

**Wednesday
3 June 2026**

**Volume 786
No. 9**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 3 June 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 3 June 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Before we begin questions, I want to congratulate the men's House of Commons tug of war team, captained by Sir James Cleverly, which yesterday beat the House of Lords team to win the Macmillan cancer tug of war 2026 in aid of that great charity. I was a last-minute addition to the team to ensure its victory. I would also like to say well done to the women's team, captained by Tonia Antoniazzi, which included Madam Deputy Speaker Caroline Nokes. They put up a valiant fight against the Lords team, but unfortunately lost this year—the first time they have ever lost.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Supreme Court Dillon Judgment: Policy Implications

1. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his Department's policies of the Supreme Court judgment in the Dillon case [2026] UKSC 15. [900186]

2. **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his Department's policies of the Supreme Court judgment in the Dillon case [2026] UKSC 15. [900188]

7. **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his Department's policies of the Supreme Court judgment in the Dillon case [2026] UKSC 15. [900193]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): Before answering, I pay tribute to Sir Desmond Rea who died recently. He played an important role in the peace process in Northern Ireland, particularly through the transformation of policing as the first chair of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am sure the whole House will join me in sending condolences to his family.

I welcome the clarity provided by the Supreme Court in the Dillon case, which has confirmed that the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery is capable of delivering human rights-compliant investigations and reaffirms the Government's position on the interpretation and application of article 2 of the Windsor framework.

Peter Swallow: Terrorists were responsible for the vast majority of deaths during the troubles. Many of those murders remain unsolved, and the last Tory Government's Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 sought to offer immunity to the perpetrators. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is wrong in principle, and can he provide an update on when he plans to move the approval motion for the remedial order to repeal it in the other place?

Hilary Benn: I agree with my hon. Friend that seeking to give immunity to terrorists who committed the most terrible crimes, including the killing of police officers, soldiers and many members of the public, was profoundly wrong. It is also wrong in principle. On the remedial order, now that we have the Dillon judgment we will be bringing it forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Fleur Anderson: The Supreme Court found wholly in the Government's favour. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Government now have a responsibility to put in place legislation that delivers justice for victims and survivors of the troubles, who are both civilians and veterans, and that upholds the special duty of care to veterans?

Hilary Benn: I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend—that is exactly what the troubles Bill will do. It is essential to build confidence across all communities, which the legacy Act failed to do, to put in place protections for our veterans and to enable all families who are seeking answers to request information through a reformed legacy commission.

Phil Brickell: As the proud son of a Northern Ireland veteran myself, I wish to put on the record my eternal gratitude to the brave men and women of our armed forces who served our nation in Operation Banner. With that in mind, can the Secretary of State reiterate to the House how many veterans have been convicted for offences committed during the troubles and how that compares with the number of paramilitaries who have been successfully prosecuted?

Hilary Benn: I ask my hon. Friend to pass on my thanks and, I am sure, the thanks of the whole House for his father's service. He and all those who served deserve our eternal gratitude. As my hon. Friend knows, the number of service personnel convicted of troubles-related offences was very small—only one in the last 28 years—whereas between 25,000 and 35,000 paramilitaries were sent to prison during the troubles. Of the current 10 live cases, eight relate to paramilitaries accused of killing or attempting to kill soldiers and police officers—paramilitaries whom the last Government wanted to give immunity to.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State agree that the Supreme Court judgment in the Dillon case reinforces vital legal protections for our security forces, creating a more secure environment? Will he join me in thanking the courageous men and women of our army and police who fought and defeated terrorism with integrity?

Hilary Benn: I will certainly join the hon. Member in expressing those thanks to all those who served with such distinction in Northern Ireland during the troubles to keep people safe. The Dillon judgment has provided

extremely important clarity about the correct interpretation of the Windsor framework, as I said a moment ago. It also reinforces the case that the Government make: that we need to put protections for veterans, which were not contained in the last legacy Act, on the statute book.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I welcome the rebuff in the Dillon judgment for the article 2 expansionist demands of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State accept that rights in Northern Ireland must evolve according to United Kingdom law, not European Union law? Thus, on the gender issue, does he accept that the ruling of the Supreme Court on the supremacy of biological sex must prevail?

Hilary Benn: That is indeed what the Supreme Court found in that particular important case. The Equality Act 2010 applies in only limited ways in Northern Ireland, as the hon. and learned Member knows. I agree with him on his first point. The Government took the appeal because they felt that the interpretation of the Windsor framework, particularly article 2, by the Northern Ireland courts was too broad. The Supreme Court has agreed with the Government and said that it is a much more narrow interpretation, relating to the troubles, not the expansive interpretation that we have previously seen.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow spokesperson.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): May I echo the Secretary of State's comments in relation to the sad passing of Sir Desmond Rea?

In response to the Dillon judgment, a Northern Ireland spokesperson said on 7 May:

"We welcome the clarity provided today by the Supreme Court, which has confirmed that the ICIR is fully equipped to deliver human rights-compliant investigations".

Does the Secretary of State therefore accept that the courts have determined that the ICIR as presently constituted is sufficiently independent to conduct its investigations? If so, why is there any need to make these cumbersome changes in his proposed Bill?

Hilary Benn: As I have said from the Dispatch Box many times before, the courts had previously found that the ICIR was independent. The Supreme Court has dealt with the two particular issues identified by the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland. I have already indicated to the House that the Government propose to make amendments to the disclosure provisions, which I think are right and proper compared with those that were contained in the legacy Act. It remains the case that the last legacy Act did not command confidence on the part of all—[*Interruption.*] It is no good hon. Members on the Conservative Front Bench shaking their heads; it did not command confidence on the part of all communities in Northern Ireland, and that is why the changes are necessary.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that the howls of outrage from the article 2 expansionists have been proven to be wrong, yet those same howls of outrage have been repeated ad nauseum by the Irish Government. They continue with

their state case against this country and they continue to assert that there is an incompatibility with the ICIR. In doing so, they refuse to respond to the requests of victims; they have not responded once to the ICIR's requests for information from the Guards; and, as the Secretary of State heard with the victim in our presence just last week, the much-fêted Garda unit does not even answer the phone. Will he now challenge the Irish Republican Government to withdraw their case and to recognise compatibility with article 2?

Hilary Benn: As I have said to the right hon. Gentleman a number of times before, the Government's view, which is reinforced by the Dillon judgment, is that the legislation that we are bringing forward, combined with the judgment, means that there is no basis for the inter-state case; but it is a matter for the Irish Government to take a decision about what they do about that. The other argument for the legislation that we are putting forward is that it will enable precisely the co-operation that the right hon. Gentleman is seeking and that will be so important to many families in Northern Ireland, including the families of service and police personnel who were killed and injured during the troubles. There may well be information that the Irish Government can now provide, and that is another strong argument for the legislation.

Gavin Robinson: The Secretary of State must know that victims in Northern Ireland would like him to stand up for them, to challenge the excess and the eccentricities of the Republic of Ireland Government, and to ensure, when they promise that they will provide information, that they do, and that their reluctance to do so has now been proven hollow. Gender has already been mentioned and he knows that the Dillon case was silent on some of the other expansionist parts of the quest on article 2. He has indicated his support for the Supreme Court's view, but will he ensure that he defends that view in court?

Hilary Benn: I reject the suggestion that in some way I am not standing up for victims, because the legislation that we have brought forward is about trying to give confidence to all victims in Northern Ireland. The right hon. Gentleman was one of many critics the immunity provisions in the legacy Act, which had no support in Northern Ireland, did not command support from any of the political parties, was wrong in principle and was never even commenced by the last Government. In relation to the Irish Government, we should judge each other by the steps that we take. Since we last had an exchange on this matter, the Irish Government have now legislated—it is just awaiting the Irish President's signature—to enable witness evidence to be given to the Omagh bombing inquiry. That is a sign of the Irish Government's good faith.

Defence Growth Deal: Economic Impact

3. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential economic impact of the defence growth deal on Northern Ireland. [900189]

4. **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential economic impact of the defence growth deal on Northern Ireland. [900190]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): There is rightly huge pride in the defence sector in Northern Ireland, where aerospace and defence are worth more than £2 billion a year. The defence growth deal will unlock even more opportunities for businesses, workers and apprentices.

Darren Paffey: One of the many things I have learned on the excellent armed forces parliamentary scheme with the Navy this year is the importance of UK defence manufacturing for our economy and our national security. In Southampton we have Tekever and Leonardo, and of course in Northern Ireland there is Navy shipbuilding at Harland & Wolff. Does the Minister agree that the Northern Ireland defence sector plays a vital role in defending the UK and protecting our allies?

Matthew Patrick: My hon. Friend is right. Not only are businesses thriving and creating good jobs, but they are protecting us and our allies, including protecting Ukraine from Russian aggression. I am proud of Northern Ireland's critical role in defending our country and protecting our allies.

Sojan Joseph: The Northern Ireland defence sector already makes a substantial contribution to the local economy, supporting well-paid, highly skilled jobs right across the region, with at least 900 jobs directly supported. Does the Minister agree that, as well as benefiting national security, this new investment will benefit the wider economy, including in my Ashford constituency?

Matthew Patrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This investment is a win-win-win—we protect ourselves, our allies and our economy, and with that we boost opportunities for people to get good, long-lasting and rewarding jobs.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Has the Minister seen the report published this week by techUK, which has members across Northern Ireland in the defence sector, focusing particularly on tech? The report expressed concern that the absence of the defence industrial strategy has been the single biggest cause of retardation of its members' business, and is particularly affecting employment. What does that say for growth in Northern Ireland?

Matthew Patrick: I have not read the report from techUK, but I look forward to reading it. I think the right hon. Member might mean the defence investment plan, which we are hoping will be published next month before the NATO summit.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Northern Ireland has skills, technology and infrastructure to contribute to the defence industry across the United Kingdom, but the Sinn Féin Economy Minister does not want defence jobs. Will the Minister assure us that the attitude of Sinn Féin will not be a deterrent to those vital jobs coming to Northern Ireland?

Matthew Patrick: We are very proud of the investment we are making in the Northern Ireland economy and in an already booming defence sector. I think people from right across Northern Ireland welcome that investment in good jobs.

Defence Industrial Strategy

5. David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the defence industrial strategy 2025 on Northern Ireland. [900191]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): The first duty of any Government is to protect their people, and this Government are ensuring that we all feel the benefit of the investment in defence. Take, for example, the £1.6 billion deal to supply missiles to Ukraine—manufactured in Belfast and built by Thales—which is supporting hundreds of jobs and tripling production capacity. This is important work that I am sure the whole House welcomes.

David Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I also welcome the good news that this week alone, Thales in Belfast has been given a £36 million contract to provide those multi-role missiles, which will support 700 highly skilled jobs in Belfast. Does the Minister agree that the defence industrial strategy represents a huge opportunity for job creation and economic growth in regions such as Northern Ireland and constituencies such as mine in North Northumberland?

Matthew Patrick: Of course. The dedication and professionalism of our armed forces is respected across this House, the country and the world, and we must have a strong defence industry standing behind them. Through the defence industrial strategy, businesses right across the United Kingdom can play their part in taking our defence industry to the next level.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Taking into account the world-class engineering capabilities already proven by industrial icons such as Shorts, Harland & Wolff and Thales in Northern Ireland, will the Minister ensure that the defence growth deal specifically leverages the existing high-tech supply chains and advanced manufacturing skills base across areas such as Strangford, to supercharge our regional private sector growth and ensure that this rising tide lifts all the manufacturing ships in Northern Ireland, which have the capacity to do so much more?

Matthew Patrick: I will do all that I can to ensure that. I have met many of those businesses and many small businesses from across Northern Ireland to discuss the defence growth deal. The hon. Member will be pleased to see there is a focus on skills and supply chains to support more of those businesses.

Replacing the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023

6. Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): What steps he is taking to replace the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. [900192]

10. David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): What steps he is taking to replace the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. [900196]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The Northern Ireland Troubles Bill will return to the House early this Session. In the meantime, I have

been consulting widely on the legislation. I will bring forward amendments designed to improve the process for victims, to further safeguard veterans, and to differentiate between the roles played by security forces and paramilitary terrorists.

Lincoln Jopp: In the Secretary of State's wide consultation, did he consult General Sir Nick Parker, who suggested that there should be no further criminal investigations, inquests, inquiries or prosecutions unless there is new and compelling evidence that was not available at the time of the event?

Hilary Benn: I have consulted and met a wide range of people. I have seen the amendment that has been tabled, which we will come to when the Bill is in Committee, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is already provision in the Bill for protection from repeated investigations unless the commission regards them as essential. I recognise, however, the need to build upon what we have already in the Bill, and that will be visible when the amendments are published.

David Reed: In the previous Session, the troubles Bill drew criticism from nine former four-star generals, regimental associations and veterans across the country. The Defence Secretary told this House earlier this week that he had "dealt with their concerns" and would make "significant amendments", but every time we ask for detail, we are stonewalled. Will the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland lay out today exactly what protections he is proposing and guarantee that no veteran will be hounded through the courts?

Hilary Benn: We are looking at amendments to improve the process for families, to further safeguard our Operation Banner veterans and to ensure oversight of how the protections work. We will make it clear that there is no equivalence, and never was, between the actions of terrorists and the conduct of our armed forces and the police in trying to protect life. We will ensure that coroners and the commission take proper account of the circumstances in which our armed forces were operating. All those things will be consistent with the joint framework and with the Government's human rights obligations, and I would hope that the Opposition would welcome them all.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): During our Committee's inquiry on legacy, we heard serious concerns from victims and survivors about the Government's approach to information disclosure. In the Dillon case, the Supreme Court showed a significant degree of deference to Government on national security grounds. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give to families and survivors that national security will not be invoked to withhold information simply because it is uncomfortable for the state, rather than because its disclosure would present a genuine risk to the public?

Hilary Benn: As my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee knows only too well, responsibility for national security ultimately rests with Ministers, and the Dillon and the Thompson judgments confirmed

that. As I have already indicated, I have proposed changes to the disclosure provisions in the Bill, including requiring the Secretary of State to conduct a balancing exercise when considering each case and also to give reasons. The Supreme Court made it clear that the Secretary of State does not have a veto, because any decision can be subject to judicial review.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Secretary of State will have seen reports in the *Belfast Telegraph* that prior to 1985, a large part of the gelignite used in IRA bombs was routinely stolen from a single factory in County Meath in the Republic. The supply amounted to many tonnes of explosives, and it took the lives of many hundreds of people. At the time, British intelligence repeatedly raised concerns with Dublin. Nothing was done, despite the factory's allegedly being in receipt of Irish state subsidy. Following those revelations, will the Secretary of State commit to writing to the Taoiseach to ask him to hold an urgent public inquiry into the Enfield explosives factory?

Hilary Benn: I have indeed seen the reports to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. As I have explained, one purpose of the troubles Bill is to facilitate co-operation with the Irish authorities in relation to all these matters. We cannot undo the past, but what we can do is provide information for those whose lives were lost as a result of the use of those explosives, through full co-operation between the Irish authorities and the legacy commission. We require the Bill to make that happen.

Alex Burghart: With all due respect, the Secretary of State did not answer my question. This is an extraordinary missing piece of the puzzle in the story of the troubles—in the story of how the IRA obtained weapons that killed people in our country. The Secretary of State is perfectly within his rights to raise this with his opposite numbers, and to ask them to conduct a full public inquiry on behalf of the victims. Will he do so?

Hilary Benn: Since the hon. Gentleman has raised the matter directly with me, I undertake to him—and to the House—to raise it with the Irish authorities, because they will have seen the exchange that he and I have just had.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The May review of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery describes a "toxic", "divided" and "disrespectful" senior culture, along with structural weaknesses in the governing legislation. It also raises concerns that the Government's forthcoming troubles Bill will make matters worse. However, in his response to the review, the Secretary of State appeared to suggest that it was simply up to the ICRIR to sort this out, although the ICRIR is sponsored by his Department, the review was commissioned by his Department, and his Department is now legislating to rebadge this failing body as the legacy commission.

Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether he accepts that he is ultimately responsible for Peter May's 19 recommendations being followed? Will he also give

us an update on whether the Northern Ireland Office plan is still on schedule, and explain how the troubles Bill is to be amended to remedy the structural shortcomings exposed in the review?

Hilary Benn: The responsibility is held jointly with the independent commission established under the legislation put in place by the last Government. Some of the things that have been uncovered are evidence of why we need to reform the way in which the commission works, which is what the troubles Bill will seek to do. We have a joint plan on which we are working together. I have made my displeasure very clear to every single one of those who sit on the legacy commission board, because what was found is not acceptable. However, we must acknowledge that the report also said the commission had a great many committed staff, and nothing must get in the way of their carrying on with their work to find answers for families.

Public Service Reform

8. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support public service reform in Northern Ireland. [900194]

9. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support public service reform in Northern Ireland. [900195]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): Public service reform is needed, and that is exactly what we are doing. Just last week we announced a £42 million package to be invested in the digitising of prescriptions. With 45 million prescriptions issued every year, the service is inefficient and expensive, and we are changing that.

Kevin Bonavia: Thanks to this Government's investment in public services, Northern Ireland received a record funding settlement in the spending review. Given that settlement and the extra transformation funding, does my hon. Friend agree that it is now up to the Executive in Northern Ireland to deliver the changes in public services that are so clearly needed?

Matthew Patrick: Yes, but, as I have always said, it is not just a question of cutting a cheque and walking away. Of course we have given more money to the Executive than has ever been received before in the history of devolution—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I am glad that that is welcomed on our Benches, but we also bring partnership working to ensure that public services can turn the corner.

Rachel Hopkins: Many of my constituents have close family ties to Northern Ireland, and understandably take an interest in health outcomes in Northern Ireland and in the United Kingdom as a whole. Does the Minister agree that when it comes to public health all parts of the UK can learn something from each other, and can he update the House on conversations between the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive on their respective successes in improving patient outcomes?

Matthew Patrick: My hon. Friend is right: no person has a monopoly on good ideas, and no Government do either. I want the best for the whole United Kingdom.

Where Northern Ireland leads the way, we can try to roll that out across the rest of the UK, but where it needs support—for instance on the digitising of prescriptions—we will provide that too. This is about working with the Executive to improve patient outcomes.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will not thank me for saying this, but whenever we have these discussions about the transformation of public services in Northern Ireland, it seems like we can have either good public finances or an unreformed Stormont, but we cannot have both. With three parties in Northern Ireland supporting reform proposals in the last number of weeks, when will the Government get serious about giving Northern Ireland the means to govern itself, and when will they get round the table to start discussions about the reform of Stormont?

Matthew Patrick: Those conversations are ongoing. We had a recent Westminster Hall debate about those issues, and we will have further conversations with party leaders. I will gently say, however, that those conversations cannot be a substitute for improving services now. Improvements can be made. The hon. Member and I have talked about cancer waiting times; we can do those things now, and they do not have to wait for conversations about reform.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Transformation needs to be embedded through a recurrent budget. We are three months into this financial year, at Northern Ireland political speed, and we still do not have a recurrent budget. What steps is the Northern Ireland Office taking to bring about such a financial budget in Northern Ireland?

Matthew Patrick: Not only have we given a record settlement—more than ever before in the Executive's history since devolution—but we are supporting the Executive, having discussions with them and encouraging them to set a budget, so that the people of Northern Ireland can see the improvement in public services that they really need.

Speaker's Statement

12 noon

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to pay tribute to former colleague Lord Alan Haselhurst, who died this week. Although we come from opposite sides of the Pennines, and the aisle, Alan served this House initially as the MP for the old Lancashire seat of Middleton and Prestwich from 1970 to 1974, before he represented Saffron Walden from 1977 to 2017. He was also my immediate predecessor as Deputy Speaker and Chairman of Ways and Means from 1997 to 2010. He was a distinguished and respected parliamentarian, serving on numerous Committees during his time in the House, as well as playing a leading role with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Friends will know that Alan was mad about cricket. Along with my father Doug, he was a prominent and long-serving officer of the all-party parliamentary group on cricket, and I know Alan took his passion to the next

level with his many novels about the sport. In 2018, he was appointed as a life peer, serving in the House of Lords until he retired at the end of 2024. I am sure that Members across the House would like to join me in sending our condolences to Lord Haselhurst's wife, Lady Angela, as well as his children, grandchildren, family and friends, who are very much in our thoughts today.

Oral Answers to Questions

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900151] **Dr Roz Savage** (South Cotswolds) (LD): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 3 June.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): May I also pay tribute to Lord Haselhurst? I know he will be deeply missed, particularly on the Benches opposite.

The findings of the recent Springhill inquest into the tragic deaths, in July 1972, of Father Noel Fitzpatrick, Patrick Butler, Margaret Gargan, David McCafferty and John Dougal are sobering. While the circumstances in which the events occurred were undoubtedly challenging, it is the duty of the state to hold itself to the highest standard. The Government accept and deeply regret these findings, and recognise their gravity. On behalf of the Government, I apologise unreservedly to the families for what happened and for the grief and trauma they have endured since the tragic deaths of their loved ones.

I also place on record our deepest condolences to the family of Lance Corporal James Freeman, who died in a tragic accident on Sunday. I am also aware of a Royal Navy helicopter crash this morning in Devon. This will be a deeply worrying time for the families, and more information will be set out as soon as possible.

Henry Nowak's family have shown extraordinary dignity after their son's life was stolen in appalling circumstances. He was clearly a kind, thoughtful and much-loved young man. There are serious questions to answer, including how accusations of racism informed police thinking, and we are supporting the Independent Office for Police Conduct to get to the bottom of what happened. But no matter the pain we feel, there is no justification for more violence and disorder. The attacks directed towards police officers in Southampton last night were disgraceful and completely unacceptable. This is a time for serious work, not rage. Let me be clear: we will ensure that anyone found engaging in disorder meets the full force of the law, as we have done before.

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.

Dr Savage: I echo the sympathies expressed by the Prime Minister for the families recently bereaved, particularly the family of Henry Nowak.

Corruption appears to be endemic in donations to British political parties. We have had years of Conservative cronyism. We have had allegations of embezzlement in

Scotland. We have had undisclosed donations from crypto billionaires and foreign oligarchs. We have even had freebies dished out to some of the hon. Members sitting on the Labour Benches. The Government have already cracked down on some specific sources of donations that favour their political opponents, such as crypto and foreign money. Will the Prime Minister now commit to restoring the faith of the British public in the integrity of our British democracy by putting a cap on all political donations?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for her question. We will do whatever is necessary to protect our democracy from foreign influence and from dirty money. That is why we commissioned the Rycroft review, capped overseas donations and introduced a moratorium on crypto donations, and we are taking further action, as set out in the King's Speech. But the £5 million question still remains: why is the leader of Reform dodging questions about his donations, and why did he keep it secret in the first place?

Q3. [900153] **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): I am proud that, after decades, this Labour Government are putting passengers before profit by bringing Greater Thameslink Railway, Southern and Gatwick Express into public ownership. The previous Government shelved plans to unblock the bottleneck at East Croydon station, which not only causes delays from Bedford to Brighton, but leaves constituents at Norwood Junction station in limbo. Will the Prime Minister look again at the Croydon area remodelling scheme and back my campaign to unblock the Croydon bottleneck? Does he agree that, by bringing our railways back into public hands, this Government are getting us back on track?

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend's campaign to address the Croydon bottleneck. The last Government cancelled work to address this; we will carefully consider the case for upgrades, including step-free access at Norwood. I am proud that her constituents are travelling on rail services that are now back in public ownership, and benefiting from the first freeze in rail fares for 30 years—a Labour Government transforming our railways and building a fairer Britain.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I echo the Prime Minister's words on Lance Corporal James Freeman and about the Royal Navy helicopter crash in Devon. I also send my deepest condolences to the family and friends of Henry Nowak. The circumstances around Henry's wrongful arrest and tragic murder must be a wake-up call to the entire country and our institutions that every life matters, and it is the responsibility of everyone in this House to bring people together, not divide them.

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Sir Alan Haselhurst—Lord Haselhurst—who died on Monday. Sir Alan served Parliament for over 50 years, eight of them in the Lords and 40 years as my predecessor as MP for Saffron Walden, while from 1970 to 1974 he was the Member of Parliament for Middleton and Prestwich. He was respected on all sides of this House, and was elected multiple times as your predecessor as Deputy Speaker, before he concluded in the other place.

Apart from serving his constituents, Sir Alan's greatest passion in Parliament and perhaps in life was cricket, as you said, Mr Speaker. He was chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on cricket, a role which he encouraged me to take up and which I graciously declined, telling him I knew absolutely nothing about cricket. However, I think colleagues should know that Sir Alan's intense lobbying is the reason that Sky Sports can be found on the parliamentary TV network. There is so much to say, but just to let everyone know, he was a good and kind man and he will be very much missed. My thoughts are with his wife Angela, his children Mark, David and Emma, and his grandchildren.

May I ask the Prime Minister by how much the welfare bill has risen since he came to office?

The Prime Minister: May I first thank the Leader of the Opposition for her approach and tone in relation to the tragic Henry Nowak case?

On welfare, as she knows, we inherited from the Conservative party a broken system, which we are now improving: delivering a youth guarantee; rolling out 300,000 work experience placements; and commissioning Alan Milburn's review into youth unemployment. They are the steps we are taking. As she will know, the number on welfare went up hugely on the Conservatives' watch, as did the cost under the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride).

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister does not seem to know the answer, so let me tell him: benefits alone have risen by £20 billion since he came to office. The Prime Minister has promised welfare reforms—we heard him say it just now—so why was there no welfare reform Bill in the King's Speech?

The Prime Minister: Welfare reform is balancing universal credit so that it no longer pushes people away from work. That is what we are doing; the Opposition voted against it. Welfare reform is introducing a right to try, to incentivise people to take up opportunities. That is what we are doing; they voted against it. Welfare reform is providing record funding on apprenticeships. That is what we are doing; apprenticeship starts fell by 40% on their watch. The right hon. Lady talks about the welfare bill. It soared by £88 billion on their watch. Nearly 3 million people were written off. Face-to-face assessments collapsed because of the contracts they agreed. And who signed off those contracts? The shadow Chancellor.

Mrs Badenoch: We need to bring down the benefits bill. The Prime Minister complains about the shadow Chancellor. The bill went up because of the pandemic and even then Labour Members were asking us to spend more. It is not the shadow Chancellor who is the problem; it is the actual Chancellor. She is not even in her place. The reason there is no welfare Bill is the Prime Minister has given up, and he has given up because Labour Members have given up on him. On Sunday, the Welfare Secretary was asked 12 times on national radio if he would make cuts to the benefits bill and 12 times he could not answer. So I will ask the Prime Minister: is he going to cut the benefits bill?

The Prime Minister: All our welfare reform measures, and all our measures to get young people into work, are to reduce the cost and numbers of people who are unemployed. That is why we have introduced the youth

guarantee so that young people can have help into work. If, after 18 months, they have not got a job, they can then be given a job for six months supported, which we know is the best way to ensure they succeed. That is the change we are making, but the Conservatives introduced the system that is broken. We are reforming it. Did they vote to reform it with us? No, they voted to keep the broken system.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister keeps saying he is bringing in welfare reforms. None of those things is going to cut the bill. Even his own Timms review explicitly says—this is their review; this is in the terms of reference—that this is not about generating proposals for further savings. The Prime Minister had a chance to cut benefits. Last year, I remember the Government were planning to cut benefits and on the Floor of the House they U-turned. What did he do when he had a chance? He caved. He caved to all the MPs behind him who do not want benefits brought down. That is why they are sitting silently behind him. Does the Prime Minister agree with his Welfare Secretary that that was the moment he lost his authority?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of what we are delivering on this side of the House. The fastest growing economy in the G7—they said it could not be done. Despite the war in the middle east, the OECD forecasts that UK growth is up and inflation is down. Net migration, which reached nearly a million under the Conservatives—the Leader of the Opposition was the cheerleader—is down by a staggering 82%. The asylum backlog is down by 46%. We are delivering the fastest reduction in waiting times in the history of the NHS. That is on top of free school meals, free breakfast clubs and free childcare—and, of course, we are lifting half a million children out of poverty. I am very proud of the work of this Labour Government.

Mrs Badenoch: He says he is proud of what they are delivering—I am glad to see that the Prime Minister still has his sense of humour, given we all know that he is losing his job soon. He has no authority, and we know why: his MPs will not let him do anything. The Welfare Secretary said in private what the Government will not dare say in public. He said:

“Every meeting I have is: ‘Who can we tax in order to pay benefits to others?’”

Last week, Tony Blair said:

“If the Conservative Party repeats its offer of working together on welfare, Labour should accept”.

Today I am repeating that offer to the Prime Minister. Is he ready yet?

The Prime Minister: They introduced a system that is broken, they put the bill through the roof, and now they want to give us advice on welfare—no thanks! The question should always be not what benefits people are entitled to, but what help we can give people to change their lives. That is what the Work and Pensions Secretary was arguing, and he is right about that. It is a Labour Government that are helping people into work. Leader of the Opposition asks what we have done: more rights for renters, stopping unfair rent hikes, and giving 11 million people greater security and a place to call home; and more rights for workers, including bereavement leave on day one—ask anyone who has lost someone, and they will say just how important it is to have bereavement

leave. We have lifted half a million children out of poverty. We often say in this House that every child should go as far as their talent or ability will take them. That does not happen if they are growing up in poverty. The Conservatives have fought us at every turn. I am proud of what we are delivering. There is much more to do.

Mrs Badenoch: The truth is that unemployment has risen every single month since they came into office. Mr Speaker, you can listen to their cheers get weaker and thinner with every passing moment. The fact is, despite his huge majority, the Prime Minister does not have the votes to reform welfare. There is a solution—a Conservative solution—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members are all jeering now, but I do not know why they are supporting the Prime Minister; he is more than happy to release their text messages while all of his have disappeared. Disappearing messages from a disappearing PM. There is a Conservative solution: benefits bill down, taxes down, growth up. Everyone in this House knows that the Prime Minister is just a caretaker keeping the seat warm for the Mayor of Manchester. But it does not matter who is in charge; Labour MPs will keep asking who they can tax to pay more benefits—it is in their DNA. The truth is that the problem is not this passive Prime Minister; the problem is the Labour party.

The Prime Minister: Forgive me if I do not take too much notice of the Leader of the Opposition. For 14 years they broke our welfare system, lost control of our borders, presided over the biggest fall in living standards on record, and broke the economy, prisons and the NHS—I could go on and on. No wonder she and the Conservatives are totally irrelevant. This Labour Government are delivering change. The biggest upgrade in workers' rights in a generation—delivered. The Renters' Rights Act 2026—delivered. Record funding for our NHS—delivered. The fastest growing economy in the G7—delivered. Lifting half a million children out of poverty—delivered. We are going to fight even harder for working people and a stronger and fairer Britain.

Q4. [900154] Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Ninety-seven homes in Coalsnaughton have been evacuated due to ground movement—that is hundreds of people enduring severe emotional and financial distress. This is absolutely life-changing. The Mining Remediation Authority is now conducting an eight-week investigation into who will ultimately be held responsible. In the meantime, my constituents are looking to the UK Government for help. Will the Prime Minister commit to working with the Scottish Government and Clackmannanshire council to ensure that affected residents receive whatever support they need for a speedy and fair resolution?

The Prime Minister: I know how difficult it is for residents who are not in their homes. I can reassure my hon. Friend and his constituents that the MRA is carrying out daily investigations to get answers as swiftly as possible, and we are working with the council to provide support for residents. I can confirm that the Energy Minister is in touch with MSPs and will ensure that both my hon. Friend and his constituents are kept updated on the next steps.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself with your remarks about Lord Alan Haselhurst, Mr Speaker, and can confirm to the Leader of the Opposition that he will be missed across the House. I also associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about Lance Corporal James Freeman, who was killed in Iraq. Our thoughts are with his family and unit. I also offer our thoughts and prayers to the family and friends of the 17 people who tragically drowned during the recent heatwave, many of whom were children.

The murder of Henry Nowak was an evil crime made much worse by the lies of the killer and the police response. The investigation must uncover everything that went wrong, and all police forces must act on its conclusions. Outside court, Henry's father made a powerful plea that his son's murder should not be used to create further division, but should instead be used to treat knife crime as a national emergency. Does the Prime Minister agree that the victims of knife crime and their families deserve a politics where we come together to solve these problems, instead of using them as a political football?

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the 17 people who lost their lives in the heatwave, many of whom, as he said, were young—each of them tragic. We send our condolences to their families.

On the case of Henry Nowak, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the approach he has taken. It is important in a case like this, which is so tragic—anybody who has seen the footage will have been deeply moved by it—that we reflect on our leadership roles here as political leaders. It is our duty to bring people together at a time like this, not to seek to divide them. It is particularly our duty to listen to what the devastated family are asking of us as political leaders. I thank all those who have acted in that way, because I think that is the right way to respond.

Ed Davey: I thank the Prime Minister for his reply and completely agree with him. We stand ready to work with the Government on serious policies to tackle knife crime.

With our armed forces overstretched, Labour now seems to be investing in a new weapon of war: the long-form essay. It gives another meaning to the phrase “drone warfare”—[*Laughter.*] Tony Blair says that the UK should suck up to Donald Trump, kowtow to US tech barons and go slow on Europe—the Prime Minister must be grateful for this rare endorsement of his agenda. Blair also claims that the sensible people are not radical and the radical people are not sensible. Is the Prime Minister concerned that unless he changes course, he will be remembered for being neither radical nor sensible?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman rather spoiled what was quite a good gag. I am surprised he has not done more to welcome the savings we are delivering for family fun days out this summer; I really thought he would have been delighted at the cheaper tickets for soft play.

Q6. [900156] Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): The whole country is united in its horror at the tragic death of Henry Nowak. Will the Prime Minister join me once again in paying tribute to Henry's family for

their courage in the face of this tragedy? Will he also join me in calling for recognition of the serious mistakes made by the police, which we must learn from so that no family faces this tragedy again?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this really important case. My thoughts are with Henry's family, as are the thoughts of the whole House and the whole country, I am sure. I have watched the bodycam footage, as others will have done, and I found it really hard. It was harrowing. As a dad of a 17-year-old boy, I felt sick. I can only imagine how devastated his family are. It is extremely moving.

Henry's life has been stolen. His family have responded with incredible and immense dignity and bravery. There clearly are lessons that need to be learned and serious questions that need to be addressed, not least the question of how accusations of racism informed decision making in such cases.

Henry's father said this:

"We do not want his death to be used to create further division, hatred or tension."

They are the words of a grieving father who has lost his son. I think those words have resonated with people across the country. We must not allow this tragedy to be hijacked by anyone who seeks to divide us.

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): Following the horrendous circumstances of Henry Nowak's death, I urge the Prime Minister to consider this: it is now clear to growing millions in this country that we are living under two-tier policing. The instructions that are given to police officers from police bosses are clear and written down in ink: "You must treat different ethnic groups in different ways."

Apart from the upset and the anger at the circumstances of Henry's death, the anger that was seen spilling out in Southampton last night is in danger of getting considerably worse if the public lose trust that they will be treated fairly by the police. Will the Prime Minister take some action, end this divisive practice of two-tier policing, and make sure that all British citizens are treated the same?

The Prime Minister: I do not believe that there is two-tier policing in this country. I am really shocked that the hon. Gentleman pretends to have respect for Henry's family and then acts in this way. *[Interruption.]* They are a grieving family—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Brash, this is a very important question, and I want to hear the Prime Minister's answer. If you want to carry on, go outside please.

The Prime Minister: The grieving family have asked us not to respond in the way that the leader of Reform has responded. They have lost their son in the most appalling circumstances, and they make a simple plea of us as human beings to please not exploit that. We all need to reflect on the words of Henry's father.

My response—and the response of others, to be fair—has been focused on the lessons to be learned so that we can deliver justice. The hon. Gentleman's response has been to appeal for rage. That is his response to a father who has lost his son and asked for that not to happen. Exploiting this tragedy to create grievance and

division would be wrong in any circumstances, but to do it when the family are expressly saying, "Please don't," is unforgivable. It shows exactly who he is.

