand that. What more can be done to ensure that reserves can get on with their role as reserve soldiers at the same time as holding jobs? It is really important to have a job and be able to do the reserve role as well.

John Healey: It is indeed; the hon. Gentleman is right. We should pay tribute to, support and welcome those employers who make it possible for their staff and employees to serve as reservists. We do so in the civil service, and there are many very good commercial firms that do the same. We need more to do that, we need more to serve as reservists, and we need to change the terms on which our reservists serve. That is why we are making amendments through the Armed Forces Bill.

It is fair to say that Members on both sides of the House urged on me questions about the publication of the defence investment plan. The Chair of the Defence Committee did so, as did the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed), who spoke from the Dispatch Box to wind up for the Opposition, and the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). Everybody wanted the DIP published sooner, including me. The Prime Minister knows of its importance and has been clear to the Liaison Committee that it is a personal priority. I say to those on both sides of the Chamber, and particularly to Opposition Front-Bench Members: we have to get this right.

The equipment programme and the procurement plan that we took on was over-committed, underfunded, and unsuited to our changing threats and battlefield conditions. Defence has not done a line-by-line assessment of how it spends taxpayers' money for nearly 20 years. The last Government made commitments of tens of billions that were not funded. [Interruption.] The shadow Defence Secretary is chuntering, but let me use an example that he himself used. He announced a £10 billion munitions strategy: it was never developed, never published and never funded. It was announced, of course, just weeks before the election. Those are the problems that we have to sort out.

James Cartlidge: One of the most critical issues in defence at the moment is the munitions position. Obviously, we did not publish it; we were not allowed to as it is a highly sensitive document. I cannot state what the figures

were. We had a general election and we became the Opposition. However—[Interruption.] Madam Deputy Speaker, I am being intervened on as I intervene.

To be clear on the 14 years point—I hope that those on the Government Benches agree with this—we gave a vast amount of munitions to Ukraine. We did that to protect Europe so that we did not end up with a situation where Russia conquered Ukraine early. It was the right thing to do, but it left massive gaps in the inventory that we were filling. If we had become the Government, we had a plan ready to go and it was funded by cutting the civil service. That is why Labour Members did not like it. The way that we were going to pay for it is something that no Labour party could agree with.

John Healey: The shadow Secretary of State has admitted to the House exactly what I was saying. The munitions strategy that he announced weeks before the election was never developed and never funded, and the country cannot be defended with unfunded commitments.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I heard something this morning that I could scarcely believe. I heard that neither the Armed Forces Minister nor the Veterans Minister—notably, the two military veterans on the MOD's ministerial team—have actually seen the defence investment plan. If he can, will the Secretary of State confirm or deny whether that is the case?

John Healey: I am really proud to have the Minister for Veterans and People and the Minister for the Armed Forces as part of our Defence team. We play different roles across the Department and they make an extraordinary contribution to the defence of this nation. There are briefings in the Department. Those Ministers play an exceptionally important part in the defence of our country and in the Defence team of this nation, and I am proud that they are part of it. The defence investment plan will be published shortly, as we can settle it within Government. There are critical parts of Defence that feed into the investment plan.

Stuart Anderson: If the defence investment plan is the Secretary of State's priority and the Prime Minister's priority, is it completed and just waiting for the financial sign-off, or is there a gap in capability to be able to complete it?

John Healey: This is a personal priority for the Prime Minister. We are working flat out to complete it, and we will complete and publish it soon. The whole Defence team are making a contribution to its development, and that contribution stretches right across the defence effort.

I say to the shadow Secretary of State: this has not stopped us getting on with the job of government. This has not stopped us letting more than 1,200 major contracts since the election, with nearly nine in 10 going to British-based firms, creating British-based jobs; nearly 70% of those jobs, investments and contracts are beyond London and the south-east. That is defence driving economic growth and lifting parts of the country, right across the UK.

In just the last seven days, we have invested in and announced: over £100 million in the new hybrid Navy to help with our deployment of the multinational mission to the middle east to reopen the strait of Hormuz;

a £1 billion contract for new mobile artillery for the Army, with steel made in Sheffield and artillery barrels made in Telford; and rapidly procured weapons for our Typhoons so they can shoot down drones at a lower cost. Just yesterday, I announced 13 contracts of up to £4 million each for small British defence tech firms, all of which have the potential to become Britain's next defence unicorns.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

John Healey: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, then I will make some progress.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have huge regard for him. We go back quite a long way, and I hope that what I am going to say now will be helpful to him and his Defence team. Poland is planning eventually to spend 9% of its GDP on defence. It is approaching 5% today from a standing start. Everybody in this House with an ounce of common sense wants the right hon. Gentleman and his team to succeed and to get the money they require to increase our defences, but we are behind the curve. I am not blaming him; I am blaming other elements in Government. Will he use this opportunity to send the message to the Government that the House requires that we get the money, publish the plan and get on with making defence successful? The Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), has said this, and Members on both sides of the House want the Secretary of State to have it. Please take this message back to the Chancellor: "Enough is enough. We have to do this for our security." Will he now do that?

John Healey: We have to do this for our security, and we will do this for our security. In the meantime, we are getting on and doing what is necessary for Britain's security.

Mark Pritchard *rose*—

John Healey: I will now turn to some of the contributions to the debate. As I said, 37 Back Benchers have spoken, and I am going to turn to some of their contributions now. I will start with the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), if I may. He urged us to reprovise our nuclear programme, and I would just say to him that, in this Parliament alone, we are putting £15 billion into the warhead programme and £6 billion into upgrading Barrow to produce the submarines that we need.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) rightly talked about the impact that defence skills have across the economy. She also talked about the skills gaps that need to be filled, which is a central part of the defence technical excellence colleges, the defence growth deals and the Defence Universities Alliance that we are putting in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) spoke passionately about the work he is doing on the Right to Food UK Commission. The testimony that he gave us from workers and parents about the pressure they are under and the problems that

creates was really moving. We look forward to the commission's report. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd North (Gill German) also ranged more widely than defence, and mentioned the pressure on families and the action that the Government are now taking on rising costs. She talked about the importance of the legislation in the King's Speech on railways and on housing for the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) talked about the importance of resilience that runs through every aspect of our defence programme. My hon. Friends the Members for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) and for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) both spoke movingly, and for the House, on the scourge of antisemitism and the need to stamp it out wherever it is, and about the threat of Iran and the edge of threat that the IRGC poses to this country, as well as to Iran's own people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) asked for comments on Cabrit and Estonia. I shall be out there in Estonia with our forward land force tomorrow, so if he will forgive me, I will probably be able to give him a more up to date and informed comment if he would like to wait until I come back, rather than commenting from the Dispatch Box today.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) talked about the important fact that our armed forces depend on the strength of the innovators and the strength of the industry that stands behind them. This is a lesson that we can draw from Ukraine: when a country is under threat or forced to fight, it is its industry, its innovators and its wider society that must stand behind it to give it strength. She rightly paid tribute to and reminded us about the civilian workforce that supports our uniformed personnel.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): On the point about Ukraine, we learned today about the delay to a ban on jet fuel and diesel made from Russian crude oil and refined in places like India and Turkey. Does the Secretary of State accept that the British people do not want to contribute one more ruble to the Kremlin for use in its war machine against the Ukrainian people?

John Healey: I rather regret giving way to the hon. Member because he has not been in the debate, and clearly was not in for the urgent question either, when it was made very clear that there are new sanctions to clamp down on Russian oil revenues and that the licensing regime is a way of bringing those new sanctions in. I urge him to consult the record.

Mark Pritchard: Will the Secretary of State give way?

John Healey: No, I will proceed.

I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) and Members from different parties on the all-party parliamentary group on rearmament. He talked about the way that the locusts were busy on UK defence during those 14 Conservative years when it was hollowed out and underfunded, and about the extent of the legacy from which we are now recovering. He rightly reminded us that defence is not

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just a cost or spending for the Government; defence is an investment and an engine for growth across the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) gave us a direct example of that from his Methil shipyard, in saying that Labour defence investment and export wins have led to a transformation from the bleak future that he described when he first became an MP to the current recruitment drive. That point was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward). She rightly took the Scottish nationalists to task for their repeated failure to be willing to invest in defence skills—skills that benefit our security, that benefit Scottish workers and that give opportunities to Scottish young people.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling), who is in his place, talked about the many military families in his area. He rightly said that we have to look after those who look after us. Just as an aside, I have been campaigning for over a decade for stronger licensing for taxi and private hire vehicles, exactly like he has, and I welcome the comments he made—entirely irrelevant to defence, but important nevertheless.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) spoke as the proud parent of a young forces member. She was right to say that at the heart of our Government commitment is the nation's commitment to those who serve, and I am delighted to hear that she has been successful in Portsmouth in helping win part of the Valour funding—the £50 million behind the new network of veteran centres. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) rightly said that election security is linked to our national security and that we are right to toughen up the rules on political funding.