Q11. [900162] **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I echo the comments the Prime Minister just made.

In August 2024, my constituent Holly Woodcock was found deceased in France aged 20 years old. Her parents Lee and Joanna, who are in the Gallery, still have no idea what happened at Holly's friend's holiday villa. They have raised significant concerns with the Foreign Office regarding the investigation, including the inconsistencies in witness statements and timelines, how samples were prematurely destroyed and how matters raised by French lawyers were dismissed by the investigating French police officers and officials.

I am grateful that a Foreign Office Minister met me and Mr Woodcock, but I share the family's concerns that our Government should do more to press the French authorities to reopen the investigation. Will the Prime Minister commit to look at what can be done to raise the matter with his French counterparts at the highest level to help Mr and Mrs Woodcock get the answers that their daughter Holly deserves?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this case and express my sincere condolences to Holly's family. I cannot begin to imagine the intense distress that they have experienced. My hon. Friend will know that the ambassador to France has raised Holly's case with the French prosecutor general, and I know that the Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), has set out further steps that can be taken and is ready to support the family. In the light of his question, I will reflect on whether anything more can be done.

Q2. [900152] **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Last month, Welsh voters elected a Plaid Cymru Government with a clear message: fairness and hope. That means tackling years of neglect by securing funding owed from High Speed 2, a new financial settlement that reflects our nation's needs and more powers for Wales—especially over our natural resources. Would the Prime Minister be open to turning a conversation into real action to fulfil the democratic wishes of the people of Wales? Now, surely, is a time for us to work together rather than facing the chaos that threatens us from every corner.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for her question. As I hope she knows, I did have a call with the First Minister of Wales just two weeks ago, and made it clear that I and this Government will work constructively with the First Minister and the Government in Wales, because that is the right thing to do to deliver for Wales.

Q12. [900163] **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): May I ask the Prime Minister about our national health service and what better treatments we can offer people suffering from memory loss? A very distressing case was recently brought to my attention by a constituent in Wouldham, a village in my constituency, of a man who could not remember his own words—

even though he said them on television—that the NHS should not be funded through general taxation. What can we do to ensure that my constituents in Chatham and Aylesford secure clarity on future Kent and Medway NHS funding, and what can we do to help the leader of Reform UK?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The Reform leader wants everyone to forget that he called for our NHS to be replaced with an insurance-based system—he might want to jot it down to jog his memory. Then he said that if people can pay, they should pay for NHS treatment. We can help him by jolting his memory here. You cannot trust Reform with our NHS—the only way to protect it is to vote Labour.

Q5. [900155] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): This week, Tom Kerridge and UKHospitality launched their “VAT’s the Problem” campaign, and yesterday my neighbour the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) and I hosted industry bodies, chefs Matt Tebbutt and Thomasina Myers and hospitality leaders from Manchester, Liverpool, London and Kent, including Andy Burnham’s night-time economy adviser Sacha Lord. They all agree with campaigners such as Andy Lennox that the UK’s rate of 20% VAT on hospitality is killing businesses daily. Does the Prime Minister agree that VAT’s the problem? Will he match the pledge of his candidate in Makerfield to slash VAT in line with the rest of Europe?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for the question. I recognise the challenges that she identifies. That is why we are permanently lowering business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. Every pub will get 15% off its new business rates bill, and bills will be frozen in real terms for a further two years. In relation to VAT, she will see that we are offering support by cutting VAT on children’s meals in restaurants—particularly over the summer period—with those savings set out two weeks ago by the Chancellor.

Q14. [900165] **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Every year, about 160 university students commit suicide. That is more than three every week, yet there is no established duty of care on universities to protect the health, safety and welfare of their students. It is not about creating excessive burdens on universities, but about requiring them to take reasonable steps to prevent injury or harm to their students when the risk is reasonably foreseeable. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss the issue so we can do all we can to prevent our young people from dying at university through suicide?

The Prime Minister: Any death from suicide is a tragedy, as everybody across this House will know. We are bringing together students, bereaved families, universities and the NHS to strengthen the mental health support provided to students. We have also appointed a student support champion to drive improvement across our universities. The relevant Minister will be happy to discuss that and other matters with my hon. Friend.

Q7. [900157] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Reform): I wonder if the Prime Minister has had the chance to study the election results in Havering: zero Labour councillors were elected in Romford, zero Conservative

councillors were elected across Havering for the first time since 1964 and it is the first Reform UK London borough. That shows people’s disillusionment with the political establishment. In his final days as Prime Minister, can he do something for the people of Romford and give us the accident and emergency unit at Queen’s hospital that the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said he would deliver, but failed to do?

The Prime Minister: We put record investment into the NHS to clear up the mess that the hon. Gentleman and others left behind. Since he brings up elections, I have studied the Reform candidate for Makerfield: a self-professed sexist who said women who get an abortion do it for “vanity purposes”, who encouraged people not to get the covid vaccine and who said Russia was “within its rights” to invade Crimea. Reform has nothing to offer but grievance and division yet again.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s comments on Henry Nowak and the calls for calm over division.

The rugby league family lost a giant last week. John Kear, the former England, Wales and challenge cup-winning coach died suddenly on Sunday afternoon on his journey north after commentating on the challenge cup final at Wembley the previous day. After playing for Castleford, his local team, he moved to teaching and coaching for a total of 700 matches with nine clubs, and his career included famous underdog challenge cup wins with Sheffield Eagles in 1998 and Hull FC in 2005. John loved, and in turn was loved by, his sport. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to John and sending condolences to his wife Dawn and his family and friends?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to John. We were all deeply sad to hear of his passing. He was a remarkable athlete and coach, and an energetic and enthusiastic champion of his sport. He will be missed by supporters across the country and my thoughts—all our thoughts—are with his wife Dawn, his family and his friends at this sad time.

Q8. [900159] **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Yesterday, at an event here in Parliament, I spoke to women whose children suffered avoidable harm after they continued taking the epilepsy drug sodium valproate during pregnancy. Doctors knew the risks and patients were not informed, and that has had devastating consequences. I am sure that the Prime Minister would agree that the fact that a Government Department commissioned a report looking at how to provide a redress scheme raised an expectation that one was on the horizon. To then not introduce such a scheme would be unbelievably cruel. When will this Government respond to the Hughes report and finally establish a redress scheme for the families?

The Prime Minister: We absolutely recognise the harm and huge impact that pelvic mesh has had on so many lives. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Minister for Public Health has been a dedicated campaigner on this very issue. I want to see a full response to the recommendations published as quickly as possible, and I will make sure that the Minister keeps her updated on its progress.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): The 10-year bus pipeline published by the Department for Transport shows that demand for zero emission buses will double by the end of the decade. In Scotland, however, jobs are being lost in our bus manufacturing sector because overseas manufacturers are winning a greater number of orders and now constitute the majority of new registration buses on our roads, despite an investigation into the cyber-security of Chinese buses. Will the Prime Minister designate bus manufacturing as a sector critical to our national security?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to champion the brilliant, talented workforce building buses in Scotland. Our pipeline will give UK manufacturers the certainty and stability they need to plan ahead and be completely effective, and I can reassure him that we are working closely with the industry to provide the necessary response and support.

Q9. [900160] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to combat antisemitism, but the regular hate marches we have seen on our streets with the chanting of "globalise the intifada" have led directly to attacks on Jewish businesses, synagogues and individuals in the streets, and now to an arson attack on where Jewish people live. The Jewish people of our country now want to see action, not warm words. Will the Prime Minister therefore commit to the type of action that we need to expel students from overseas who commit antisemitic acts? Will he take action to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps? Will he take action to close down the 13 Iran-sponsored charities in this country that spread antisemitism? Will he also take action to ensure that all children are taught the horrors of the Holocaust, the importance of not expressing hatred towards one another, and the true history of the founding of the state of Israel? The Jewish people of this country want to feel safe on our streets, in their homes and in our country, so will the Prime Minister take the appropriate action?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and we are united in our belief that we must fight the poison of antisemitism wherever it is found. We are investing more to keep Jewish communities safe, with more police patrols and greater security at schools and synagogues; investing £7 million to tackle antisemitism within our universities; and bringing in proscription-like powers to clamp down on malign state activity. We will set out further steps in coming days, and I will make sure the hon. Gentleman is fully informed of the steps we are taking.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Less than 48 hours ago the family of Henry Nowak stood on the steps of Southampton Crown court and gave a courageous and dignified statement in which they said:

"We want to use Henry's heartbreaking story to make change for the better. We do not want his death to be used to create further division, hatred or tension. We want his story to make our streets safer for everyone."

Does the Prime Minister agree with me and my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Test (Satvir Kaur), that the violence we saw whipped up on the streets of Southampton last night, the criminal

damage to innocent people's homes, and the injuries to 11 police officers are the total opposite of what Henry's own family clearly and powerfully called for?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the discussion that we had this morning about the impact in Southampton. I also thank him for the work he has done along with his fellow MP, and, if I may say so, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), who has been dealing with Henry's family for some time. The attacks directed towards police officers last night were disgraceful and completely unacceptable. There is no justification for further disorder.

Q10. [900161] **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): The Conservatives repeatedly promised us 40 new hospitals that we knew were never going to happen, but the current Government are now promising us a new hospital in Hampshire in 20 years' time, if it gets built at all. My constituents really rely on our A&E and maternity services, but our current hospital has a huge repair backlog and rainwater leaking into clinical areas. Will the Prime Minister please break this cycle of governing parties promising us hypothetical hospitals and simply commit to fixing our actual hospital in Winchester?

The Prime Minister: I recall that the hon. Gentleman has raised this matter with me previously at Prime Minister's questions. As he knows, the reorganisation of services is a matter for local integrated care boards who take decisions based on the evidence and engagement with patients. Across the country, patients are benefiting from the £450 million investment that we have provided to expand urgent and emergency care capacity. That improvement is because of the investment we have put in, but this is a matter for his local board.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Despite the efforts of dedicated teachers in Scarborough and Whitby, only 36% of pupils achieve grade 5 and above in both English and maths GCSEs. Does the Prime Minister agree that Mission Coastal has the potential to deliver the same transformational impact for young people in deprived coastal communities as the London Challenge achieved, and that it is the kind of bold and targeted intervention that only a Labour Government can deliver?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on championing such an important issue. Mission Coastal will help break the link between background and success, giving the most disadvantaged children mentoring, career support and enrichment opportunities, because we believe that no matter where they grow up, every child deserves the same opportunities to succeed.

Q13. [900164] **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): This Government's top-down housing targets, which are about to almost double in my constituency, mean that communities like Redbourn and Tring are about to see huge-scale development while infrastructure is bursting at the seams and a supposedly affordable new build in my patch costs more than £500,000. It is no wonder that Hannah, one of my sixth-formers, says that she can never dream of buying a new home and will have to

leave the place where she grew up. Will the Prime Minister urgently review these targets, and come and speak to Hannah and other constituents to see how these top-down targets are not delivering the affordable homes and services we need, nor protecting our precious landscapes?

The Prime Minister: We inherited a housing crisis, with people unable to have the security of their own home or even get on to the housing ladder. We are determined to change that. We have invested £39 billion to deliver more social and affordable homes, prioritising brownfield land. We must build more communities with strong infrastructure, but the hon. Lady's party consistently votes against the planning reforms that will allow those homes to be built.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Yesterday, the Health Secretary confirmed that all eligible black men would be invited to the Transform trial. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prostate cancer, I welcome this vital step towards screening for this terrible disease, for which black men have a doubled risk for both diagnosis and death. This is something

that Reform has responded to with nothing but divisive weasel words and rage-baiting. Does the Prime Minister agree that our NHS was founded by Labour to be there for everyone equally, and that when there is a proven higher risk, targeting support is equality?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his work as chair of the prostate cancer APPG. This programme is England's first targeted cancer screening programme. We are also funding a major expansion of research and treatment, backed by £20 million, to help men at the highest risk. We are determined to improve cancer care, and more cancer patients are now being diagnosed on time, thanks to Labour's decisions, but of course there is more to do.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order come after statements and urgent questions—*[Interruption.]* You did not ask a question, though—so the point of order can come after the urgent questions.

South East Water: Disruption of Supply

12.47 pm

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): Will the Secretary of State for the Environment make a statement following the disruption of water supplies throughout the area served by South East Water during the spring recess?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for asking this question. I will update the House on the water supply disruption in Kent, and I want to begin by expressing my sympathy for those affected by the disruption. Being without water is distressing at any time, but particularly during a period of hot weather, alongside school revision and examinations. This is now the third major outage affecting South East Water customers in recent months, and it is simply not acceptable.

South East Water reported that thousands of customers were impacted by supply disruptions over the course of the incident, and I am pleased that normal water supply has now been restored. I met the interim chair and senior operational staff twice during the course of the incident, including on Sunday, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team met them daily to hold them to account for the incident and to request that they set out by the end of this week how they will compensate customers.

Water supply disruption causes significant cost to businesses and impacts the most vulnerable in society. I have heard of a 100-year-old lady without water, and a care home in Cranbrook using wet wipes to keep their residents clean. This is simply unacceptable, and the company must take urgent action.

I thank all those working in the Kent local resilience forum, the local authorities, the health and social care partners, and civil servants in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and DEFRA for their hard work to support those affected. I am also grateful to operational staff and volunteers who worked on the ground to restore supplies and provide alternative water.

A reliable supply of clean water is one of the foundations of a healthy, functioning society. The situation demands further bold action to deliver fundamental long-term reform, and that is why we are delivering whole-scale reform to the water sector. Through our clean water Bill, we will create a new single, powerful regulator, giving us for the first time a clear system-wide view of company performance and the tools to intervene more quickly when companies fall short. We will put consumers first by introducing a water ombudsman, ensuring that customers have a stronger voice and clearer routes to redress. We have already passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which introduced the toughest sentencing powers ever applied to lawbreaking water company executives, and introduced powers to ban unjustified bonuses.

It is vital that South East Water and all water companies deliver on improvements to their infrastructure, but most of all, they must continue to improve their ability to maintain water supplies to their customers, whatever the weather.

Sir Roger Gale: I thank the Minister for her obvious and genuine concern, and for the measures that she has sought to take. I join her in thanking the very many organisations that have sought to help us through this problem, and I include in that the employees on the ground at South East Water.

Mr Speaker, you know that thousands of people in Herne Bay in my constituency and thousands more in Whitstable, in the constituency represented by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), were left without water during the four hottest days of the year so far. That is totally inexcusable and totally unacceptable. Not only were households disrupted, but at the very time when they should have been having a glorious start to their season, guest houses, hotels, restaurants and pubs were shut, care homes had frightful problems, and a doctor's surgery lost consultations, because they did not have water.

There is no quick fix. The Broad Oak reservoir should have been built 50 years ago. It will take 10 years if we start tomorrow, but we have to try to make sure that in the coming months, because there will be more hot weather, this does not happen for a fifth time across Kent.

Finally, I do believe that the water companies face a very real problem in the regulations as they stand. They are required by law to connect every new house to a supply, but they are not consultees in planning applications—we have to correct that. They have to be given a voice because they cannot spirit water out of thin air.

Emma Hardy: I share the right hon. Gentleman's outrage at the situation. He is quite right to say that one of the answers is the reservoir, which will take a long time to build, but this is not just about the reservoir. It is also about desalination plants, and the need for more urgent action to tackle leakage; too much water is lost through leakage. Across Government, we are looking at building standards for new homes and at how we can make homes more water-efficient, because this is a big problem. I hope that I can offer the right hon. Gentleman some reassurance by telling him that the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority has been doing some mapping to identify areas of the country that have more acute water shortage problems and what we need to resolve them.

I asked the company, "What are the actions you can take now?" There is no excuse for poor communication; that is something it can fix overnight. It can also improve its relationship with the local resilience forum. That does not cost any money. It can look at its bulk supply deal with Southern Water—that is another action it can take. It can accelerate its work on leakage reduction—that is another action it can take. Fundamentally, though, the right hon. Gentleman is quite right: the answer is building reservoirs and having greater water storage across our country. Quite frankly, I think it is that we have a situation where we complain about the drought all through the summer and complain about the rain all through the winter, yet have no way of storing that water. I am urgently trying to change that.

Mr Speaker: I remind everybody that this urgent question is about South East Water, not other water companies. I am sure that all questions will be linked to that subject.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): Like many of my constituents, I have lost all faith in South East Water after its repeated failures to deliver adequate standards for customers in my constituency and across Kent. The latest incident left around 4,000 of my constituents having to cope for days with no water entirely, an intermittent supply or low water pressure. South East Water's failure to invest in infrastructure means that I have no confidence that it will be able to provide a basic standard of service. Moreover, it kept in place the hosepipe ban until February, and there was no preparedness for the coming hot weather, so there is a lack of understanding by the senior leadership within that organisation. What practical measures can the Government take to ensure that we will not suffer in the coming summer months?

Emma Hardy: I share my hon. Friend's outrage at the situation. He has been a fantastic champion for his constituents in raising this matter with me a number of times. On the immediate action that South East Water can take, we have said to the company that it needs to be prepared for future hot weather during the summer. What is its resilience plan, what actions will it take and where can it identify immediate actions to take? The longer-term solution is greater water storage. Fundamentally, this company is a water-only company. It has one job—that is all—and that job is to supply water, and it is, quite frankly, astonishing that it is failing to do that at the moment.

My hon. Friend will be aware that South East Water is under investigation by Ofwat and the Drinking Water Inspectorate as to whether, because of its recent credit downgrade, its licence conditions have been broken—so serious actions are being taken against the company. I will, of course, update the House as soon as I hear more about the actions it will be taking in the immediate short term. I should also say that the CEO has offered his resignation and the chair has already resigned. There is an interim chair, and the CEO is currently there while the organisation looks to replace him.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale). I thank the Minister for her approach and engagement on this vital issue.

It is deeply regrettable that we are here yet again with unacceptable outages from South East Water following the events back in December and January. The shortage of water supply in Kent in these hot conditions has had a terrible impact on local communities: homes have been without water supply; schools and businesses have been impacted; farmers and horse owners, again, feared not having enough water for their livestock; and local residents have lost confidence in their water supply and are switching to bottled water. That is simply outrageous.

These repeated failures from South East Water are simply not good enough. We have heard repeated accounts about poor communication and logistics from South East Water, including difficulties in accessibility to collect bottled water, compromising vulnerable residents. Can the Minister please provide guidance on what is being done to ensure that, moving forward, people can reliably access adequate supply, particularly vulnerable households?

What is being done to ensure that vital healthcare delivery can continue uninterrupted? In these hot conditions, what measures can be put in place so that farmers and horse owners have enough water for their livestock? What meetings has the Minister had with South East Water, Ofwat, the Drinking Water Inspectorate, local resilience fora and affected councils since this latest disruption?

We have seen resignations at the top of South East Water, but we are yet to see any change in performance. What enforcement action is being considered against South East Water if it is found again to have failed its statutory duties? What investment has South East Water committed to improve resilience in Kent, Sussex and other areas, and how will Ministers ensure that it is delivered? Do the Government accept that repeated water outages are unacceptable, and what steps will Ministers take to support people in South East Water's area so that they do not face yet another period of interrupted supply?

Emma Hardy: Access to water for livestock was raised with me after the last outage—I think by the hon. Member and the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies). This time, South East Water did make deliveries of alternative water to farms across the region during the incident—or that is what I have been informed, but if there is intelligence otherwise, I am keen to learn about that and to understand. South East Water has said that it continues to monitor farms in at-risk areas.

The issue of vulnerable customers continues to be a challenge. I have been talking to the Cabinet Office about whether there are ways to share more accurate information and data. The water companies say that it is challenging to keep a priority register up to date because people sometimes fall in and out of being classified as “vulnerable”. For example, a lady who is pregnant is classified as being vulnerable and needing water, but after she has had the baby, she is no longer classified as vulnerable in the same way. We need to ensure that we can maintain accurate records of who is vulnerable and in need of additional water, so I am having conversations with the Cabinet Office about whether there are ways of sharing data, while bearing in mind the sensitivities and complications of sharing information. I ask all colleagues to encourage their constituents to self-identify through the priority services register if they are classified as “vulnerable”, so that they can access water as they expect.

I met the interim chair of South East Water, and we had a productive conversation. She is keen to reset relationships, and she wants to meet MPs who represent constituencies in the area and talk to them. She is committed to rebuilding the relationship with the local resilience forum and looking at how the company can improve communications. To be fair to her, she has been in post for only a few weeks, so this incident has happened very early in her interim chairship, but there are things that we can work on and build on. There are things that the company can do now around communications and I am concerned by what the hon. Gentleman says about accessibility problems at drinking-water stations.

The hon. Gentleman asked about who I have met. I have met the new interim chair and the senior people involved. I regularly meet the Drinking Water Inspectorate

and Ofwat. There are currently live investigations into the company following the last incident and those will continue.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the way that she has approached this incident, particularly for pointing out that South East Water has one job. Unfortunately, the company is accountable to its shareholders more than to the people who it is supposed to serve. Notwithstanding the reforms to the water industry that the Government have already put in place, may I make a suggestion for the future? Rather than simply fining these companies when they fail so catastrophically, we should take stocks in the company to the value of the amount of the fine to be held by a locally convened water board, so that residents have some form of control and accountability for the decisions that are made. Otherwise, we are relying on extractive capitalism and that will destroy our water supply.

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. As the White Paper set out:

“Where a water company might want to transition to a new ownership model, such as a not-for-profit, the regulator will develop a transparent process to assess whether a water company’s requested move to a new model should go ahead”.

We are looking at developing a transparent process, if that is something that the water company might want to consider.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about increasing the customer voice. On day one when this Government came to power we announced new consumer boards for water companies. The Consumer Council for Water has covered the entire country, gathering together different people for customer panels. It has already held a customer panel in the South East Water area, so that customers can hold water company bosses to account—it works very much like a Select Committee hearing. I will share the report from that panel with the House. It is interesting that the No. 1 issue that came up for the water company to tackle was the lack of adequate communication. That does not require millions or billions of pounds spent on a reservoir—it just requires competence.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Leaving thousands of South East Water customers without access to drinking water has become a pattern of neglect, enabled by a water system that fails to hold water companies accountable for their actions. Whether it is environmental disruption or consistent water disruption, this situation is simply unacceptable, but the Government’s timid reforms do not rise to the scale of the challenge. We do not need more tinkering—we need a total structural overhaul. Given the repeated failures in water supply and sewage pollution in the South East Water area and across the country, will the Minister back Liberal Democrat proposals for a mutually owned public benefit model for water companies, focusing investment on the environment, customers and infrastructure, rather than on lining the pockets of the bosses of water companies such as South East Water?

Emma Hardy: South East Water is a water only company, not a sewage company, so we can criticise it for many things, but sewage pollution is not one of

them. When the Government came to power we introduced customer panels on day one, and since then we have secured £104 billion of private investment, passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 and given the Environment Agency more powers to monitor water companies and uncover wrongdoing. In fact, the EA has done more than 10,000 inspections of water companies and uncovered 81 examples that have gone on to criminal investigations. I gently point out to the hon. Lady that under the coalition Government funding for the EA was cut by more than a half.

We have also introduced criminal liability for water companies, introduced automatic penalties, reduced the burden of proof, introduced cost recovery, banned the sale and supply of wet wipes, looked at reforming our bathing waters, established the water delivery taskforce and have abolished Ofwat. Yes, there is more work to do on top of that, but I stand proud on the record of the actions that we have already taken following years of inaction.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) for securing the urgent question. The disruption caused by this incident has been extremely distressing for my constituents on the Sussex-Kent border who are served by South East Water. Many residents and businesses were impacted, and it is right that the chief executive and the chairman of South East Water have resigned. I urge the Government to look at the terms of the company’s licence and whether they have been breached.

We are here in the Chamber again discussing another major water outage—as the Minister knows, there have been two major outages in my patch—and we see the same mistakes and failures repeated time and again by the water companies. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee looked at the issue and found that the water companies need to have clear plans of action in place, including for providing water stations in the right places, such as those that people can get to without a car, and they need to think about the impact on businesses and maybe deliver water to them to keep them open. All of those things are forgotten every time, so will the Minister instruct all water companies in the country to have detailed emergency response plans in place for every constituency in the country and ask that they work with local MPs on them? We are the people who can get the contact details for the local headteachers and vicars, as I had to last Christmas eve, who can set up water stations, but the water companies need to do the planning before disaster strikes and people lose water. I urge the Minister to look at such measures.

Emma Hardy: South East Water has broken its licence conditions, and it is currently in breach of its licence. It has been downgraded by Moody’s credit rating agency because of its performance—I think it is the first time that a credit rating agency has downgraded a water company over performance rather than insolvency. Its licence is also being investigated by Ofwat under the consumer duty because of the supply outages in December and January.

My hon. Friend asked about emergency response plans. Water companies should absolutely have emergency response plans, but clearly the plans that South East Water has are inadequate. That is why we want to work

[Emma Hardy]

with the local resilience forum, the water company and officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that those plans are improved before we have another short spell of hot weather.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) asked a good question that the Minister touched on, but I want to press her further. Parts of Mereworth, Platt and Offham in my area were left not only without water, but without the support necessary for those who were most vulnerable, until two fantastic councillors, Matt Boughton and Sarah Hudson, both from East Peckham, really went in there and got into the fight with the water company to ensure that the water station was set up. What planning can the Minister help with to ensure that infrastructure is put in place? The water companies have got away with it for far too long. Let us not beat around the bush: South East Water has been the worst run company that I have ever come across and it is quite right that the leadership has gone. By the way, I have come across quite a lot of companies, so that bar is set quite high. The Minister has extraordinary discretionary authority to corral and coerce companies to act, so will she look at bringing forward a task group within regional areas to ensure that emergency water plans are in place? Otherwise this situation will happen again,

Emma Hardy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful question. The water companies have a statutory duty to provide wholesome water. In the event that they cannot do that, they must include provisions of alternative water supplies, as set out in the Security and Emergency Measures (Water and Sewerage Undertakers and Water Supply Licensees) Direction 2022, so they have that statutory duty to plan and prepare.

The right hon. Gentleman's suggestion is a helpful one, and I would want South East Water to work with the LRF on this issue. In this case, it was just a water supply issue, but often when we have incidents that take out water supply—such as flooding, potentially—there is more than one issue, so it is important that companies work really closely with local resilience forums. I can commit to contacting the company and the local resilience forum to ensure they have those plans in place, and also recommend that they speak to the local Members of Parliament about those plans, to ensure that they are felt to be satisfactory.

Tom Tugendhat: And the councillors.

Emma Hardy: And the councillors, of course, through the local resilience forum; they need to make sure they are ready for what may be another hot summer.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): Constituents of mine have been really worried and concerned by seeing residents of Herne Bay and Whitstable along the coast deprived of their essential water supplies. It should not have come as a shock; we know that there was 15% extra usage of water during the heatwave the other week, but local farmers were telling me in March and April that water supplies in the swales on Sheppey were really low. We have more investment coming, but it

is really chalk and cheese in my area and in Swale, where we have Southern Water and South East Water. South East Water is absolutely dreadful, whereas on Sheppey—which is particularly vulnerable to water supply issues—we have a new water main coming, £4 million-worth of investment, and a massive new drainage system. The difference between those two companies is obvious, so will the Minister tell me how we cannot just increase the amount of investment going into the water system, but deliver it at pace, and how we can end the postcode lottery of whether people get water or do not just because of the management of these firms?

Emma Hardy: On the issue of farmers and water supply, I am keen to make it much easier for farmers to set up on-farm reservoirs. I have heard repeatedly from farmers that they find that difficult, so I want to make it as simple as possible. I have spoken to too many farmers who tell me about their frustrations, particularly in the Suffolk area; they say, “All winter, we send all the water out into the sea, and then all summer, we wish we had it back.” I want to do something about that.

Every single water company has been told to produce a drought emergency plan ready for the summer, to make sure we are prepared. As for making sure the companies deliver what they promise, one of the things we did through the Water (Special Measures) Act was ensure that if they do not deliver what they promise, the money they have taken to deliver it must be refunded to customers. That money has been ringfenced, and the Water Delivery Taskforce tracks all of the major projects to make sure they are on track and on budget. If they are not, we as a Government intervene to understand why, and to assess what can be done to bring those projects back on track.

My hon. Friend is quite right that someone who lives in a certain area should not suffer a much poorer service than they would receive if they lived somewhere else. That is why we want to get a better grip on the delivery of projects, and also make it easier for people to hold on to water during the winter, to make sure they have it during the summer.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): I thank the Minister, who has been engaged on this issue for a long time—she talks to me and my neighbours, and I know she really cares. My neighbours and I spend far too much of our time talking about the latest water shortages. Heat seems to equate to a lack of water in the taps. Whitstable has been devastated yet again, and we are really worried about too many new houses whose demand for water will not be met, as well as about local businesses in the summer. The excellent Nomad Pizza, an independent company, had to close for days during a peak time for tourism. By the way, lots of my constituents are very behind the nationalisation model; I get a lot of emails about that. With our reservoir 10 years away from being built, how can I assure my constituents that the tanks will not still be empty in July and August? If they are, businesses will suffer.

Emma Hardy: That pizza business sounds great, and definitely worth a visit in summer. The hon. Lady is right; when I spoke to South East Water again on Sunday evening, I asked, “What immediate measures can you put in place over this summer to make sure we have enough water supply?”

I have had some really productive conversations with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about how we build homes that use less water—what we can do through building standards to build homes in a different way, so that they do not have to use the same amount of water. That happens all over the world; it is not beyond our grasp as a Government to do.

Fundamentally, we are going to need to build the reservoirs. We are going to need the desalination plants and those big sources of water, but as I have mentioned before, one of the more immediate things that South East Water could do is tackle the leaks. At the moment, too much water is going into the ground and being wasted.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Residents in Dartford, like those across Kent, are experiencing poor service and increased bills—including residents in Ebbsfleet, who have to pay an additional sum for waste water to flow from their community into the Thames. That is charged for by the Port of London Authority; it is called dewatering, and it is incredibly unfair to those residents. They ask me continually why it is acceptable for this poor performance to occur and for water executives to continue to pay themselves large bonuses. What work is going on to tighten the regulations so that reward matches performance?

Emma Hardy: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. As I have mentioned before, I do not have an issue with bonuses per se; I just think they should be linked to how well people do their jobs. We have banned unfair bonuses through the Water (Special Measures) Act, but some companies have attempted to exploit loopholes so that they can continue to award them. We are determined to close those loopholes.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): We have had a few days of hot weather, and yet again we have had water outages in my constituency and across Kent, on top of what we saw earlier this year and last year. Residents, businesses and livestock owners are frustrated, but they are also really worried, because getting water is the most basic thing in this country. It is right that the chief executive and chair of South East Water have gone; my anger with them was particularly about their response and how they have handled these outages. However, there is a longer-term problem with water infrastructure and supply that will not be fixed overnight. In my constituency, 20,000 more houses are in the pipeline for the next few years, and thousands more in the surrounding area. Is there enough water for those thousands of additional houses in rural Kent?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Lady raises an important point—I remember how powerfully she described the impact on her constituents and businesses when we were last in the Chamber talking about South East Water, so I know this is something she cares deeply about. As I have said, one of the things we are doing through the Water Delivery Taskforce is identifying areas of the country where there are more acute water shortages, and therefore what actions can be taken to ensure that people have the homes to live in that they need, and businesses have the water they need, without having a detrimental impact on the residents who already live in those areas.

South East Water, in particular, is reliant on a bulk supply agreement with Southern Water. That is one of the things I am keen to look into the details of, to make sure that that can be guaranteed, whatever circumstances Southern Water finds itself in. There are various other actions we can take; I have mentioned businesses, building standards and the way we build homes. In Cambridge, they have looked at retrofitting some homes to make them use less water.

There are various other rules and regulations on businesses' use of water—at the moment, we have a slightly bizarre situation where businesses have to use potable water. They are not able to use other types of water, and it seems a bit crazy that we are wasting drinking water on things that are not drinking or for domestic customers. We are looking at a whole spread of different actions to make sure that we have the water we need; the nine new reservoirs, the desalination plants and all those things are brilliant, but they are not going to be in place this summer or next summer, so we are looking at what more immediate actions we can take.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will gently say that the question was about South East Water. The Minister has opened it up by mentioning other water companies, but it would be more helpful if we could concentrate on the theme. I am going to test that by calling Clive Efford; I think his constituency is covered by Thames Water, but I am sure that he will link his question in.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Absolutely, Mr Speaker: my question is about South East Water, because what we have here is a company that fell over at the first short period of hot weather. We have to wonder what planning has gone on in that company, given that it fell over so quickly in the season. When are we going to call time on these water companies? The consistent failure that we see from them, while they extract enormous profits from the industry, has to come to an end at some stage. I know that my hon. Friend is as frustrated with these water companies as the rest of us, but there must come a time when we say to them, "Enough is enough", and take control of them for the public good.

Emma Hardy: As I have highlighted, the White Paper talks about companies that wish to move to alternative ownership models, but I will briefly touch on special administration for breaching statutory duties. Under section 37 of the Water Industry Act 1991, a water company has a duty to supply water within its area of appointment. A serious breach of these principal duties or of an enforcement order can be grounds for a performance special administration regime, if that breach is so serious that it is no longer appropriate for the company to continue to hold its instrument of appointment.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I absolutely despair of South East Water. As we have heard from Members who represent Kent constituencies, South East Water cannot cope with large water outages; but nor can it cope with small water outages. In my constituency, the village of Staplefield has just gone through 30 hours without water, without bottled water being supplied and without good information—indeed, there was even some misinformation. I understand that trying to fix

[Alison Bennett]

decades of neglect of water infrastructure will take a long time, but in the Minister's next meetings with executives at South East Water, will she ask to look at their communication plans so that people can know what is happening, get timely information and get the bottled water they need, since outages seem to be par for the course these days?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. One of the issues that we discussed in the conversation on Sunday was communication, including about where to put bottled water stations. I was told that during this incident, South East Water had worked more closely with the local resilience forum to listen to its advice about where to place those stations. If that is not her experience, I would be keen to hear about that, so that I can take that back to the company. South East Water has an interim chair, who I know is keen to build new relationships with Members of Parliament—she has assured me that she will be meeting MPs. I urge Members collectively to raise this issue of communication and where bottled water stations are directly with the interim chair, so that we can have them in the right place. Fundamentally, Members of Parliament and councillors probably know and understand their areas far better than a water company does.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) for securing this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for her approach to this difficult and appalling issue in Kent. Can she update the House a little bit more on the work to get meaningful compensation for the affected residents and businesses? In the longer term, what is she doing to improve the system of compensation? Many of my residents who had a water outage had to wait a long time for money to be paid back.

Emma Hardy: One of the first things we did when we came into government was to look at the guaranteed standards scheme. We have introduced increased compensation payments and new standards. Previously, compensation was not being paid when people were under a boil notice, but this Government have introduced that, along with doubling compensation for failings such as supply interruptions, low pressure and sewer flooding. Because of those changes, customers should for the first time be receiving payments for boil notices. We have told water companies to make compensation available to people as soon as possible. We are clear that customers come first. They are the people I care about, and they are the people for whom I am the Water Minister. We will also look at introducing a water ombudsman. In the conversation I had with South East Water on Sunday, I asked it to identify by the end of the week what compensation will be paid to who, and when, and I will be following up on that.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): As the Minister is looking into the situation with South East Water, can I also feed back what happened last week, when parts of Weybridge had restrictions on water supply? Although we are supplied by Affinity Water, I think the problem is broader than just our area.

Will she urgently review the resilience and availability of water supply, and in particular the impact that new house building will have on supply over the coming years?

Emma Hardy: On resilience, one of the things that we want to introduce for the first time is asset standards for water company assets. At the moment, those do not exist; there is no rule or criterion for the standard to which water companies need to maintain their water treatment work, waste water treatment work or pipes, or for how much leakage is acceptable. With the new regulator, we want to introduce those asset standards, which say that companies have to maintain their assets to a certain standard. That should help change things and basically build against what we have seen—admittedly not on this occasion; on this occasion, the company ran out of water—in other cases where infrastructure falls over because it is not adequately maintained and looked after.