Finally, I say to the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) that where I live in Rotherham, no one is talking about the European Union. People have put Brexit behind them. Nevertheless, I welcome his welcome for the European partnership Bill, but the last thing that people want is for us to set aside the manifesto they elected us on and to plunge back into detailed institutional negotiations with the European Union.

Mark Pritchard: One of the defining features of this country's support for Ukraine has been the cross-party support, but I think it is right for His Majesty's Opposition to call out the Government where we think they have got it wrong. Over the last 24 hours, I think the Government have got it both right and wrong. I support the Government in the new sanctions regime around third countries. Where I do not support the Government is in allowing temporary licences for the import of Russian jet fuel and diesel. Today in Ukraine, the bombs and missiles are falling. This country should have no part in funding any part of Putin's war machine.

John Healey: As the Minister for Trade said in response to the urgent question, and as I said earlier, these are steps to further sanctions in order to tighten sanctions and to screw down further on Putin's ability to fund his illegal war in Ukraine.

I will turn to the question of spending on defence, which was mentioned, as always, by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), as well as by the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary). In the debate on the last King's Speech in 2024, I reaffirmed this Government's manifesto pledge to reach 2.5% of GDP on defence spending. Throughout that debate, the figure of 2.5% of GDP on defence spending by 2030 was urged on me 16 times by the shadow Defence Secretary. We have done that, and we have done it three years earlier than anyone expected. We have put in place the biggest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. We will spend more—we know we must. I say to the shadow Defence Secretary, the defence budget this year is more than £11 billion greater than it was in the final year of his Government.

In that same debate, I promised the strategic defence review, the first of its kind, which we published as a vision for defending Britain, making it safer and more secure at home. I told the House then that we would step up our support for Ukraine. We have provided more military assistance than ever before, we took on the leadership of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group to support the fight today, and we established and now lead the coalition of the willing for Ukraine to secure the peace tomorrow. I pledged a new UK-Germany defence agreement, and less than four months later I signed that with Defence Minister Pistorius in the Trinity House agreement. I went on to sign deals with France, Norway and Turkey.

In the same debate, I raised the scourge of dreadful military housing. Within months, we brought back into public ownership 36,000 homes that our military families live in. We upgraded the worst 1,000 before Christmas, and we have already done another 250 since then. In that debate, I said that the morale of our service personnel was at a record low. Since then, we have awarded them the biggest pay rise for nearly two decades, extended free childcare and legislated for the first ever Armed Forces Commissioner in order to improve service life.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) that I missed him at Cabinet this week. He gave us a reflective speech. He is rightly proud of the Government's record on rebuilding and reforming the NHS, but I trust that he will agree that as with the NHS, in Defence we have certainly not been treading water.

I will close with the His Majesty the King's opening words last week:

"An increasingly dangerous and volatile world threatens the United Kingdom...Every element of the nation's energy, defence and economic security will be tested."

Every Member of the House recognises that truth. We are a Government committed to a decade of rising defence spending, to the readiness of our armed forces, to backing Britain's industries and its innovators, and to making Britain safer, more secure at home and stronger abroad.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 104, Noes 317.

Division No. 2]

[6.44 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Burghart, Alex
 Cartlidge, James
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dinage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian

Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdoch, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 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
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Rebecca Smith and
 Lincoln Jopp

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi

Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James

Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 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
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jerry, Terry
 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
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Ayoub

Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 MacAlister, Josh
 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
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 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, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan

Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie

Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael

White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
 Stephen Morgan and
 Gregor Poynton

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: (1), at the end of the Question to add:

“but respectfully regret that the Gracious Speech fails to outline proposals to negotiate a UK-EU Customs Union; and call on the Government to open negotiations with the EU on creating a UK-EU Customs Union, to start fixing the damage done to the British economy by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.”—(*James MacCleary:*)

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 33), That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 78, Noes 408.

Division No. 3]

[6.58 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Ann
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Denyer, Carla
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Doogan, Dave
 Dyke, Sarah
 Foord, Richard
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glover, Oly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jones, Clive
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris

Leadbitter, Graham
 Logan, Seamus
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Maynard, Charlie
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Murray, Susan
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stone, Jamie
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Cameron
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wishart, Pete
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Mr Will Forster and
 Tessa Munt

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burghart, Alex
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Cartlidge, James
 Champion, Sarah
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Cocking, Lewis

Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, John
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costa, Alberto
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Cross, Harriet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davis, rh David
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dinelage, Dame Caroline
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Easton, Alex
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Fortune, Peter
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 French, Mr Louie
 Frith, Mr James
 Fuller, Richard

Garnier, Mark
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glen, rh John
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffiths, Alison
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jerny, Terry
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kruger, Danny
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura

Lam, Katie
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lamont, John
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Mak, Alan
 Malhotra, Seema
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McAllister, Douglas
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McMurdoch, James
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 McVey, rh Esther
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moon, Perran
 Moore, Robbie
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mullane, Margaret
 Mundell, rh David
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha

Nichols, Charlotte
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 O'Brien, Neil
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillips, rh Bridget
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rankin, Jack
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, David
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Robertson, Joe
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sewards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simmonds, David
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Rebecca
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth

Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tice, Richard
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tufnell, Henry
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Katie
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wild, James
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Wood, Mike
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
 Stephen Morgan and
 Gregor Poynton

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: (p), at the end of the Question to add:

“but respectfully regret that the Gracious Speech does not include a commitment to grant new oil and gas exploration licenses in the North Sea which would boost energy security, and instead restricts the UK to existing drilling operations; believe that it fails to defend the right to trial by jury, which is a cornerstone of justice with origins stretching back to the Magna Carta; further regret that it includes proposals for digital identification; also regret that there are no protections for brave British veterans who served for Queen and country in Northern Ireland; further believe it fails to protect small businesses from rising energy costs and business rates, and fails to attract new investment in high streets; regret that it allows for greater alignment with the EU which betrays the democratic result of the referendum in 2016 and betrays the fishing industry and the agricultural sector; and note that it does not explicitly include SEND provisions to preserve access to an appropriate range of placements to support families and schools whilst ensuring parental oversight.”—(*Richard Tice.*)

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 33), That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 104, Noes 316.

Division No. 4]

[7.13 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Hudson, Dr Neil
Anderson, Stuart	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Andrew, rh Stuart	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Bacon, Gareth	Jenrick, rh Robert
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Barclay, rh Steve	Jopp, Lincoln
Bedford, Mr Peter	Khan, Ayoub
Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Lam, Katie
Bool, Sarah	Lamont, John
Bowie, Andrew	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Lopez, Julia
Brandreth, Aphra	Lowe, Rupert
Braverman, rh Suella	Mak, Alan
Burghart, Alex	Malthouse, rh Kit
Cartlidge, James	Mayhew, Jerome
Cocking, Lewis	McVey, rh Esther
Cooper, John	Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Costa, Alberto	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Coutinho, rh Claire	Moore, Robbie
Cross, Harriet	Morrissey, Joy
Davies, Gareth	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Davies, Mims	Mundell, rh David
Davis, rh David	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Dewhurst, Charlie	Norman, rh Jesse
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	O'Brien, Neil
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Patel, rh Priti
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Paul, Rebecca
Easton, Alex	Philp, rh Chris
Evans, Dr Luke	Pritchard, rh Mark
Fortune, Peter	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Fox, Sir Ashley	Rankin, Jack
Freeman, George	Reed, David
French, Mr Louie	Robertson, Joe
Fuller, Richard	Rosindell, Andrew
Garnier, Mark	Shannon, Jim
Glen, rh John	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Griffiths, Alison	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Harris, Rebecca	Simmonds, David
Hayes, rh Sir John	Smith, Greg
Hinds, rh Damian	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Hollinrake, Kevin	Smith, Rebecca
Holmes, Paul	Spencer, Dr Ben
Huddleston, Nigel	

Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Trott, rh Laura

Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
James McMurdock and
Sarah Pochin

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, rh Yvette

Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 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
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian

Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 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
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 MacAlister, Josh
 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
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison

McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 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, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Seward, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy

Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna

Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Stephen Morgan and
Gregor Poynton

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 171.

Division No. 5]

[7.26 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast*
by Sir Nicholas Dakin)
 Blake, Rachel
 Brackenridge, Sureena

Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul

Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast*
by Sir Nicholas Dakin)
 Glendon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 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
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 MacAlister, Josh
 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
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 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, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggum, Michelle
 Sewards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth

Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Gregor Poynton and
 Stephen Morgan

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen

Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire

Cross, Harriet
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
 Lincoln Jopp and
 Rebecca Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

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.