That is why the no-notice inspections matter; with those MOT-style inspections, as I refer to them, people from the Environment Agency can go in with no notice, check the assets, mark the water company on them and then give it an enforcement notice to say that it has to improve its assets up to a certain standard. The situation will not be fixed overnight, but having that goal for where we need to get to will help to prevent infrastructure from falling over because it is not properly looked after.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): South East Water is one of a number of privatised water companies that are responsible for selling off 35 reservoirs since 2017, and those companies have not built a single one since privatisation that is complete. We understand that this Government are committed to a regulatory approach to dealing with this issue, but that is akin to putting a complaints box on the Titanic. It is a nice idea, but I do not think it will work. Ultimately, private water companies' first priority is private shareholders—many of them overseas—who do not give a damn about our constituents. This situation will keep happening until water is put back under public control, in public hands, and owned by the public.

Emma Hardy: I know how passionately my hon. Friend cares about this issue, and I genuinely pay tribute to him for championing this issue and for the work he has done in Parliament to bring people together. As I have mentioned, the White Paper talks about setting up a transparent process to look at whether a company should transition to a different model, including a not-for-profit, if that was what it wished to do.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Mr Speaker, as an Essex MP, may I endorse your lovely tribute at PMQs to Sir Alan Haselhurst? He will be much missed, even though he did achieve a respectable innings of 88 years in his time on this earth.

I strongly endorse the suggestion of my right hon. Friend from across the Thames, the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), about making water companies statutory consultees for planning applications. When there is an application for a large number of houses, the implications can be severe not just for fresh water, but for foul water and in particular for sewage. In my constituency, our sewage capacity is

very nearly maxed out, and the implications of getting that wrong are frighteningly obvious. I can see that the Minister is helpfully nodding. Can we please change the law to make water companies statutory consultees, so that they can give expert advice on whether new planning proposals are feasible in reality?

Emma Hardy: The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out the consequences of getting it wrong. Just to reassure him, we are looking at using tools such as the water delivery taskforce where we have shortages, to see what we can do. That is for not just water, but waste water capacity too, because both are crucial. We want to see homes being built—people want somewhere to live, and first-time buyers in particular are finding it incredibly difficult—but we are taking a sensible approach. We are identifying where we have shortages in waste water or water to see what we can do to address the amount available, as well as what can be done to reduce demand in that area, including retrofitting, building standards and various other measures.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has extensively investigated South East Water; what I found particularly shocking was the fact that so many warnings and concerns were raised but were simply ignored. Despite a high risk of water supply failure, the lack of preparedness was plain to see. Will the regulatory reforms that the Government are looking at have real consequences when those concerns are raised, but are ignored by the water companies?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend and all members of the EFRA Committee for their excellent report, which was forensic in looking into the failures of South East Water. It was a brilliant, useful document. He is right that tough consequences are needed if concerns are raised and ignored; that cannot be allowed to continue to happen. That is exactly why we want to create a new regulator with strong powers and teeth to be able to take action. It is also why we are looking at introducing this performance improvement regime for water companies so that, if we identify failure in a water company, the regulator has proper oversight to turn that company around and make it improve, with consequences if it does not.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for her praise of the EFRA Committee's report. I speak as a member of that Committee; we are doing extensive work on the water industry and we are following this matter carefully. As has been said, the key issue with the South East Water disruption was the lack of communication, something that applied equally to Anglian Water with the outage that occurred at exactly the same time in South Northamptonshire. I was not told about the outage, and residents report not knowing what was going on for 12 or 24 hours, and the water delivery was inconsistent. What more can the Government do to send a clear message to the water companies that this lack of communication is not acceptable?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on the EFRA Committee. She is entirely right: it is unacceptable. I feel that I am a fair-minded person. I know that water companies cannot control the weather, and I know that they cannot build a reservoir overnight.

However, they certainly can contact their Members of Parliament, contact their councils, get in touch with their local resilience forums and make sure that they communicate with their customers, as an absolute bare minimum, and that is exactly the conversation that I will be having with each and every one of them.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): Alongside the failures in the south-east, during the recent heatwave there was a widespread disruption of water supply across swathes of my constituency, in Buntingford, Cottered, Ardeley and Throcking. In a country as wet as ours it should take a true organising genius to create disruptions in water supply, but we are on track for a water deficit of 6 billion litres in our country in the coming decades, and on top of that, AI data centres estimate that water consumption will reach up to half a trillion cubic metres every year. Does the Minister—whom I deeply respect—accept that if we are to prevent water supply disruptions from recurring year in year out, we cannot continue to have infinite increases in demand on our already vastly overstretched water resources?

Emma Hardy: My hon. Friend is right. It is astonishing that although, owing to climate change, we will experience wetter and wetter winters and drier and drier summers, we have no capacity to store water in the winter and use it in the summer. That seems to me to be absolute nonsense.

As for the issue of data centres, there is one possibility that I am keen to look into, and I touched on it in an earlier answer. Under the current legislation, water that is supplied by a water company must be of drinking-water standard. It strikes me as logical and sensible to say, "If water is being used for cooling purposes rather than for drinking purposes in people's homes, could it not be of a different standard? Why does it need to be of drinking-water quality?" Where, for instance, we want to use water for data centres, for growth, why do we not—in a closed-loop system—use waste water? We have some legislation that has been drafted for the right purposes and sounds great—of course, a water company must produce water of drinking-water standard—but does it need to be of drinking-water standard if it is being used to cool machinery?

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): South East Water has openly and publicly admitted that it cannot supply drinking water for all the future homes that are planned for Kent. What is the Minister's response to that specific concern, and is she having conversations with her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government?

Emma Hardy: The short answer is yes. The previous chief executive of South East Water—or rather the current chief executive, who has not gone yet—met members of the water delivery taskforce a few weeks ago, with some of the councillors from the area, to discuss exactly that issue of how both water supply and housing demands can be met. I sit on the taskforce along with representatives of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, so we are all having the conversation together about how we build the homes that are needed without having an impact on the people already living in the area, yet also ensuring that new homes have the water that they require.

[Emma Hardy]

We have been assessing what is likely to happen over the next five, 10 or 15 years. What are the various water supplies that will be coming in? What impact will that have on house building? How can homes be built to a more water-efficient design? Those conversations are happening now, across Government. We need to achieve the right balance between ensuring that everyone has a home to live in and, at the same time, preventing a water crisis?

Lebanon: Israel Defence Forces Operations

1.34 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs to make a statement on the Israel Defence Forces' operations in Lebanon.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Before I answer the hon. Lady's important urgent question, let me say that I am sure the whole House will join me in condemning Iran's strike on Kuwait International airport with drones this morning. It was a completely unacceptable attack, which has tragically resulted in multiple injuries and at least one confirmed fatality. We stand in full solidarity with the Government and the people of Kuwait, as well as our partners across the Gulf. I have conveyed my condolences this morning to the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and his colleagues. We urge Iran to de-escalate immediately and return to meaningful dialogue to secure lasting peace and regional stability.

Let me now turn to the issue of Lebanon. The reckless and disproportionate escalation of Israeli military action there has resulted in a devastating situation for Lebanese civilians, killing thousands. At an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council on Monday, jointly called by the United Kingdom, we firmly condemned the actions of the Government of Israel and called for a genuine and lasting ceasefire. We also condemned Lebanese Hezbollah's ongoing attacks against Israel, including the attacks on Israeli northern communities. They have faced a repeated barrage of missiles and drones.

Lebanese Hezbollah is a proscribed organisation. At Iran's instigation, it has dragged Lebanon into a war that its Government and its people do not want. It does not speak or act for the people of Lebanon. It must end these attacks and disarm. I condemn the recent comments by Hezbollah's leadership, seeking to destabilise the Government of Lebanon within their own country.

In April I visited Beirut to show our support for the Government and the people of Lebanon, and saw the impact of this military escalation at first hand. In the south, on a previous visit, I saw the devastating impact on civilian communities—villages razed to the ground—and I was pleased to be able to hand over tangible support to the Lebanese armed forces. Since April, conditions for civilians have only worsened. More than 3,000 people have been killed and more than 1 million have been displaced, with civilian homes and infrastructure destroyed. We believe that one quarter of the population of Lebanon is now displaced. Displacement means families fleeing from their homes, not knowing what they will return to. It means ever greater strain on hospitals and clinics. It means civilians sleeping in tents by the roadside. It means thousands of children—some of whom I met—not being able to go to school, and the spread of disease even among the youngest. That is why a ceasefire, properly observed by the parties, is so urgent.

While I was in Lebanon, I announced a commitment of an additional £20 million in humanitarian support, particularly for those displaced by the conflict, making

the UK one of the largest international humanitarian donors to those affected by this man-made crisis. I also met President Aoun, as well as with other members of the Lebanese leadership. His Government are taking courageous steps, setting out an unprecedented commitment to tackling Hezbollah, and have made the case for direct diplomacy with the Government of Israel. The people of both Lebanon and Israel deserve to live in peace and security.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am sure that the Minister does not really need to be reminded of this, but Ministers have three minutes in which to answer an urgent question, and his response overran by some time.

Monica Harding: It has become routine for Donald Trump to declare a ceasefire when none exists, and in Lebanon the President's claim that fighting has ceased is a dangerous fantasy. Under direction from the Israeli Security Cabinet, the IDF is expanding its illegal military operations in southern Lebanon. Israeli forces occupy more territory in Lebanon now than at any point since the start of the century. Hundreds of shattered communities have been left in their wake, with more than 3,000 Lebanese killed and 1 million displaced. This looks far too much like the IDF's operation in Gaza. Last week, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Israel would expand its control to 70% of that territory, breaching the ceasefire there. There can be no doubt that these actions have breached international law, and they are likely to constitute war crimes.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah continues to target Israel with missiles and drones. Its violence has led to the displacement of Israeli citizens from across northern Israel and is completely unacceptable. There can be no place for that terror organisation in the region. No part of this resembles a ceasefire. We need to see concerted action from the international community, including the UK Government, to bring this cycle of violence to an end.

Do the Government support the need for an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon? Are the Government pressing the Israeli Security Cabinet to stop its illegal offensive and occupation in Lebanon? Will the Government stop all arms sales to Israel and sanction Netanyahu, alongside the extremist members of his cabinet? Have the Government made any progress with partners to advance multilateral plans for the disarming of Hezbollah?

There is no military solution to the Lebanon crisis. The only path forward is a Lebanese political settlement that ensures Hezbollah's disbandment and full state sovereignty over all its territory.

Mr Falconer: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's questions. As I am sure was clear in my answer, we do call for an immediate and meaningful ceasefire. I also commented on the extent of civilian suffering, which she was right to draw attention to. She was also right to highlight the vital importance of the rapid disarmament of Hezbollah, which is doing the people of Lebanon nothing but harm through its continued efforts to undermine the Lebanese Government and bring the Lebanese into a conflict that they do not wish to be part of. I discussed those questions of disarmament in all my meetings in April, with the President, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the Parliament and members of the Lebanese armed forces. We will continue to play our full role, including in the Security Council, as we did earlier in the week.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Instead of it being completely unacceptable for Israel to invade and threaten the Lebanese people south of the Litani river, it seems to have been long understood that providing it did not cross the river, there would not be any particular consequences—as if there was a modern-day Rubicon. Now it has crossed, and now Israel and Hezbollah are fighting out their ancient hatred in the middle of a country, and deliberately trying to destabilise Lebanon. That is completely unacceptable.

When my Committee visits the country this month, I expect that we will hear many requests for more assistance to the Lebanese army, so that it can make real progress in disarming Hezbollah and defending its people. Can the Minister confirm that such assistance is going in? Can he give us more details of the plans?

Mr Falconer: I thank my right hon. Friend for her continued interest in Lebanon. I have been south of the Litani, and I have handed over watchtowers to the Lebanese armed forces in those areas. I would not want the House to have any impression other than that our view is consistent, north and south of the Litani. I saw for myself, from that watchtower, the extent of damage done to civilian infrastructure, with whole villages completely flattened. People said to me, quite rightly, that their lives mattered and that people in the south of Lebanon should not expect their villages to be flattened or their children to be displaced. I have been clear in all our contact with the Israeli Government and the Lebanese authorities how important it is for this violence to be brought to an end.

My right hon. Friend asked for further detail. I can confirm that we have provided over £175 million in training, equipment and advice to the Lebanese armed forces since 2009, and there has been particular work in relation to Lebanon's borders against Syria and Israel.

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

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Lebanese Hezbollah is an Iranian-backed terrorist organisation that, for too long, has caused harm to the Lebanese people, undermined the Government of Lebanon and threatened Israel. It is also part of a terror network that threatens our interests and security, and those of our friends in the middle east. The House should be in no doubt that Hezbollah continues to undermine efforts to secure peace in the region, and fails to comply with the terms of the 2024 Israel-Lebanon ceasefire. What is the Minister's assessment of Hezbollah's actions when it comes to violating the ceasefire, and of the support that it has received from Iran? Does he agree that the interests of peace are best served by Hezbollah being permanently disarmed?

The current conflict has caused terrible hardship in Lebanon and Israel, and the UK Government must use their influence and diplomacy in the region to help bring this to an end. We must see this conflict come to an end. Can the Minister tell us what direct discussions have taken place with representatives in Israel, Lebanon and the US Administration on the terms of a lasting ceasefire? What are the British Government doing to

[Priti Patel]

support the disarming of Hezbollah? What contributions and practical efforts are being made to fully implement the UN Security Council resolution 1701?

Much of this leads back to the architect of so much disturbance in the middle east—Iran—so I will conclude my remarks by joining the Minister in condemning the strikes that took place today in Kuwait. Iran cannot carry on persisting in the way it is as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Mr Falconer: The shadow Foreign Secretary makes a range of important points, including on the enormous and continued harm that Hezbollah does to the people of Lebanon, as indeed it continues to attempt to do to the people of Israel. It is completely unacceptable that communities in the north of Israel continue to face barrages of missiles and drones. We have called repeatedly for Hezbollah to stop; what it does harms Lebanon as much as Israel.

We have discussed in detail, with the Lebanese armed forces and the leadership of Lebanon, the progress that must be made in disarming Hezbollah. There has been a lot of commentary about the phasing and sequencing of those efforts over the last few months, but it must be the Lebanese Government who disarm Hezbollah. That is the only way that the Hezbollah issue can be properly dealt with. The Government of Lebanon are brave and courageous people in whom we have very considerable confidence. President Aoun, who I was in contact with today, is taking very important steps to try to safeguard his country and its future, and we must support him. He, his Government and his armed forces must monopolise force in Lebanon, not Hezbollah and not the IDF.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Some 125 health workers have been killed in Lebanon in the last three months alone. Today, an Israeli strike hit an ambulance in south Lebanon, killing two paramedics, which takes the death toll to 127. The November 2024 ceasefire agreement is barely worth the paper it is written on. The Minister rightly condemns the targeting of civilians, but what about Israel's targeting of health workers or journalists? Does the Minister realise that condemnation without action has utterly failed, and reinforces Israel's continuing disregard for international law? Will the Minister make it clear today that sanctions must be used to hold Israel accountable?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has been a persistent advocate on these issues. We have taken a whole series of steps, which I will set out in brief for the House. So important are the issues in Lebanon that during my visit in April, we went from providing only £10 million of humanitarian assistance to now providing £30 million. We are now one of the world's largest humanitarian donors to Lebanon. Few other Ministers in the world have gone as close as I have to the blue line. I met incredibly brave representatives of the Lebanese Red Cross—young people who have, in many cases, given up their lives to try to minimise the harm coming to southern communities. I was so upset to see that there have been further strikes since I met them. I am proud of our support for them, and I utterly condemn the attacks.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a tragic perversity that the actions of Hezbollah and Hamas actually hurt and harm the interests and safety of those whom they purport to act on behalf of. Several years ago, former Israeli Prime Minister Barak described Israel as being the "villa in the jungle". Last week, with cross-party colleagues, I was in Israel, and it is becoming increasingly evident that the Israeli Government's actions are rendering it a rogue and a pariah state, oblivious to international and US pressure and opinion. That, in turn, is making Israel herself far less secure.

Apart from saying words, which are welcome, what can the Government do? Can I suggest an expansion and deepening of sanctions, because that will hit people where it is needed and may refocus attention?

Mr Falconer: Strong views are held right across the House on questions around the middle east, but I pay tribute to those on the Opposition Benches who have shifted their position in recent years. The British Government, while I have been the Middle East Minister, have made very significant policy decisions. There are existing sanctions, and I know the hon. Gentleman will understand why I do not go further on the question of sanctions, and I am the first British Minister to announce from this Dispatch Box sanctions on Israeli Ministers. I recognise what a Rubicon that was to cross, and I also recognise that I have been supported in doing so by voices on the Opposition Benches and, of course, those of my many hon. Friends behind me. I recognise the gravity of what is happening in the middle east, and we will continue to take the steps we have taken in responding with the urgency required. I hope the House will permit me to say that, when I announced the recognition of the state of Palestine, I felt I was speaking for the whole House, not just the Government.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I take 30 seconds to associate myself with the Speaker's remarks about Sir Alan Haselhurst? He was in the Chair when I seized the Mace, and he expelled me from the Chamber, but he did it with such good grace that we became firm friends and have been ever since. I send my condolences to his wife.

As the Minister knows, I am the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group. We are now experiencing in Lebanon exactly what we saw in Gaza, with the targeting and murder of journalists. When he was there in April, Amal Khalil, the famous woman journalist, was hit by an Israeli strike, and the Red Cross ambulance that went to assist her was hit as well. The Lebanese Prime Minister has made it quite clear that these are war crimes. Could I ask that the Government join others in collecting the evidence, so that we can take action against the Israeli Ministers who have perpetrated these war crimes against the Lebanese people, just as they did against the Palestinians?

Mr Falconer: I am familiar with the incident my right hon. Friend describes, and I pay tribute to his work on these issues right across the world. It is appalling that journalists in Lebanon who are reporting on developments in the south have been struck in this way. We made interventions in the United Nations following some of those assaults on journalists both in Lebanon and in Israel, and we will continue to press these points.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): With the world on fire, with war and climate change and with diseases such as Ebola stalking Africa again, will the Government reconfirm their commitment to returning aid spending to 0.7% of GNI and to not cutting it below 0.3% of GNI?

Mr Falconer: We have discussed these issues on a number of occasions. The Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have set out why we had to take the difficult decisions we have made, but I would like to assure the House that we have protected Lebanon from those cuts. That is why we are in the position we are of being one of the largest humanitarian donors to Lebanon in the world.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the Minister's dogged determination, shared by many of us on the Labour side of the House, to get this issue right.

I think I have said prayers every time throughout this crisis when there has been an abuse of human rights—not just in Lebanon, but when Hamas took the hostages, when innocent Palestinians have been killed, when villages have been threatened and when there has been violence in the settlements—and the IDF and the Israeli Government have been involved at many of those times, but I fear I am running out of prayers to make. Beyond the moral outrage we rightly express in this House, what more will it take for a British Government to stand up for sanctions and further actions that demonstrate to the world—and the people in Lebanon, Gaza and the west bank—that we get it and will take the action necessary to stand up for international law, human rights and their freedoms?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for describing my work in gracious terms. I hope Britain's sustained commitment on the issues in Lebanon has demonstrated that we understand the gravity of what is going on. We will remain deeply engaged in these questions. I have been in contact with the Lebanese Foreign Minister, the Lebanese President and American counterparts. We have also raised these issues with the Israeli Government, and we will continue to do so.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I join the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—she is just returning to her place—in seeking to support capacity building in the Lebanese army, which is absolutely right. I also join the Minister in recognising the courage of the President and Ministers in the Lebanese Government, particularly in their public condemnation of Hezbollah and even, indirectly, of Iran. Could he confirm that it is the view of the British Government that not all those who follow the Shi'a tradition of Islam, in both Lebanon and Iran, necessarily support Hamas, Hezbollah or the evil Iranian regime?

I put on record my condemnation of both Hezbollah and Iran, which have basically caused this latest conflict in Lebanon. It is absolutely clear that Israelis should be able to live in peace, without fear of being bombed by drones or missiles. Does the Minister share the view of the French envoy to the United Nations that Israel needs to learn the lessons of its occupation of Lebanon in the year 2000? Does he also recognise the words of

Danny Danon—as the Minister will know, he is the Israeli envoy to the UN—when he said that Israel is not seeking to expand the conflict or retain territory in Lebanon? If that is indeed the position and policy of the Israeli Government, it is welcome, but it does seem at odds with some of the public utterances of the current Israeli Prime Minister.

Mr Falconer: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that Shi'a communities—whether in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran or, indeed, Pakistan—overwhelmingly want peace and human rights like everybody else. This is a small, unrepresentative part of Lebanon that is funded and supported by Iran, and it is bringing the Lebanese into terrible difficulties.

On the right hon. Gentleman's important point about the Israeli Government's intentions, if this is a counter-terrorism operation, I can see absolutely no justification for raising the Israeli flag over Beaufort castle. We want to see Lebanese Hezbollah disarmed, and that cannot possibly involve such a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of a neighbour.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): For years, it has been reported that Israel has been using white phosphorus munitions against civilian targets in south Lebanon's Bekaa valley. Alongside reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon has even reported that UN peacekeepers in Lebanon were injured by white phosphorus munitions. The Minister has confirmed to me previously that the Government are aware of these reports, and they know that the use of white phosphorus as an incendiary weapon in populated areas is strictly prohibited, yet this is just one of thousands of examples of Israel tearing up the laws of war. Can the Minister explain whether the UK's joint agreement, signed in 2020, on military co-operation with Israel is still in place, and if so, why?

Mr Falconer: To be clear about the position, I think my hon. Friend is referring to the 2020 Israel-UK road map, which is suspended. However, on the very important question she raises about arms exports, as I have told this House on a number of occasions, we take our obligations under international humanitarian law incredibly seriously. That is why we conducted the review we did when we became the Government, and why we took the action that then followed, which has been discussed in this Chamber on a number of occasions.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am sure the Minister understands that there can be no sustainable ceasefire for as long as there exists in Lebanon an Iranian terrorist proxy that has as its war aim the complete, final and irrevocable destruction of the state of Israel and the Jews who live there. So we are faced, are we not, with trying to mitigate some of the actions of this terrorist organisation. Would he agree with me that the only viable way of doing that, given this situation, is to do everything in our power to strengthen the Lebanese army, which he will know is a credible organisation, and to support the UN Secretary-General in his stated intention of renewing UNIFIL and making sure it is fit for purpose, rather than simply an observer, as is currently the case?

Mr Falconer: I very strongly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is the Lebanese armed forces who, in the end, must be the force that disarms Hezbollah and ends the threats to both the Lebanese and the Israelis that emanates from that malign group, so I completely support the Lebanese armed forces and agree with what he says. UNIFIL will, of course, be a subject of discussion in the Security Council in the coming months and we will play our full part to try to ensure that it can contribute as much as possible. In much of the discussion around Lebanon, there is often a focus on the international elements. We have to be clear that the Lebanese Government, the Lebanese armed forces and the Lebanese President must have control over the use of force in Lebanon. That is the position of the British Government.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): While we rightly focus on the grave situation in Lebanon, the wider region is seeing an increasing pattern of British nationals being arbitrarily detained and used as leverage by countries including Iran. In light of the news that Craig and Lindsay Foreman have had their appeal dismissed by the Iranian courts, and given their ongoing hunger strike in Evin prison—I think Craig is on his 27th day and Lindsay is on her 18th day—to protest against their conditions and ongoing detention, what further specific steps are the Government taking to secure consular access? Are the Government now prepared to condemn their detention as arbitrary, use international levers against Iran for hostage taking, and show Iran that it cannot keep taking British citizens hostage as pawns in its own games?

Mr Falconer: I was clear yesterday, in response to the news that my hon. and learned Friend refers to, that their continued detention is unjustified and appalling. He has been a doughty advocate for his constituents in this matter. I will continue to meet him directly and with them on all these questions. The behaviour of Iran does not relate solely to British nationals, although they must of course be our focus in this Chamber; it is part of a much wider pattern of detentions which appear to have absolutely no justification of any kind. It is a pattern that extends far beyond Europe as well. We condemn it. It is completely erosive of any trust in Iran, and I have made that point clearly and repeatedly to the Iranian authorities.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In referring the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I commend the Minister for visiting Lebanon in April, and for his continuing dialogue with the very good new ambassador here and our ambassador there. He will know that the Lebanese people deserve to be free from fear, persistent uncertainty, perpetual hostility and permanent doubt. The only way for that to happen, as he said, is to support the Lebanese Government and armed forces. We do so already, but to endorse the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), will the Minister look at what further steps can be taken to communicate that support within Lebanon? The worry people have, which I think is shared across the Chamber, is that, sadly and tragically, the Lebanese people will come to believe that Hezbollah is defending them. In fact, it is doing anything but; it is

endangering them. What further steps can he take to reassure the Lebanese people of what he has told the House today?

Mr Falconer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, my Lincolnshire neighbour, for his kind words and attention to these matters. I take the challenge that there is a completely untrue narrative that is promoted. The idea that either Lebanese Hezbollah or Iran itself is a protector of Lebanon is patently and completely untrue. Iran's influence in Lebanon over many years has been malign. It has undermined the sovereignty of the country and it has harmed the interests of its people. I take his challenge and will return to him on what more we can do both to make sure of our support and on the malign nature of Iranian influence within the country.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The reality is that Israel continues to rip to shreds every last line of the international rules-based order. It continues with its illegal land grabs, illegal settlements, war crimes and genocide in Gaza. It is now breaching the ceasefire agreement with illegal military action in Lebanon. In Lebanon, 55 children have been killed and 212 injured since the ceasefire began on 16 April. The Minister will have seen the strength of feeling in this place and I seriously ask him this question: how many more children must be killed in Lebanon and Gaza before his Government stop the empty condemnations and take real action?

Mr Falconer: I recognise my hon. Friend's engagement in and commitment to these issues. I just gently say back to him that I have met the children displaced by this escalation. We have taken urgent steps to very significantly increase the support that is being provided to them. We have done everything we can privately and publicly, in the way I have described in the Chamber over the course of the afternoon, to try to ensure that there is a genuine, meaningful ceasefire that holds and does not lead to the loss of life, whether children or otherwise. We will continue to do that.

We have changed very significantly our posture towards Lebanon in the last few months. As I said earlier, we are now one of the largest humanitarian donors. I have myself handed over equipment to the Lebanese to try to ensure that they can control the south. That is not to say that progress has been uniform. In fact, it is very clear, as my hon. Friend will have heard and as I am acknowledging, how much worse the situation has got, but we will continue to play our full role here, at the United Nations and with our counterparts in the region to try to bring about a genuine and meaningful ceasefire.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Israeli Minister Ben-Gvir said in the last few days on social media:

"Electricity must be cut off to Lebanon, the Zahrani River must be seized, and intensive fighting must be resumed".

Last week, he said of Dahieh,

"flatten, flatten, and flatten again",

and that the suburbs must be targeted. The indiscriminate targeting of Lebanese people shows what the Israelis are really trying to do. Does the Minister agree that the time has finally come for a full ban on all arms to Israel?

Mr Falconer: I am almost reluctant to talk any more about that Minister from the Dispatch Box. I am glad, I am afraid to say, that I sanctioned him in the way that I described earlier. We were among the first countries to do so. I am glad to see that others are now taking similar steps. That Minister, whose name I do not really want to say again in this Chamber, brings Israel nothing but harm. He undermines its position in the world. He brings even Israel's friends to a position of disgust at his actions.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I share the Minister's condemnation of the murderous attacks on Kuwait airport this morning. I am sure he will share with me the condemnation of the murder of two more health workers in Lebanon this morning, at the hands of the IDF.

The Minister referred to the Israelis ordering the war crime of the forcible displacement of around 1 million Lebanese south of the Zahrani and Litani rivers, with 3,500 killed and tens of thousands injured by their actions. This reflects the early stages of the Gaza war, when they told Gazans to move south of the Wadi Gaza river. Since then, the estimates are that 70,000 have been killed and 170,000 injured. Indeed, Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz explicitly said that the destruction of villages in southern Lebanon would proceed in accordance with the model of Beit Hanoun and Rafah in Gaza. With the growing Israeli attacks in the west bank in addition to that, when will the Government act on this consistent pattern of war crimes purposefully pursued by the Israeli Government, take action to pressure the Israeli state to stop its military action, end arms sales, stop F-35 supplies, impose sanctions, and utilise the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 and the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002? There are tools at the Minister's disposal. When will he use them fully?

Mr Falconer: We have talked about the F-35 programme at length before. I am usually happy to go back into that debate, but as my hon. Friend has given me the opportunity, I would prefer to comment further on the impact of displacement in Lebanon, which is different in some respects from the impact of displacement in Gaza. As many right hon. and hon. Members know, there is a complicated, multiconfessional balance within Lebanon, and displacing a quarter of the population, often over long distances, has a significant impact on the stability of the country. Exactly as my hon. Friend says, forced displacement is a war crime, but to displace so many people will also have a deleterious impact on the stability of Lebanon in the long term, so it is all the more important that the practice is reversed and that we return to a genuine and sustainable ceasefire. To give one small note of optimism, we welcome the talks that the United States has been convening between Israel and Lebanon, including the talks today, and we want to see them progress.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Hezbollah has made south Lebanon into an armed camp and a massive arms dump in which it stores rockets and drones that have been used to attack Israeli towns and cities, kill civilians, cause billions of pounds worth of damage, and displace a large part of the population. Does the Minister agree that it is not

disproportionate for any Government to take action to defend their own citizens? That can be done only by going into the area the enemy is firing its weapons from and causing that destruction. Would he not agree that Israel does not want to occupy Lebanon and take over territory, but that the answer is to eliminate and disarm Hezbollah, and then there will be real peace in that area?

Mr Falconer: Perhaps the right hon. Member has been to southern Lebanon, as I have recently. I can assure him that it is not an arms dump; it is a place where people are living, where children are living, and where people are displaced. I saw for myself villages that had literally been flattened to the ground. There is no military operation that ends up flattening entire villages to less than the height of this Dispatch Box that does not prompt the question, "What on earth were you trying to do with that operation?" It is absolutely clear that Lebanese Hezbollah must be disarmed. It continues to strike northern Israeli communities, which is absolutely and completely unacceptable. The responsibility to prevent that must be with the Lebanese Government and armed forces, and we must see a genuine and sustainable ceasefire.

Of course the Israeli Government will react with understandable total fury if their nationals are targeted from another state, but as the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) said, Israel has attempted before to occupy southern Lebanon for long periods of time, and it did not lead to safety among northern communities in Israel. We must all support the Lebanese Government to do what is necessary to disarm Hezbollah, but we must ensure that civilians in southern Lebanon are protected in doing so.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Israel's bombing of Lebanon has seen yet more war crimes. It is incredibly dangerous for the people there. It is also a direct threat to a peace process being achieved between the US and Iran, in a war that is killing people over there and driving up the cost of living for people here. How many more countries does Israel have to bomb before the Government impose widespread sanctions, as they rightly did on Russia?

Mr Falconer: We have already covered sanctions in these exchanges. I slightly correct my hon. Friend: what will protect Lebanon is not Iran or its talks with the United States of America; it is the Lebanese Government and armed forces, the process that is happening in Washington today between the Governments of Lebanon and Israel, and the efforts of the United States, which I have welcomed, in seeking to ensure that there is no further violence. The President of the United States said earlier this week that the guns must fall silent, and I agree with him.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Is not the issue that Israel's occupation and destruction of so much life in Lebanon at present is a continuation of its genocide in Gaza, of its continued occupation of the west bank, and of its arming of settlers to commit violent acts against Palestinian villages and steal their land and crops? Is not the real issue that Israel is allowed to get away with it because the rest of the world provides Israel with the wherewithal to do it? Will the Minister be very clear about this: what is the British

[Jeremy Corbyn]

Government's military relationship with Israel at the moment? Are we supplying weapons? Are supplying parts for the F-35? Are we sharing intelligence information? Are we assisting Israel's military occupation of the three areas that I have just mentioned?

Mr Falconer: We are not—I have set out to the House on a number of occasions that the steps that we took were to ensure that no bombs and no bullets were being sold to Israel, or were being licensed to be sold to Israel by UK companies. That is because of concerns that we had about Israel's conduct in Gaza. That applies to Gaza, it applies to the west bank and it applies to Lebanon. The right hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the F-35 programme, so let me reiterate this to the House: the UK does not permit licences for direct sales of F-35 parts to Israel, but we are part of the global F-35 supply chain. We do contribute to the global spares pool—from which Israel may indeed be able to buy parts produced in the UK—but as part of a global arrangement that is vital to our security and to that of our friends and allies, such as Ukraine. That continues to be our policy.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The US news service Axios reported that this week President Trump held a direct phone call with Benjamin Netanyahu, in which he said that Netanyahu was “effing crazy” for escalating his military action in Lebanon, killing thousands of innocent civilians, adding:

“You’d be in prison if it weren’t for me.”

Netanyahu is also continuing to inflict death and misery on the people of the west bank and Gaza, as we have heard many Members report today. Is it not time for the UK Government to show that we share the global anger and disgust at Israel's attempt to act with impunity, by imposing our own sanctions on illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: I have seen those reports about the language used by the President of the United States in his call with the Prime Minister of Israel—I think the President confirmed that this morning. The language is unparliamentary, so I will not repeat it, but I very much sympathise with the frustration that the President feels with the Prime Minister of Israel and the conduct of the Israeli Government in Lebanon. I reiterate my support for the President's call that the guns must fall silent, and we must have a genuine and sustainable ceasefire.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers; he has an incredibly difficult portfolio.

Israel is not perfect. I am not perfect. The Minister is not perfect. Nobody in this House is perfect. Following Hezbollah's sustained barrage of missiles and rockets targeting Israeli towns and cities, and the murder of Israeli civilians and soldiers, will the Minister set out the Government's position on whether they fully recognise and support the IDF's actions in Lebanon as a necessary and proportionate response to eliminate the terrorist threat and protect Israeli civilians? Surely the duty of any Government is to protect and stop terrorists killing their people.

Mr Falconer: I regret to disagree with the courteous and hon. Gentleman on this question. I do not think that what Israel is doing is proportionate, for all the reasons that we have set out in this urgent question. He is absolutely right that it is the responsibility of the Government to protect their people. That applies to Lebanon as much as it does to Israel, and that is why the talks in Washington today are so important.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): On 2 March, I asked the Prime Minister what steps the UK was taking to prepare for targeted stabilisation and humanitarian efforts in Lebanon and Yemen if the Iranian regime changed. While we are all in support of the dismantling of Hezbollah, the Iranian regime, of course, has not changed, but the Israeli Government have none the less stoked regional instability through these wholly disproportionate attacks. Will the Minister therefore condemn the actions being taken by the Israeli forces and reassure my constituents that nothing is off the table when it comes to the UK's responses to such actions, including sanctions and further arms and trade embargoes?

Mr Falconer: We keep all those questions under review, and we recognise the magnitude of events in the middle east. I will decline to enter into the hypothetical question, but obviously events in the middle east—whether in Iran or Lebanon—are of real concern to constituents right across the country, including in my constituency of Lincoln and in my hon. Friend's constituency of Rushcliffe.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): All of us in this House know that words have consequences, whether they are spoken in this House or outside. We remember the Prime Minister's comments about the cutting of vital supplies being fair game. Look at the lack of criticism and calling out of war crimes that we have all witnessed; the specific terminology of “war crimes” is not being used by Ministers of this Government. Recently, Cenk Uygur—someone that even Piers Morgan holds in high regard—was banned from entering the United Kingdom. It is words and actions like those that embolden Netanyahu and his right-wing Government. Does the Minister recognise that words need to change, as well as sanctions?