Address to be presented to His Majesty by Members of the House who are Privy Counsellors or Members of His Majesty's Household.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Videos are emerging of civilians, including British nationals, blindfolded, bound, forced to the ground and crying out in what appears to be agony after Israel's interception of the Global Sumud Flotilla in international waters. These were ordinary people carrying aid to the starving and besieged population of Gaza. Their crime: refusing to sit back while the world watches genocide unfold live on our screens.

I met members of the flotilla team here in Parliament before they sailed. They were sincere, courageous people driven to act because Governments would not. Moved by images of genocide, they chose to act. All 14 British nationals on board—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to get to the point of his point of order.

Mr Hussain: I have asked the Government whether they will summon the Israeli ambassador, demand the immediate release of those detained, including British nationals, and speak out in the face of such barbaric breaches of international law. What recourse is available to secure immediate answers from the Government on the detention of British nationals and the action being taken to secure their release?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he will know, it is not a matter for the Chair. He might have an opportunity tomorrow to raise it with the Leader of the House at business questions. Those on the Government Front Bench will have heard his question, and I think it is best this evening that we move on.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Two Sikh women were raped in the Birmingham and west midlands area. While one of them was being raped, a perpetrator directed Islamic and Muslim slurs at her. My mosque in my constituency was attacked not once, not twice but on three separate occasions. These attacks do not happen in a vacuum. We all saw the scenes from the march over the weekend and heard the vile Islamophobic comments that were made. What advice can you provide about getting a Minister to make a statement on this topic?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Again, that is not a matter for the Chair, but Government Front-Bench Members will have heard his comments. I am sure that if they are planning to bring a statement forward, they will indeed do so.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Controlled Drugs (Drug Precursors) (Amendment and Revocation) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 26 February, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the draft Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 1990 (Amendment) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 26 February, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Port State Control) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 2 March, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway

7.40 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Shropshire is the only county in England without a direct train service connecting it to London. I stand here today alongside my neighbours from Wrexham, Ruabon, Wolverhampton, South Shropshire, The Wrekin and Nuneaton, who share my request to reinstate the line that connects six underserved towns back to the capital. In total, over 10,000 people have signed the petitions, with 1,436 having done so on paper and 8,741 having signed a similar one online, demonstrating the strong public demand for the service—those are 10,000 fare paying passengers asking for a train.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the proposal for a Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway by encouraging the Office of Rail and Road and Network Rail to work constructively with the operator to enable the establishment of new direct services between London and North Wales, Shropshire and the Midlands.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of England and Wales,

Declares that the Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway has submitted proposals to restore direct rail services between Wrexham, Shropshire, the Midlands and London, which would offer significant economic, social and environmental benefits for the communities along the route; further declares that the establishment of these new direct services would improve transport links, access to health services, and strengthen regional economies across North Wales, Shropshire and the Midlands.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the proposal for a Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway by encouraging the Office of Rail and Road and Network Rail to work constructively with the operator to enable the establishment of new direct services between London and North Wales, Shropshire and the Midlands.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003201]

Bridlington Care Unit

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The proposed rushed closure of the care unit at Bridlington hospital in my constituency is deeply concerning and must not go ahead. The unit provides vital short-stay rehabilitation close to home, especially for elderly residents, avoiding unnecessary travel to Scarborough or York for care or for relatives' visits. Some 5,784 local residents have signed my petition in-person and online against the closure, in the light of Bridlington's rapidly growing population, especially the over-65s.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urgently instruct both NHS Humber and North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board and York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust not to close the Bridlington Care Unit; and further to urge the Government to work with the various health providers and the Bridlington Health Forum to in fact actively expand the range of services available at Bridlington."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of East Yorkshire,

Declares that the proposed closure of the Bridlington Care Unit is deeply concerning and must not go ahead; further declares that Bridlington Hospital has successfully achieved accreditation as an elective surgical hub and has potential to increase the number of operations delivered on site, as it did during Covid; further declares that York and Scarborough are already at capacity with patients; and further declares that redeploying staff from Bridlington to other NHS facilities in Scarborough and York will extra incur costs to the trust.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urgently instruct both NHS Humber and North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board and York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust not to close the Bridlington Care Unit; and further to urge the Government to work with the various health providers and the Bridlington Health Forum to in fact actively expand the range of services available at Bridlington.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003202]

Banking Hubs

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

7.43 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is pleasing to see a significant number of Members in the Chamber to be part of this Adjournment debate, by hearing it and perhaps by participating. I am aware of about 15 hon. Members who have asked to intervene on me, which is a high number for an Adjournment debate. There may be more whom I am unaware of. The Minister has kindly indicated that she is also happy to take interventions, so if hon. Members feel like spreading the love when they think I have had enough, that would be much appreciated.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On that point—*[Laughter.]* First, may I commend the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) for bringing this matter forward? I spoke to him beforehand, and I thought it was important to put this point on the record. I have had 11 banks close in my constituency, and seeing the decline of banks in rural areas has been excessively worrying and frustrating. Although every bank that has pulled out of the peninsula in Ards has promised working hubs, the reality is that a member of staff in a room without even the facility to print off a bank statement for a client is not acceptable. Does the hon. Member not agree that a hub must have banking facilities, as well as a post office, and that we must make sure that there is not just a member of staff for two hours a day or a week?

Graham Leadbitter: I absolutely agree with that. It is important that, where there are hubs, they are open for a reasonable period of time and are accessible at different points of the day to different people with different needs.

The important subject of banking hub criteria has been raised many times in this place and in Westminster Hall, and it is an issue I have campaigned on since I was elected and during my time as a councillor and a council leader. In 2015, Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey had 22 bank branches. Just 11 years later, the number has dropped to just six in the latest data from January this year; that is a 77% reduction. That is six banks for almost 100,000 people living in the fifth largest constituency by geographical area in the UK—a constituency that it takes about two and half hours to drive from end to end.

The following bank branches alone have closed since 2020: in Forres, the Bank of Scotland and TSB closed their branches in 2022; in Badenoch and Strathspey, the Bank of Scotland closed its branch in Aviemore in 2024; and in Grantown-on-Spey, the Bank of Scotland and the TSB closed their branches in 2020 and 2021; while in Nairn, the TSB closed its branch in 2021, and most recently, the town lost its last bank. Link, the organisation that monitors bank closures and which is tasked with determining where new shared services should be, reports the total number of bank closures across the UK as 2,237 since 2022. For the same period, 276 banking hubs have been recommended by Link.

In this modern age, when there is digital banking on websites and through apps and when, frankly, fewer and fewer people are using physical bank branches, it is

[*Graham Leadbitter*]

not a surprise to see those closures. However, it is how we respond that is important. There remain many vulnerable people and, indeed, certain types of businesses that rely heavily on cash banking and we cannot allow the rug to be pulled out from under them.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way and for securing this debate and choosing this topic. He is so right that there are older and vulnerable people who are not able to access banking services or to access cash because of high street bank closures. Does he share my view that the Government's introduction of the Financial Services and Markets Bill today in the other place presents a great opportunity for them to consider how banking services and access to cash can be provided in rural areas?

Graham Leadbitter: I absolutely agree. I am pleased to see the Bill coming forward, as it will provide opportunities to make progress on this important issue.

There is also the vital question of community sustainability. The loss of banking services in rural communities makes it harder to attract people to live and work there. It also means the loss of local banking jobs that have long provided access to respected professional jobs and the potential of a career in financial services.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The hon. Member rightly talks about the lack of banking access in his constituency and in rural areas. I have noticed that there is now a lack of banking access even in my urban constituency in Glasgow, particularly in areas such as Castlemilk and Carnwadric. That is particularly bad because some of the people there do not have access to a car. Does the hon. Member agree that banking hubs are also important in urban areas where those services are not provided?

Graham Leadbitter: Certainly; there are some areas, particularly large estates in urban areas, where we can see services disappearing simply because of how people live their lives. It is important that the state takes action to protect those critical services that people access. I was a student in Glasgow, and I see lots of places where there were banks that I used when I was a student which simply do not exist any more.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I know that this is an issue that the hon. Member cares about passionately. I am sure that like me, he has had issues with people, particularly elderly people, who fear that they have been scammed. It is all very well saying, "Get online and we'll see if we can sort this out," but there is nothing like a face-to-face meeting and somebody from the Bank of Scotland, the Clydesdale or the Royal Bank of Scotland saying, "No, you're okay," or, "This is what we'll do." With all due respect, that reassurance is not there online. That is why I believe that face-to-face advice is hugely important.

Graham Leadbitter: I absolutely agree about face to face, particularly for vulnerable people, but also for businesses or maybe somebody who might be thinking about starting up in business. Being able to talk to a community banker who can give them a little bit of early advice about access to basic business services is really helpful.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has been very generous with his time in allowing all these interventions. Does he agree that part of this is about fairness? Without the access to the professional advice that they would get from face-to-face banking, some businesses might not succeed as much as they should have done. In my own constituency, we have seen high streets being closed, but we have not yet been successful in getting a bank hub in Abbots Langley, despite there being a community demand and, I would argue, a need for it.