Mr Falconer: Words do matter. It has been a long-standing principle of this Government, and indeed previous Governments, that it is not for Ministers to say what crimes are—that is for courts to find. That is why we have not used the particular formulation that the hon. Gentleman would like to hear. I do not think anybody in the Chamber could have any doubt about the extent of criticism that other Ministers and I have delivered in relation to Israeli conduct, whether in Lebanon or Gaza. That has been criticism not just in words, but through concrete actions, including sanctions against Israeli Ministers, as I set out earlier in my question. We have a very delicate situation in the middle east, which we are seeking to navigate in the best interests of the region and of the United Kingdom. I sing the praises of many people in this Chamber, but Piers Morgan, I am afraid, is not one of them. We have to make difficult decisions in a serious way, and that is what we try to do day in, day out.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): The attacks by Hezbollah must cease, but the wholly disproportionate response in Lebanon by the Israeli military is bringing untold suffering to those least able to bear the consequences: women and children; and older and disabled people. What can UK Ministers do, alongside international partners and agencies, to ensure that humanitarian support and aid reaches those who have been left in desperate straits as a result of the actions of Israeli forces, who are responsible for serious violations of human rights and international law?

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his commitment to the region and developments in the middle east. We are proud that we are now one of the largest humanitarian donors in Lebanon. Access to that aid has not been impeded within Lebanon. However, as some of my hon. Friends have already set out, there have been terrible incidents involving the death of aid workers—very committed young Lebanese who are doing their absolute best to help people in their own country—and that must stop.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The illegal actions of Hezbollah and Iran must be condemned, but so must the illegal actions of Israel. Israel carried out 11,518 attacks in Lebanon between 2 March and 11 May, with more than 3,000 further estimated attacks since. Israel has bombed and destroyed or heavily demolished more than 100 villages. As of yesterday, Israel has injured 10,577 people and killed 3,468 people, including 128 health workers. It has attacked and damaged 17 hospitals, destroying three of them. It employs double and triple-tap attacks on civilians. Will this Labour Government do anything meaningful to stop Israel's thirst for the blood of innocent civilians, its insatiable appetite for the most barbaric violence and its Gazafication of Lebanon and the wider middle east? Does the UK support or condemn Netanyahu's declared plan for a Greater Israel?

Mr Falconer: I think we have to be a bit careful when we describe the Government of Israel. I do not think they have a thirst for the blood of innocent civilians. We have to be a bit more careful with our language in this Chamber, because that sounds to me like it echoes antisemitic tropes—so I want to take a little bit of issue with the question that I was asked. I have taken clear steps in relation to Lebanon, and indeed in relation to events in Palestine, and we will continue to do so, but I do think we have to be careful with our language in here.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I echo the comments about the need for Hezbollah to cease their attacks on civilians, but it is clear that the tactics being used by the IDF deliberately echo and mirror the tactics being used in Gaza and in the west bank: forced displacement, deliberate targeting of hospitals and other healthcare facilities, and intentional targeting of journalists to try to blind the world to the crimes that are taking place. Does the Minister agree that there is a clear need for further and deeper sanctions against the individuals and organisations responsible in the Israeli Government?

Mr Falconer: I know that my hon. Friend has long been committed to these issues, and that he has constituents in the region who have strong views as well, and I am glad for his continued engagement. I will not provide further comments on sanctions from the Dispatch Box for reasons that people will understand, but we will keep all measures under review as the situation evolves.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Last week, France sanctioned Itamar Ben-Gvir, almost a year to the day since the Minister made the same announcement from this Dispatch Box. I thank him for the leadership he has shown over the past months and years. He is right not to pick a side in this war other than the Lebanese Government, because both Iran's Hezbollah and Netanyahu have shown a disregard for civilian life right across the region. People and organisations in Edinburgh South West want to be reassured that if a ceasefire is established, the aid we are putting into that region is sufficient and scalable.

The Minister started off by talking about Iran, so I have to mention the fact that we have seen the industrialisation of the death penalty in Iran against the Iranian people—often young people who have simply been out protesting. I know that he raised concerns about this—in, I think, November last year. Is there more that we can do? I know it is a really difficult situation.

Mr Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words about the leadership we have shown on these issues. He is absolutely right. Let me just reiterate to the House our total opposition to the death penalty everywhere. What has happened in Iran, particularly since the protests in January, has been an absolutely awful cracking down on their own people. The Government have imposed very significant restrictions on communications, so some of the detail of that crackdown is not as accessible to us now as it once was. I have grave fears about how Iranians are being treated within Iran. We will continue to monitor this closely and raise it with the Iranian authorities with the force that my hon. Friend would expect.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I associate myself with the words of the Minister in strongly condemning the Iranian attack on Kuwait airport and the continuing attacks by Hezbollah on Israeli civilians. It has been disturbing over recent weeks and days to see the IDF appearing to engage in a mission to seize land that does not belong to them, exemplified by the hoisting of the Israeli flag over Beaufort Castle, presumably as a symbol of conquest. Will my hon. Friend join me in condemning that act and in reiterating once again that international law applies to Hezbollah and to the Government of Israel?

Mr Falconer: It does. Of course, flags are much less important than the horrific loss of life that we have discussed over the course of this afternoon. However, it is hard to draw the conclusion that the Israeli Government are taking steps simply to deal with a terrorist organisation when they take one of the most historic sites in Lebanon, with a long history of occupation by the Israelis, and raise the Israeli flag in exactly the way my hon. Friend has described. I join him in his condemnation.

Lord Mandelson: Response to Humble Address

[Oral evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 28 April, 23 April, 21 April 2026 and 3 November 2025, on the Work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Session 2024-26, HC 385. Written evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, on the Work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, reported to the House on 27 April, 21 April 2026, 18 November and 16 September 2025, Session 2024-26, HC 385. Correspondence from the Deputy Prime Minister to the Foreign Affairs Committee, on the appointment of Lord Mandelson as Ambassador to USA, reported to the House on 2 June. Correspondence from the Cabinet Office to the Foreign Affairs Committee, on the oral evidence session with Catherine Little, reported to the House on 28 April, Session 2024-26.]

2.30 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government's response to the House's humble Address of 4 February 2026.

On 4 February I came before the House to debate the Humble Address motion. I said at the time that it was in the national interest to be transparent and to act as quickly as we could, and with the second publication of documents earlier this week on Monday, the Government have done so. Today's debate is a further opportunity for Members to put questions and, indeed, debate the content of the documents. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, who is alongside me on the Front Bench, will listen to the debate and close it in due course.

As we debate these issues today, we should ensure that we keep Jeffrey Epstein's victims at the forefront of our minds. What Epstein did was abhorrent and unforgivable. He was a vile, evil paedophile, and I denounce him and his actions as strongly today as I did on 4 February when I came to the Dispatch Box.

The Prime Minister has taken responsibility for appointing Peter Mandelson as ambassador to the United States. He has said that if he knew then what he knows now, he would never have appointed him, and he has apologised.

I think it is worth setting out the process that was followed in order to publish such a large volume of material on Monday.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As the right hon. Gentleman is going to talk about process, I would be very grateful if he could clear up one matter. I have a high regard for the right hon. Gentleman's integrity, and so I hope he will not dance around this subject, as has been done by others in the past.

In the first tranche of documents there were a number of notes sent by private secretaries to the Prime Minister. If I were allowed to use a prop, I would open the documents to pages 3 and 8, where Members would see notes discussing the situation as regards how to appoint the ambassador, Peter Mandelson and so forth. Under those notes are big boxes headed "Prime Minister Comments". The normal course of action when a Prime Minister receives a document of that sort is that he

notes down his response to it. These boxes are totally blank. My simple question to the right hon. Gentleman is this: are they blank because the Prime Minister made no notes whatsoever or because any notes that the Prime Minister made have been redacted and removed? The Intelligence and Security Committee deals routinely with even more sensitive material, and every time there is a redaction in a publication, there are three asterisks to show that the redaction has taken place. Have there been redactions of the Prime Minister's notes on these memorandums that were sent to him for decision?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The answer is that they are blank now because they were blank then. The formal decision to appoint Peter Mandelson as the ambassador was conveyed by the Prime Minister's then principal private secretary in a letter to the Foreign Office. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the empty box notes, and the reason that they are empty is that there was nothing to redact. I hope that is a sufficiently clear answer.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because I want to ask about the process of the appointment, rather than the process of the release of the papers, which I think he is about to move on to.

I have previously spoken in this House about the process in the future, and I think the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), has made not-dissimilar comments. Whether we have a future Conservative Government—hopefully—or another Government, we should have pre-appointment scrutiny of senior posts, both ambassadorial appointments and, I would argue, permanent secretaries of Departments. That would be a safer way of doing things.

On senior appointments to the ISC—there are lots of current ISC members present in the Chamber, as well as former members such as myself—the Paymaster General will know that the appointment is made by the Prime Minister, but the double-lock mechanism ensures that the House has a say and can veto appointments if necessary. I am not necessarily asking for that mechanism, but certainly the relevant Select Committee should carry out pre-scrutiny for senior appointments of ambassadors and other senior officials, whether they are political appointees or not. I think that would help the whole House, whatever our politics.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am not hiding from the fact that we have to make changes to the appointments process. Indeed, the Government have changed the process for all direct ministerial appointments to make sure that due diligence and national security vetting have to take place prior to appointment. It is absolutely right that that change was made.

Let me turn to the process. The process that was followed was obviously a significant one in order to publish such a large volume of material. When I was at the Dispatch Box on 4 February, I committed to publishing material in scope of the motion—bar that which the Intelligence and Security Committee agreed would be prejudicial to national security and international relations.

At this point, I want to put on record my thanks to the Committee. Members who were in the House that day might recall that even as I was speaking in the

Chamber I was making the case for the involvement of the Intelligence and Security Committee. I know that it was not a small undertaking for the Committee. A huge amount of time has been spent on this, and I am very grateful to the Committee's members for their very careful and—it looks to me—painstaking work in going through the volume of documentation.

On 4 February, and indeed since, Members have raised a range of issues, and it is absolutely right that the Government are held to account on those. As Members will have seen from the material that was published on Monday, the Government have acted on the House's request for transparency to an extraordinary extent.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On Monday, I asked a question to the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister about the fact that it is extraordinary that there appeared to be no WhatsApp or text messages from the Prime Minister—that was the information available to us at the time. We now know that there are no text messages from the Prime Minister to Mandelson after a few days after the general election, and the WhatsApp messages have totally disappeared.

The answer I got on Monday from the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister was slightly disingenuous, I have to say. He said that Prime Ministers do not operate in this way. Rather like Mr Gladstone, they sit at the Cabinet table and men in frock coats bring them papers. It is complete rubbish. We know that the Prime Minister must have been using WhatsApp all the time. To use disappearing WhatsApp messages is contrary to what the covid inquiry suggested, and it is quite contrary to transparency.

I say to the Paymaster General that these scandals are made much worse by any hint of a cover-up. Everybody knows that a mistake was made, and people are very forgiving of the Prime Minister if he has made a mistake. What they are not forgiving of is some sort of cover-up, where numerous text messages and WhatsApp messages have suddenly vanished.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I think some Conservative Members would be quite happy to have Gladstonian principles in government.

I really do reject the point about a cover-up, and I reject it for this reason: this process was quite rightly driven by and led by officials without political interference, working with the Intelligence and Security Committee—a cross-party Committee that is very well respected across this House. Not a single redaction in those documents came about because of a ministerial decision, and that is simply because we have not played that part in the process—and neither should we have done, so I completely reject the idea of a cover-up.

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

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the subject of someone who might be keen on Gladstone, I will give way.

Sir John Hayes: The right hon. Gentleman knows me well, and he knows of my disdain for Gladstone and my deep admiration for his rival Benjamin Disraeli, who in my judgment was the greatest ever Prime Minister by far.

The key thing about the ISC, on which I sit—I am grateful for the Minister's comments about its work—is that the House took the view that the ISC should see the whole of the information. Whether that was the right view or whether the Humble Address was too permissive is an open question, but the House took the view that we should see all matters relating to international relations or national security.

An executive decision was taken—I do not know whether it was endorsed by Ministers; it was certainly endorsed subsequently by the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister—not to make the UK Security Vetting file available to the ISC. That is not what the Humble Address says. Subsequently, that has been legitimised by the argument, which I do not buy, that it would have a chilling effect on the whole vetting process. However, the Minister—and by the way, I share the respect of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) for him—knows that the ISC's seeing material is not the same as disclosing it. This is about scrutiny, not disclosure, so why was an executive decision made not to make that information available to the ISC? Who made it, and when? Was it made by officials? Was it made by Ministers? Will he explain how he can square that with the remark he just made?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It was an official-led process. Let me just make that clear, because the right hon. Gentleman points towards a pretty important issue. We had the Humble Address and its wording—hon. Members can read that wording—with the quite extensive list drafted by the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart). At the end, it said:

“except papers prejudicial to UK national security or international relations which shall instead be referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee”.

What the Government have done, and indeed were entitled to do so, is take into account the precedents set by previous responses to Humble Addresses—under the Government whom the right hon. Gentleman supported, indeed. The Prime Minister has written to the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee on precisely that point.

There were a number of Humble Addresses during the 2017-19 Parliament when I was in opposition. I would not say that they were a constitutional innovation, because they have quite an ancient origin, but I personally played some part in their re-emergence. It is obviously the case that, as those Humble Addresses have been replied to—now by a number of parties in government—principles have been used in approaching them which come from things such as the Freedom of Information Act, the duty of Ministers under the ministerial code, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the general data protection regulation. Those are based on precedents for responses to Humble Addresses.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): The Minister is being incredibly generous with his time. As an aside, I think many hon. Members in this place—those on the Conservative Benches at least—would like to go back to the 19th century.

It is clear that officials have done a huge amount of work with regard to this process. Will the Minister say a little bit about the independent King's Counsel,

[Tim Roca]

and what assurances it has provided that the Government are complying with the Humble Address?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: That was another important part of what was done, and the House should also take reassurance from that. I made the point about precedents to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), and the Government also sought to take that independent legal advice on their interpretation of complying with the Humble Address.

Sir Julian Lewis *rose*—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will take an intervention from the right hon. Gentleman, but then I need to make a bit more progress.

Sir Julian Lewis: I want to clear up the point about precedents. It may be that I am wrong about this, but I do not think there is any precedent for the House deciding that the Intelligence and Security Committee specifically should look at material that was to be redacted before it went to the public. The Intelligence and Security Committee, as the Minister well knows, was founded in 1994. Since that time, there has never been even one leak from the Committee. So there is no comparison between making things available to the Intelligence and Security Committee—the only parliamentary body entitled to see highly classified material, and one which never leaks—and to any other body. While he says, “This is all led by officials. It is okay for the officials to see it, but not to release it to anyone else,” the reason the ISC was chosen for the motion is that it is within the ring of secrecy, and that is unaffected by any precedents regarding bodies that do not have that special status.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is just that if he looks at the wording of the Humble Address, he will see that it lists a series of classes of documents, and then it says, “except papers”—those that were referred to the ISC. That is our compliance with the motion.

Let me turn back to the process, which, as I said, was undertaken by officials. They sought returns from all Government Departments, including material, as has been referred to, on non-corporate communication channels. There were multiple rounds of discovery to ensure that searches returned material relevant to the full scope of the motion. Some documents were assessed as likely prejudicial to national security or international relations—the point I was just making—and, as I committed to the House in February, they were then referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee.

Due to the wide scope of the motion and the significant volume of material that needed to be located and reviewed, the first publication, on 11 March, was focused on the parts of the motion that were of most urgent interest to the House: Peter Mandelson’s appointment, his withdrawal and the severance. The second tranche, which was published on Monday, contains material relevant to the parts of the motion that cover communications and documents concerning Peter Mandelson’s appointment and vetting, and messages between Peter Mandelson and Ministers, special advisers and senior civil servants in the months prior to and throughout his tenure as ambassador. All

documents held by the Government have now been disclosed, save those that are being withheld on the request of the Metropolitan police.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): On the point of communication between Peter Mandelson and Ministers, the fact remains that the more documents that are released, the more questions emerge about Peter Mandelson’s reach across Government. Will the Minister tell the House whether Lord Mandelson had any discussions whatsoever with Ministers, officials or advisers about Palantir? Will further documentation with regards to that be released?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On Palantir, I refer my hon. Friend to the methodology statement at the start of each of the three volumes, where it is made absolutely clear that there is a recognition that Palantir is a matter of interest to the House; indeed, there are references to Palantir within the documents. As I am sure the House will understand, I will not speculate on the contents of the documents that remain with the Metropolitan police, but certainly I invite everyone to look at the references to Palantir in the tranche of documents before the House—indeed, the public can do so as well.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am interested in the mitigations, which are the reason we have this great gap between what would seem to be a security threat and Peter Mandelson being appointed. I cannot find any documents about that, but I have found that in written evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee in September 2025—after the appointment, and when it was about to be withdrawn—Ian Collard said that he had requested a copy of the vetting summary. He made some notes based on the summary as an aide-mémoire, in case it was needed, and submitted them for the Humble Address. I am interested in seeing what the notes are of the mitigations: the man responsible for the mitigations took a note—presumably of what he had seen—and put it in for the Humble Address, yet it is not in the papers.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Officials leading the process will have heard the exchange—and this exchange—in relation to that specific point about Ian Collard. As the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister set out in his statement on Monday, the documents with the Metropolitan police fall into several categories: internal correspondence relating to Peter Mandelson, and documents in relation to conflict of interest and national security vetting. I appreciate the point that my right hon. Friend makes and officials will have heard the exchange between her and me.

Emily Thornberry: I want to make it clear that the document I referred to is not part of the original decision making; it is an aide-mémoire that Ian Collard made. If I cannot see the original documents, can I at least see that later one?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As ever, my right hon. Friend makes her case forcefully. I am treading carefully in my language because this process has been led by officials working with the ISC. The officials working on it will have heard the request that she just made.

Sir John Hayes: I will take up the point that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) raised about mitigation later in the debate—should I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, which is not a given. Will the Minister address the issue of when the Metropolitan police asked for information on UK vetting? We will not know the granular detail because the executive decision based on precedent was made, although my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) has challenged the precedent. However, there was an assumption that some information on vetting would be made available, perhaps in a redacted form having been considered first by the ISC—I will say no more than that. We now hear that no information on vetting will be made available until the Metropolitan police has finished its work, when it will come back through the ISC according to the process agreed as part of the Humble Address. When did the Metropolitan police begin to take an interest in the vetting part of all this, and why?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To the right hon. Gentleman's direct question, I have not been part of the process or been given precise dates for when the Metropolitan police said what. However, I will say this: the documents with the Metropolitan police have been viewed by the chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), so within the confines of not wishing to undermine the ongoing investigation we have tried to be as transparent as we can be with Parliament at this stage. In addition, the summary document of the vetting has been shared with the Intelligence and Security Committee, so to the extent that we have been able to share documents, we have. The request in this debate from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury, will no doubt have been heard as well.

Let me turn to the issue of redactions, which I started to develop in earlier answers to interventions. I will not repeat what the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister said on Monday, nor the methodological note that is available for right hon. and hon. Members to look at, but I want to clarify some issues so that there is no doubt about the process that was followed. As I have said, no material was redacted on grounds of prejudice to national security or international relations without the ISC's approval. The redactions agreed with the ISC are all triple-asterisked throughout the publication. When you see the three asterisks, that material was agreed with the ISC to be redacted.

On my point about precedent in the earlier exchange with the right hon. Member for New Forest East, the redactions were limited to the names of junior officials, contact details such as telephone numbers and email addresses, the personal or commercially sensitive data of third parties not relevant to the motion, and some cases where there was legal professional privilege. That is in line with the process that has been followed by successive Administrations in relation to Humble Address motions. Those redactions are clearly labelled in the publication. To reconfirm, no Government Minister or special adviser has determined any of the redactions; that was done by the official-led process. I echo the comments made by the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister on Monday in thanking the Chair of the PACAC, the hon. Member for North Dorset, who is not

in his place, for reviewing our approach to the third-party redactions and the material withheld, so as not to prejudice the ongoing police investigations and to ensure that we are being transparent with Parliament, as we should be.

Let me turn to the specific point about the Metropolitan police. Everyone across the House will appreciate the need not to prejudice the investigation, and will understand that I am unable to answer questions about certain documents that have been withheld. They include questions to Peter Mandelson by the Prime Minister's then chief of staff and Peter Mandelson's responses. The remaining documents, as I said a moment or two ago, fall broadly into the following categories: national security vetting material, conflict of interest process material and relevant internal correspondence with Peter Mandelson. Such information will be published in due course, either at the conclusion of the investigation, or at a point, if there were one, at which publication would no longer be prejudicial to the police investigation.

On 4 February, the House made its will clear.

Emily Thornberry: It may be that I am just lacking in imagination, but I do not understand why the police would not allow us to see the letter from the Foreign Office to Peter Mandelson saying, "You are given this job subject to not having anything to do with x, y and z", or whatever the mitigations were. At the moment, we just do not have anything at all and so it is very difficult to understand why he was appointed. We are told that we need to wait for some time in the future—there is no date by which that will be disclosed—and at that stage all will become clear. It is as if the central point of the investigation and all these thousands of pages do not amount to anything until the police eventually decide to give us those crucial documents.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is, quite rightly, for the police and not for Ministers to determine the way in which they want their investigation to proceed and to identify documents that they feel are reasonable lines of inquiry. However, to give the House reassurance, even that class of documents was viewed by the Chair of PACAC—obviously, under particular controlled circumstances—because we wanted for Parliament the level of transparency that we could provide at that stage, despite the ongoing investigation.

The Government have discharged their duty to the House in complying with the Humble Address motion, aside from that small amount of information that will be subsequently published in a final tranche. As Members will have seen, Monday's publication complies with the spirit and the letter of the motion, as well as being one of the largest ever publications laid in this House. Members have had some time to consider the document—certainly, since Monday—and I am grateful to the Leader of the House for making further time to debate the issue today. I know that throughout the course of the debate, Members will be conscious of not prejudicing the ongoing criminal investigation. I am grateful to the House for understanding the position the Government have taken and my position on answering questions on that.

I look forward to the debate before the House. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister will close and respond to points made during the debate. I commend the motion to the—

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will, just.

Martin Wrigley: I was trying not to interrupt his flow—[*Interruption.*] Until I did.

Throughout the files there are mentions of Palantir and Peter Mandelson, including a memo in which he tries to introduce Peter Thiel to No. 10 staff in June last year. Even though Mr Louis Mosley has written to me today suggesting that Peter Mandelson was not intervening regarding Palantir business with the Government, does the Minister agree that he still was doing so?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I reject the suggestion that there is any wrongdoing, as regards Palantir contracts being renewed—I think one was renewed by the Ministry of Defence—in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests. I reject that absolutely. On the meeting between the Prime Minister and Peter Thiel, to be clear, that did not happen.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP) *rose*—

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) *rose*—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We have set off a surge of interventions. I will give way to the hon. Lady and then the right hon. Gentleman, and that is it.

Kirsty Blackman: I was listening to the reassurances the Minister gave about the material that has been provided, and the fact that this is all the material bar that which is being held back. May I just ask for a further assurance from the Minister that if things do come to light, which were not found in what I appreciate were significant trawls, and which constitute correspondence that would fit the Humble Address terms, he will follow up and ensure that those things are published as well as the stuff that has been held back because of the police investigations?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do not expect that to happen, but of course if it did, we would consider it. I will finally give way to the right hon. Member for Islington North.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous with his time. Is he able to confirm whether Peter Mandelson had divested himself of all his financial interests in companies, including peripheries or actuality of Palantir, while he was ambassador in Washington?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: That of course strays into the conflict of interests class of documents, which is still one of the classes that is with the Metropolitan police.

I conclude by saying again that it is very important that the House has this debate today. From the debate in February to today, I have certainly taken my duties, and indeed the Government's duties, to the House very seriously, as has my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister—I think today is his eleventh appearance in the House on this matter. He will, of course, close the debate and answer any further questions. I commend the motion to the House.

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

3.1 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Paymaster General for his remarks and look forward to hearing what the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister has to say at the end of the debate.

As we made clear earlier in the week, we are not entirely happy with the way this has come together. However, just because, in the way that these debates take place, it is not automatic that we will get to ask Ministers questions if they decline to take interventions, I am very encouraged by how the Paymaster General has handled that, although *Hansard* should know that he said that nobody could follow the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—he shut down everyone else—and I know that the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister will want to follow his good lead.

I hope that the Paymaster General will accept my sympathies on the loss of his mobile phone. I mean that genuinely, and it is very unfortunate that it was stolen five days after the phone of the former chief of staff, Morgan McSweeney, was stolen. This, I believe, is an indication of how dangerous life is in Labour-run London, and I hope those responsible for looking after the Met police are listening to this. I say that genuinely because a lot of us have friends and colleagues who have experienced the same thing and it is a serious matter.

The Paymaster General referred to his resurrection of the Humble Address as a political tool, and I hope that he is still proud of that achievement and that he does not rue it or regret it and that he is enjoying being on the other end of it. I remember this coming up in one of those Brexit years, I forget exactly which one, and I was reminded of it because he spoke about precedent and the Humble Address, and the truth is that his Humble Address breached precedent in a very serious way. It had been the case in “*Erskine May*” throughout the ages that Humble Addresses would not be used in order to take the opinions of Law Officers of the Crown and present them to the House. That was specifically carved out, yet his Humble Address struck right through it.

When we talk about precedent and Humble Addresses, we must be very careful and be very clear that the instruction given by the House to the Government is sacrosanct. It is more important than anything, and it is not for the Government to redefine what the House has asked them to do. It is simply the Government's job to comply in order to treat the House with respect, but also to avoid falling into contempt. So I will say again that the idea that potentially large classes of document should be retained and kept away from the House because the Metropolitan police are using them may be desirable, but that should not be done automatically without the agreement of the House.

If the Government wish to change the terms of the motion that was presented to them, they can come back to the House and do that. A dangerous precedent is set when the Government decide they will reinterpret what the House has said, because maybe this has not been convenient for the Government, but it might be for a future Government, so we must be very careful with precedent and very careful with setting new precedent.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend's point is about the relationship between this House and the Executive and, more than that, the relationship between Ministers and officials. It is time that this House asserted its authority in that respect, and the Humble Address does exactly that—it is an assertion of the House's authority—and that Ministers use their authority, given their appointment by the Crown, to insist on what officials do and do not do. While it is right that this process has been driven at a logistical level by officials, in the end it is up to Ministers and then this House to make a judgment about what is published, where and how.

Alex Burghart: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right: there is no higher authority than Parliament and consequently the Government should bear that in mind when delivering not just on this Humble Address but any future Humble Address.

I do not wish to go over all of the ground that we have already covered, but there are clearly some discrepancies between what has been said in public and what has appeared in the Humble Address. There may be good reasons for some of that, but some is much harder to explain.

I shall start with the information that appeared in *The Guardian* last week regarding the contents of the ISC's summary document. Obviously that has not appeared in this return, as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who sits on the ISC, have pointed out. We now have a situation in which the readership of *The Guardian* has been privy to the information that a document contained concerns about Mandelson's relationships with at least four individuals: a Chinese Minister; Oleg Deripaska; a former Israeli Minister; and an unnamed man with whom Mandelson is said to have had "a relationship". This information has come out of what, by the Government's own definition, is a highly secure document, which we were previously told very few people had seen. I suggest that if this is so secure, first, that information should not have come out in any form and, secondly, given that it has, there really ought to be a leak inquiry because this is nationally sensitive information. I hope we can get confirmation later on from the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister that that is what is happening. *[Interruption.]* I hear that from across on the Treasury Bench, but it would be good to have it formally on the record later.

I turn now to the central element that has featured in all of our debates: the Prime Minister's role and judgment in the process of the appointment of Peter Mandelson. The Opposition established after the first release of documents that the Prime Minister was shown a due diligence document in which he was told that Mandelson had maintained an unhealthy relationship with Epstein after Epstein had been sent to prison. We have often in this House rightly paid tribute to the victims and survivors of Jeffrey Epstein, stating that they should always be in our thoughts, but the Prime Minister's thoughts were not with the victims and survivors of Jeffrey Epstein after he had read that due diligence document, and I think we should put that clearly on the record.

Sir Julian Lewis: I think it is worth just putting on the record the actual words from that due diligence note, which can be found on page 11 of the first volume. It talks about a 2019 report commissioned by JPMorgan:

"The report cited Epstein's personal records which showed contact beginning in 2002 and continuing throughout the 2000s.

After Epstein was first convicted of procuring an underage girl in 2008, their relationship continued across 2009-2011, beginning when Lord Mandelson was business minister and continuing after the end of the Labour government. Mandelson reportedly stayed in Epstein's House while he was in jail in June 2009."

That is from a document which it is not in doubt the Prime Minister saw, yet he went ahead with making this appointment.

Alex Burghart: I thank my right hon. Friend for that timely spelling out of exactly what the Prime Minister read—and yet he went ahead and made the appointment anyway. I take the remarks of the Paymaster General and other Ministers totally at face value and totally sincerely, but it is clear that the Prime Minister was not thinking in that way.

Sir John Hayes: On that particular point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), what is not clear, however, is the relationship between the due diligence process, particularly in relation to Epstein, and the vetting process. It is pretty hard to believe that the UK vetting process would not have taken account of what my right hon. Friend just referred to, but we will never know that because the Government have decided not to make that available for scrutiny, even to the ISC. It is surely inconceivable that that would not have been part of the vetting process.

Alex Burghart: I also find that very difficult to believe.

We have these comments about the due diligence documents, and we have these comments about Epstein. We also have the comments about Mandelson's directorship of a Russian company that owned a defence company that supplied Putin's war effort in Crimea, and about his business relationships in China, to name but a few things in the due diligence document. It can be no accident that on the same day that the due diligence document was given to the Prime Minister, the then Cabinet Secretary said to the Prime Minister, "If you're going to appoint this man, get the security vetting done first. Make sure that you have done the security vetting and had his disclosure of interests before you confirm his appointment." But the Prime Minister went ahead and did it anyway. This was an enormous, historic and really terrible error of judgment.

What we then witnessed in September 2025, when the Mandelson appointment had completely fallen apart and he had been fired, was that the civil service scrambled to try to retrofit a justification for what had happened. Chris Wormald, the then Cabinet Secretary, did not do a bad job, but it was clearly inaccurate because we have in black and white what Simon Case had set down. We now have the due diligence document and the fact that the security vetting happened after the appointment.

We also now know, thanks to the second return, that in January 2025, Mandelson was sitting in Washington looking at "highly classified" documents—the phrase "highly classified" is used in an email from January 2025—

[Alex Burghart]

despite not having any security vetting and despite not having special treatment and restricted access procedures, or STRAP, clearance. This is a massive error of judgment and of government. It goes right to the heart of why the Conservative party has been fighting for transparency on this issue: to expose the failings of the senior people in the Labour party at that time.

If we look at the second return, and at document 36 released on Monday, we can see that people such as Sir Olly Robbins were saying, while Chris Wormald was writing his note in September 2025, that they could not comment because they had not seen the relevant documentation. That makes one wonder who else had not seen the relevant documentation, because the relevant documentation is not in this release. Had Chris Wormald seen the relevant documentation, or was he just doing what a Cabinet Secretary in a crisis might do, which was trying to protect the Prime Minister?

What we do know, again from document 36, is that No. 10 itself signed off Chris Wormald's note. No. 10 itself approved—and had been given an opportunity to edit—the Cabinet Secretary's note. Again, this feels wrong. It feels as though the process was very obviously being commissioned by No. 10 and interfered with by No. 10 in order to give the answer that No. 10 wanted, rather than the truth. It was a bogus process. It was designed to get the Prime Minister off the hook, but transparency shows that he was very clearly on the hook.

Turning to the broader material, we have some things that have appeared and some things that we can deduce have been retained by the police. We have some things that we know have been destroyed and some things that may have gone missing. I hope that, during the course of this debate, we can get to the bottom of which documents may fall into which category.

In April this year, the Foreign Affairs Committee had Morgan McSweeney before it, and the Chair and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) asked him a number of questions about his messages. This was some time after the theft of his phone in October 2025. In question 970, the Chair said:

“Are any of your text messages to Peter Mandelson—or not—going to be available in the Humble Address?”

Morgan McSweeney said, “Yes.”

In question 1117, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, fearing that the theft of the phone might mean that information had been lost, asked:

“Can we take it that your phone would have contained quite a lot of communications, either with Peter Mandelson or about Peter Mandelson's appointment?”

Morgan McSweeney replied:

“Probably not much about his appointment that hasn't already been available to No. 10, because when he was sacked, No. 10 did its own—I don't want to say investigation, but its own research on what happened and why it happened and, as part of that process, I was asked to share messages and emails about the appointment and also to be interviewed”.

So we know that, in April of this year, those messages still existed, that they were not affected by the theft of McSweeney's phone and that they must have been available to the Government, but they are not in this this tranche of releases. We must therefore conclude that this is

because they have been retained by the police, so let us assume that the McSweeney emails fall into that category, unless the Minister wishes to tell us that he has received any subsequent information to say that those messages were irretrievable.

We then have the messages from the Prime Minister—or rather, we do not have any messages from the Prime Minister. It seems highly unlikely that the Prime Minister did not exchange any messages with Peter Mandelson at all, at any point. In fact, we must strongly suspect that he did, because there was a report in April in *The Spectator* by Tim Shipman, which quoted from some of those messages. We might think that those messages would have ended up being retained by the police, but when we look at the quotes that Tim Shipman had, they are incredibly anodyne. It is very unlikely that those messages would have been kept on grounds of national security or because they would be useful to a police investigation. Shipman says that

“there is a text message which Keir Starmer sent the night before he made the announcement. ‘You'll be brilliant in challenging circumstances,’ he told Mandelson. ‘And after many years of our discussions, we get to work together side by side. I really look forward to that.’”

That did not age well.

Kirsty Blackman: Can I take the hon. Gentleman back briefly to the Morgan McSweeney messages? On page 173 of the third volume, there are some messages that Morgan McSweeney has managed to provide from a group chat, which have been published, but not individual messages between himself and Peter Mandelson. If his phone was stolen, which I have no reason to doubt, how did he manage to provide these messages but not those other messages, unless, as the shadow Minister says, they do exist? Why have they been held back? I cannot imagine that it was on the grounds of national security.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady makes a good point. It may be because it was on a group message and somebody else had retained their phone, so he provided it. We have to assume that Morgan McSweeney's messages have, in some part, been retained by the police. I suspect that we will not know why for some time.

In the case of the Prime Minister's messages, however, it is hard to understand why the police or the Government would block the publication of simple messages of praise, even though they fall within the scope of the Humble Address. We really do need further reassurances from the Government about their approach to disclosure.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham Yardley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman gives me an opportunity to say that in the documents, those who may have had disappearing messages or who deleted their messages are listed almost as nil returns. I was one of those people who was asked for my messages and had an actual nil return. It would be good to have more transparency about those whose messages were lost and those of us who have very clearly never spoken to Peter Mandelson. The hon. Gentleman also gives me the opportunity to say that if there was a gender split of Ministers who had never had contact with Peter Mandelson, I imagine it would skew one way.

Alex Burghart: I congratulate the hon. Lady on taking the opportunity to put that on the record.

This is information that the House deserves to have. In what cases are we dealing with messages that never existed because no messages were sent, as in the hon. Lady's case? In what cases was there auto-delete, which we know the Prime Minister had, because it was disclosed in the lobby briefing for journalists yesterday? In what cases have phones gone missing and back-ups were not done? In what cases has information been held by the police? It really ought to be possible to know that.

I know that the police and the Government are, to a certain extent, understandably being sensitive about the police investigation. However, it really ought to be possible to say to the House, "X number of messages from the Prime Minister are being held by the police, as well as Y number of emails and Z number of text messages." There is no way that any of that could possibly interfere with any police investigation, if we know roughly what the police know. We started to move in the right direction on that on Monday, when the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister told us the categories of document that we have, but there must be other ways of giving some guidance to the House on what is being held.

We obviously have a huge amount of material that has been justifiably redacted for reasons of national security and international relations, but that does not mean that we do not have the headings. We often have email headings that say, "There was an email sent on this date from this person to that person." We cannot see the subject, but we know that the email existed. Why can we not have the same thing for the messages that the Prime Minister sent to Peter Mandelson on this date, that date and the other date? We cannot see them, because they are part of a police investigation or subject to national security concerns. We have a discrepancy between different types of approaches to the disclosure of information.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): In the context of disappearing messages, is my hon. Friend troubled by the fact that in March 2023, the Cabinet Office issued very clear guidance about the use of non-corporate communications channels by Ministers, special advisers and others? It said that disappearing messages should be used sparingly and that the use of disappearing messages does not in any way supersede the record-keeping obligations of Ministers to communicate to their private office a record of anything on their personal devices that is pertinent to the conduct of Government business.

Alex Burghart: That is entirely true. I believe that the ISC said as much in one of its responses to Government disclosure, saying it was very troubled by the fact that this guidance, which all Ministers are supposed to obey, was routinely being broken.

My right hon. Friend and I were both Ministers at the time when that guidance was brought in, and it was brought in for a very good reason. It was to reflect the fact that there are new communications channels and Ministers will want to use them—some of them are very useful for Ministers—but to make it clear that that should not get in the way of the fact that the system needs to retain a record of how decisions are made and what the decisions are. That has clearly not been done in many cases here, not least, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis)

pointed out, in the fact that we have a lot of empty boxes and no record of the Prime Minister assenting to the appointment of Peter Mandelson, even though we know that he did.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend is right that that was highlighted in the ISC's statement on these matters, and that is an issue to which it may return. It is not for me to prejudge that, but it is a matter of considerable concern. It was raised during the period of the last Government, actually, so it is not unique to this Government. Indeed, we had issues in that regard with previous Secretaries of State and Ministers—I will say no more than that. My hon. Friend is right that it is entirely unsuitable that Ministers are using insecure means to communicate very sensitive information.

May I press my hon. Friend to challenge a little further in respect of Peter Mandelson? We understand that Mandelson's own messages have not been disclosed. Will my hon. Friend press the Government on the point at which they became aware—prior to, during or subsequent to Mandelson's appointment—that Mandelson was withholding information of the electronic kind to which my hon. Friend draws the House's attention, particularly given that the Humble Address specifically deals with the issue of electronic communications?

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend is right. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister will have heard his remarks, and I hope he will respond to them.

Further to what my right hon. Friend said, the Humble Address was in February, but it was not until March that the Government asked Peter Mandelson for his phone, and Peter Mandelson then refused. As I and other Members said on Monday, the Government should seek to go after Peter Mandelson's exit payment if he denies co-operation with the Humble Address. It is totally unacceptable that the House should be denied this critical information. We have some information that is retained, some information that appears to have been destroyed and some information that appears to have gone missing.

I wish to turn to some remarks that the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister made on Monday about his own messages, as he brought them up. I think that will be a useful case study. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister said:

"I do recall having some limited exchanges with Peter Mandelson over WhatsApp, including those I have already discussed...but these conversations did not involve transacting Government business and were in line with official guidance on the use of non-corporate communications channels at the time."—[*Official Report*, 1 June 2026; Vol. 786, c. 853.]

That is all well and good, but who decided that those messages fell into that category? Did the right hon. Gentleman decide that himself? Did he show them to officials, who then decided? Did he show them to the police? Who made the decision? Again, we must ask these questions of all Ministers who were asked to disclose information. Where is it that people have self-edited? Where is it that people have had auto-deletion on their phones? Where is it that people have refused to hand things over? We deserve to know.

Something that I believe is missing throughout the three volumes we received on Monday is photos, videos, voice notes and, more significantly, attachments. I would

[Alex Burghart]

be very interested to hear the Minister's explanation for the Government's approach to those types of document. Let me draw attention in particular to document 33, from 15 September 2025. The email explicitly refers to an attachment, which is pertinent to the subject of the Humble Address, but that document is not available. I could have been led to believe that that document may have been retained by the police, were it not for the fact that all attachments seem to be missing and all photos, voicemails and videos are also missing. I cannot help but feel that it has accidentally fallen out of the full disclosure. May we have some clarity on that?

Let me turn to Peter Mandelson's declarations of interest, which are one of the most important classes of document; they are perhaps the most important class of document that we are yet to see. We now know that something definitely does exist—first, because the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister told us on Monday, and secondly, because there are references to a back-and-forth about Mandelson's contacts in the release. Mandelson pushed back on a number of occasions, saying, "I know a lot of foreign people. I have a lot of contacts. I cannot be expected to disclose everything. There was a suggestion from one official not to worry about it too much, just to get on with it and give them a list."

We appear also to be seeing an absence of documents, such as the mitigations that the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury, referred to—Collard's document. If we add it all together—the absence of the declaration of interests, the absence of the mitigations designed perhaps to handle Mandelson's relationships with his business contacts when in office, the fact that the documents of certain members of the Cabinet are entirely absent, and the business interests that we know Mandelson had—I think we can reasonably hypothesise about what the police are looking at. That would be—this is speculation—an abuse of his position in Washington to support the interests of his business relations. It is very unfortunate that we will not see that information for some time, because it goes to the heart of one of the problems with the appointment of Mandelson in the first place. [Interruption.] I think Madam Deputy Speaker is encouraging me to wind up, so that I will do. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I can understand why the Government do not want me to ask them any more questions.

In conclusion, there are a number of things that we need of the Government. Most importantly, we need a slightly fresh approach to disclosure where we are told a bit more about what the police have: how many documents in each category, how many WhatsApps and emails of the Prime Minister, Peter Mandelson and Morgan McSweeney, and so on. It is important that the House understands where things have gone missing and can start to put that picture together in its head. I say to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that, once the police investigations are complete, it would be interesting for the police officers involved to come before the Select Committee—it may fall to another Committee as well—to discuss what their approach has been and why, and what lessons might be learned for future disclosures to Parliament.

I end by turning, rather unfortunately, to the last speech that Peter Mandelson ever made in the Lords, where he said:

"I feel very deeply that there will not be anything like the systematic undermining of the Civil Service that we have seen in recent years...when government policy was conducted by private WhatsApp, rather than on properly considered Civil Service advice."—[Official Report, House of Lords, 28 November 2024; Vol. 841, c. 830.]

This scandal has taken the jobs of the ambassador to Washington, of the Prime Minister's chief of staff, of the Cabinet Secretary and of the chief official in the Foreign Office—and, ultimately, it will take the job of the Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I will now announce the result of today's deferred division on the draft Agriculture (Delinked Payments) (Reductions) (England) Regulations 2026. The Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 153, so the Ayes have it.

I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

3.32 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We are a very long way from one of the original aspects of this scandal, which was an allegation that the Prime Minister knew when appointing Peter Mandelson that he had failed his developed vetting. We have moved a long way from that, but one thing we have not moved away from is that the man who was appointed was a "best pal" of the world's most notorious paedophile, that he remained his "best pal" when he was in prison, and that he stayed in his house. Personally, I found it so profoundly shocking when I heard that was what happened. It is a matter of good character to stand by friends when they are in trouble, but when they are convicted of a terrible crime like that, you do not stand with them, you do not stay in their house and they should not be your "best pal". It is not just that: we have also learned that Peter Mandelson was friends with Russian oligarchs, Chinese Finance Ministers and former Israeli security chiefs; he had a loan of £1 million from an unknown source, which he used to buy shares in a secretive Israeli company; and, of course, there are all the issues in relation to his business dealings.

Given that it is the job of the Foreign Affairs Committee to try to ensure that the Foreign Office is as good as it possibly can be, the Committee has as to remain focused on why it was that a man like that—when it came to developed vetting, it was decided that he was a case of high concern and that his clearance for vetting should be denied—was nevertheless appointed. There is a lot of gossip and other stuff, the tittle-tattle and things that obviously the Westminster village loves, but the serious point is: how could we have got it so wrong and how did this happen?

Sir Julian Lewis: At the beginning of her speech, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee said most powerfully that what happened in relation to Epstein should alone have been a sufficient bar for anything to go further, but even if that had not happened, it was already in the due diligence document, purely on foreign policy grounds: the Prime Minister was told that Mandelson gave a speech at the University of Hong Kong where he claimed that the rule of law and independence of the

judiciary remain intact there. In November 2024, I personally challenged the proposed appointment on the grounds that Mandelson had said in a radio interview that the basis for a settlement with Ukraine would be that Ukraine should give up to Russia all the land that Russia had so far occupied, and that Ukraine should give up any hope of ever belonging to the NATO alliance. These were political grounds that should have ruled him out. The Prime Minister knew about them, but nothing seemed to prevent him from following through on his intent to appoint such an unsuitable individual.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me down a path that I was not going to go down, although I have gone down it for quite some length in the Committee hearings. It seems to me that all these papers tend to show one thing: the Prime Minister was not particularly interested in the appointment of the ambassador to the United States. He was certainly not a good friend of his: there is no correspondence between them, there are no chatty messages and there is no attempt to get the Prime Minister to vote for Mandelson when he was standing for chancellor of the University of Oxford—I mean, there is not a friendship at all.

The criticism that I make, and I make openly, is that I think the decision was subcontracted to others who were close to Mandelson. The criticism that one can level at the Prime Minister is that he delegated and he did not watch sufficiently what was going on, essentially giving power to others who then abused it—I think that is central. That is not very flattering to the Prime Minister, but it is an honest assessment of the evidence that I have heard. I think the appointment was being pushed and I think that it was being pushed by his then chief of staff, who has a style—and that style is, “When I want to do something, I will go for it hard, I will go for it fast and I will push everybody out of the way.” Once Mandelson had not been elected chancellor at Oxford, someone who should have been a marginal candidate—and had been, as I understand it, just in November 2024—suddenly, within two weeks, moved from being a borderline candidate to being the main person in the frame.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The right hon. Lady persuades us that there is a good hypothesis, as she has described, for how this has happened, although we will never know—only the Prime Minister will know. However, does she accept that there is another hypothesis: that the Prime Minister was convinced early that this was the right thing to do, that the system accepted that that was his judgment, and that nobody sought sufficiently strongly to try to persuade him otherwise, until the appointment was finally confirmed?

Emily Thornberry: We may be talking about the same thing. Another way of putting it is that the Prime Minister's chief of staff had taken responsibility for it on his behalf and was pushing it, and the power that the chief of staff had was because he was the chief of staff to the Prime Minister. It is borderline one way or the other.

Sir Julian Lewis: I disagree with the right hon. Lady's analysis because the whole point of what we have been saying from the Opposition Benches is that the Prime Minister himself knew about these points: he knew

what Mandelson had done in relation to Epstein; he knew what he had said in relation to justice in Hong Kong; and he knew what Mandelson had said in that radio interview because I had challenged him about it. I must say, although it may not meet the high standards of court litigation, that when the Prime Minister brushed aside my challenge to him on 21 November, he sat down with a very notable and ingratiating grin, and I turned to the person sitting next to me and said, “He's definitely going to appoint Mandelson.” It was his decision.

Emily Thornberry: I will move on, but before I do so, I will say something that I think any fair-minded person will know. Presumably the job of being Prime Minister means that there is so much on your desk, and if someone comes to you and says, “Don't worry about this, I'll take it and sort it”, there is a temptation to go, “Okay, you do that, because I have 7,000 other things that I have to deal with today.” I do not know—I have never been Prime Minister—but I would assume that that is the reality of the situation.

The question is how somebody who is so manifestly inappropriate gets appointed. It may be that those behaving in this way did so because they felt under huge amounts of political pressure, but how does someone whose case was of high concern and for whom it was recommended that clearance be denied become interpreted as a borderline case, leaning against? How do we bridge that gap? The only way that gap is bridged is through mitigations, so I spend my time looking for mitigations, and I cannot find any. Ian Collard, who was one of the security men speaking to Olly Robbins—who, at the time, was the permanent under-secretary—mentioned the importance of mitigations 10 times in his written evidence to us, and Olly Robbins talked about it six times. It is at the forefront of their evidence.

I have already referred to an aide-mémoire that Ian Collard made in September. He says that he looked again at the summary. He accepts that UKSV's statement was

“‘this case presents as a high concern’ with a recommendation of ‘clearance denied or withdrawn’”,

and he

“noted that, as well as the tick boxes”—

red tick-boxes, which were ticked—

“UKSV stated in the final case assessment: ‘Overall, I believe that this is a very borderline case...If a clearance was awarded to the individual by the Department, it is recommended that a very robust risk management model is put in place’”.

I do not know whether that is just Ian Collard's memory of what he may or may not have read—well, I know that he did not read it, because he says that he did not read it at that stage. I do not understand how the UKSV paper can say, “Don't give him the job”, and then it can also be believed to be a very borderline case with robust risk management recommended. I suspect that the latter bit is an interpretation—a way in which, it was hoped, the difficulty that Mandelson was essentially being refused vetting could be slid over into “He can be given the job, so long as there are robust mitigations.”

But where are those mitigations? When Sir Olly gave evidence to our Committee, I said to him,

“I do not really follow why you would not know the contents of the UKSV document and their concerns or even that they said that there was high concern about Peter Mandelson. I do not

[Emily Thornberry]

understand how you can not know that if you are considering what the mitigations are. You cannot have the mitigations without knowing what the problem is.”

He said,

“The risks were explained to me, but I have not seen the underlying documentation. That is what I am saying. That obviously strikes members of the Committee as odd”—

well, it certainly did—

“but in all my years as a civil servant—many of them as a relatively senior one—I have never seen a UKSV document, other than the ones that I have filled in myself.”

It is ridiculous. If he is putting down mitigations in order to deal with legitimate concerns and a security threat, he needs to know what that security threat is, and to understand that UKSV is saying that it is very serious and that Mandelson should not be given the job—yet he says, “I didn’t know. I just thought it was borderline, leaning the other way.” I mean, this is Alice in Wonderland.

Alex Burghart: The right hon. Lady is making an important series of points. Does she not also think that the fact that the vetting was not done before Mandelson arrived in Washington, as we now know, means that somebody was in post in Washington seeing highly classified information which he was not fit to see, because there were no mitigations in place, even though the process subsequently threw up the fact that he would need them? Of course, as she is saying, he probably should not have had the job, given that the mitigations were warranted.

Emily Thornberry: I really do not know. The Foreign Office got the UKSV clearance on 29 January 2025, and it says that it did something about it, but we cannot see what that is. An email on page 72 of part I is the nearest thing to mitigations I have been able to find, and Ian Collard referred to it in his evidence. It is an email he wrote on 30 January, and I think it is the mitigations, but I just do not think it is a robust set of mitigations to deal with serious security concerns. The email states:

“As part of the usual clearance policy process, UKSV identified some areas in his application for ESND to review”—

that is the security man.

“I understand that Lord Mandelson’s private sector engagements are being managed by HRD”—

that is human resources—

“and the Legal Directorate through the conflict of interest process.”

Who knows? It continues:

“With regard to personal conduct”—

I think that is hanging out with oligarchs, being friends with the Finance Minister, borrowing money and who knows what else—

“I understand that Lord Mandelson has received a letter from Mervyn Thomas, informing him of his responsibilities as an FCDO employee, including under the Diplomatic Service Regulations.”

Is that it? He got a letter from a man telling him to behave himself! We have not seen the letter, and I do not know what it is. The email continues:

“Matters pertaining to his overseas contacts will certainly be reviewed by the STRAP authorities.”

STRAP is another issue, and we should not be distracted by STRAP. Mandelson needed to follow the developed vetting before getting anywhere near the latest STRAP stuff.

It is important that we take these things in order. We have that email, which is about as pathetic as it can be. There might be something in the nine-page summary that some Members sitting in this Chamber have seen. It might be that that summary showing the security concerns has a page or so at the end—it is a blank page—asking the Foreign Office for its response. UKSV is giving a recommendation saying, “Mandelson should not be given the job, he is a security risk.” The process might be that the Foreign Office has to write something on that form saying, “We have read this. We don’t agree with you. We think he should be appointed, and we’re going to put in the following mitigations”, and then list them. It might be that the Foreign Office did not fill that in properly, and it might be that that bit of the form remains blank. I do not know whether anybody is in a position to be able to enlighten me one way or the other, or whether we will have to wait for the police to give us the document.

Sir Julian Lewis *rose*—

Emily Thornberry: I do not think the right hon. Gentleman is one of the people I am referring to, but I give way.

Sir Julian Lewis: Surely that information would be precisely the kind that could be safely entrusted to the ISC, and it ought to have been entrusted with it.

Emily Thornberry: I suspect that the ISC may have been entrusted with it—that is what I am trying to say. I am hoping that if the form is blank, it is not necessarily the case that anything of particular security interest was being disclosed, and it is just a process issue, where the Foreign Office did not follow process as it should have and at least put on that form, “Yes, we have done these things.”

I am just trying to do my job, holding the Government to account. Why did Britain employ a man who was a security risk to this really important job? We did so because of the mitigations, but nobody will tell us the mitigations. After all these thousands of bits of paper, and after my poor right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West coming to the Chamber 11 times, we still cannot get to the root of it.

Sir John Hayes: It would be entirely inappropriate for me, or for any other member of the ISC, to say what we have received, which has now been sent to the police, but given that following an urgent question just before the recess I challenged the Chief Secretary on the issue of mitigations, asking him whether there were mitigations in place and whether they would be made known to us, it would not be unreasonable for a diligent member of the House such as the right hon. Lady to conclude that I would not have asked that question if I had known the answer to it.

Emily Thornberry: Well, that is very helpful; I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much.

Let us move on. Is there a record of the decision? When Sir Oliver Robbins appeared before the Committee, and indeed when other people appeared before it, I kept coming back to the same question: “Where is the record

of your decision? What was the process that you went through before doing this? Why are there no notes? Why is there no record? How can we hold you to account if you really, genuinely are not making any notes at all?" Given that a decision was made to give Peter Mandelson the job subject to mitigations, where is the record of the decision? Do the police have it? Is it in the papers and I have missed it? I do not think so. Was there never a written record of the decision? Surely someone would have made a record of the action taken—or is that the email? Is that it? Is that the action that they took, or is there something else?

Surely there was a letter written to Peter Mandelson saying, "You have the job, but only if you do x, y and z." This cannot be dealt with by way of a WhatsApp message or a phone call. This is very serious. This is about the security of our nation, and it should be in a letter. I certainly hope that the reason that I have not seen it is that it exists but the police have it, but I do not know one way or the other.

I know that others will be dealing with this later, and I want to draw my remarks to a close, but the Foreign Affairs Committee has been trying to do its job to the best of its ability to try to ensure that such a mistake does not happen again, and we have been doing that in good faith. It has been difficult. We have been "mandarined"; we have been given partial answers; we have been given nonsense by people believing that it is not for us to know. Well, it is for us to know, and it is for us to know because we are trying to make our Government better, and it is our job as Back Benchers to do that.

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

3.52 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister reminded the House on Monday that he had given 10 updates on the Mandelson affair to Parliament, and, as the Paymaster General reminded us earlier, it will be 11 today. There are more than 1,500 pages of documents in this release alone—the largest Government response to a Humble Address in parliamentary history—but there is still one account that we have not received.

In April, I said in this Chamber that when the Prime Minister simply says that he should not have appointed Peter Mandelson to the UK's most important diplomatic posting—that it was, in his words, an "error of judgment"—he gives a description of an outcome, not an account of his judgment. I used the analogy of a driver saying, "I should not have crashed the car", without ever accounting for the actions that led to the crash. That matters if we are to understand properly what went wrong, it matters to preventing it from happening again, and it matters to judging whether the driver should still be behind the wheel.

If the House will indulge me, I will extend that analogy. These 1,500 pages give us the crash scene in more detail than Parliament has ever received on any comparable matter. We have the vehicle's full mechanical history, we have the account of every passenger, we have what the bystanders observed from the pavement, and we have what the recovery team found when they arrived—but what we still do not have, after all that, is the driver's

account. What did the Prime Minister weigh in making his decision, what did he conclude, and where does he now think he went wrong in his reasoning?

The Prime Minister received the due diligence in December 2024, which documented Mandelson's association with Epstein and that he had stayed in Epstein's home while Epstein was serving a prison sentence for sexual offences against a minor. The document described that as a "reputational risk"—not a moral question about what it means to appoint someone who maintained such a friendship, not a question about what message it sends to the victims and survivors of Epstein's crimes, just a reputational risk to be managed. Did the Prime Minister consider any of those questions? We do not know. All we know is that he proceeded anyway.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) said on Monday, in these 1,500 pages, Epstein's victims are not mentioned once in any document dated before Mandelson's appointment. The only reference to them seems to be in an email written after he was sacked. The victims were not just an afterthought; they were given no thought at all.

The published documents also highlight failures once Mandelson was in post. The due diligence was explicit: Global Counsel interests would have to cease on appointment. During Mandelson's seven months as ambassador, from February to September 2025, he retained a substantial shareholding in Global Counsel. In February 2025, weeks into his ambassadorial role with that shareholding intact, he accompanied the Prime Minister on a visit to Palantir's Washington headquarters. No formal minutes of that meeting were taken. In July 2025, he wrote to No. 10 suggesting that the Prime Minister should meet Palantir co-founder Peter Thiel while in London.

Palantir was a Global Counsel client. How was an ambassador who retained a commercial stake in a lobbying firm permitted to accompany the Prime Minister to a meeting with one of that firm's clients, with no formal record of what was discussed, and then suggest a further meeting with the firm's founder? The due diligence said those interests should cease. They had not. Nothing in the published documents suggests that anyone asked why.

The documents also reveal that in February 2025 Mandelson advised the then Technology Secretary to include

"more positive language about AI"

in a speech to the Munich security conference. The then Secretary of State replied that it was

"all v good advice which I'll action"—

in text speak, obviously. This, again, was while Mandelson retained his shareholding in a firm that represented OpenAI and Palantir, and while he described OpenAI's chief executive as his "chief AI buddy". My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) has today written to the independent adviser on ministers' interests calling for an investigation into that, and she is right to do so.

Those are only the conflicts that Parliament can currently see. The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, asked on Monday, and again today, whether there is any written evidence of

[*Ian Sollom*]

mitigations being put in place for the other conflicts identified in the due diligence. Those include the connections to the sanctioned Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska; to Lan Fo'an, China's Minister of Finance; and to Tamir Hayman, a former head of Israeli military intelligence. They also include a £1 million loan to invest in an Israeli start-up. The Chief Secretary's response was that those documents are with the Metropolitan police, so Parliament cannot yet see whether those warnings were taken seriously or set to one side.

The Liberal Democrats have consistently called for the reforms that this affair has made unavoidable. Government by WhatsApp must end. These documents show exactly what happens when significant business is conducted through channels that are imperfectly preserved and impossible to scrutinise. One senior Minister told Mandelson in writing that a sensitive matter was:

"A convo for the phone."

That Minister warned:

"There is a pattern we must get out of."

The review of non-corporate communications must produce enforceable rules, not just guidance.

The lobbying register also needs root and branch reform. An ambassador retained a commercial stake in a lobbying firm throughout his tenure, arranging meetings between the Prime Minister and clients of that firm, and it seems that the system had no mechanism to prevent it. The ministerial code must be placed in statute. Having a code the Prime Minister can choose whether to enforce is not accountability, but it appears to be, which is more corrosive.

Ultimately, those reforms will only address the system around the decision. The Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), observed on Monday that the Prime Minister has almost no presence in the 1,500 pages, comparing him with "The Man Who Never Was". The response of the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister was that

"Prime Ministers do not sit at computers, sending emails from Outlook. They have officials who action their decisions on their behalf".—[*Official Report*, 1 June 2026; Vol. 786, c. 860.]

That may be true, but officials action decisions; they do not make them. The decision to appoint Peter Mandelson was the Prime Minister's—his judgment, his decision and his error, as he acknowledges—but the House has never received his account of that decision.

After 10 updates and 1,500 pages, the House might begin to wonder about the reasons for that absence, and I think there are three possibilities. Perhaps the Prime Minister genuinely does not know why he made the decision, and cannot reconstruct the reasoning that led him, having read the due diligence, to proceed. If so, that is alarming. A judgment of this sensitivity—involving national security, a convicted sex offender's associate and known commercial conflicts of interest—should not be one whose reasoning evaporates without trace.

Perhaps the Prime Minister knows why he proceeded, but believes an honest answer to this House would be embarrassing, and that explaining his reasoning would require him to acknowledge something he would prefer left unexamined. If so, that is a choice to protect himself at the expense of Parliament's right to hold him to account. Perhaps the Prime Minister may genuinely

believe that repeatedly saying, "I made an error of judgment," constitutes an adequate account of his judgment. If so, it reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what accountability to Parliament actually requires. None of those three possibilities reflects well on a Prime Minister who promised that integrity and accountability would define his Government.

Before taking up his post, Peter Mandelson wrote to the then Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), that if appointed, he would make sure the Prime Minister never regretted it. The Prime Minister has now expressed regret, but regret without explanation is not accountability. This House, and Epstein's victims, deserve more than that: they deserve an answer.

4.3 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I think what has struck me most about this whole affair is not what has been said, but what has been missing. Over the past week, we have seen endless coverage of private messages, political embarrassment and Westminster intrigue. We have heard discussions about powerful people, powerful networks and powerful reputations. However, amid all this, we have heard far too little about the victims. For all the headlines that have been generated by this story, the people whose lives were devastated by Jeffrey Epstein's abuse have too often been reduced to a footnote, and that should concern every single one of us. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the disclosures is not simply who Ministers were meeting, but who they were not. While significant effort appears to have gone into cultivating relationships with influential figures in the tech world, victims were left feeling unheard and overlooked. That is the wrong way around.

I sought to use my position in Government to advocate for victims, but when we are forced to fight tooth and nail simply to have those voices heard, something is not working as it should. That is why I took the difficult but necessary decision to resign. But stepping down does not mean stepping back and that is why I will now voice Lisa's words:

"My name is Lisa Phillips. I am a survivor of Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell's global paedophile trafficking and abuse network. I respectfully ask that MP Alex Davies-Jones be permitted to speak on my behalf and be my voice in Parliament today, when so many survivors' voices still go unheard.

I met Prince Andrew on Epstein island on the night I was sexually assaulted by Jeffrey Epstein. Like many of my survivor sisters, I was trafficked and abused over a number of years. I am seeking answers not only about Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell, but also about the powerful men who enabled, protected, or benefited from this abuse and trafficking.

This debate is about accountability. Jeffrey Epstein's powerful network made many victims and survivors feel unable to come forward. When powerful people protect or turn a blind eye to abuse, justice becomes harder to achieve. That must change. Many UK survivors came forward to the Metropolitan police, yet they too were left without the answers and accountability they deserved.

As a survivor, I struggle to understand why Prime Minister Keir Starmer appointed Peter Mandelson when his association with Jeffrey Epstein had long been publicly known. For survivors, this raises serious questions about whether the lessons of the Epstein scandal have truly been learned. I have repeatedly requested the opportunity to meet with the Prime Minister, but those requests have been ignored. Must I now wait for the next Prime Minister to acknowledge me and my survivor sisters?

With respect, Prime Minister, your apology alone means little without meaningful action, so I ask you directly, Prime Minister: do you, and the Government you lead, support a full public inquiry into Jeffrey Epstein, Ghislaine Maxwell and those who enabled, protected, participated in, or benefited from their crimes, including those on British soil? The answer is simple: yes or no. Regards, Lisa Phillips.”

The least Lisa, and the many other British brave survivors, deserve is an answer, yet they are being met with silence. Lisa’s testimony reminds us all that this debate cannot be confined to any one individual. It is about a culture: a culture where power protects power, and where influence and connections can matter more than accountability.

The disclosures made available to the House paint a troubling picture: a picture of senior figures discussing how to build relationships with powerful tech billionaires and silicon valley elites; and a picture of a Government seemingly preoccupied with winning over the likes of Elon Musk and maintaining close relationships with figures such as Sam Altman. That raises an important question: what was the priority?

At precisely the same time as those Ministers were discussing how to secure the approval of tech oligarchs, Ministers such as myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), along with campaigners, safeguarding experts and survivors, were all calling for stronger action on online harm. We were calling for action on violent pornography, action on misogynistic content, and action to better protect children online. Yet too often our voices were ignored, sidelined or dismissed. As people who have spent much of our careers campaigning to tackle violence against women and girls, my hon. Friend and I found that deeply frustrating to say the least. The role of Government should not be to seek approval from the world’s most powerful technology companies; it should be to stand up for the people we are sent here to serve.

When people look at these disclosures, they see a Government who appeared more interested in cultivating relationships with tech elites than listening to the warnings about harms being experienced by women, girls and young people every single day. That matters. The public increasingly feel that there is one set of rules for the powerful and another for everyone else. They see the same names, the same networks, the same circle of influence and the same men, and they see powerful institutions closing ranks when difficult questions are asked. That perception damages trust.

What concerns me almost as much as the disclosures themselves, however, is how they came into the public domain in the first place. It was not because the Government chose transparency or Ministers proactively provided answers, but because Parliament forced the issue—because Members in this place demanded scrutiny and this House insisted on accountability. That takes us to a much bigger question: why is transparency so often dragged out of institutions rather than being freely given? Why do victims, campaigners and Parliament so often have to fight for information that should be freely available from the outset?

Perhaps the most striking contradiction of all concerns transparency. While this Government have spoken passionately about the importance of openness, accountability and a duty of candour, the disclosures raise serious questions about whether those principles were being lived as well

as preached. The public are entitled to ask how confidence and transparency can be maintained when disappearing messages were being used at the highest level of Government. They are entitled to ask why survivors have appeared to struggle to secure the same level of access and attention that was afforded to some of the most powerful figures in global technology. They are entitled to ask whether the voices that mattered most were truly being heard.

When victims and survivors feel ignored while those with wealth, influence and power are actively courted, something has gone badly wrong. That is not the culture that the public expect from Government, and it is certainly not the culture that victims deserve. That is why this debate—this whole issue—should strengthen our resolve to deliver a genuine duty of candour. Not a slogan, a soundbite, or something invoked only when convenient, but a genuine legal and moral obligation on those exercising power to tell the truth, to preserve information, to be transparent, and to place accountability ahead of any self-protection.

Too often in this country, transparency is not volunteered; it is extracted—painfully. It comes only after leaks and investigations, and after victims’ families, campaigners and parliamentarians fight for information that should have been available from the outset, sometimes for decades. The disclosures before us did not emerge because the Government chose openness; they emerged because Parliament forced scrutiny through Standing Order No. 24. That should concern every Member of this House, because if transparency depends on being forced, then we do not yet have a culture of candour. Until we confront that honestly, we will continue to fail the very people that this House exists to serve—not with words but action; not with promises, but accountability.

4.12 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a genuine privilege to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones). Knowledgeable and passionate Ministers are a huge asset to any Government, and she is a significant loss to this one. If I may say, the same can be said of the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who sits next to her. The hon. Member for Pontypridd makes important points about the victims of Epstein, which I will not repeat, and she has added considerably to this debate.

I also take the opportunity to join in the tributes that were made earlier to Alan Haselhurst, Madam Deputy Speaker, who occupied your Chair with immense dignity and considerable rigour, but did so with deep warmth and kindness. He will be missed in both Chambers of this place.

Turning to the motion, I will say something about the process that has led to the publication of the documents we are now considering, and then something about their contents. On the process, I start by offering thanks to the officials of the Cabinet Office and the staff of the Intelligence and Security Committee. The whole House will now be conscious of the sheer scale of the task that lay before both those groups of people and the immense work that they all had to put in to turn the process around as quickly as they did. The House will also now appreciate that, given their nature, it was inevitable that a large number of those documents raised questions of either national security or international relations.

[*Sir Jeremy Wright*]

On behalf of the Intelligence and Security Committee, I want to make it very clear, as I have before, first that we are very grateful for the words of the Paymaster General, and indeed the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister on previous occasions, on the work that we have done. Secondly, I want to reassure the House that throughout the process, we were rigorous in our view that Government embarrassment was not sufficient cause for redaction of these documents. I hope the House can now see that that is the case, as there is plenty of Government embarrassment left unredacted.

The prejudice that we sought to establish in relation to international relations or national security needed to be real prejudice, and not the vague possibility of that prejudice. That is the way in which we approached the task. I am confident in the redactions that we agreed to make, and indeed in the decisions we took not to support the redactions that we refused to consent to.

In the process that we undertook—I have spoken about this before—two issues of process have arisen. The first is the question of who checks proposed redactions for reasons other than national security or international relations. I am very glad that the Government have agreed that my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) should fulfil that role, as he has now done. The second concerns the grounds for redaction beyond the protection of national security or international relations. As many who have heard these conversations before know, I have been and remain critical of the way the Government have maintained the unilateral right to redact for other reasons. I do not propose to go through all those arguments again. I take that position not because I do not think the Government have a good case to do so, but because I think it is wrong for the Government to assume Parliament's consent to that case.

Jeremy Corbyn: For clarity, is the redaction done in Downing Street—in Government—and then sent to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's Committee, or is it done by the Committee on grounds of national security and international relations?

Sir Jeremy Wright: I am happy to give the right hon. Gentleman that clarity. The documents that we received were unredacted documents marked with the proposed redactions the Government sought to make for reasons of protecting national security or international relations. Where we agreed with the Government, we agreed that those redactions should be made; where we disagreed, those redactions were not made. We saw all the documents unredacted, and we decided whether to accept the Government's proposals for redaction or not. The House made it clear that it wanted the final word on those redactions—yes or no—to be ours as a Committee, and not the Government's. I hope that is of assistance to the right hon. Gentleman.

Sir Julian Lewis: For the sake of completeness, will my right hon. and learned Friend explain whether the Committee saw the third category of documents—those redacted or withheld because of the police inquiry—or whether the Committee labours under the same degree of ignorance as the rest of us?

Sir Jeremy Wright: I think we may have to wait for the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister to explain the position from the Government's perspective. I can say only that what was put in front of us did not, I think, include the documents that the police had sought to have withheld. I cannot say that that is the case in every instance, but we do not believe that there has been complete disclosure yet. We think there will be further documents put before us, which the police currently have in their possession, so it may well be that there is further work for the Committee to do. My right hon. Friend will recognise from his long experience that we will apply the same degree of rigour and impartiality to any further documents put before us as to the documents we have already seen.

Kirsty Blackman: I just wanted to ask one more question for clarity, because this is incredibly useful. On the redactions that were made because of personal information, for example, did the Committee see the unredacted version of those documents, or had they been redacted by the time they got to the ISC?

Sir Jeremy Wright: The answer to the hon. Lady's question is that we will have seen only the documents to which there were proposed redactions for the purposes of either national security or international relations. However, we may well also have seen other proposed redactions to the same documents. The reason that I have raised concerns in the past about the breadth of those proposed redactions for other reasons is that the Committee has seen some of those proposed redactions, but, of course, we have no way of knowing what proportion of such proposed redactions we have seen—if a document does not contain within it redactions that the Government have proposed for either international relations or national security reasons, the document would not have come before us at all.

Kirsty Blackman: The Paymaster General said that those redactions marked with three stars are the ones that were redacted with agreement from the Committee. Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm that redactions marked by three stars relate to the ISC and that other redactions are marked differently?

Sir Jeremy Wright: Yes, I can—and this is an important point. The Intelligence and Security Committee wanted to be extremely clear that we took responsibility only for the redactions that we had considered and agreed. The Government, to be fair to them, have always accepted that those redactions that the Government made without the involvement of my Committee would appear on the documents differently, and they do. The House will be able to see exactly the difference when the documents are considered.

I need to make it clear that I am not an enthusiast for the use of Humble Addresses to demand disclosure of documents at all, whichever party may choose to use them. That is simply because I think it is inappropriate to involve the monarch in a political argument, but if we are to have them, or indeed any other motions that demand the disclosure of material, we should be clear about the grounds on which the Government are entitled to redact that material.

Hannah Spencer (Gorton and Denton) (Green): I have had the privilege of meeting some of the women who survived Epstein's abuse, and I pay tribute to them and to those who are no longer with us. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that as we rightly discuss the processes that took place, we must also highlight the sheer bravery of those women, and that that should be front and centre in this debate? Does he agree that this appalling episode, in which the victims were overlooked and Mandelson was still appointed despite his links to Epstein, must lead to a fundamental change in political culture?