Graham Leadbitter: The hon. Gentleman makes a fantastic point and I will come on to that later in my remarks.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. We will leave him in peace for a while after this. For nine months I have been trying to get a banking hub in Ammanford, which is a post-industrial town, but Link has turned us down. We went to appeal and it turned us down again. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need consistency in applying Financial Conduct Authority guidance? All the elements seem to qualify that town for a banking hub, but yet again, Link has turned us down. There seems to be a lack of consistency in applying the rules.

Graham Leadbitter: Absolutely. That consistency is vital, but flexibility within the criteria is also vital. I will come on to that as well.

It is frankly hard to stomach that the big high street banks use the argument of increased digital banking to justify local bank closures while building large, centralised banking centres in our cities. Surely the same argument can be applied to push workforce and management out to existing bank branches in local communities and enable that local workforce to carry out tasks on national functions such as mortgage services and business banking using the very same digital technology.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): On the point about the assessment made by Link under statute, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the three-mile radius that is being used by Link is totally inadequate when looking at rural areas such as mine in Pembrokeshire?

Graham Leadbitter: Yes, and I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. We are down to six bank branches in an area that takes two and a half hours to drive around. It is simply impossible for many people in those areas to access those services.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is really interesting hearing about these rural-urban splits. My constituency is very much on the urban fringe, yet we are really struggling. We have been trying to get branches in Chertsey and Addlestone, and we had one in Cobham that recently closed down. This sounds like an issue that affects people everywhere, irrespective of rurality, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking forward this debate.

Graham Leadbitter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that.

After the election, the Government said they were working closely with industry to roll out 350 banking hubs across the UK, which is very welcome, and that the banking sector was committed to deliver those hubs by the end of this Parliament. But that is not far off just one for every two constituencies, and we need more and much better targets than that.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The banking and cash hubs in Hornsea, Withernsea and now Hedon in my constituency are fantastic and really work well, but is the hon. Gentleman aware that Lloyds is the only major bank that does not allow the deposit of cheques at post offices and cash and banking hubs, and that that is damaging to the most vulnerable in our society and to the bank's customers. Will he join me in calling on Lloyds to look at that again, to ensure that people can deposit those cheques? Apps and other approaches do not always meet people's needs, particularly those of elderly people.

Graham Leadbitter: Absolutely. I would consider those to be basic services that people should be able to access as close to their own community as they possibly can.

I was perplexed to read, in response to a written question from November last year, that the Government do not hold any bank closure data at all, despite the figures that I have quoted from Link. That is concerning when it is considered alongside the policy of 350 banking hubs, as neither the Government nor we who provide scrutiny can determine definitively how many closures have occurred and, by extension, how much damage requires to be mitigated.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): We successfully managed to apply for an interim banking hub in Kilsyth, which opened only four weeks ago. One of the grounds for having that hub was the closure of the Santander branch in Cumbernauld. There was a push then saying that the nearest alternative was the Santander branch in Kirkintilloch. Six months after the branch in Cumbernauld closed, notification was given that the Kirkintilloch branch would also close, with the nearest facility being in Glasgow, 25 miles away.

Graham Leadbitter: That gets to the heart of the matter. There is not an understanding by either the regulators or the banks themselves of the impacts that those closures have on communities that view themselves as being neighbours and part of a wider community, and the cumulative impact of that is significant.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): We are talking about the rules. We know that the banks have withdrawn from our communities. My market towns of Fakenham and Aylsham have had all the banks go apart from one Nationwide. They say their answer to that is Link, and yet the rules seem to say that market towns, with that huge hinterland they also serve, are not sufficient to allow for banking services to be provided via hubs. Does the hon. Member agree that if those are the rules, those rules need to change?

Graham Leadbitter: Absolutely.

I turn to the inadequacies in the current framework, and I will try to make some progress. Current criteria include the number of remaining branches, the population size and the retail centre size, which is frankly ridiculous

when some communities can be compact while others can have a narrow spread over a greater distance, often constrained by physical landscape and infrastructure features, such as rivers, railway lines, roads and, in some cases such as in my constituency, the foot of a mountain range. Transport distance, public transport links, population vulnerability and existing cash services are also all considered by Link. It is, however, the flexibility of those criteria that is the problem and the lack of cognisance of the wider geographic and population context, especially in areas such as the north of Scotland.

Friends in Kinross in Perthshire, while not in my constituency, noted that one criterion their community failed to meet was the retail centre requirements. They are sandwiched between a loch and a motorway, so the town can only realistically expand in two directions, resulting in smaller retail hubs rather than a bigger central area. Surely the answer is not reclaiming the loch or moving the motorway to get support for banking facilities.

Equally, the lack of progress on potential banking hubs in Grantown, Lossiemouth, Nairn and Aviemore in my constituency tells me that the current criteria are simply not good enough. Current population criteria ignore the needs of smaller hub towns in rural areas. Bus and train services to even relatively close alternatives still require significant journey planning and, indeed, cost for people who had previously been able to access facilities for free within walking distance. What may seem a relatively short distance can see a bus going off the most direct route into other communities, en route to the destination, and the return journey is not always available immediately on concluding banking transactions. In inclement weather, this process is even less appealing, and in mid-winter it is deeply concerning that elderly people may be waiting for buses in temperatures well below zero. That is very common through the winter months in the Cairngorms area where several of these communities are located.

The lack of banking facilities in Lossiemouth, for example, means that many businesses have to rely on services in Elgin, which is five to six miles away. Although that may not sound like a significant distance, travel times, paid parking and the impact of these repeat journeys to Elgin on smaller businesses' workforces pose severe problems for Lossiemouth-based customers.

For the towns of Newtonmore, Kingussie and Aviemore, their last banks have all closed. The closest bank is in Inverness, which is up to an hour's drive away across a distance of 30 to 45 miles. That is especially concerning as Aviemore is the UK's principal ski resort, but locals and visitors alike do not have a bank to use. A banking hub would be a great way to boost the local economy, which is reliant on tourism and hospitality—traditionally a more cash reliant part of the economy.

For Grantown, a market town, its nearest non-Post Office banking service is now a 30-minute drive away in Forres, on a road with snow gates and snow poles that I can assure Members are necessary on numerous occasions over the winter. A banking hub would reduce journey times, costs and banking uncertainty for residents.

In Nairn, another busy town with significant tourism and a population of approaching 10,000 people, which is much higher in the summer with the tourist population added, there are no more banks in town. Alternatives are in Forres and in Inverness, but people cannot reasonably

[*Graham Leadbitter*]

travel to and from those towns on public transport in under two hours, in addition to the time taken to transact their banking business.

Finally, I would like to point to an area not related to access to cash but to the other critical services offered by banks through banking hubs.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being incredibly generous with his time. I share his frustration that from the northern parts of Scotland to Southampton, on the south coast, the criteria is completely inadequate. In fact, in its assessment for the Bitterne application, Link included bus times that simply did not exist on any timetable anywhere. Does he agree with me that when banks have been removed, an assessment of access to cash is entirely the wrong answer to the question? Does he welcome, as I do, the Government's review, and does he share my hope that what we will actually get to is an adequate, effective tool to assess the lack of banking services?

Graham Leadbitter: Absolutely. I am about to talk about the critical services offered by banks through banking hubs, which addresses the hon. Gentleman's point.

Community bankers located within banking hubs can offer much needed savings, loan and mortgage advice. Recently, a local community leader in Grantown made the strong point that basic business support, such as collecting change, depositing and withdrawing cash, transferring money between business accounts, making payments, managing cards, fraud support and money advice and even offering simple advice on how to open a business bank account, can be the difference between a business thriving and a business failing in a rural community.

Paying utility bills, depositing cheques and, for local charitable groups, even depositing the proceeds from a coffee morning or a raffle stall at a Highland Games, can make the difference between succeeding or struggling. The golden thread in all of this is that without banking hubs in the areas that need them, current policy is making it harder for people to buy their own homes, to run their own businesses and even to simply access cash in these areas.

I am pleased to acknowledge the Government's announcement last week of an independent access to cash review, which will report in October 2026. I would have liked that work to have been done and concluded by now, but now it is in place I do not want to be churlish or grumpy about it. I know that those engaged in that review will be paying close attention to debates like this. I am sure that they will have noted the number of hon. Members from all political parties who are contributing to this debate and making their views and those of their communities known on this important issue. It is important that the regulators and the independent reviewer hear that breadth of opinion, because that will inform the response to the review.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and allowing me to give one further example that I hope the reviewers will consider. Lloyds will this month close the last existing bank in Kingswinford and South Staffordshire,

leaving all of my constituents, whether urban or rural, without a proper bank. However, none of the villages are eligible for banking hubs because of the presence of building societies—sometimes part-time building societies—within the villages. Does he agree that while our building societies provide a fantastic service, they do not provide the range of services that my constituents, particularly those with small businesses, need that could be offered through a banking hub?

Graham Leadbitter: Absolutely. Again, that goes back to the point I made about people needing a business service and basic business advice without having to travel dozens of miles to access that. Setting up a business is hard at the best of times, and having simple access to somewhere that will answer simple questions is really important.

To conclude my 12-minute speech that has now lasted for 20 minutes, banking hubs would make a massive difference to communities like Lossiemouth, Grantown, Aviemore and Nairn, and to the many other communities that Members from across the House have mentioned in the debate. I trust that the Minister will recognise the firm but constructive approach that I and other Members have taken on this important issue.

8.3 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Rachel Blake): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) for securing this debate and for setting out the concerns of not only of his constituents but, as he made clear, those of the many Members who are in the Chamber this evening who want to talk about this topic. I congratulate him on gathering people from across the country and from across different political persuasions to talk about access to banking services—I know how important it is to people.

Let me start by acknowledging the important work done on this issue by my predecessor, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby), particularly in relation to the announcement of the independent review on access to banking services and the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which was introduced yesterday. I will return to that later in my speech—in fact, I will probably be referring most hon. Members' interventions to the access to banking services review.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): The Minister mentioned interventions, so I congratulate her and welcome her to her place.

I welcome this Government's commitment to ensuring that people up and down the country have access to banking services. In my constituency, Mr Jignesh Patel has made an excellent application to open a banking hub in his post office in Anerley, with the support of local Labour councillors for Crystal Palace and Anerley as well as residents. With an experienced team already handling sensitive financial transactions daily and existing infrastructure already in place, his post office is fully equipped to deliver a banking hub with minimal disruption. Does the Minister agree that the application process must ensure that the merits of excellent applications such as that of Mr Jignesh Patel are fully considered, giving him and others the best chance of success?

Rachel Blake: I thank my hon. Friend for his thoughtful intervention, and I wish local businesses in his constituency all the best. These decisions are made by Link, but the Government keep a very close eye on the assessment criteria.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I want to bring a bit of good news to the House. Last month, I had the honour of cutting the ribbon on a new banking hub on Oxford Street in Ripley. It is an important facility for my constituents, but it is actually the first of its kind. It did not go through the Link procedure; it was identified as a site by Cash Access UK. It is run by and staffed entirely by Cash Access UK, so a continuing team is involved there. Will the Minister recognise the great achievement of Cash Access UK in my town and the importance of similar banking hubs across the country?

Rachel Blake: I absolutely recognise the importance of banking hubs, as my hon. Friend has described. I am very grateful to her for highlighting the different models available, and I very much hope that she will submit some of that evidence and the case study to the access to banking services review.

I am particularly struck by the reflections of hon. Members on the importance of banking services for those who are vulnerable, and the importance of banking services in urban and rural communities and how they have been lost.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I welcome the Minister to her new role.

On the criteria, I have pushed for a banking hub in Budleigh Salterton for a great deal of time, but it was pushed back because there is a post office in the town. The post office was closed for 10 weeks last year, and the surrounding rural villages—places such as East Budleigh, Otterton and Colaton Raleigh—were starved of cash. Will the Minister meet with me to look at the criteria that Link has put in place around the post office's suitability to see if we can get that overturned?

Rachel Blake: I would absolutely be happy to meet with the hon. Member to talk about that issue. I hope to meet with Members from across the House about the access to banking services review.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to her place.

My constituency was one of the lucky ones that was awarded a banking hub two years ago, and I worked with Cash Access UK to secure a temporary place in the council library. Two years on, it has failed to secure an accessible permanent site and is refusing to engage with me. Will the review also look into the delivery of commitments by Cash Access UK?

Rachel Blake: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution, and I hope that we can discuss it during the review.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I have had the pleasure of opening two banking hubs, in Rossington and in Thorne, and have seen the success that they have brought to the area. However, I also have the Isle of Axholme—a rural area—in my

constituency, and access to cash is really important for financial inclusion, local businesses, and the resilience of our rural communities. Will the review take that into account?

Rachel Blake: My hon. Friend makes important points about access to banking services across a number of different areas. I am grateful to him, and I hope we can continue to discuss this issue.

We now have very little time left—

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): On that point, will the Minister give way? [*Laughter.*]

Rachel Blake: I will.

Dave Doogan: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Could she give my constituents some comfort that after the review—I am certain it will find that the current criteria set out for Link by the FCA are deeply flawed and exist in a random, abstract form that bears no resemblance to local people's circumstances—places such as Pitlochry will be able to revisit Link and the FCA's flawed decisions?

Rachel Blake: I disagree—I think that the hon. Gentleman goes too far in his criticism of the criteria. It is important that the Government continue to monitor how these banking hubs are assessed and the need for them.

I will close by talking about—

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Reform): Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Blake: I am going to make a little bit of progress now, because we do not have much time. Despite the important progress that we have heard this evening about the number of banking hubs that have been set up—a commitment to 275 with 235 already delivered—it would be premature to conclude that all people and communities are receiving support with their banking needs. Decisions to close bank branches are ultimately commercial decisions taken by banks and building societies, and reflect some of the changes in the way people choose to bank.

Suella Braverman: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Blake: I have to finish now. I welcome the commitments that firms have made to maintain or improve their existing branches, recognising just how important they are to their customers. There are already some rules and obligations for firms that are changing their branch networks, which they must take very seriously. All Members should know that those decisions must be taken with regard to the impact on customers and communities. I underline that banks and building societies are expected to put appropriate alternatives in place ahead of closure, and where they fall short of those expectations, the FCA can and will ask for closures to be paused.

Suella Braverman: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Blake: I am not going to give way. I fully support those powers, and expect the FCA to use them where necessary. However, the Government are concerned that although firms have been reshaping their branch networks in response to customer demand, this may be creating particular challenges, which is why we have brought forward the review.

The Government recognise how important it is that communities such as those represented by the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey and many other Members from all parts of the country have

sufficient access to cash and banking services. Banks and building societies are a core part of the everyday economy. It is critical that communities have sufficient access to those important services. I am sure that many Members from across the House agree with that, and I look forward to working with them on the access to banking services review.

Question put and agreed to.

8.12 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 20 May 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Horizon Shortfall Scheme: Fixed-sum Offer Appeals and Independent Senior Lawyer

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): The Government are determined that postmasters affected by the Horizon scandal receive the compensation they deserve.

The Government are today announcing further details about how postmasters who previously accepted the Horizon shortfall scheme fixed-sum offer will be able to request permission from an independent person to appeal their award. We are also providing an update on the recommendations from the Horizon shortfall scheme independent senior lawyer on cases where there is no evidence of a shortfall.

Permission to appeal

Volume 1 of the Post Office IT Horizon inquiry report recommended that postmasters who feel they may have under-settled their HSS claim by accepting the 75,000 HSS FSO

“should be afforded the opportunity to appeal against their acceptance of such an offer if they are granted permission to do so”

by an independent person. Being granted permission to appeal will not guarantee that a postmaster’s award will be uplifted when their claim is fully assessed in the HSS appeals process.

To implement Sir Wyn Williams’ recommendation, the Department for Business and Trade has developed draft guidance for the scheme and engaged with key stakeholders, including claimants’ representatives, the Horizon compensation advisory board and postmaster organisations. This is to ensure that the process will be fit for purpose and meets its aims.

The FSO permission to appeal process will open for registrations later this year. Postmasters who have already received an FSO will have three months from the launch date to register and seek permission to appeal. Those who receive FSOs in future will have three months from the date of the offer to seek permission to appeal. Once confirmed as eligible, they will then have a further three months to make their application by submitting a concise written narrative explaining why they believe that their claim was under-settled. Assessment of these requests will be undertaken completely independently of the Department and Post Office. A postmaster who is granted permission will be permitted to apply to the HSS appeals process.

DBT will fund postmasters’ reasonable costs of obtaining legal advice to understand the value of their potential claim and prepare their narrative on the basis of a tariff which was discussed with legal representatives and has also been published today. We will strongly encourage those considering seeking permission to appeal to take up this offer and only engage solicitors and firms that

are regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority, the Law Society of Scotland or the Law Society of Northern Ireland. Additionally, postmasters should not engage any firm which offers a “no-win, no-fee” conditional fee or litigation funding agreement.

The Government have today published the draft fixed-sum offer permission to appeal process guide, which details the proposed principles, eligibility criteria, stages of the process and expectations for applicants. This provides the information which postmasters and their legal representatives will need to start submitting cases. We continue to welcome feedback from stakeholders on our proposals. This is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/horizon-shortfall-scheme-hss-fixed-sum-offer-permission-to-appeal-process>.