Sir Jeremy Wright: I do agree with the point that the hon. Lady makes, and I think that that argument was put very forcefully and eloquently by the hon. Member for Pontypridd, which she may have heard a moment ago.

I want to return to the grounds on which the Government are entitled to redact material under a Humble Address motion or similar motions. It seems to me not only that Parliament should have clarity about the grounds on which the Government seek to redact such material but that the proper time to have that clarity is when such a motion is first agreed, not as documents begin to be disclosed in response to it.

I want to make a suggestion, and I hope that the Government will see it as a helpful one, because it is genuinely meant as such. I suggest that this House agrees standard rules by which a Government may make a redaction and the reasons for it, and that those should be used in all similar situations in the future so that we have clarity. The Government have relied on a variety of legislative and common practice routes to support their right to redact, or in some cases even to withhold documents altogether, in relation to this Humble Address. I think that the process would benefit from consolidation of those reasons into a single document that the House can then endorse. It would save this argument being rerun, or at least limit it to a discussion of any specific grounds for redaction that the Government seek to rely on beyond the agreed reasons.

I will turn to the content of the documents and what they tell us. I have said very little about them so far in order to, I hope, preserve the integrity of the process that the ISC has been conducting at the House's instruction. There is, of course, lots of interest in the documents—in how, for example, the ambassador to the United States steadfastly refused to stay in his lane as a diplomat and instead offered his advice on almost every aspect of the Government's activity; in the fact that he was held in such high regard, not to say awe, by so many members of the Government; and in the slapdash approach to secure communications, to which the Government, and perhaps also my Committee, will return.

It is important to remember that this whole exercise, as I think the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee said, was supposed to be about interrogating how Lord Mandelson's appointment as US ambassador came to be made. It would be churlish not to accept that Lord Mandelson had successes in the role. That indicates that he had merits as a candidate for the job that the Prime Minister was entitled to consider, but considering someone for a role is very different from appointing them to it—especially someone who had such obvious and well known risks, and especially to an appointment of such

evident importance and sensitivity. That is why I find the process of making the appointment so concerning and so surprising.

I accept that it is unfashionable or even heretical to say it these days, but I have a soft spot for the Prime Minister. I do not think it is just because I like the idea of lawyers with knighthoods being in charge, though I do; it is really because I am an enthusiast for good government. The question of whether one supports a Government's policies is one thing, but we should all be in favour of good government none the less. I want to see responsible decision making, considered judgments, a preference for evidence over instinct, and flashy ideas properly tested to ensure that they will actually work. That is good government to me, and I thought that in this Prime Minister's Administration I would see it, but good government requires that where a sensitive appointment carries considerable risk, extra work is done to understand that risk and mitigate it. These documents do not show that.

Peter Mandelson's letter to the then Foreign Secretary—now Deputy Prime Minister—has become famous for his assurance that the Government would not regret his appointment, and ranks up there with “peace for our time” and Michael Fish's pre-hurricane weather forecast in the pantheon of poor predictions. But there is something else interesting about it, and that is its date—18 November 2024—which makes it clear that Lord Mandelson was at the very least under serious consideration for the ambassador position in mid-November. The vetting process did not begin until late December, with everyone then being told—this is very clear—that it should be completed in time for Mandelson to begin work in January. There are several mentions in the documents of the urgency of that from officials. We know already that the National Security Adviser considered the process strangely rushed, and in the latest drop of documents, we see that in volume II, part I, page 21 it says:

“The SPAD work has shown just how slick this can be when needed.”

Page 66 says:

“We have had quite a bit of senior interest in the processing of this case (not the details merely that it goes smoothly)”.

If officials had been asked to start that work earlier, they could have taken longer over it, and surely more time and consideration would have been beneficial in this complex and controversial case.

Indeed, the haste with which things were being done was apparent elsewhere. In another document, an official points out that the Prime Minister had announced his choice for ambassador before *agrément* had been granted. In other words, the United States had not agreed to accept Lord Mandelson as ambassador at that point. That, the official says, should not have happened.

It is, and was, clear to everyone that this was a controversial appointment: perhaps high reward, but definitely high risk. There were substantial reasons to worry about it—we have heard several of them—and almost all of them were very public knowledge. That should have given everyone—perhaps especially the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as the appointing Department—pause for thought, yet we know from page 106 of part III of this volume that UK Security Vetting informed the FCDO of its recommendation in the last week of January 2025 and the FCDO granted the developed vetting certificate on 29 January 2025. Not much pause for thought there. Worse still, as others

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

have pointed out, we have not seen mitigations—ones that were clearly agreed to be necessary—evidenced anywhere. Good government this was not.

It has been said by many on the Government's behalf that mistakes can be made, and that is of course true. When in opposition, the Prime Minister pointed out more than once that Prime Ministers are accountable for the tone and character of the Governments they lead and for how those Governments transact their business, and he was right. These documents show that in the making of this very important and sensitive decision, there was much wrong with the tone and character of this Government.

4.30 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): The latest Peter Mandelson scandal epitomises everything that my constituents in Liverpool West Derby detest about the political establishment and why so many are losing faith in this place. Here was a man who brought Government into disrepute on multiple occasions—a man who repeatedly placed personal interest and profit ahead of public service—yet instead of being consigned to political history, he was rehabilitated by senior figures in my own party and elevated through a position of extraordinary, unelected influence. Why? Because his value to the political establishment was never rooted in principle or public service; it was rooted in his history of brutal, factional manoeuvring, his network of powerful contacts and his ability to pull strings behind the scenes. Even his association with one of the world's most notorious paedophiles was seemingly outweighed by the usefulness of those connections and—shamefully, for those responsible for his appointment—with no apparent regard for the victims of Jeffrey Epstein. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for her speech, which outlined that so powerfully.

Though the latest documents reveal moments of embarrassing sycophancy, they tell us little that we did not already know. Mandelson's fingerprints are all over this Government. His involvement stretched from Ministers and advisers to the very centre of power. Just yesterday evening, we learned that the Chancellor asked Mandelson to visit her at the Treasury to advise on trade matters while he was chair of the private lobbying firm Global Counsel. No record of the meeting was disclosed.

Mandelson's influence, exercised through figures such as the Prime Minister's former chief of staff Morgan McSweeney, was vast, unaccountable and entirely undemocratic. Based on the great lengths that McSweeney and others went to ensure that Mandelson was given the job as US ambassador, including by applying pressure on civil servants, it is very reasonable to conclude that Mandelson's influential position was reward for his support of the Labour Together faction. The damage that organisation has done to my party and this Government cannot be ignored, so I once again reiterate my call to the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister for a full, transparent and independent inquiry into Labour Together and all those involved in the organisation.

The question many of my constituents are asking is: how could an unelected figure, whose public record is so controversial, wield such influence over the decisions of

Government while facing so little scrutiny or accountability? That lack of accountability also helps to explain why the latest disclosures were not far more uncomfortable for Mandelson and those around him. As we know, despite requests to do so, he refused to hand over his personal phone as part of the evidence-gathering process. That speaks to a wider problem of culture in Westminster and Whitehall, and is exactly why we need a duty of candour that a Hillsborough law would introduce. There can be no more exemptions from transparency for the powerful; there can be no special rules for those at the top. Public confidence depends on accountability applied equally to everyone.

I, like many others, await Government actions on the progress of that crucial piece of legislation, and I hope that the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister can shed some light on its stalled progress when he winds up the debate. The ongoing police investigation means that Mandelson may yet face further scrutiny. However, the absence of so much correspondence, together with the significant redactions in material already published, means the true extent of his influence over Government decision making may never be fully known.

My particular concern centres on the relationship between this Government and the US technology firm Palantir, a former client of Global Counsel. The documents reveal that Mandelson arranged meetings with Palantir's founder Peter Thiel—historically a supporter of Donald Trump—and Louis Mosley, the company's UK head. Those meetings followed the Prime Minister's visit to Palantir's Washington headquarters in February—a meeting reportedly brokered by Mandelson, for which no official minutes or transcript were produced.

Following this, later in the year, in September, during the state visit of Donald Trump, there was a pledge by Palantir to expand its work with the Ministry of Defence to a value of £750 million over five years. I and many others in this place and beyond do not believe a company associated with military operations in Gaza and the facilitation of aggressive immigration enforcement in the United States should be entrusted with expanding influence over any public services in this country.

My greatest concern is Palantir's growing role within our national health service—a matter that the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee today described as

“an unacceptable point of weakness”, which could leave our data “at the mercy” of hostile actors. I first raised concerns about this company in 2023 when the federated data platform contract was awarded. Since then, I have repeatedly called on the current and the last Governments to exercise the 2027 break clause and end this relationship. Yet despite widespread concerns from parliamentarians, healthcare professionals and members of the public, for some reason Palantir's presence within our NHS and access to patient data has only continued to grow.

That expansion comes despite significant concerns being raised elsewhere. NYC Health + Hospitals withdrew from its contract with Palantir earlier this year, while a proposed Metropolitan police contract was blocked last month. Those decisions reflected principled leadership and a recognition that public trust must come before corporate influence, and I thank Mayor Khan for showing that desperately needed leadership, which is a real example to others. The concerns that were acted on are shared by many NHS staff and many of my constituents, who are

deeply uneasy about the growing role of Palantir in managing sensitive personal data. That is why I was particularly concerned when the former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (West Streeting), ruled out ending Palantir's contract earlier this year, citing efficiency gains, despite evidence that many NHS trusts using the platform had not reported clear benefits of the software.

For me, it is here that the missing documents become extremely significant. Just months after Mandelson sought a meeting with Palantir UK's Louis Mosley, the former Health Secretary, who we know was in regular contact with Mandelson, held a private meeting with Mosley himself, as reported by *The Guardian* among others. A legitimate question arises: did Mandelson facilitate that meeting in the same way he appeared to broker discussions between Palantir and the Prime Minister?

While many in Westminster are preoccupied with the gossip, personal exchanges and political intrigue contained within these documents, I am far more concerned by what is absent: the gaps, the redactions, the missing correspondence that may never come to light because relevant material was withheld or "phones were stolen". Those missing pieces would not simply demonstrate that Peter Mandelson was embedded within the machinery of government; they would reveal the consequences of that influence. They would show how decisions affecting our public services, our NHS and our democracy may have been shaped by unelected power, corporate interests and private relationships operating beyond public scrutiny. Until there is full transparency and genuine accountability for how decisions of national importance are made, public trust in this place will continue to erode, and that is a very dangerous place to be going.

That principle should have applied to Peter Mandelson, but it clearly did not, and what a catastrophic mistake that was and continues to be. Moving forward, it must also apply to all those currently exercising power within this Government and anybody seeking to lead this Government in the years ahead.

4.38 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This House stands tall when those across it find common cause in speaking for the people. Our authority is derived from just that. There is immense wisdom present in the House today, and probably even greater wisdom that is not present, but that is not the essence of the root of our authority which is derived from our election, and when the House finds its feet in the way personified by the speech of the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), the message broadcast from this place more broadly is that MPs do not merely dance to the tune composed and conducted by the Treasury Bench, or indeed the Opposition Front Bench, but are capable of making judgments of the kind that she epitomised in making her contribution earlier.

I have been part of this process. I will not say that I have sweated blood, but I have certainly spent a great deal of time on it, as has my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright). Over the past weeks, I have seen more of my fellow members of the Intelligence and Security Committee than I have of my own family, as we have trawled through immense numbers of documents.

Following that process, I want to make five points. The first is that the Humble Address—there is a debate to be had about the appropriateness of Humble Addresses; we have rehearsed parts of that debate today—was absolutely explicit in its instructions to the ISC. It empowered the ISC in a unique and unprecedented way to examine those documents concerning international relations and national security pertaining to the appointment of Peter Mandelson as the ambassador in America. I do not accept the arguments about the withdrawal of documents and about precedent, because this particular Humble Address empowered the ISC in an unprecedented way.

It did so on 4 February, in expansive terms. There is a case to be made that the Humble Address was too permissive, but that is not for us to debate now, for that was the debate that took place then. For example, it talks about all "electronic communications", yet we have seen nothing of the videos, recorded messages or other kinds of electronic communications that clearly might be salient to our consideration of whether Peter Mandelson should have been appointed at all, and why he was appointed.

The Humble Address gave the ISC that instruction, and so it is important to make it crystal clear that the ISC is a Committee of Parliament with unique and special legal powers, and those legal powers extend beyond any other Committee of the House and enable the Committee to look at the most sensitive matters of all, such as STRAP documents. I would argue that such documents are as sensitive as, and in many cases more so than, anything that we might have been offered as a result of the Humble Address providing that instruction to us, yet the Government took the decision not to make available to the ISC the vetting file associated with Peter Mandelson. The argument used was that if they did so, it would have a chilling effect on the whole vetting process.

I regard that as specious because it confuses scrutiny with disclosure. The ISC was never going to disclose any of that material—a point made by its former Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). It was a matter for the Government to have faith in the ISC—as the House clearly did—or at least for the Government to reflect the faith of the House in providing all the relevant material to the ISC. But let us leave that to one side.

The Minister might want to come back to this, because my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam, who sits on the ISC with me—indeed, he is the deputy Chairman of that Committee—came to the House with an urgent question, explicitly requesting that the Government return to the subject of the Humble Address to see whether they wished to amend it, to legitimise their decision not to provide that information. The Government chose not to do that. In other words, they chose not to ask the House for consent. That is a highly questionable decision and, frankly, I think the Government will come to regret not coming back to obtain that consent.

Let us move on to my second point. I will not say too much about this, but it is now known—it is in the public domain—that the ISC did receive a summary document. Indeed, some of that summary document has found its way into the public realm by means of a national newspaper, the Manchester *Guardian*, which clearly had

[*Sir John Hayes*]

access to information. We heard earlier that there may be an inquiry into how that information found its way into the press, but we were told that that information would not be available in the second tranche of information, even in redacted form, because it was required by the police. However, we do not know when the police made that inquiry or when they decided that the information was vital to their investigations, and we have been given no rationale as to why they might have come to that decision so late in the process. Had they made the decision earlier, we would have saved a lot of time, and the expectation that we might have seen more about vetting would not have been fixed in the minds of Members of this House.

It is important that the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister is crystal clear about when that request from the Metropolitan police was made, and it would be helpful if he could give us some indication of why. Clearly he could not compromise the investigation or any subsequent legal action, but giving the House some indication of when and why the police changed their tune, as it were, in respect of the summary of the vetting file would be highly desirable.

Let me move on to my third point, which concerns mitigation. I said that there were five points, and I know you are counting them, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am.

Sir John Hayes: Indeed, you will chastise me if I do not stick to my chronology precisely, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, there is some confusion about the character of mitigation. We certainly know that nothing has been provided in respect of mitigation or about the reaction to the flags about Mandelson's associations with senior figures in foreign states or his personal circumstances, yet Sir Oliver Robbins gave evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee in April—its Chair has made this clear—in which he said that clearance could be approved if

“risks identified as of highest concern...could be managed and/or mitigated.”

Such mitigations were meant to have been noted in an email from Ian Collard, the Foreign Office head of security, noting the decision to grant Mandelson's clearance. According to Sir Oliver Robbins, that email recorded

“the ways in which we would manage”

Mandelson's clearance and “the mitigations”. Sir Oliver Robbins's claim was supported by the top official in charge of gathering the Humble Address material, Cat Little. She told MPs that she had seen an email that

“sets out the decision to grant DV and some mitigations.”

There was certainly a stated need to manage the risks associated with Peter Mandelson's appointment and an acknowledgment that that might be done through some process of mitigation, but we have heard no more. It may be that no detailed mitigation plan was drawn up. It is perfectly possible that that might have happened, for the very reason that these risks were so great that they could not have been mitigated. However, even if

that were the case, surely there would have been box notes or communications in emails making all that clear between the Foreign Office and the Cabinet Office, between UKSV and the Cabinet Office, and between Ministers and officials, yet we have seen nothing.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the concern he has expressed that there is no evidence of mitigations being put in place, there is a concern that there was not much time to do those mitigations between the point at which UKSV recommendations were received and the decision by the Foreign Office to grant vetting? There really was not much time for mitigations, as well as very little evidence that they were provided.

Sir John Hayes: That is true. Indeed, that might have been reflected in some of the messages that I have suggested to the Department that it might, even at this late stage, make available to our Committee—perhaps that is the most sensible thing given the terms of the Humble Address—and subsequently, in a redacted form, more widely. Even if it were true that because of the pace of the appointment, a full plan could not be drawn up, I find it inconceivable and—I would go as far as to say—unbelievable that there were no communications of any kind associated with the measures referred to by Sir Olly Robbins and Ian Collard.

Emily Thornberry: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way—I hope this is helpful. In the written evidence that Collard gave to us, on point 6 in answer to the question, “When was the report received by the department?” he said that they had

“received an email from UKSV at 1.52pm on 29 January informing PST that the report was ready for the FCDO to review.”

That was the date he heard about the developed vetting. The email, which is the nearest thing we have to anything that has any mitigations, is dated 30 January at 10.12 am.

Sir John Hayes: The right hon. Lady will know furthermore that Ian Collard, through a letter sent on his behalf to the Foreign Office, told MPs that he had sent an email

“recording the fact of the decision (but not any of the underlying discussions or reasons for doing so) and mitigations”.

She is absolutely right, and when she said earlier that she was unknowing of why this had occurred, I think the whole House would share her view. None of us quite know why on earth that material does not exist or, if it does exist, why it is not being made available.

My fourth point—I am coming to my exciting conclusion; I know you will be pleased to hear that, Madam Deputy Speaker—concerns the declaration of interests form. We know from the first tranche of documents that were relayed to the House that a blank template on declaration of interests for Peter Mandelson to complete was made available, but the completed declaration of interests, from which presumably detailed actions could be derived, has never been made known. I understand that this is another document that may have found its way into the hands of the Metropolitan police. If so, when did that occur, when did the Metropolitan police request it and, again, why? Greater clarity from the Government on the declaration of interests would be most welcome.

Finally, thanks to the learning of the Paymaster General, we were able to speak a little earlier of Gladstone and Disraeli. I carry a picture of Benjamin Disraeli with me at all times. Many people carry pictures of their children or grandchildren; I carry a picture of Disraeli—

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Should I carry a picture of Gladstone?

Sir John Hayes: I would not recommend it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Regardless of whichever picture Mr Martin would wish to carry, it is always decent for Members to ensure that they are in the Chamber long enough before intervening on someone who is giving a speech.

Sir John Hayes: I will say no more except this: Disraeli said that circumstances are beyond our control, but we all have control of our conduct. Of course it is true that the context in which the appointment of Peter Mandelson was made was beyond the control of the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister who is responding to the debate, but the conduct of the Government, as described by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam, is a matter for which he and other members of the Treasury Bench are answerable. The conduct of this affair seems to me to be, at best, highly questionable and, at worst, something much more serious.

I simply say to the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister: there is still a chance to put to rights some of these wrongs in what happens next. Some of the questions posed from across the House, as it found its feet earlier today, can and still should be answered. We will not get the full detail until the Metropolitan police have conducted their own inquiries and I understand that, but there is much that can be done to provide further explanation about the things we have not seen and why.

4.55 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I start, as I must, with the victims of Jeffrey Epstein. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for raising the testimony of Lisa Phillips and naming one of Epstein's victims. Those victims have names, they may be listening to the debate and they will find this whole process retraumatising and painful again and again.

Everything that has happened seems to have been because of an ultimate boys' club situation: a boys' club that surrounded Epstein, a boys' club that surrounded Mandelson and a boys' club that was in No. 10. Even today we have been drawn into its vortex. I do not like the fact that we are still having to be part of it and still saying his name when he did such dreadful things to so many people. I also pay tribute to the women and girls who were abused and exploited by him and his associates. They deserve truth and accountability, and to know that public institutions have learned lessons. Their bravery in speaking out is why this House keeps returning to questions of standards, judgment and transparency.

I ask the House to stand back a bit and look at the Humble Address process. As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I have been following the process very closely. I join the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) in

saying that I am not an enthusiast for the Humble Address process. I think that it should be used but I have questions about it.

I have been very critical of the appointment of Peter Mandelson from the moment that appointing him was even thought about—it should never have gone further than that—through the due diligence process, the vetting process and the final decision. My constituents expect Ministers to be held to the highest standards and when those standards fall short, they expect answers.

Some areas about which I have particular concerns have already been raised by Members during the debate. There need to be changes to the appointment system. This process tested that system to the limit. It was an extreme circumstance, with a new Government, a high-profile position, an appointment made very quickly and a rare political appointment to an ambassador role, but a system needs to be tested to the utmost for such a situation. In future, I hope the Foreign Affairs Committee will be given the opportunity to meet candidates who are being considered for political appointment. There may never be any more political appointments after this one, but if there are, they need to be made differently and we need to hear that that will happen.

I have questions about the due diligence process. I have asked officials whether it is a pass or fail process. Due diligence is just a part of the process and it cannot be failed, and I think that should be looked at. If there are enough red flags in the due diligence process, why would we go ahead with vetting? In this case, there were a couple of red flags: Epstein, and Russia and China. To me, those are pretty big red flags, so that part of the process should be looked at.

The Humble Address process is an important tool for the Opposition to gain transparency. It is an appeal to the King over the Heads of Government, once used for ceremonial messages but now more commonly used as a tool to gain information. In February, the Humble Address process was used for the publication of papers relating to Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor. When in opposition, the Labour party unsuccessfully requested Humble Addresses on the cost of the Rwanda plan and the asylum system and on the safety of school buildings, for example, and successfully asked for Humble Addresses on Brexit in 2018 and on Lebedev in 2022. It is a useful tool, but seeking answers is not the same as backing any process regardless of cost or consequence, and so far in this debate, there has been no mention of the cost—the financial cost, and the time cost to civil servants.

I would argue that this Humble Address has not been a good process—it has been disproportionate. The Humble Address was drafted so widely that it has become a catch-all, not a focused request for information, which is why many of us are finding the process very frustrating.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, and I agree with the case she is making. She is right that wide Humble Addresses are deleterious, both because there is an opportunity cost—while civil servants are looking at that, they are not looking at something else—and a real financial cost. However, does she agree that the right moment to push back on an excessively broad Humble Address is when it is being decided on? The Government have a majority; it is there so that the Government can get their way.

[*Sir Jeremy Wright*]

Would it not have been better for them to have said on 4 February, “This is too broad. We will only agree to something narrower”?

Fleur Anderson: I will come to that point later in my argument. I hope that my speech today will be something we can learn from, to learn the lessons from this Humble Address and try to make future ones better.

Sir John Hayes: Following on from the point made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), I would add, “or later”. He is right that the Government could have said, “This is too broad,” at the outset, but they were provoked—encouraged—to look at it again several times later. Even later on, it would have been wise to have amended the Humble Address in exactly the way that my right hon. and learned Friend and the hon. Lady have suggested.

Fleur Anderson: This Humble Address has been worked on by Ministers and civil servants very diligently, independently and scrupulously, but that has led to some huge costs, which I am going to outline. Maybe that is a lesson that should be learned for future Humble Addresses. As the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), said earlier in the week, £1 million has been spent by the Cabinet Office alone. A further £1 million has been spent by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and there have been further costs, including the cost of the independent King’s Counsel; the 16 to 20 civil servants entirely dedicated to this role; the time that the Intelligence and Security Committee has spent on this matter; and the many other civil servants from all the Departments involved in this. Those are huge costs.

My constituents in Putney want Government money to be spent on making their lives better, so we should always question whether this inquiry is making their lives better. When we use parliamentary powers, we have a duty to use public money responsibly and proportionately. I want full transparency, but full transparency must be smart, targeted and proportionate. A Humble Address should be a power of last resort, not a blunt instrument. Because this one was drafted on the hoof and without limits, it is taking up huge resource and time, and in doing so risks making future scrutiny harder, not easier. Most Humble Addresses ask for papers relating to a specific decision; this one asked for “all papers relating to Lord Mandelson’s appointment...including but not confined to”

nine wide-ranging categories spanning from pre-appointment to post-departure, plus all electronic comms and minutes. The breadth of that request is why the Government said:

“Given the breadth of the motion, this process will clearly take some time”—[*Official Report*, 23 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 41.]

It will obviously take even more time because of the police investigation. Meanwhile, the cost is now £2 million and rising.

I reiterate the need to be able to use Humble Addresses as an Opposition tool. Maybe one day, Labour will be in opposition, and we will want to be able to use it. I absolutely agree with that, but I think that some

guardrails should be put in place. I ask the Procedure Committee, alongside the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, to review how Humble Addresses are used.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important and well-thought-out speech. She has talked about guardrails, and my constituents in Harlow will feel the same as hers about the time this process is taking and the amount of Government resources that are being used. It is really important that we get transparency, but does my hon. Friend agree that one of those guardrails should be to protect minor officials? That is what the redactions—which, of course, there has been some discussion about—are seeking to do. What should happen in this process is that those who are guilty should be punished, but those who are innocent should not be.

Fleur Anderson: My hon. Friend raises another good point. The rules around redactions were mentioned earlier, and we should ensure that they are consistent between inquiries. We can learn many things from this, and we should build in those things for the future.

I will make three points—only three. First, we need scope and limits. Motions should set out the subject, the time period and the type of documents sought much more rigorously than this Humble Address did. Secondly, we need a proportionality check. When we voted on this Humble Address, we were not given financial information. Before the House votes, we should have an estimate from the Government of the likely cost, staff time involved and how long compliance will take. That should be part of our measured judgment. We can weigh that against the public interest and use that information when voting. Thirdly, we should use the right tool for the job. There are Select Committees, as we well know—the Foreign Affairs Committee has been rigorously looking at this issue—as well as written questions, freedom of information requests, police investigations, as there are in this case, and evidence under oath. There are other routes to transparency, too. I am not saying we should have used those things in this case—this is the right one for this matter—but we should be prepared to check with future Humble Addresses whether those other routes should not be used.

Emily Thornberry: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her thoughtful and important contribution. We need to ensure that if we use a Humble Address again, we use it as effectively as we can. We have talked about the amount of money, but will she also highlight the opportunity costs? We heard in the Committee from the Foreign Office and the Cabinet Office about the amount of time that civil servants were spending on this. One particular gentleman had come back from Iran and was an expert on that, but he was spending his time on this issue, rather than being able to give the right sort of assistance to the Foreign Office on what we should be doing on Iran.

Fleur Anderson: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Foreign affairs money is being spent on this, when it could have been spent on humanitarian aid or ensuring that our systems and processes are supporting those worldwide to make sure that we are all safer. The Intelligence and Security Committee has been looking

at this issue a lot, but we face many other intelligence and security issues in the world. Huge amounts of senior civil servant time has been spent on the Humble Address, too, and those people have been reflecting on the process. I am sharing some of the frustrations that they are feeling, because they have had to look through an enormous amount of papers that are well outside the focused questions we are asking, such as, “Why was Peter Mandelson ever employed in the first place?” We should be looking at that with a laser-like intensity, but we have wide-ranging other bits of paper. I accept that we can never know what we do not know until we have looked at it all, but the civil servants—the ones in the middle of the process—have seen that there could be a far better process.

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is making an important contribution about the effort, time and amount of documentation involved. She has also spoken about the cost and suggested a number of things that the money could have paid for. Does she agree that one thing could have been an inquiry? That is what the victims and survivors are calling for, and reams of information could have been included in that that would not necessarily have been included in this Humble Address, as they would not necessarily be relevant to the appointment of Mandelson as the ambassador to the US.

Fleur Anderson: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend talked about the inquiry during her speech, and I thought exactly that: should there not be one so that, with all this money being spent, we can look at the victims and the necessary justice?

In my constituency, I am working the victims of the PIP breast implant scandal. Some 47,000 women are affected, and they have never had any amount of parliamentary money spent on any inquiry. They would look at what we are doing here and want us to look at the proportionality. I always like to raise their case, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I hope you will allow me to do so. We have to have those comparisons in our mind all the time, and as constituency MPs, we do.

Moving on from my three points about the Humble Address, which I hope the Procedure Committee will take up, I will briefly address the idea of publishing the full internal vetting document. I understand why Opposition Members want it published, and I share their frustration about the way in which the appointment was handled, but I must emphasise that I cannot support the publication of the raw vetting documents, because it would do lasting damage to our vetting process.

Sir John Hayes: I do not think that anyone wants to publish that document. The point is that it was a document that could have been made available to the ISC not for publication, not for disclosure, but for scrutiny, because it might have informed our understanding of the whole process.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the right hon. Member for that pushback, but, having spoken to those who carry out the vetting process, I know that understanding that anything you say may be disclosed to a parliamentary Committee is itself a hugely chilling factor. Vetting only works if civil servants can give the frankest, most professional advice without fearing that anything they say will be published or shared with Committees.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way again. She could still develop her case if she talked about parliamentary Committees in general, but I chaired the ISC for four years, and, as I said in an earlier intervention, the ISC has been in existence since 1994. The ISC never leaks. If it did leak, the person who leaked anything would be criminally prosecuted. There is no question, if these vetting documents were shown to the ISC, of its having a chilling effect on anything, because the ISC is hermetically sealed. It does not leak about far more important things than the miserable private life of Peter Mandelson.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the right hon. Member for his comment about the ISC. I will continue to take advice from that vetting process: it needs to be even more hermetically sealed. We need to take real care over this. Any over-sharing will have an effect on everyone who is asked to sit down and give the frankest and most private information, and we need to make sure that they are doing that so that their potential risk to our security as a country is very well known. We cannot allow self-censoring because of this process. We do not need those far-reaching unintended consequences.

Emily Thornberry: Is there not another argument? Certain people are thinking again about applying for jobs for which they may need to undergo developed vetting. Those people may well be women, people from ethnic minorities or people who are gay, for whom any disclosure would be so profoundly embarrassing that they would rather just not get the job.

Fleur Anderson: My right hon. Friend has made the point very well. There are minority groups. There are people who do not know whether what they are worried about in respect of their past will be an issue, and they will not share that. They will not even go for the developed vetting, which means that they cannot rise within the Foreign Office. They may not even go for the job for fear of it.

We cannot allow that to be the unintended consequence of this process today. We cannot hear about it in 10 years' time. There have been other issues that may have compromised our national security because they have not been shared, or have robbed us of serious talent and opportunity from across the country because people have not joined the ranks of our civil servants because of the things that we are sharing or not sharing within this process. It is not about more transparency; it is about less. It could potentially leave Ministers with less honest advice. It could potentially weaken accountability, and put unfair pressure on civil servants who serve Governments of all colours with impartiality. What the public need is the outcome of the vetting.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I agree with the hon. Lady, as someone who has been through the vetting process repeatedly in the past. Those who attend a vetting interview are told, “The information that you are going to give me is between you and me”—between the subject of the interview and the vetting officer. Of course the ISC is hermetically sealed, but if the person going through the process knows that the information will be given to anyone other than the vetting officer, it makes that person think, “Should I be giving this information?” and that compromises the entire vetting system.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention—it is helpful to understand what happens inside the process. It has to be between the person and the vetting officer, and they must not think that it will be shared further. That is absolutely at the heart of it.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Fleur Anderson: I give way for the last time.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I am extremely grateful; the hon. Lady is being very generous with her time. I want to develop the point from a slightly different angle. What we are really interested in are the conclusions of the vetting process, not the material that leads to the conclusions. It is therefore entirely possible that we could give all the reassurances that she and the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) have made clear are important to those who contribute to the vetting process, but also make sure that, in the interests of disclosure on occasions such as this, the House can be clear about the conclusions of the vetting process without being told the raw information on which those conclusions are based.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the right hon. and learned Member. I have honestly enjoyed these interventions and I appreciate the spirit of dialogue in the House today. We are tackling a very difficult issue and we want to get it right.

I agree that the public need the outcome of the vetting: who was consulted, what risks were identified, what decisions were taken, whether a proper process was followed, and what on earth the mitigations were. The Cabinet Secretary or relevant permanent secretary can be called to a Select Committee to answer those questions directly, as the Foreign Affairs Committee has done. That is scrutiny, but publishing the raw documents is counterproductive.

To conclude, I remain appalled by, and very critical of, the Mandelson appointment. My constituents deserve full answers, and I await the documents being released by the Metropolitan police after its investigation, but we need to review this process that has cost so much, financially and in the opportunity cost. We also need to put some guardrails around the use of the Humble Address for any future requests, so that they stay focused on the issues that are meant to be investigated. We must make sure that when we demand accountability, we do it in a way that is effective, responsible and sustainable.

5.16 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This has been an interesting and wide-ranging debate, but at times it has been painful to listen to, because we are talking about a really terrible decision that was made by the Prime Minister, and about the retraumatising of victims, who have to keep hearing about this issue without seeing justice. If we were talking about a way to get justice, that would be different. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) made an excellent speech, and I agree that she has been a consistent champion of women's safety, particularly online, but these issues have been constantly raised.

Throughout the debate, hon. Members—not the hon. Member for Pontypridd—have waved or thrown around a significant number of dead cats. In fact, for anyone

who has spent a lot of time going through the documents, perhaps it should be red boxes that have been waved around, especially ones with “President of the United States” written on them. An awful lot of time seems to have been dedicated to getting a red box for the President of the United States—that is civil servant time that could have been better spent being more transparent, rather than chasing the specific maker of red boxes and getting them to print things on one.

One of the dead cats, or red boxes, is about the mitigations. It is important that there should have been mitigations, and that point was made when the Prime Minister was first given a document about whether Peter Mandelson should be appointed. Its advice was that mitigations would need to be put in place. The problem is not that mitigations were not put in place—I am not saying that they were put in place, or that we know or do not know which ones were put in place; the problem is that the Prime Minister made the decision in the first place.

The information on the bit of paper that was given to the Prime Minister talked about the “reputational risk” of appointing somebody who was friends with Jeffrey Epstein. It was not a reputational risk; it was just a risk—a risk of retraumatising victims and a risk of giving somebody who had close links to various companies and to Russia a position of power. The Prime Minister knew about those problems, and it was incredibly cute of the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee to try to say that the Prime Minister really was not responsible for this, because he delegated it to other people. The Prime Minister made the decision—the Prime Minister has held up his hands and said that he made the decision—and nobody in the House can say that the fault was that the mitigations were not put in place. The fault is with the Prime Minister for making a political appointment and choosing somebody he knew—he was told it—was friends with Jeffrey Epstein.

Sir Julian Lewis: I entirely agree with what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she agree with me about this? We have established clearly that those blank boxes, in which the Prime Minister could have made a comment when he was given the crucial information and the options leading up to the appointment of Mandelson, were intentionally blank. They are there precisely for the Prime Minister to record his response and, indeed, his decision. The fact that they were not redacted, but were genuinely blank, suggests to me—I cannot think of any other explanation—that the Prime Minister did not want to fill them in because he knew that there was something shameful about the appointment he was about to approve, and he did not want it on the record.

Kirsty Blackman: It is also clear that the Prime Minister had made up his mind, and it almost did not matter what people said. There was an awareness of the article that had been published saying that Peter Mandelson stayed in Jeffrey Epstein's house while Jeffrey Epstein was in prison—it does not get much worse than that. The Prime Minister had made the decision, as we can see from a whole lot of this documentation.

I appreciate the reasons for how the redactions have been made, and I appreciate that this massive amount of work was pulled together by a significant number of people dealing with things in all different formats. However,

there is a significant lack of consistency in this document that makes it really difficult to work out what is going on. For example, there are spaces in the document. If we look at page 199 of part III, Jon Garvie apparently sent a blank message, to which Peter Mandelson replied, "Quite". I do not know how he could have replied "Quite" to a blank message. The document does not have stars, it does not say that the message has been redacted and it does not explain what the message was. At other points in the document, it does say what the messages were and what the redactions are—a certain picture, or something. As I have said, I appreciate the amount of work that was put in to pull this document together, but we are not getting the full picture. We are not seeing everything because the document has in some places been put together in a not very helpful way.