DBT will work with the Post Office to ensure postmasters who previously received an FSO are contacted upon launch to make them aware that this process is available.

Horizon shortfall scheme

In December 2025, Sir Gary Hickinbottom was appointed to the HSS as the independent senior lawyer to review any generic issues arising under the scheme; and, if appropriate, make recommendations to ensure full, fair and prompt redress within the scheme and, as far as possible, across the Horizon redress schemes as a whole.

The DBT and Post Office referred the handling of cases without shortfall evidence to Sir Gary for review. He has reviewed this process and provided recommendations on it. He advised that, subject to implementation of those recommendations, the process is appropriate, robust and fair, and does not apply more than the necessary burden on claimants. The Government have today published the full report which is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-senior-lawyers-review-of-unevidenced-shortfalls-process>. The Post Office and the Department are grateful for his advice and have accepted his recommendations in full.

In addition to the report, we have issued guidance outlining the procedures for managing and processing these cases to ensure claimants have a clear understanding of how their claims will be handled. The Post Office and the Department are committed to providing full and fair redress for those affected by the Horizon scandal. We consider that this revised process will ensure that applicants will obtain that redress in a manner that is fair to all claimants. DBT will continue to work with Post Office to ensure claims are processed as quickly as possible.

I will keep the House updated as this work progresses.

[HCWS45]

Trade Negotiations

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): The UK has concluded a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—as friends and valued partners.

The UK’s ties with the Gulf are deep, historic, and future-focused. This deal is founded upon our shared commitment to open trade, mutual prosperity, and the long-term economic success of all our nations.

The Government recognise the challenges UK businesses are facing as a result of the situation in the middle east and are already taking action to support firms through this period of uncertainty, by supporting critical supply chains, strengthening domestic steel production and boosting consumer confidence. Ministers are working closely with business groups and industry leaders to understand the pressures facing industry and, as the situation develops, will be agile in responding.

Today's agreement with the GCC supports that wider, co-ordinated response—providing the legal certainty and long-term stability that businesses tell us they need to plan, invest and grow with confidence. Alongside domestic action through the industrial strategy and small business plan, this deal forms part of a coherent strategy to build economic resilience and support long-term growth in trade and exports.

This deal is one of the most ambitious that the GCC has ever concluded and marks the first FTA it has concluded with a G7 nation. It reflects and strengthens the deep, long-standing partnership between our nations, built on decades of shared commitment to open trade, mutual prosperity and the long-term economic success of all our nations.

The GCC is equivalent to the UK's 10th largest trading partner¹, with total trade between the UK and GCC valued at £53 billion in 2025². This deal is estimated to grow trade between us by almost 20%³, supporting economic growth and putting money in people's pockets. The deal could add an estimated £3.7 billion annually to the UK economy in the long run when compared to 2040 projections and £1.9 billion a year to real wages⁴. When combined with the India FTA, the two agreements are estimated to add over £8 billion a year in real terms⁵, helping to drive forward our modern industrial strategy. This agreement responds directly to the priorities raised by UK businesses and includes measures that will meaningfully improve the ease of doing business with the GCC.

As the second largest services exporter in the world⁶, with strengths in sectors such as financial and professional business services, the UK is well matched to support the Gulf's ambitions to diversify its economies. This FTA gives UK firms the tools and certainty they need to expand their presence across the region. This includes locking in market access across a broad range of sectors for our services firms. This will ensure that UK businesses are provided with guaranteed terms on which to trade, reducing the risk of future restrictions that could impact their operations. This includes limitations on foreign ownership or requirements to set up a base in the GCC to supply their services in the region. We are also providing greater regulatory transparency in telecoms, including authorisation and licensing processes, ensuring that businesses can access GCC regulations and that regulatory processes are fair and efficient.

The GCC has taken its most ambitious commitments on business mobility to date, which will improve consistency and transparency of visa requirements and processes, and provide increased certainty on the level of access that businesses can enjoy. This will support UK firms to deliver services in the region, in support of the GCC's diversification plans.

For the first time, the GCC has committed not to impose disproportionate or unjustified requirements on firms to store their data locally in the bloc, giving UK

tech firms greater confidence that they will not face costly new burdens. The far-reaching digital provisions in this agreement will drive innovation and support the use of emerging digital technologies through UK-GCC co-operation. This will enable both sides to take advantage of opportunities when new products and services emerge, including in areas such as artificial intelligence, paperless trade and clean energy.

For goods exporters, the deal will make trade cheaper, faster, and more predictable, cutting red tape, reducing and removing tariffs and simplifying customs processes. Based on existing trade, the deal will eliminate duties worth an estimated £580 million a year on UK goods exported to the GCC once fully implemented.

Some £360 million of these estimated duties will be removed on day one of the agreement entering into force⁷. After a decade, 90% of GCC tariff lines will have tariffs removed, unlocking tariff-free access for around 93% of UK goods exports based on existing trade. Two thirds of UK exports will enter the GCC tariff-free immediately after the deal enters into force, delivering a major boost for UK manufacturers, food and high-value brands⁸. The UK is also liberalising tariffs on all current GCC exports from day one under this agreement, supporting supply chains and helping UK businesses to reduce input costs. The deal excludes pork, chicken and eggs from tariff liberalisation.

This deal removes tariffs on British exports, including automotives, aerospace, and food and drink such as smoked salmon and baked goods. UK businesses will benefit from tailored rules of origin, digital trade provisions such as paperless trading, a ban on customs duties on electronic transmissions and provisions allowing UK exporters, should they wish, to complete and self-certify their own origin documentation after initial registration. This was a top ask from businesses, helping to remove the often costly and time-consuming requirements which often deter smaller firms from exporting.

Investment is a core pillar of our growth mission, and this deal lays the foundation for even deeper UK-GCC investment ties, protecting investment on both sides and driving growth for years to come. The GCC is already a key source of inward investment into the UK, with total foreign direct investments, portfolio, derivatives and other investment assets and liabilities between the UK and Gulf Arabian countries—which include the GCC nations, as well as Yemen and Iraq⁹—amounting to £485 billion in 2024¹⁰. UK investors from a range of sectors also have a long history of investing in the Gulf. In this deal we have agreed comprehensive levels of protections for UK and GCC investors and their investments, ensuring they will receive fair and non-discriminatory treatment that will give investors the confidence to make long-term investment decisions. It will also provide transparent, independent legal recourse to resolve disputes if treaty obligations are breached. This will help to ensure that projects in both regions have the certainty they need to succeed.

Within this FTA, we have also agreed a package of commitments on environment, labour, women's economic empowerment, and animal welfare that go further than anything the GCC has agreed before in an FTA, opening new avenues for collaboration on shared priorities. These include commitments to address barriers that are specific

to women in trade, as well as upholding the labour standards that underpin fair competition for businesses on both sides.

The UK will continue to work closely with our Gulf partners—across trade, investment, defence and security and to build prosperity across all our nations. We will now go through the steps to prepare this treaty for signature, and I look forward to updating the House further on this agreement in due course.

^{1,2}<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/balanceofpayments/datasets/uktotaltradeallcountriseasonallyadjusted>

³DBT modelling

⁴DBT modelling

⁵DBT modelling

⁶UNCTAD

⁷Duty estimates are based on GCC import figures from ITC trademap, using 2024 data for all countries except Oman, which uses 2023 data. Duties are calculated using the GCC common external tariff and country-specific tariffs as of 2022. For countries where HS6-level data is used (Oman, Qatar and the UAE), the lowest MFN tariff within the HS6 subheading is applied to provide a conservative estimate.

⁸Estimates based on GCC import figures from ITC trademap, using 2024 data for all countries except Oman, which uses 2023 data.

⁹Yemen and Iraq are not a part of this FTA.

¹⁰<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/balanceofpayments/datasets/10geographicalbreakdownoftheukinternationalinvestmentpositionthepinkbook2016>

Gulf Arabian in this instance refers to GCC members states, in addition to Yemen and Iraq. Due to data limitations, it is not possible to calculate the value of GCC assets in the UK collectively.

[HCWS52]

CABINET OFFICE

Covid-19 Inquiry Response Costs

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The UK Covid-19 Inquiry is examining the UK's response to and impact of the pandemic. The Government are fully committed to supporting the work of the Covid-19 Inquiry and to learning lessons from the covid-19 pandemic to ensure that the UK is better prepared for a future pandemic.

The Government recognise the unprecedented and wholly exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. The inquiry is therefore unprecedented in its scope, complexity and profile.

The independent UK Covid-19 Inquiry publishes its own running costs quarterly. The Chair is under a statutory obligation to avoid unnecessary costs in the inquiry's work—and she has been clear as to her intention to complete her work as quickly and efficiently as possible.

I would like to update the House on the costs to the UK Government associated with responding to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry.

Figures provided are based upon a selection of the most relevant Departments and are not based on a complete set of departmental figures, and different Departments organise their response teams in different ways, according to business need. As such, these are not precise figures for accounting purposes. Ensuring a comprehensive and timely response to the inquiry requires significant input from a number of key Government Departments, including, but not limited to, the Cabinet Office, the Department of Health and Social Care,

the UK Health Security Agency, the Home Office and HM Treasury, many of which are supported by the Government Legal Department. While every effort has been made to ensure a robust methodology, complexities remain in trying to quantify the time and costs dedicated to the inquiry alone.

It should be noted that alongside full-time resource within Departments, inquiry response teams draw on expertise from across their organisations. These costs, including costs associated with staff taking time to provide written or oral evidence, are not included in the costs below.

Breakdown of staff and costs

The Government's response to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry is led by inquiry response units across Departments. These associated staff costs for Q3 2025-26 are below, and include retrospective adjustments for Q1-2.

Q3 number of UK Covid-19 Inquiry response unit staff: 167 full time equivalents

Q3 cost of UK Covid-19 Inquiry response unit staff: £3,486,000 (including contingent labour costs)

Financial year 2025-26 (Q1 + Q2 + Q3), total cost of UK Covid-19 Inquiry response unit staff: £12,800,000 (including contingent labour costs, and retrospective adjustments for Q1-2)

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Cumulative Total for 2025-26
Cost of UK Covid-19 Inquiry response unit staff (including contingent labour costs)	£5,015,000	£4,299,000	£3,486,000	£12,800,000
Number of UK Covid-19 Inquiry response unit staff (full time equivalents)	248	207	167	N/A

Total inquiry response unit legal costs

Inquiry response units across Government Departments are supported by the Government Legal Department, co-partnering firms of solicitors, and legal counsel. These associated legal costs—excluding internal departmental advisory legal costs—for Q3 2025-26 are below, and include retrospective adjustments for Q1-2.

Q3 legal costs: £3,633,000

Financial year 2025-26 (Q1 + Q2 + Q3), total legal costs: £14,965,000 (including retrospective adjustments for Q1-2)

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Cumulative Total for 2025-26
Total legal costs	£5,034,000	£6,298,000	£3,633,000	£14,965,000

[HCWS50]

TREASURY

Transport Taxation

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): The Government are confirming action to support households and businesses with their fuel costs, in response to the conflict in the middle east.

Middle east context and existing Government action

A rapid de-escalation in the middle east remains the best way to bring down fuel prices, where the most impactful step is to reopen the strait of Hormuz. The UK Government are playing a leading role in the international effort to get shipping flowing freely.

Alongside this key step, the Government's priorities will continue to be helping families with the cost of living, including through protecting the public finances to support the Bank of England with its role in keeping inflation as low as possible.

The Government have already taken action to bear down on prices at the pump. In November, the Government extended the 5p per litre cut in fuel duty for a further five months and ensured that fuel duty will not increase in line with inflation this year. The Government's fuel finder scheme is delivering real benefits at the pump, with a growing number of apps and websites making near-live fuel prices available to drivers right across the UK. The CMA has stepped up its monitoring of petrol and diesel prices, recently publishing its first enhanced monitoring report on the impact of the conflict, with plans to report further in the coming week.

Petrol and diesel are currently 11p per litre cheaper than under plans inherited from the previous Government, and fuel duty has not been lower than it is now at any point in over 16 years. However, some fuels have been more impacted than others by this conflict, with jet fuel, diesel and heating oil prices increasing more than petrol. The Government also recognise the pressures being faced by drivers and other fuel users.

Going further to support motorists and other fuel users

Today, the Government are announcing a package worth over £400 million, which combines broad support for motorists with targeted support for sectors most exposed to and affected by higher fuel prices.

Fuel duty: 5p cut extension until end of 2026 to support motorists

The Government will not add to the cost of fuel while this war goes on, so there will be no rise this year. The temporary 5p per litre cut, which was introduced in 2022 and remains in place now, will be extended until the end of the year, providing certainty to motorists. This will save the average motorist over £120 compared to plans inherited from the previous Government, with hauliers and van drivers seeing greater savings. The proportionate percentage cut for rebated fuels, which includes red diesel, will also be extended.

This support for motorists builds on help for more families to get off the fossil fuel rollercoaster for good, through the over 110,000 electric car grants the Government have made in the last year to help people to switch to EVs. The Government have also worked to bring the cost down and convenience up to make electric driving work for more people, enabling motorists to save with every mile they drive, irrespective of the Iran conflict's uncertain path. This change to fuel duty will ease the pressure on those not yet ready or able to make the switch.

Fuel duty: additional support for red diesel users

To support farmers, who face substantially increased costs on fertiliser and fuel, the Government will cut the duty rate on red diesel by over a third per litre from 10.18p to 6.48p, the lowest rate in over 20 years.

This lower rate will take effect from 15 June and remain in place until the end of the year, supporting the agricultural sector in the fuel-intensive harvest period through to the end of the year, and will also help other users of red diesel too, such as maritime, commercial fishing and rail freight.

HGV VED holiday: support for haulage

In recognising the key role the road haulage sector plays in transporting goods across the UK and their disproportionate exposure to fuel costs, the Government are introducing a 12-month holiday from vehicle excise duty for the majority of heavy goods vehicles, which will save a typical HGV £600 on top of savings from fuel duty. Fuel costs make up a substantial proportion of HGV operating costs, and this action will help prevent cost pressures from the Iran conflict spreading across the economy.

The Government will bring forward legislation to enact these changes.

Today's announcement is one part of support for households and businesses. The Government will consider further action if price levels increase significantly. More broadly, the Government will continue to monitor the situation and make the necessary decisions to help protect consumers from price increases from the Iran war.

[HCWS49]

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations: Annual Reports and Accounts 2

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of the Council of the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations annual report and accounts 2023-24 and 2024-25, in accordance with the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations Regulations 2014.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-05-20/HCWS48>

[HCWS48]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Strategy Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I am today updating the House on the Environment Agency's review of the statutory flood and coastal erosion risk management strategy for England.

The current strategy, published in 2020, sets the long-term direction for managing flood and coastal erosion risk. Since then, our understanding of flood and coastal erosion risk has developed, which includes increasing recognition of the risk of surface water flooding.

This Government have also delivered significant changes to strengthen our national resilience to flood and coastal erosion risks. These include major changes to flood and coastal erosion funding rules to make it quicker and easier to deliver the right flood defences in the right places; the publication of the water White Paper, which sets out once-in-a-generation reforms that will transform the water system; and the UK resilience action plan, which sets priorities to strengthen resilience across society.

It is important that the updated strategy reflects the Government policy priorities to ensure that delivery is aligned with Government objectives. It must deliver and enable real improvements in protection and resilience for people and communities at risk of flooding and coastal erosion. I have, therefore, written to the chair of the Environment Agency, as the statutory body responsible for the strategy, to set out the Government priorities for the review. I have asked that the strategy should:

Recognise that deprived communities are more likely to face flood risk and coastal erosion, as well as face bigger challenges in recovery;

Reflect the latest evidence and learning on approaches to engaging the public in taking action to improve community resilience to flooding and coastal change as well as reflect best practice from community-voluntary groups in flood preparedness;

Reflect the ongoing work of the floods resilience taskforce to improve communications and co-ordination around flood preparedness and response;

Implement the Government's updated flood funding policy to deliver a broad range of projects, including rebalancing investment towards capital and routine maintenance, repair and refurbishment, natural flood management and property level measures, and focusing investment decisions around value for money, continuing to seek partnership funding to make every pound of taxpayer funding go further;

Aim to define what good flood and coastal resilience looks like by setting out long-term strategic objectives and shorter-term measures, which should include exploring how a measure of natural flood resilience could be developed over the longer term;

Provide strategic direction in support of lead local flood authorities to manage surface water flood risk including local skills and capability building, and supporting greater take up of surface water flood risk projects;

Align with latest Government policy on matters relating to water and English devolution such as the published water White Paper and the Government commitment to reorganising local government and supporting mayoral combined authorities, in particular taking into consideration the proposals for regional water planning to improve joined-up local decision making and delivery;

Reflect and showcase the learning and successes of long-term, place-based, integrated planning—such as “Thames Estuary 2100” and “Humber Estuary 2100”—with a view to embedding these approaches where they support Government priorities, notably growth, and deliver multiple benefits for flood, water and other outcomes;

Actively support the recommendations from the flood-ready review to encourage greater take-up of property flood resilience;

Consider the right long-term approaches to manage rural flood resilience, including a more sustainable approach to asset management;

Support the updating and implementation of shoreline management plans to inform investment and planning decisions over the long term, including the mainstreaming of innovative measures to adapt to coastal erosion;

Identify improvements to flood and coastal risk modelling and mapping, including sharing of flood depth information, to inform policymakers and practitioners in risk management authorities;

Explore ways to better assess the wider impacts of flood events on people, businesses, infrastructure and agriculture.