I turn to the Morgan McSweeney messages. As I have mentioned, Morgan McSweeney has lost his phone and therefore cannot provide WhatsApp messages. However, on page 173 of part III, he has provided group WhatsApp messages. The document specifically says that the "messages were provided to the Cabinet Office by Morgan McSweeney".

As the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) said, it would be really nice if there was an explanation of why the information that is not there is not there. She gave back a nil return: she was asked for her messages with Peter Mandelson, and she replied that there were no messages with Peter Mandelson. On the Morgan McSweeney stuff, for example, it would be helpful if it said against these group chat messages that he could access only these group chat messages through another method, and he could not access his own personal messages, which is why we do not see them, or that he had disappearing messages on, and that is why we cannot see them. We do not know the reason: we do not know if it is because there is nothing, or because there was something, but it has now gone. I think that the level of transparency we are getting is deeply unhelpful.

On the speech by the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), I have never had a constituent say that they would like less transparency. I have never had one say that they would like to know less about why the Prime Minister appointed Peter Mandelson; they want to know why the Prime Minister appointed Peter Mandelson. Today is perhaps the wrong day to make a call for there to be less information. I think that our discussions about this decision should be centred on the victims. The fact is that the Prime Minister made these decisions knowing about the victims, and knowing that Peter Mandelson was friends with Epstein and continued to be friends with Epstein.

It did not matter what red flags were shown up by the processes; the political decision had been made. We know that. We know that the appointment was announced in advance of these things taking place. We know that the decision had been made. We know that—for some reason that I am still not totally clear about—the Prime Minister thought Peter Mandelson was the best person for the job and the person who would do the best for national security, the people of these islands and the Labour Government. That was the decision-making process that the Prime Minister must have gone through.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), said that we do not know what was in the driver's head.

We do not have that really key piece of information. We can have the driver apologise and say, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done it," but until they explain why they did it, we are not going to understand it, and the apology sounds hollower than I think the Prime Minister would like it to.

On transparency, we know that, even though there has been a significant amount of work and there is a significant number of documents, we do not have everything. Some things have been held back because of the police investigation or because of national security. I completely understand and accept that that is the case. However, there are other things that we do not have. On 4 February, the day the Humble Address went through, I submitted a number of freedom of information requests to the Cabinet Office. I received an acknowledgment of those FOI requests and, on 9 March, I received an email telling me that there was a delay in responding. I have received nothing since. Despite submitting an FOI request on 4 February, I have received nothing but an acknowledgment and then one update from the Cabinet Office, on 9 March, telling me that it was very sorry about the delay.

It would be very helpful if those on the Government Front Bench could ensure that I get a response to my FOI requests, because it is a legal requirement for Governments and the Cabinet Office to provide responses to such things and to make it clear if there is a delay why there is a delay, or if they are not going to provide a response why they are not going to provide a response. I would be interested to know how many members of the public have submitted FOI requests relating to the decision-making process or messages about Peter Mandelson, and have not received adequate responses from the Cabinet Office. I do not know why the Cabinet Office has not responded to me, but I would be concerned if it was doing exactly the same thing with members of the public, who do not have the ability to stand here and criticise the Cabinet Office.

The last thing I want to talk about is where things are with the Prime Minister and his currency at the moment. The Prime Minister is not standing here defending himself. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister is once again having to fill that role—I do not envy him. We have heard a defence of the Prime Minister's decision from very few Members on either side of the House. I do not think anybody is trying to defend the Prime Minister's decision. That brings us back to the Prime Minister's judgment and to the fact that he made this decision. It was not, as some have tried to say, some civil servants or special advisers who made the decision. It was the Prime Minister who made the decision, however much his arm may have been twisted.

Perhaps, as was suggested by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, it was others who really pushed this appointment and did the decision making. Maybe it was down others, in which case why would you have a Prime Minister who can be so easily led by others that they are willing to appoint somebody who was friends with a convicted paedophile to the most senior role in the ambassadorial service? We must assume that the Prime Minister is not that easily led. We must assume that the Prime Minister cannot have his arm twisted by officials or special advisers, in which case he made the decision. He is not standing here explaining why he made that decision. He is not meeting the victims. The

[Kirsty Blackman]

worst thing that has been uncovered today is the fact that the Prime Minister has had requests from those victims and not met them. That is despite the fact that we can see in the mass of documents before us the people who the Prime Minister did meet—people who my constituents would be much less keen on him meeting than the actual victims of Epstein.

The Prime Minister has a significant number of questions to answer. This is not the change that he promised when he stood on his manifesto in 2024. This is not a Parliament that is working for the benefit of people. It is a Parliament that is continuing to hide things, and to duck away from having the difficult conversations and from listening to the people it really needs to listen to the most. The Government need to take a long hard look at themselves, change their priorities, and listen to the requests that are being made by the people who have been harmed the most by this complete shambles.

5.30 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I originally thought that a large number of Members would want to attend this debate, because it goes to the heart of so much about the political system of this country, and the power and influence of very wealthy people around the world. I am sure that this is not the only time we will debate the issue, and I hope there will be a more thorough public inquiry into it later down the line.

We should also thank the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for what she said in her speech, the way she put it, and the way she placed centre stage the victims—some of whom are nameless—of the depravity of Jeffrey Epstein and the whole golden circle surrounding him, as well as the fact that one of those victims took her own life as a result.

The victims were young women who were trafficked and exploited by very wealthy men who felt that they could get away with it. Even after Epstein's initial conviction, those men carried on gravitating towards his golden light, the money and influence he exuded, and the way he made his money, which was all about helping the super-rich in the United States avoid paying tax by relocating their resources to the US Virgin Islands. The millions that Epstein made, and the millions that were not paid in tax by those very rich people, are millions not spent on health, housing, education and all the other things that working-class communities need.

Somewhere along the line, Epstein was apparently almost forgiven for his crimes, and then they came back much later on. We can now begin to see the whole, horrible story unravelling. Surely there is an object lesson here about unaccountable power, unbelievable levels of arrogance, supreme levels of wealth, and the way in which politicians—probably less wealthy than Epstein and some of his mates—were seduced by the super-yacht, the private island, the private jet, the big dinner, and so on. All of that is a corruption of our political system.

Unless we do something about the influence of big business, super-wealth and money in politics, then everything that Bernie Sanders says about the USA having the best democracy that money can buy will soon apply to this

country as well. We have got to be much stronger about needing a purer form of democracy and accountability within our society.

This is a debate on Peter Mandelson. I remember, when Mandelson first appeared in this building as the media director of the Labour party, discussing him with Tony Benn in the Tea Room. Tony had met him at the meeting of the national executive, where he was introduced to the Labour party. I saw Tony that evening and asked him, "What was it like?", and he said, "Well, this guy Mandelson is going to give us all a lot of trouble." He then wrote in his diaries that evening:

"I find Mandelson a threatening figure for the future of the Party."

Tony recognised that Mandelson's whole objective was a political one: to take the Labour party away from its roots—away from its trade union connections and the working-class communities—and to turn it into a party of business. As the hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) and others pointed out earlier, that eventually ended up with Labour Together and the huge amounts of money it spent trying again to subvert the whole principle behind the Labour party.

The results of all that are being paid for day in, day out—in hospitals spending 15% of their expenditure on private finance initiatives, in schools having to pay debts related to Building Schools for the Future and so on. The whole idea was that the state should become an arm of business rather than providing services that are necessary for the people of our society. Mandelson was successful in many ways in turning things away from their original purpose. All the contracts that are now being agreed upon are a consequence of that sort of philosophy and those sorts of political dealings that went on.

In an earlier debate on this subject, I said that there has to be a serious and open public inquiry into the influence of business, money and corruption on our political system. I understand the limitations of the Intelligence and Security Committee and its work, which is why I intervened on the deputy Chair, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), earlier on. I am sure—he may well agree with me—that this will not be done and dusted by his Committee and that it will actually go on for a very long time, because it goes to the heart of democracy within our society.

I hope that at the end of this, we do have an open public debate about money and politics, and a serious open inquiry that will get to the heart of everything that is going on, because if we do not, we will all be the weaker for it. As the hon. Member for Pontypridd pointed out, the victims here are known to be those young women who had such a terrible experience and terrible time at the hands of the rich and powerful. If we do not have such an inquiry and debate, there will be other victims of the rich and powerful further down the line.

I know that time is of the essence, so I will just talk briefly about Palantir. On 22 July 2025—less than a year ago—Peter Mandelson sent an email to Morgan McSweeney. The subject was a name: Peter Thiel. Mandelson wrote:

"This celebrated techie is in London til Aug 9. I don't know whether you have been approached already,"

saying it would be good for the PM to meet him—so the ambassador to Washington starts trying to set up meetings with a tech entrepreneur who happens to be a friend and supporter of Donald Trump. Contained in the second tranche of the so-called Mandelson files laid before Parliament, the email is one of a series in which Mandelson personally connected the UK Government to Palantir, the data analytics and surveillance firm co-founded by Thiel, and to the wider network of investors around it, at a time when his own consultancy firm, Global Counsel, still counted Palantir among its clients. Is that corrupt or what? The ambassador to Washington owned a company whose client he was trying to introduce to the head of the British Government via a series of private emails using connections that he had obviously obtained through the Labour party over a very long time. Mandelson did not divest himself of his significant financial stake in 2024 despite official advice that he should do so before taking up his appointment. That advice stated:

“the retained role and interest in Global Counsel would have to cease”,

if Mandelson were appointed His Majesty’s ambassador. But it did not. Mandelson carried on with that, as we well know.

We also know that the Prime Minister met representatives of the firm with Peter Mandelson in Washington. That was the mysterious meeting that apparently nobody was at, although it did happen; of which there is no record, and yet everybody was there; and during which no discussion went on because nothing was reported, and yet we all know that it took place because they were filmed going into it. That took place only a fortnight after Mandelson had started the job.

Days later, on 5 March 2025, a partner in the silicon valley venture firm 137 Ventures—an investor in both Palantir and the defence company Anduril—emailed an invitation for Mandelson to attend the Hill and Valley Forum, a Washington gathering that brings together defence technology executives and Congress. The sender’s name was redacted, but the file notes that Mandelson was attending “with Louis”, who we understand to be Louis Mosley, the head of Palantir’s UK business. And so, this very tight connection of people goes on.

According to Ethan Shone of openDemocracy, Mandelson’s security “mitigations” forbade such one-to-one meetings with former clients like Palantir—a restriction which, like divestment from Global Counsel, the former ambassador assiduously ignored. He did not fulfil the requirements to divest himself and not to follow up those connections, and, as others in the debate have pointed out, he was very generous and free with his email advice to just about everybody, trying to set things up all the time.

Kirsty Blackman: I am wondering whether the right hon. Gentleman remembers the issues around covid money, when many Conservative Ministers or peers made introductions to companies that they were linked with. Does he remember the Labour party jumping up and down about how people should not be using their power and connections to get preferential access, and does he see anything ironic about the situation with Peter Mandelson?

Jeremy Corbyn: There are many ironies surrounding Peter Mandelson. The most useful thing he ever said was that he hated me, wanted nothing to do with me

and woke up every morning trying to get rid of me when I was leader of the Labour party. I take that as a badge of honour, actually, because I wanted absolutely nothing to do with him and the politics that went with him.

Mandelson managed to land a deal for Palantir. That was his achievement, and in his farewell letter to embassy staff, he singled out that one achievement. He wrote that the UK leaves the relationship with the United States

“in a really good condition, with a magnificent state visit and the new US-UK technology partnership—my personal pride and joy that will help write the next chapter of the special relationship—set for next week.”

Obviously the visit went ahead without him.

Palantir confirmed that it would invest £1.5 billion in the UK and expand its Ministry of Defence contract to £750 million over five years, replacing a £75 million, three-year arrangement. The deal was folded into the technology prosperity deal that Trump and the Prime Minister signed at Chequers the next day. In only a short time as ambassador, he embroiled us in all this stuff with Palantir and set up this technology agreement with the USA.

As we all know, because we hear it from our constituents, people who use the NHS are alarmed that Palantir will get hold of their medical records. They are concerned that the company will get hold of the entirety of the NHS and social security records—in other words, crucial personal information on every single person that has lived or died in this country since 1948.

Are we seriously saying that we, as a society and country, are incapable of setting up our own technology arrangement? I do want data sharing within the NHS. I want it to be the case that when someone goes to the doctor, they can access that person’s records quickly and sort out what is wrong with them. I want that technology in place for A&E departments, but I do not want those records to be shared with a company that is busy advising Israel on how it will go about its bombardment of Gaza and trying to get hold of other contracts all around the world

Do we have to mortgage ourselves to an American multinational that will have control of and access to vast amounts of data? Surely to goodness, we have enough ambition and ability to develop our own systems within the NHS. We are all proud of the NHS, but let us not destroy it by handing it over to the private sector. Let us not destroy the whole philosophy behind it by giving it over to those who will make money out of it rather than deal with the obvious health issues that so many people face.

I hope that the lesson from all this is that when the political system becomes corrupted by lack of principle and the amounts of money made available to people—the private donations that are still made by private health interests and others to Members and the parties represented in this House—we are all the losers; democracy is the loser, and ultimately the price is paid by the poorest and most vulnerable people within our society.

5.44 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be the last Back-Bench contributor. I actually mean that, because unlike some debates which we have all been in, this one has been characterised by

[Jerome Mayhew]

knowledge and a really serious approach to the subject in hand. I have learned a lot, and I am grateful for many of the contributions made.

The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) made quite a good point when he said that he was surprised there were not more people in the Chamber to take part in the debate. Perhaps one of the reasons why the Chamber is relatively sparsely populated is that this feels like old news. It is easy to lose the sense of wonder and shock at the seriousness of the allegations that led to the Humble Address.

It is old news that Peter Mandelson was grossly unfit for public office—we have known that for decades. Tony Blair knew it, because he sacked him for dishonesty not once but twice. We have known for years that Peter Mandelson was a byword for double-dealing—after all, his nickname was the Prince of Darkness, and that did not come from nowhere. We have known for years, unfortunately, of his continued friendship with his best pal, Mr Epstein—that they were such close friends, and that Mandelson was so on Epstein's side that he stayed in Epstein's house even when Epstein was in prison for child sexual offences. We say that too often without stopping to realise what it actually means. It is an extraordinary statement. We knew that. The Prime Minister appointed Mandelson despite knowing those things and despite having advice on vetting from his then Cabinet Secretary. He ignored that advice. This, of course, is the Prime Minister who famously said that he was going to put "country before party". On this occasion, he appeared to put party before national security. It is pretty serious.

Some months ago, we had the unedifying spectacle of the Government attempting through obfuscation to cover up this scandal. They whipped their Back Benchers to vote down the release of relevant documents, which was such a grubby move that it fomented such revolt among Labour Members that the Government were forced into a climbdown.

Then there were not one but two stolen phones. I accept that perhaps that happened, but there were also no messages from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, no messages from the Deputy Prime Minister—although we know that no one tells him anything, so perhaps we have not missed anything there—and no messages from the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, either. We also had the use of disappearing messages, with no record kept by the Prime Minister, in direct contradiction of Cabinet Office guidance for the retention of records. All that was found out drip by drip, one painful and damning piece of evidence after another, as a result of the Conservative-led Humble Address.

Yet we are still not at the end. It is clear from the documents that have been released that there are obvious continuing gaps in disclosure. Messages have been leaked to the press, including *The Guardian* and *The Spectator*, which are not included in the release to Parliament, even though they were ordered to be. The Intelligence and Security Committee—an organisation of eminent Members of the House from across the parties—has given its opinion that the Government are interpreting exclusion of material on the grounds of prejudice to national security or international relations "far too broadly".

I am sorry to say this, but it feels that the Government are still at it, because they are withholding documents. We have talked a lot about the vetting file. If that file is too difficult to disclose, at least its conclusions should be shared with the ISC, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) suggested. It is important that the Government have no legal authority to take decisions not to disclose. As the Intelligence and Security Committee said,

"while Government may believe that there is good reason to withhold certain documents, it does not currently have the authority to so do."

It is not for officials to decide what is released to Parliament; Parliament decides. If the instruction—a direction from the high court of Parliament to officials—is thought by officials to be too widely framed, it is the responsibility of Ministers to come to this House and persuade Parliament to change its mind. They have not done so.

One of the things that really worries me about this Administration is that officials appear to think that they can decide what is and is not supplied to Parliament. That undermines the administration of this country by democracy. Parliament is where decisions are taken; we are the people who decide what authority is granted to the Executive. For officials to then decide, perhaps for good reason, that they will not comply with the direction of the high court of Parliament undermines our entire democratic process. They do not have the legal authority to make that decision. It is for the Government to stand up for Parliament, and if they think that Parliament has made too wide a direction, they must come and persuade us of that, and they will no doubt get a vote to correct it.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The hon. Member will recall that the Conservative Humble Address motion required the sharing of all communications "between ministers and Lord Mandelson, in the six months prior to his appointment",

and all communications among

"ministers, Government officials and special advisers during his time as Ambassador".

That was a hugely broad scope. Does the hon. Member think that when the Government amended that and proposed to exclude any of those things subject or prejudicial to national security and international relations, they were serious in wanting all that information to be shared with the ISC? Or does he think that the Government were trying to be too smart and too clever by half, suggesting that His Majesty's Opposition were acting against national security and international relations?

Jerome Mayhew: I would never accuse the Government of being too clever by half, and I am unable to put myself in their heads. However, I hear the hon. Member's concern.

We have this drip, drip, drip: the failed cover-up, the partial disclosure, the embarrassing exposures and the continued unauthorised retention. When will the Government realise that this is not going to stop and that this painful, weeping sore will remain open until they finally deliver what the Humble Address requires of them?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.53 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I open my remarks by paying tribute to Sir Alex Younger, the former head of MI6, who we learned had passed away during this debate. He was an incredible public servant who gave an enormous amount to his country. He was incredibly wise and generous, and I know that everyone in this House will miss him very much.

In all these parliamentary encounters, we have been talking about a seeping of a great poison. The evil of Epstein seeped into his relationship with Peter Mandelson, which seeped into Mandelson's influence on Government, which is still seeping into the way in which the Government have allowed themselves to behave. It is time for that to stop. Although we are approaching the point when we might be able to draw a line, that point is still quite a long way away, because we are dependent on the police releasing their documents.

With that in mind, I ask the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister to try a new approach: for us to build on what has already happened and go further, so that the House can be more reassured about what it is and is not being given sight of. As far as anyone can see, there is no good reason why the Government cannot tell the House more at the high level. As I said earlier, on Monday the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister gave us something more high-level in the four categories, but we can go further.

There is no good reason why the information that has been given to the police cannot be given to the ISC. The Government could unilaterally decide to do that; they do not need to ask anyone's permission. As has been raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) who used to be Chair of the Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who is not in his place, who is a current member of the Committee, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), who is still on the Committee, this House has complete trust in the ISC. It entrusts it with the most confidential material that the state has on offer—STRAP-level material—so I do not think anyone here would believe that sharing the material given to the police with the ISC would in any way run the risk of prejudicing a trial. Consequently, I genuinely invite the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister to give the House that.

All of us, even those who are not members of the ISC, should be entitled to know a bit more. We should be entitled to know about the number of messages being withheld. We should be given a degree of detail, because there is no reason why that would prejudice an investigation or a trial. I will go through a few points and then I will sit down and let the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister respond.

I want to return to the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister's own messages, not because I think he has done anything wrong—I do not believe he has—but because he disclosed to us the other day that he had messages that he did not feel were relevant and I wonder if he could tell us about them. They are obviously not in

the returns, but because the Humble Address required the disclosure of messages between Ministers and Peter Mandelson, we need to know the process that was gone through with messages that were not in the Humble Address returns. Were they deleted? Were they deleted after they had been shown to officials? Were they shown to officials and it was decided they were not to be disclosed? It would be very good to have clarity, because it might give us insight into how other such messages were treated.

Secondly, on the question of Morgan McSweeney's messages, which we know still existed in April this year when he talked to the Foreign Affairs Committee about them and said that they were already in the possession of the Government because of the inquiry that Wormald had done in September last year, will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister confirm that the process discovered those messages and consequently that Morgan McSweeney was telling the truth to that Committee? Do those messages exist? I do not think it prejudices an investigation or trial to know that those messages exist.

Similarly, with Morgan McSweeney's messages, the Prime Minister's messages, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's messages, and so on, we deserve to know how many messages are being withheld. There is nothing in that data that would prejudice an investigation or a trial. That is what we care about—I know that is what the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister cares about—and if the Government were to co-operate in that way, it would show a willingness and a transparency that we have not previously had.

Related to that is the issue that I and several Back Benchers raised about other forms of electronic communication, particularly pictures, videos, voice recordings and attachments, none of which have made their way into the Humble Address returns. It seems very unlikely that all of them have been retained by the police, particularly when the messages they are related to are in the Humble Address returns. It feels like they have slipped through the net. Can the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister tell us a bit more about that?

Lastly, to return to the point made by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and by my right hon. Friends, during the course of this debate I believe we have ascertained that the ISC did not see the mitigations. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee has not been able to detect any mitigations. I think we deserve to know whether there were any mitigations. Even if we cannot be told what they were, and even if we are told that they are being retained by the police, there is no good reason why we should not be told whether or not they exist. There is nothing in that information that would prejudice an investigation or a trial.

It is time for the Government to take us to the next level of transparency. I very much hope that that is what the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister wants to do, because ultimately, all of this will come out in due course. If it does, and it turns out that the Government were unnecessarily withholding information, the scandal will continue again and again and it will infect more and more people. It does not need to do that. Let's clear this up now.

6 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): I thank Members from across the House for their contributions this afternoon and for sharing the condolences expressed by the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), on the news that we learned during the debate that Sir Alex Younger, the former director general of MI6, had passed.

As I have said to the House before, while it is right for Members to discuss process and how the Government have responded to the Humble Address, we must not neglect to remember the women and girls who are at the very heart of this matter. Their suffering cannot be forgotten in this pursuit of justice—a pursuit that has been denied to them for too long. On that point, I want to start by paying particular thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) for her powerful speech this afternoon and to take this opportunity to thank her for the work she carried out so diligently as part of this Government as the Minister for Victims.

The accounts that my hon. Friend has shared with this House this afternoon from victims such as Lisa are harrowing and should remind us of the anger and suffering that they rightly continue to feel each time we have one of these debates. But my hon. Friend's speech has made me think that just reading the words on this page alone feels insufficient in the context of the cultural challenges that she raised, and with your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to take a moment to take this opportunity to ask myself questions about my relationship with Peter Mandelson.

Did I consciously ignore the stories that followed Peter Mandelson, or indeed know about many of them, from many, many years ago? I do not think that I did. Did I ever ignore warnings that were put to me about Peter Mandelson? I did not receive any, to do so. But as I reflected on my hon. Friend's speech, it made me think: did I at best subconsciously treat Peter Mandelson differently because I believed him to have influence and power within the Labour party? I think the answer to that question is yes, I did. Have I benefited from that relationship in the time I have been an elected politician? I think in part the answer to that question is yes, I did. For that I would like to apologise to the House, to the victims, to Lisa, and commit to then doing something about it.

In the first instance, I hear my hon. Friend's request for a meeting with the victims of Jeffrey Epstein. I know that there is a request with No. 10 for the Prime Minister to do so, but if she thinks it appropriate, I make myself available for that meeting to discuss the issues that she has raised. I know that she will continue to be a strong advocate from the Back Benches for the action this Government are taking to halve violence against women and girls, as well as to pursue the duty of candour on which I know she worked so hard, and I look forward to continuing my work with her on these important issues.

Sir Julian Lewis: The Minister has shown once again what a decent man he is, and he is doing a very difficult job in defence of somebody who knew a lot more than he did. He was not chief of staff at the time that the Mandelson appointment was being carried out. On page 8 of the first bundle, we have the note from the private secretary to the Prime Minister, which says:

“We have sought a due diligence review...and your Chief of Staff”—

Morgan McSweeney at the time—

“has discussed Peter's relationship with Jeffrey Epstein which we will go through with you, but your Director of Communications is satisfied with his responses to questions about contact.”

However, we also know from earlier in the bundle that the Prime Minister specifically knew that Mandelson had stayed in Epstein's flat while Epstein was in jail for the abuse of an under-age girl. The Prime Minister knew all that at the time. What is the purpose of having a box at the end marked for the Prime Minister's comments on the alternatives he has been given when in fact, as we now know and as has been clearly explained by the Paymaster General, there has been no redaction—the Prime Minister did not comment? Why did the Prime Minister withhold any remarks on this highly contentious matter? Where did he comment? Where did he give his decision? He certainly did not do it in the place that he was supposed to do it.

Darren Jones: In relation to the first part of the right hon. Gentleman's question, he will know, because I have confirmed it to the House at the Dispatch Box previously, that questions were put by the Prime Minister's former chief of staff to Peter Mandelson following the due diligence report to seek further information about the stories reported in the newspaper. He will also know that Peter Mandelson replied to those questions, and that information was then considered by those in No. 10.

As I have confirmed to the House, that document—the question and its answers—is one of the documents being held by the Metropolitan police. I have been advised repeatedly that I am not permitted to disclose what I have seen in that document on the Floor of the House, so I am afraid it will have to be one of those questions that remains until such a time as the Metropolitan police publishes its documentation. In relation to the second part of the right hon. Gentleman's question, I refer him to the Paymaster General's answer earlier today. That is the answer to that question.

This is my 11th update to the House on this matter, and I am grateful for the opportunity to answer Members' questions. I will speak to a number of issues first, before turning to some specific questions from Members and setting out what the Government intend to do next.

Since the Humble Address motion was passed on 4 February, the House will know that a huge disclosure exercise has been undertaken by Government officials. The motion called for the disclosure of documents in respect of the appointment and dismissal of Peter Mandelson as His Majesty's ambassador to Washington, alongside relevant communications. The publication of documents on 11 March, followed by the second tranche on Monday, has done that, in the Government's view. I hope the Government have provided the House with the reassurance it needs that, with the exception of the small number of documents withheld at the request of the Metropolitan police, which we intend to publish when we are allowed to do so, the Government have discharged their duties to the House in relation to the Humble Address.

Sir John Hayes: In those terms, at what point did the Metropolitan police ask for the vetting summary? Clearly it is now a known fact that there was an assumption

that that vetting summary, but not the granular detail, was likely to be published, albeit in a redacted form, having been through the normal process.

Darren Jones: If the right hon. Member will forgive me, I have noted that question from earlier in the debate, and I will come to it in a grouping shortly.

I note the comments and questions today from Members on the process that officials have led to support the Government in responding to the Humble Address. As I have said each time I have been at the Dispatch Box, the Government have taken their obligations to comply with the Humble Address seriously and, in their view, have done so in full.

I hear the calls of some Members for the Government to provide further detail on Peter Mandelson's vetting. As I told the House on Monday, we have shared the vetting summary and recommendation with the Intelligence and Security Committee. However, the vetting inputs collected as part of those investigations would never be published, because if the Government did so, people would feel unable to answer those questions honestly and frankly in any UK Security Vetting investigation in the future—a point that was made by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin), who has been through that process. That would undermine our national security—not just in this instance, but the very basis of the national security system itself. It would have far-reaching impacts that no responsible Government rightly should entertain.

On that basis, I welcome the comments from the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, Lord Beamish, on Monday night. He said that he

“agrees with the Government that the larger vetting documents shouldn't be released to the Committee”

because of the potential impact on the vetting system. The former National Security Adviser, Lord Sedwill, wrote in a letter published in *The Times* today that

“the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) has seen a summary of the issues that vetting inevitably raised. That should be sufficient for Parliament to judge the Prime Minister's handling of this episode. Any Humble Address requiring disclosure of Lord Mandelson's detailed submissions or vetting file would be a serious mistake.”

In the other place yesterday, Baroness Manningham-Buller, the former director general of MI5, said:

“I know that security vetting is very detailed—I have been subjected to it many times myself. It goes to your school, education, employers and friends, and people speak frankly. If for one moment they felt it was going to be published, security vetting designed to protect the most secret information would be of little value. Whatever else we do, we must hold on to that. However tempting it would be, for whatever reason, to know the full contents, they must not be revealed. I am talking not about this case but about a general principle.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 June 2026; Vol. 856, c. 764.]

I hear the arguments put by right hon. and hon. Members in the House today, but I do say that not just the Government's position, but the advice from the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, a former National Security Adviser and a former director general of MI5 should be taken seriously.

Kirsty Blackman: I have been here through the debate and not one person has asked for all that information to be published—not one. People have been asking for the

summary at the end, the outcome. Did it say “Red—he should not be granted clearance”?

Darren Jones: I have said repeatedly that the summary has been given to the Intelligence and Security Committee. I think the hon. Lady may be confusing the summary and the recommendation from the interview information that was collected between the UKSV official and Peter Mandelson. This is important because, as the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells said, when someone goes into an interview with a UKSV specialist and they say, “You must tell me everything, and it will go no further,” if that were to be handed over to a politician—even a politician on the Intelligence and Security Committee—it would undermine the very basis of that work.

Sir Jeremy Wright: We need to be very clear about this: the arguments the Minister is making are right, but as the hon. Lady points out, they are not a response to the arguments we are making. The argument that has been made to him by the Intelligence and Security Committee, as he knows, is that there is no harm to be found in the disclosure of the conclusions of the vetting process. We accept absolutely that the contributing material that led to those conclusions should not be disclosed. I need him to be very clear that it is our view that the conclusions could be disclosed, and there is no harm to be done to national security, which there would be if the contributing material were disclosed, by the disclosure of the conclusions. Will he confirm that?

Darren Jones: Again, it is important to distinguish between the notes and information collected in the interview process, which some Members have called to be given to the Intelligence and Security Committee, and the interviewer's recommendation and summary and conclusions, which, as I say, the Government have already given to the Intelligence and Security Committee. The fact that documents that have gone through the ISC have not appeared in the bundles of this week must be in relation to the fact that categories of information given to the Metropolitan police are relevant to this question.

Moving to the documents that Members may have expected to see in the second tranche, as I said on Monday, some messages may not have been captured where people may have previously changed their phones without having backed up their messages or where they had disappearing messages turned on, and I noted to the House on Monday that that included myself. In my circumstance, to answer the questions from the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, it is not that I took a unilateral decision about messages that I felt were in scope or not in scope of the Humble Address; it is merely that I have access to no messages to disclose.

That is an important distinction because the disclosure process that took place involved the Cabinet Office writing to every Department, to permanent secretary and principal private secretary level for all relevant Ministers, special advisers and officials, to set out the guidance on which the disclosure process should take place—that is, for example, to include WhatsApp and other communication services, emails, personal devices, work devices and other messaging platforms—and a clear set of guidance about what would be in scope and not in scope. Permanent secretaries as the accounting

[Darren Jones]

officers to Parliament for each of those Departments were individually made liable for ensuring that that disclosure process took place in line with the guidance. The Cabinet Office did not go to each person in each Department and conduct that itself; it executed it through Departments in line with the process that I have set out.

Alex Burghart: I just want to make sure that I understand—I hope the Minister will forgive me if I do not. In his case, was it his permanent secretary as the accounting officer who verified that the messages he had were not admissible to the process?

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands: there were no messages to consider and that is different.

Alex Burghart: The reason I brought this up is that on Monday the right hon. Gentleman said:

“I do recall having some limited exchanges with Peter Mandelson over WhatsApp, including those I have already discussed in the media”.—[*Official Report*, 1 June 2026; Vol. 786, c. 853.]

I do not wish to push this point too far, but I do wish to understand: there were messages, so who decided that they were not to be submitted under the Humble Address? Please can he explain?

Darren Jones: I have tried to explain the answer to that question a number of times. There was no decision to disregard any messages because there are no messages to consider. What I confirmed on Monday was that I have had WhatsApp exchanges with Peter Mandelson, but I have not saved them on my devices to be able to share with my principal private secretary. The only person who could release those messages, if they have them, would be Peter Mandelson, who has refused to disclose his phone to the process—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Mr Burghart, please can you observe the courtesies of the House and ensure that the debate continues in an orderly fashion?

Darren Jones: As an extension of that question, the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster asked me to comment on how this relates to Morgan McSweeney’s messages. I am afraid that I did not conduct that conversation or investigation, so I cannot answer on the specifics of that question.

I will now turn to some of the specific questions raised by Members during the debate, which I have grouped in a way that I hope is satisfactory to the House. The first group relates to vetting information, information on mitigations, both commercial and related to national security, and the question of attachments. I have already addressed the issue of vetting information. In relation to mitigations, I confirm to the House that I have not personally seen any of the UKSV information nor the summary, recommendations or any mitigation information that was put in place, so I cannot speak to this question from personal experience. However, I note my comment on Monday that the Metropolitan police have permitted us to confirm that the categories of documents that they are holding include vetting information and conflict of interest process material. Unfortunately, that is all I am able to say on the matter.

Emily Thornberry: Does the Minister appreciate that there may be a difference between conflict of interest information and national security mitigations, and that he may be able to tell us about some of that information but not able to tell us whether or not there were mitigations to defend national security?

Darren Jones: I share the expectation of my right hon. Friend that there would be a difference between commercial mitigations—for example, what investments there may be in particular companies—and mitigations that may have arisen from national security considerations. What I do not know is whether that was the case and how they were dealt with in any particular instance, because I do not have that information to hand.

Lastly on this first group of questions, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) asked me to confirm the relevant detail in relation to the Metropolitan police dates and documents. As I have set out previously, I have been advised that I am not permitted to put that on the public record, but I am happy to go back to the Metropolitan police to see if there is anything further that we can add in due course.

Sir John Hayes: When the Metropolitan police have concluded their investigation, all of that material will return to the ISC, and presumably the Government will then want to publish the information, albeit in an appropriate and redacted form.

Darren Jones: Again, I do not know which documents the Metropolitan police have, so I cannot speak to them specifically, but I share the sentiment of the right hon. Gentleman’s point.

The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster asked me to confirm that there was a leak inquiry under way in relation to what appears to be information from UKSV being in the hands of *Guardian* journalists. I can confirm that that leak inquiry is under way but has not yet concluded.

Questions of judgment and due diligence have been put to me. I have already answered the point about the follow-up questions to the due diligence report and can only reiterate to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), the words of the Prime Minister when he said that he regrets the appointment and has apologised for it.

The deputy Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), made the helpful suggestion that we should think about codifying the precedent on which the Government rely when making redactions for the future. I commit to taking that away and taking advice, not least on what that might mean in terms of House business and Government business.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) made some interesting points about how Humble Addresses may be used in the future, given that the House seems to have decided that it wants to use them more often than has been the case in the past. I was then asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) to confirm the Government’s continued commitment to the duty of

candour legislation, which I can confirm. As he knows, there have been discussions with families and others about refining some of the final points in that legislation. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked me about freedom of information requests, and I commit to taking that question away and asking officials to try to respond as promptly as possible.

As the Prime Minister has set out, there are clearly significant lessons to be learned from the issues that arose from Peter Mandelson's appointment, so while the Government consider that they have now duly discharged their obligations in respect of the Humble Address, they will none the less continue work on a number of important areas. Those include our commitment to bring forward legislation to ensure that peerages can be removed from disgraced peers, noting that Peter Mandelson has already been removed from the list of Privy Counsellors, and changing the process for direct ministerial appointments so that due diligence and national security vetting must take place prior to announcement.

Kirsty Blackman: I was expecting and hoping that the Minister would come on to Morgan McSweeney's messages, which were asked about by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), and be clear about whether those messages exist and where they are. If they are with the Metropolitan police, for example, will the Minister commit to going to the police and asking if he can tell us that those messages exist?

Darren Jones: I say politely to the hon. Lady that I have already answered all of those questions.

The Government will continue their review with Sir Adrian Fulford, looking at recommendations for the national security vetting system arising from the lessons of the Peter Mandelson case. We are ordering an examination of any security concerns raised during Peter Mandelson's tenure as ambassador, which the Government Security Group in the Cabinet Office is now taking forward. We are commissioning an independent review of how non-corporate communications channels, including WhatsApp, are used in Government. In addition, the Cabinet Secretary has written to all heads of department to clarify the rules on record keeping and ensure they are being properly applied across Government. The Government have also noted the Intelligence and Security Committee's comments on the management of sensitive information; I share those concerns, and have expressed them at the Dispatch Box. The Government are committed to raising information security standards, and will take further action on this issue.