The Environment Agency will continue to engage with flood risk management authorities, local partners and stakeholders as the review progresses. I will ensure the House is kept informed at appropriate stages, including following public consultation on the updated strategy.

This work will help to ensure that the strategy continues to provide clear and effective direction for managing flood and coastal erosion risk, supporting communities, and preparing the country for the challenges ahead in a changing climate.

[HCWS46]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Telecoms Fraud Charter

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Home Office (Lord Hanson of Flint) has today made the following written ministerial statement:

The telecoms fraud charter was signed on 5 November 2025 by the six major UK mobile networks and 13 business-to-business telecoms companies.

This statement provides a six-month progress update on delivery of the telecoms fraud charter, launched to strengthen the telecoms sector's role in preventing fraud, protecting consumers and businesses, and supporting law enforcement. As set out in the fraud strategy, the Home Office has committed to report to Parliament on delivery of the charter every six months until the end of 2027.

Commitments made under the charter are on track. Several workstreams are now established and operational, demonstrating strong collective ambition to disrupt fraud at scale.

Progress is being led through two complementary groups:

The Communications Crime Strategy Group, covering the UK's mobile network operators; and

Comms Council UK, representing the business-to-business telecoms sector.

Communications Crime Strategy Group—mobile networks

Data sharing

Cross sector workshops are under way, focusing on progressing new data sharing pilots, including opportunities involving voice data. By November 2026, we expect to see cross-sector data sharing models to be finalised and wider information sharing practices in place.

Voice fraud

An industry workstream has been established, with activity on traceback progressing, as well as planned engagement with Ofcom and cross-sector partners to improve alignment.

SMS fraud

Following a Home Office workshop, activity is progressing across the SMS workstream, with planned engagement with tech platforms on emerging messaging services such as RCS. By November 2026, we expect to see strengthened sender verification and onboarding processes across the major UK networks, with established sector-wide standards for secure messaging.

Artificial intelligence

An AI-focused industry group has been established, mapping current use across networks and developing a shared view of future risks and opportunities. By November 2026, ethical principles on AI are to be agreed and published, along with an operational intelligence sharing framework for AI-related threats.

“Stop! Think Fraud” campaign

CCSG working group is in place, with ongoing collaboration to tailor campaign messaging for mobile-specific threats and consumer behaviours.

Staff capability and victims

Industry has shared best practice, with work under way to map standards, identify learning needs, and strengthen support for staff and fraud victims. Collaboration with National Trading Standards on this is ongoing.

Collaboration with law enforcement

Strong engagement continues, with active industry groups, a dedicated eSIM working group, CCSG representation in policing forums, and industry participation in the fraud targeting cell.

Comms Council UK

Data sharing and tracing

Promotion of the National Trading Standards data sharing scheme is ongoing, alongside support for development of a traceback scheme and continued engagement with CCSG. By November 2026, findings and recommendations for sector-wide adoption on a traceback solution are to be shared with the Home Office.

Best practice and standards

Guidance for business telecoms providers has been updated and placed on a regular review cycle, with ongoing promotion to members. By November 2026, a new and updated guidance is to be shared with the Home Office.

Awareness, staff and business victims

A fraud information hub has been launched, with support for the “Stop! Think Fraud” campaign and work to improve support and guidance for business victims.

Technology and innovation

Members are sharing how new technologies, including AI-enabled tools, are being used to strengthen fraud detection and prevention.

Conclusion

At the six-month point, the telecoms fraud charter is firmly on track. Industry, Government and law enforcement are now working together through established structures, with clear momentum across all workstreams.

Government welcome the proactive approach shown by both CCSG and CCUK and will continue to work closely with them to ensure delivery over the coming year, building a more resilient telecoms ecosystem and strengthening protection for consumers and businesses alike.

[HCWS47]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 2 Report

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

The Grenfell Tower tragedy exposed deep-rooted weaknesses in the systems designed to keep people safe. The preventable loss of 72 lives remains a profound failure of oversight and accountability which should never have occurred. The bereaved, survivors and local community continue to remind us of the human cost of those failures and of the importance of lasting reform.

This Government accepted the inquiry’s findings and is today publishing the May 2026 Grenfell Tower inquiry progress report, setting out the action taken and the further work under way to deliver a more robust, coherent and accountable building safety system. Since February 2026, we have completed a further nine recommendations, bringing the total of closed recommendations to 21 since February 2025. We remain on track to deliver all recommendations by the end of 2029.

Alongside the May progress update, we are publishing:

A call for evidence on the building professions, trades and occupations;

The college of fire and rescue consultation;

The building control independent panel report and Government response;

The public engagement policy;

An Office for Product Safety and Standards research paper.

The publications alongside this progress report illustrate the continued progress being made towards implementation of the inquiry’s recommendations and wider reforms of social housing and the construction sector. While not all these documents in themselves close a recommendation, they represent important steps in the work needed to do so, and form the foundations to support sustained, system-wide change. They seek to address fragmentation and ensure that those responsible for building and fire safety have the support they need to keep the public safe in their homes.

The Government will also bring forward a remediation Bill, which will drive forward the remediation of unsafe cladding by giving regulators the powers they need to compel the worst blockers to take action, and make those responsible pay towards the cost of fixing the problem they caused.

Call for evidence on the building professions, trades and occupations

Following on from publication of the single construction regulator prospectus in December 2025, we have today launched a call for evidence on the built environment professions, trades and occupations. This goes beyond the specific recommendations in the Grenfell Tower inquiry for fire engineers, fire risk assessors, principal contractors and architects to tackle the underlying findings of the inquiry. This concluded that the skills, knowledge and experience of all those engaged in the construction industry are critical to making sure our buildings and environments are safe, high quality and high performing.

This call for evidence seeks information about current barriers, opportunities and interdependencies shaping how people work and behave during all stages of the building process. The outcomes of this exercise will help to set the shape and scope of the new overarching strategy for the professions, trades and occupations which will be published in 2027. This will set out a long-term plan for regulatory and non-regulatory reform across Government and the sector, in addition to the delivery of the specific recommendations around professions.

The call for evidence will run for 12 weeks until 12 August 2026.

Building control independent panel report and Government response

The Government have today published the final report of the building control independent panel, alongside our response. The panel was established, under the chairship of Dame Judith Hackitt, following a recommendation of the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 2 to consider whether building control functions should be performed by those who have a commercial interest in the process; and whether all building control functions should be performed by a national authority.

We welcome the panel’s clear assessment of long-standing challenges in the system, despite the professionalism and commitment of many of those working within it. The report sets out principles for reform, alongside recommendations for action in the near term and options for longer-term reform.

The Government agree with the panel’s assessment and accept the direction of travel it has set out. Our response makes clear that building control must be

properly supported as part of a well-functioning wider building safety system, building on reforms already delivered since the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

We will now take forward detailed work on the panel's recommendations at pace, including how reform can be taken forward in a way that strengthens public safety, supports the profession and maintains confidence across the sector. We will set out further detail as this work develops.

College of fire and rescue consultation

We are today publishing a public consultation on the establishment of a new college of fire and rescue. This consultation seeks views on the role, design and delivery of a new centre of excellence to support the capability, professionalism and resilience of the fire and rescue sector.

The consultation marks an important step in delivering the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. The inquiry identified serious and systemic weaknesses across the fire and rescue sector, including inconsistent professional standards, variation in training and leadership, and fragmented responsibilities. As the cornerstone of our reform programme, the college will address these challenges and build on the recommendations from the phase 1 report by collecting and curating operational learning and providing a trusted national voice on risk and fire behaviour. The college will therefore play a critical role in raising professional standards and improving outcomes for the fire and rescue workforce.

The consultation sets out proposals for the college's strategic purpose and the functions it could fulfil, including,

but not limited to, leadership and command, recruitment and training, and culture and integrity. It also seeks views on how the college could operate in practice.

This consultation will run for eight weeks, closing on 15 July, and we strongly encourage responses from the public, the fire and rescue sector, other blue light services and any other respondents with an interest in this work. The consultation will be available on gov.uk and will be laid in both Houses.

Public engagement policy

The Grenfell Tower inquiry details significant widespread failings that led to the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Of these failings, and the many individuals and organisations named, seven firms were most significantly criticised for their actions. Sir Michael Moore-Bick found that some of these organisations acted with "systematic dishonesty" and

"engaged in deliberate, sustained strategies to mislead the market."

The inquiry found that materials were used on Grenfell Tower that firms knew were not fit for purpose, and that safety was deprioritised behind ease and economic gain.

In response to these findings, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has implemented a policy to advise Ministers and senior officials not to share a public platform with any of these firms. The principles of this approach have since been shared across Government.

[HCWS51]

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