As I have committed to previously, I will return to the House to update it on the progress of this work in due course, but on the basis of my statements today and on Monday this week, the Government now consider that they have duly discharged their obligations in respect of the Humble Address. I thank the Intelligence and Security Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, and right hon. and hon. Members for their work on this matter and their contributions to today's debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Government's response to the House's humble Address of 4 February 2026.

General Strike Centenary Commemorations

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Lilian Greenwood.*)

6.22 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a great honour to bring this Adjournment debate before the House to mark the centenary of the general strike of 1926. Twelve years after the general strike, the Welsh miners' poet, Idris Davies, asked,

"Do you remember 1926? That summer of soups and speeches," which was a reference to the bitter months endured by the miners and their families after the general strike ended. He also referred to the strike itself, which he called

"The great dream and the swift disaster".

I am really grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker for granting parliamentary time so that we can answer that question in this place and do so in the affirmative, just as it has been answered at events across the country during the past month.

The general strike remains the most extensive confrontation in our national history between organised labour on the one side and employers and Government on the other, and it remains contested history.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate on the general strike before the House. Does he agree that when we remember the general strike as the national event that it was, we should also reflect on the countless local stories of solidarity, mutual support and sacrifice that defined so many communities, such as those in my constituency, home of the train wreckers? A local group of miners derailed the Flying Scotsman and suffered severe consequences as a result. It is such an important part of our labour movement and our national story that we remember those local actions as well.

Laurence Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and for sending me a copy of the documentary on the Cramlington train wreckers ahead of this debate. It was moving to see those men in their later years. It is telling that the general strike tends to be remembered as local history, and there will be much to say throughout this debate about the general strike in Birmingham and elsewhere.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Speaking of local history, Wolverhampton, Bilston and District trades unions council has prepared a book on the 1926 general strike. In my hon. Friend's experience, has he found that workers usually go on strike only as a last resort? Does he agree that the right to protest and to withdraw labour are part of the important civil liberties that we enjoy against abuses of authority and power, and that they should therefore be protected?

Laurence Turner: I agree with my hon. Friend, and it is only right to say that he, through his role on the GMB executive and as one of the delegates to the national policy forum in opposition, was one of the people who helped draw up the reforms to employment rights that have been passed by this Parliament.

The general strike raised profound questions about the proper balance of state power and the rights of dissenters at times of civil contingency, and we should ask them again and with urgency in each generation. It is difficult to capture the essence of the world that created the strike: the depths of poverty in the older mining districts; the extreme social control exercised by employers in the villages put up around the more lucrative and newly exploited seams; and the critical dependence of the nation's economy upon a coal industry that killed one in 1,000 of its workers each year and seriously wounded one in 10.

When working people rallied across occupational boundaries to defend the miners in 1926, they showed extraordinary solidarity, and their unions channelled national power to a degree perhaps unseen before, even if they were unsteady in exercising it and uncertain of its limits.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate forward. I spoke to him beforehand to ascertain his focus, and I will outline my focus and why I wished to be here. I remember when I went for my first job, which was at Henry Denny & Sons in Belfast. The manager brought me in and said, "Jim, here's the job, but now you have to join the union." When I heard that, I said, "Oh, but I don't think I want to join the union." He said, "No, you have to." Here is the reason why that is important. I joined my union, and my union fought my corner when I was with Henry Denny's. I realised then the impact and importance of being a union member. I was glad to be a member of that union, which helped me on many occasions.

The 1926 strike set the scene in stone for me when I joined Henry Denny's, but the strike is more than that. Does the hon. Member agree that workers' rights have evolved at pace and that the determination to ensure that people are paid a fair wage for a fair job is a foundational principle in every area of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Laurence Turner: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I truly welcome the cross-party support he has demonstrated for the principle of trade unionism and for workers' rights. It is only fair to note that right now, additional enhanced employment rights are being considered in Northern Ireland, as well as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

In interpreting the general strike, it is important to note that union members were, as they remain, fiercely defensive of the independence of their individual organisations, and those factors militated against planning for the national confrontation that fell upon them. Ranged against the unions were a Government determined not to repeat the humiliation of the so-called red Friday a year before and whose preparations had been meticulous over the nine months that followed.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend not only for bringing this debate forward, but for the interesting speech he is giving. He will know that my passions include not just Harlow, but my interest in the 1924 Labour Government, and in particular the Prime Minister and leader of the Labour party at the time, James Ramsay MacDonald. My hon. Friend and I have had a conversation about this, and he will know that James Ramsay MacDonald wanted to speak on the

BBC to provide an alternative narrative to the Government about the general strike, and he was blocked. Will my hon. Friend reflect on that?

Laurence Turner: My hon. Friend has displayed his customary ingenuity in mentioning Harlow. I believe that, as a new town, it did not exist at the time of the general strike—but I will come on to the points he made.

Ranged against Ramsay MacDonald was, of course, Stanley Baldwin, a Conservative party leader who convinced many of his natural critics of his sincere desire to bring about industrial reconciliation, summed up by his famous declaration in this Chamber a year earlier:

“Give peace in our time, O Lord.”—[*Official Report*, 6 March 1925; Vol. 181, c. 841.]

That apparently heartfelt plea masked a hidden ruthlessness, and an extraordinarily singular capacity for political calculation.

In 1926 the Government made, not altogether comfortably, common cause with the coal owners who, taken together, could have been the archetypes of Baldwin's famous description of

“hard-faced men who look as if they had done very well out of the war.”

The British coal owners, unlike their counterparts in America and Europe, mostly represented small concerns that had failed to adapt, amalgamate and modernise, and they would go unmourned when Parliament obviated their role 20 years later.

Opponents of organised labour sometimes claimed that union leaders sought national confrontation, or that they wished to supplant the authority of Parliament with that of the TUC general council, but those wild words had foundation only in the imagination of their accusers. As Jonathan Schnerer's brilliant and evocative new history of the strike shows, they spent the weeks before the strike exhaustively, even desperately, trying to prevent the breakdown of talks and searching for some compromise, some new formula, and a negotiated path through. The way in which they convinced themselves that settlement was possible, as they masked their private doubts of the likelihood of victory and tried to balance what were probably irreconcilable internal and external forces—often in the small hours, and often in rooms not far from this Chamber—as the clock ran down, will feel familiar to many who have had the privilege and responsibility of trade union office.

But such doubts cannot have been at the forefront of the minds of the great majority of the nearly 3 million men and women who answered the stoppage call on 3 May. They did so at great personal risk to their livelihoods and pensions. In that hot spring, many of them wore their war medals as a conscious rebuke to those who charged them with a lack of patriotism, and even with falling under the influence of a foreign power. It is easy to see why so many strikers thought that victory was imminent and assured. In Birmingham—then, as now, inland transport's great, interlocking heart—it was said that neither bus, tram nor train moved on that first day. “Every man in every union involved is out,” the city's trades council enthusiastically, if somewhat improbably, reported to the TUC. That claim, incidentally, committed the sin of omission, because many women joined the strike. At the Joseph Lucas factory they were led by Jessie Eden, an imaginative version of whom was immortalised as a character in “Peaky Blinders”.

Some officials actually had to coax members who had not been called out to remain at their work, with mixed success. Most strikers could see neither the depth of their opponents' preparation nor the lack of their unions' own. In truth, most union leaders and the members of their executives expected the Government to resume negotiations swiftly, and extend the subsidy until the mining industry could be reorganised along the lines of the Sankey and Samuel commissions. They did not perceive, until it was too late, the Government's hidden determination to force not settlement but surrender. While the TUC and the newly constituted local committees attempted to resolve profound logistical problems on the fly and to adapt sometimes confused central instructions to local circumstances, the well-resourced and carefully attuned Government machine sprang into action. In Birmingham—the city of a thousand trades, where general unionism and the centralising and organising tendencies that it represented had long struggled to prosper—the response to the strike was uneven from the start.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being typically generous in taking interventions, and I congratulate him on securing a debate on such an important topic. Will he join me in recognising the tradition of the Red Clydesiders in Glasgow, who were a huge part of the trade union movement and its history in this country, and in particular Jimmy Maxton, whose nephew ended up becoming one of my predecessors as the Member of Parliament for what was then Glasgow Cathcart?

Laurence Turner: That was an important intervention, and it is absolutely right that we remember the role of the Red Clydesiders and the members of the Independent Labour party, among whom Jimmy Maxton was so prominent not just in responding to the strike but in shaping the course of Labour history.

In Birmingham, production continued throughout the strike at such employers as Fort Dunlop and the BSA, despite a strong response from members of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union. At Cadbury, more than 1,000 workers walked out. Although the firm's Liberal owners were relatively sympathetic to the strikers' cause, differences in turnout within the workforce were apparent from the beginning.

The position at the Austin Motor Company's works in Longbridge in my constituency was instructive. Herbert Austin had been a Conservative Member of Parliament. He had lost the King's Norton seat two years before, but the factory remained a bastion of what has been called “cloth-capped Chamberlainism”. The universities provided many middle-class volunteers, who tried their hand at skilled manual work—sometimes with comically inept consequences; sometimes resulting in tragedy—so the factory swelled the ranks of the strike's opponents. It is likely that more workers did strike than the company claimed, but they were comfortably outnumbered by the 400 men who volunteered as special constables.

The politicisation of policing and the justice system during the strike left broken heads and bitter memories in many areas. For every account of friendly relations, which were real enough—in many districts, the police and strikers took pride in the fact that no violence occurred during the strike; the most famous example is probably the football match between strikers and the

[Laurence Turner]

constabulary at Plymouth where the strikers won 2-1—there were more cases of police overreach and the denial of freedom of speech.

The chief legal weapon ranged against the strike was the set of regulations expedited under the Emergency Powers Act 1920, which were debated in Parliament only retrospectively. It is necessary to quote regulation 21 to bring home just how loosely some of those powers were worded. It was made an offence for a person to cause, or attempt to cause,

“disaffection among any of His Majesty’s Forces, or among the members of any police force...or among the civilian population”.

Further, it was made an offence to possess “any report or statement”, the publication of which would cause such disaffection. The term “disaffection” was never defined, however, and the police had the power to raid premises on the basis that they might contain such documents.

Although those powers were affirmed by Parliament mid-way through the strike, they were established by an Order in Council—that is, under the royal prerogative—and were in force before Parliament had a meaningful chance to debate or scrutinise them. It is no wonder that the then Home Secretary, William Joynson-Hicks, could reflect that the powers practically “made the Government dictators”.

Many strikers were brought before magistrates simply for making statements of political opinion. As Miliband—Ralph, that is—put it:

“Large number of arrests were made...often on the flimsiest of pretexts, and sentences to short terms of imprisonment were freely handed down by magistrates little disposed to sympathy with those brought before them.”

To give one example, in Cumbria, a lead miner and branch secretary of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers posted handbills that encouraged members to refrain from enlisting as special constables. He was sentenced to three months’ imprisonment with hard labour. The headquarters of the *Daily Herald*, the only Labour-supporting newspaper of the day, were raided on the basis that seditious literature might be discovered. The Government attempted to prevent the publication of the TUC’s improvised news sheet, the *British Worker*, by commandeering paper stocks.

The nascent BBC preserved its technical independence, following consultation with Ministers, through the expedient of denying its platform to critical voices, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) noted. As John Reith put it in his diary:

“They”—
that is, Ministers—

“want to be able to say that they did not commandeer us, but they know that they can trust us not to be really impartial.”

In Birmingham, after the local strike bulletin contained an erroneous—but, it seems, innocently arrived at—report that the Government had suffered a defeat in this House, the union’s entire emergency committee in the city was arrested, and the printing presses held at the Birmingham Labour party’s offices on Corporation Street were seized. One Labour councillor, Percy Shurmer, was dismissed and blacklisted by the Post Office on account of a speech made during the general strike, although he was later elected to this place as the Member of Parliament for Birmingham Sparkbrook.

I can do no better than quote Dr David Torrance, who somehow manages to combine writing histories of this decade with his role as a subject specialist on the constitution in the House of Commons Library. In his excellent recent book on the politics of the strike, he put it this way:

“If anything, it was the...government rather than the TUC which came close to behaving ‘unconstitutionally’ during the general strike.”

The strike’s end and the final rift between the Miners’ Federation and the rest of the general council has been covered elsewhere, and I cannot do it justice in the time available tonight. It is sufficient to say, I hope, that the trade unions, having lacked a theory for winning the strike, also lacked a plan for ending it. At some firms, the unions were able to secure a return to work on the same terms as prevailed before and without victimisation, but other employers took the opportunity to reduce wages and settle scores. Some strikers never worked in their chosen occupation again. The Economic League, a professional blacklisting organisation, found new reach and strength, often in collusion with public bodies.

An even harder fate awaited the miners, as they struggled on during those hot and hungry summer months, until they too were eventually forced to concede. In the most hostile districts, principally south Wales and Nottinghamshire, their independent associations were all but broken by the so-called non-political miners’ industrial unions—better known as Spencerism—which owed their position to the coercive enforcement of the colliery companies and the quiet backing of a fund instituted by Baldwin. It left a legacy of division that I think is comparable with the aftermath of the 1984-85 strike, which has still not entirely faded. If the House will indulge me, I have in my pocket a token of the Nottinghamshire Miners’ Association. It was a small token that hung around the neck of miners, and it is stamped “1925”. They were never made again, because it was too dangerous for men to identify themselves as members of a free union.

In the months that followed the general strike, the defeated issued pamphlets and the victors issued commemorative truncheons. If the trade unions conducted inadequate soul searching before the strike, they made up for it later, asking themselves many inward questions. By contrast, the Government perhaps asked themselves too few.

At the time of the 80th anniversary, we could still meet women and men who stood in their youth on the picket lines. Now, the strike has all but passed out of the outermost limits of living memory. The collieries are gone, the Austin works are gone, and so is much of the world that they sustained.

It has sometimes been argued that the general strike had little long-term effect on industrial relations or political life, as great as the consequences for some individuals may have been; that the response of the Government was surprisingly restrained; and that the conflict, in its own peculiar way, represented a very British form of moderation. I think this is a misreading. The severity of the blows dealt to many of the strike’s participants disqualifies the last claim, and the strike fundamentally altered politics and industrial relations, too. It drove the unions closer to the Labour party, and it seems to have hastened Labour support in some working-class areas.

For the ageing leaders of the new unionism, the strike marked the end of an era. It might be said that the spirit of 1889, already dampened by the war, was finally extinguished in 1926, giving way to a paternalistic and deferential internal style that dominated union politics and shaped the post-war consensus, until that too broke on the rocks of the prices and incomes policy 50 years later. Let us look at the official response. The Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act 1927 imposed restrictions on the political levy, and consequently upon political funding, despite the issue being of no relevance to the strike. That was undone in 1946 and reimposed in 2016, but we repealed those provisions again in December. In that sense, we are still contesting the battle lines drawn up 100 years ago.

I think the best way we can remember the general strike's participants—and I make no apology for placing the emphasis on the nearly 3 million coalminers, transport workers, printers, dockers and more who answered the TUC's call—is by carrying forward some lessons from their times to our own. It seems to me that the strike raises questions for us that are immediate and vibrant. What should the roles and limits of the police and the courts be in the settlement of industrial disputes? What obligation does the state owe to its dissenters' liberties in times of civil contingencies? Do our laws provide sufficient protection from the potential abuses by the Executive of prerogative powers? Those questions must be asked and answered another day. Tonight, it is enough to answer the question put at the start of this debate. In Idris Davies's words:

"Ay, ay, we remember 1926..."

And we shall remember 1926 until our blood is dry."

6.44 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Huge thanks go to the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for leading this important debate with such an important speech. It is great to speak today. It is right that we honour our local struggles when we talk about the general strike and ensure that we cement them in our own local history.

Last month, in my constituency, I had the great honour of unveiling my very first blue plaque. It was to mark the battle of Lewes Road, which took place on 11 May 1926. The plaque has gone up at the site of the old tram depot in Lewes Road in Brighton, where 4,000 Brightonians stood strong against hundreds of police on foot and 50 mounted special constables to stop the training of strike breakers. The courage shown by thousands of local residents, workers and protesters who stood up to state intimidation, and who faced immediate imprisonment and hard labour as a result, is one of the many stories of Brighton and Hove's proud and principled history.

I praise and celebrate the work of Brighton and Hove District Trades Union Council and all those involved in campaigning and fundraising to get the plaque up on the wall in time for the centenary, and for hosting such a brilliant event recently to mark the centenary celebrations and to discuss the lessons.

Let us be clear and never forget that the unprecedented working-class mobilisation of the general strike shook the establishment to its core—its reaction shows that. By recognising and honouring our local struggles for workers' rights alongside this history of national

collective action, blue plaques such as the one in Lewes Road can act as a permanent reminder to us all of the power of solidarity, and the importance of the right to strike and protest.

To today's workers and unions in Brighton Pavilion I have pledged that I will always honour the values and spirit of our city and the battle of Lewes Road, and stand with them when they make the hard choice to strike in their own struggles. As the debate has shown so far, the lessons of the general strike are as relevant today as they were a century ago.

6.47 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I am really grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for securing this important Adjournment debate. I was very excited a few weeks ago when he told me that he had secured it. He has spoken really eloquently about the importance of the general strike to labour history. I was reminded, when he told me he was applying for the debate, of the quote from AJ Cook, who said:

"Not a penny off the day, not a minute on the day".

As my hon. Friend powerfully pointed out, the defeat of the miners in that strike led, effectively, to an attempt to crush working people in this country. That is very powerfully illustrated in "The Road to Wigan Pier" by George Orwell, who paints the picture of what the consequences of the failure of the strike were for working people. It reminds us that many of the freedoms and liberties we enjoy today hang on a timeline of solidarity that was won by the trade union movement. I am proud to be a Labour MP, from a party that was born from the trade union movement, as I know are many of my colleagues.

I want to take a moment to honour a woman whose name deserves to stand alongside others who might be mentioned today: Mary Turpin of Macclesfield. When the marchers passed through Macclesfield on their way to London during the general strike, she did not watch from the sidelines—she got stuck in. She organised soup kitchens, set up feeding centres for children and prepared thousands of family parcels for the locked-out miners in Biddulph. This was a woman who at nine years old had worked in one of the Macclesfield silk mills, so she knew in her bones what it meant to go without. It was not an abstract political cause for her; it was a real calling.

Mary went on to become Macclesfield's first female magistrate, its first female alderwomen and almost its first female mayor. We owe it to her memory, and to the countless ordinary women like her whose quiet, relentless solidarity held communities together, to speak of them in debates such as this one today.

6.49 pm

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I declare an interest, as I spent most of my life—31 years—in the coal industry before I became a Member of Parliament. I believe I am the only coalminer in the Commons who worked under the North sea. In this place, we had 70 to 80 miners representing the Labour party at one time—it is strange how things change.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) on securing this debate and the eloquent way he presented a fantastic

[*Ian Lavery*]

contribution. It is important that in this place we recognise that it has been 100 years since the famous general strike of 1926. People have different views on what it was about—they really have—but as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) said, the issue can be summed up in one sentence:

“Not a penny off the day, not a minute on the day”.

That is the crux of the 1926 dispute.

We have to think about and remember the conditions of the miners. The conditions were atrocious and poverty was rife. We then had, after the first world war, the mine owners reducing the wages of the miners by almost 50% because of what was happening globally with coal trading. The owners wanted to maintain their huge profits, and the only way they could do that was by taking it off the miners, who could not actually feed their kids. That was what the strike was about.

People say the strike was about the Labour party—the party I have been a member of for more than 40 years—but history shows that it was really about the Government worrying about the miners; that they were revolutionaries who wanted to change the Government. That might have been partially true, but the real reason for the 1926 dispute was that miners, working seven days a week, had money taken off them—up to 50%—and there was a further attempt to reduce their wages by 13.5%. The rich coal owners used global issues to sustain their profits on the backs of the hard-working miners. It was not for lack of negotiations; plenty of negotiations went on at national level with the TUC and the Government, but they failed.

The Government had prepared well. It was similar in many ways to the dispute of 1984-85, of which I am apparently a veteran, because I was on strike for the whole duration of the dispute, as were my family and friends. When you get classed as a veteran, you really understand how old you are getting. It is not just the grey hair; it is the sore knees and the bad fingers—all of it. What did the Government do in 1926? They prepared. They set up an organisation for the maintenance of supplies, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield. They recruited hundreds, if not thousands, of special constables, and ensured that there were months of coal reserves available. The Government were ready to take on the miners.

What the press and the Government said—which was what the TUC and the Labour party were frightened of—was that they were revolutionary miners, but those miners were fighting not even for decent wages, but to maintain what they had and to ensure that the coal owners paid people correctly. What is interesting is that King George V said:

“Try living on their wages before you judge them.”

I am not a monarchist—the House knows that I am not—but it is very interesting that the King was actually supporting the miners at that point in time.

While the great strike itself lasted just over a week, miners stayed out for months. In the north-east, Chopwell miners in Gateshead were famously locked out for 17 months. In rural Northumberland, in the forgotten community of Plashetts—now below the Kielder reservoir—the miners lasted for months and months longer.

I want to refer to a key moment in my area, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) has also mentioned. It was in her constituency; I can see it from my bedroom window. I represented the people who derailed the Flying Scotsman because they were part of my union, the Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain. I was proud to be the general secretary of the Northumberland area of the National Union of Mineworkers, and I was proud to be the president of that union. These are my people.

We have to remember these people. I will mention their names shortly. On 10 May 1926, the miners at Cramlington accidentally derailed the Flying Scotsman, a coal train that they believed was being powered by blackleg labour. The crash resulted in only one minor injury, some spilt milk churns and a goods van was damaged, but it became national news. Warnings, including the waving of a red handkerchief, were given, but the inexperienced crew were unable to respond. The train was actually able to slow down. The miners themselves decided that they would sabotage this blackleg truck of coal. They took a few rails from the line, and the train skewed off it. There is a great play, by the way, called “The Cramlington Train Wreckers”, produced by a chap called Ed Waugh, who is from the north-east. If anybody gets the opportunity to see the play, they should do so.

The situation was untenable. There were desperate consequences. The Government, looking for answers, launched an investigation that swiftly escalated into what can only be described as a witch hunt. On the night of 5 June 1926, miners were unceremoniously dragged out of their beds and homes and arrested. The Mineworkers' Federation of Great Britain was very much unaware of this, and the eight mineworkers who were arrested were put on trial without any defence at all, while the Government had professional prosecutors. The witnesses admitted to lying to police at first, calling into question their reliability. In fact, one defendant was partially deaf and could not even hear what was going on in the courtroom.

Despite that, the eight defendants were sentenced to up to eight years in a first offenders prison. They were separated and sent to Maidstone Prison, more than 300 miles away from their homes. There was an instant campaign for their release, which was partially successful. However, innocent men were jailed. Even now, a hundred years later, no apology has been given whatsoever. These people were Labour men. They were hard workers. They were grafters. They did not want anything other than fairness and dignity in their lives—decent wages and terms and conditions. Many of their families still live in south-east Northumberland. I want to ask the Minister tonight to commit to a posthumous pardon for these men who were so badly treated more than 100 years ago. They were William Gordon Stephenson, Robert Harbottle, Joseph Wallace, Oliver Sanderson, William Muckle, James Ellison, Arthur Wilson and Thomas Roberts. They all lived in the Cramlington area and ranged from age 21 to 29.

Remember, colleagues, that they did not demand the world. These were humble individuals who only wanted dignity—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Ian Lavery: All they wanted was dignity, an existence, food and a roof over their heads:

“Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day.”

7.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) on securing this debate on commemorations for the centenary of the 1926 general strike—a moment in our nation’s history that is not always recognised as I believe it should be.

I thank Members across the House for their moving contributions about the background, events and impacts of the strike. My hon. Friend’s brilliant contribution painted an evocative picture of those events and the particular experience in Birmingham. He reminds us that what this Labour Government are trying to achieve in protecting and strengthening rights in the workplace is a case of not only unpicking recent anti-worker legislation, but building on the struggles and sacrifices of previous generations who were often fighting against brutal tactics by their employers and the Government. While he is right that many of the questions he posed are for a different debate, I hope that I can start to answer some of them today by outlining the Government’s approach to workers’ rights in the 21st century.

As we have heard, the general strike was called by the TUC on 3 May 1926 in response to 1 million coal miners being locked out of their mines by owners who wanted them to work longer hours for less money. This was against a backdrop of declining wages, the severe dangers of working underground, and difficult economic conditions in the aftermath of the first world war.

In solidarity with the demands of the miners, more than 1.7 million workers took strike action from industries including bus, rail, printing, gas, electricity, building, iron, steel, chemical industries and the docks.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I just want to add to that list the 19,000 members of the National Society of Pottery Workers, which now forms part of the GMB, who, even when the strike ended, still found their jobs at risk because the supply of coal was not available to power the kilns. The local community came together at the time to form solidarity and support committees to ensure that the workers’ families were fed while alternative sources of coal were being found. I think the Minister would agree that that is a testament to the strength and power of the solidarity of the labour movement when it comes to supporting not just the workers but the families of those workers as well.

Kate Dearden: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. I will come on to exactly that point about the importance of solidarity.

The next nine days became the largest expression of worker solidarity in British history. Some of the strongest support for the strike was found in industrial heartlands, such as the area that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield represents, where unions had a strong presence. Those areas included south Wales, the midlands and northern constituencies like mine of Halifax, where 10,000 people attended a mass meeting in Savile Park on 9 May 1926 to support the strike. The trains stopped running, and the *Halifax Courier*, itself impacted

by some of its workers joining the action, reported that even the clock at Halifax station stopped ticking during the strike. This was a pattern experienced across the country: public transport stopped, newspapers could not be printed, and many parts of the economy stood at a standstill.

The Government responded with emergency measures to break the strikes, deeply dividing the country. After nine days, the TUC called off the strike action, though the miners continued their struggle for several months, with many returning to work, though on worse conditions than before.

Emma Foody: I wonder if the Minister will indulge me in paying tribute to a particular striking miner who was born in Hirst in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery). His name was Robert Wallace Pringle. He was one of the striking miners, and he died the following year in a horrendous accident as an assistant lamplighter, after catching on fire as a result of the fuel-soaked rags. He was my great-grandfather, and I wanted to take this opportunity to get his name on the record.

Kate Dearden: I sincerely thank my hon. Friend for bringing that story to the House and commemorating the memory of her family member. What an incredible story to share with the House.

Although the strike did not achieve its immediate aims, it became a defining moment for the British labour movement. For many workers, it was a stand against falling living standards and a system that was stacked against them. The strike brought workers from across different industries together to demand a fairer deal.

The events of 1926 changed the relationship between workers, employers and the Government, helping to shape the labour movement for the next century. It reinforced the importance of trade unions as a collective voice for workers and sparked debates about workers’ rights, industrial relations and the role of the state. Those debates, as we have heard, continue to this day.

Over the decades since 1926, union campaigning and collective action have secured many of the rights that people now rely on at work, from paid holidays to safer workplaces, protections against unfair dismissal, maternity and parental rights, and the national minimum wage. Those gains were not inevitable; they were the result of workers organising together and demanding change.

One hundred years on, it is clear that many workers in this country feel, as they did back in 1926, that the system does not work for them. After 14 years of Tory austerity and attacks on rights in the workplace, I understand why so many people feel angry and left behind. That is why this Labour Government are working to change that. Our plan to make work pay has brought employment rights legislation into the 21st century, ensuring that workers are paid fairly, have secure work and are protected from discrimination and harassment, extending the protections that many of the best British companies already offer their workers.

My hon. Friends will know that we will not build a robust and growing economy by rewarding the minority of businesses that offer insecure work and predatory environments; instead, we must build an economy based on job security for workers, fair pay for hard work and

[Kate Dearden]

fair competition between businesses. That is the path to greater productivity in the workplace and our wider economy.

The Employment Rights Act 2025 is the first phase of delivering our plan to make work pay, supporting employers, workers and unions to get Britain moving forward. Alongside the new industrial strategy, the Act supports this Labour Government's mission to increase productivity and create the right conditions for long-term, sustainable, inclusive and secure economic growth.

For too long, employment rights legislation has only protected some of our workforce—not all. The Act changes that, delivering stronger rights, greater fairness and more security for more than 18 million more people, providing a new baseline of protection from sexual harassment, strengthening statutory sick pay, introducing the right to guaranteed hours, tackling fire-and-rehire and reversing previous Governments' laws that restrict workplace democracy.

As a lifelong trade unionist, I am proud that this Government champion the vital work of unions in protecting and representing workers across the country, ensuring that they are listened to, supported and heard. By tearing down barriers to trade union activity and ensuring that industrial relations are carried out in good faith, the Government are empowering working people to organise collectively, helping to settle disputes and secure a fair deal in their workplace.

As part of that, the Act repeals the majority of the Trade Union Act 2016 and the entirety of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023, undoing the Tories' damage to our workers and our economy. By simplifying the statutory trade union recognition process, strengthening trade unions' rights of access to workplaces and introducing a duty on employers to inform all new employees of their right to join a union, we are enabling unions to recruit and organise.

We are also delivering new rights and protections for trade union representatives, alongside tackling the illegal blacklisting of trade union members through predictive

technologies. This is the biggest increase in trade union and collective rights in a generation, but we know that legislative change alone is not enough; we need attitudes to change, too. That is why we are committed to introducing a new framework for industrial relations, setting out the Government's vision for a new approach: one that is fit for the challenges of the 21st century, based around the principles of collaboration, proportionality and accountability, and which balances the interests of workers, businesses and the wider public.

My hon. Friends posed questions and raised some important points in the debate. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) and for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) for raising the issue of the Cramlington derailment of the Flying Scotsman. I know that the memory of the incident still inspires strong feelings in the region, and there will be a range of opinions on how that memory should be marked. I pay tribute to the Cramlington community hub in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth, which has done some brilliant work in commemorating the incident. My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington mentioned pardons, and I direct him to the process to submit a petition to be considered by the Ministry of Justice.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield for bringing this important debate to the House and allowing parliamentary time to commemorate the events of the general strike. Many Members who were unable to make the debate have shared their stories with me, as I am sure they have with other Members in the Chamber. We must never forget these important parts of history, and we must take the time to reflect on how we can work across Government, industry and the union movement to deliver a stronger, fairer future for working people.

Question put and agreed to.

7.10 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Agriculture (Delinked Payments) (Reductions) (England) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 10 March, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 153.

Division No. 11]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn

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, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen

Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stewart, Elaine

Stone, Will
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet

Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey

Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast
 by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farage, Nigel
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter

Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa

Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 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
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 3 June 2026

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Small Towns: Transport Links

9.30 am

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. As you can see, a significant number of Members wish to participate. After the opening speech there will be an immediate time limit of three minutes per person. To discourage added minutes through interventions, I am not going to allow an added minute for any intervention. That does not mean you cannot intervene—you can—but the person speaking needs to know that they are not getting extra time as a result. I hope that is clear. I call Andy MacNae to move the motion.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport links for small towns.

It is a pleasure, Sir Roger, to serve under your firm chairship. I thank the Minister for attending today. He has been a keen advocate for small towns, and I am sure a lot of the issues we will talk about today will be familiar to him.

Connectivity is not a luxury; it is a necessity. It underpins economic growth, but it also shapes something far more immediate and personal: our health, our independence and a sense of belonging. For our small towns, the quality of connection sends a powerful message about whether we are seen, valued and included in our national story. It would be a mistake to think of this as a question simply of how towns connect to cities. It is about the everyday journeys that define people's lives: how they get from their front door to work, to school, to the shop or to the doctor.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): To end the exemption for old buses that are not fully accessible under the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000 will mean that kids from rural constituencies will not be able to get a place on a bus to sixth form anymore, due to the limited bus stock and funding. Will the hon. Member join me in urging the Government—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. The next ground rule is that we do not read interventions. I hope that is clear. An intervention is an intervention. It is not a pre-prepared speech to read into the record for the benefit of the local press. I call Andy MacNae.

Andy MacNae: Thank you, Sir Roger. There will be an extensive section on buses—pages 75 to 300—so I am sure we will cover a lot of that sort of ground. Connectivity really matters for connecting communities. Ultimately, it is about how easily and affordably we can move through the place that we call home.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): The biggest single issue holding back economic growth in my constituency is the poor transport connections. In a non-mayoral area, we have found it difficult to access

development funding to solve that problem. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to find a way of getting money into non-mayoral areas so that we can punch above our weight and be on a level playing field?

Andy MacNae: That is a real inequity within regions now, and I will cover that in my conclusion. It is a fundamental that we have to address.

We must begin with empowering people to actively travel by walking, wheeling or cycling to work or school or to see friends. True connectivity is not just about how we get from one place to another; it is about having real choice in how we do so. At present, too many people in our small towns feel that they have to rely on a car even for the shortest journeys. For many, it is not that they are unwilling to walk or ride; it is just that they do not feel they have the option. What they need is not persuasion but safe, accessible, well-designed environments to make active travel the obvious and practical choice. That means getting the basics right, from ensuring our pavements are usable for everyone—including those with disabilities or parents with prams—to safer crossings, better lighting and dedicated routes that give people the confidence to walk, wheel or cycle as part of their daily routine.

Within this context I would like to focus on travel to school. We can all recognise the benefits of more children walking or riding to school on health and on reducing congestion. It is generally a more relaxed start to the day. Parents know that, but far too many concerns over safety are a key barrier: speeding heavy goods vehicles, narrow and blocked pavements and a lack of safe crossings present challenges. It is no surprise that in small towns and villages, only 30% of children walk or ride to school. For cities the figures are much higher at around 60%, showing how much room there is for improvement, and that inequity can be addressed. Living Streets, working with forward-thinking councils like Blackburn with Darwen, has shown a way forward: local authorities working proactively with schools to deliver evidence-based travel initiatives and infrastructure.

But this sort of best practice is still far too patchy. Last year in Lancashire, my 11-year-old constituent William Cartwright collected 1,400 signatures for a petition asking the county council to simply install a safe crossing, to allow him and his fellow pupils to walk safely to school. Despite this clear public support, Lancashire county council said no, citing the tired old excuse that not enough people have been killed or injured—yet—on the road in question. The idea of working with the school proactively to enable safe travel seemed entirely alien to it. We need to do better. I call on the county council to think again and work with me on this, and I call on the Government to clearly lay down best practice in their road safety and active travel guidance.

More broadly, active travel must be seen as integral to the wider transport system, not separate from it. Walking and cycling are what connect people to buses, trains and trams. When these modes work together, we create a system that is not only more efficient but healthier, more affordable and more sustainable for the communities it serves.

I turn to buses, which are a crucial part of the transport mix that we have to get right. They are vital for the more vulnerable in our society—the elderly, the

[*Andy MacNae*]

young and the disabled—yet 56% of county and unitary council areas still lack adequate provision. For small towns, a lack of buses limits access to essential services.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that small towns and large villages share similar challenges? I think of Winterbourne in my community, where people are still unsure whether they will have a regular, reliable bus service once the M4 overbridge reopens soon.

Andy MacNae: Absolutely—there is rural isolation, and I will be talking about a large village in my constituency in a moment. When it comes to small towns and villages, it is a spectrum. These are communities that have been left behind for far too long, and they are the ones we now need to prioritise.

The lack of buses limits access to essential services such as healthcare, education and employment, exacerbates social isolation and forces people into higher-cost alternatives.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): One of my constituents had a stroke last year. While he jumped through all the hoops required by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to get his driving licence restored, he was stranded in a rural village with no bus service, struggling to get to shops, medical appointments and so on. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that both DVLA delays and the lack of rural bus services need to be addressed by the Government?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. It is quite clear that a number of Members who are not on the speakers' list are seeking to intervene. That is fine, but please understand that you are expected to remain in the Chamber to hear the winding-up speeches.

Andy MacNae: Thank you, Sir Roger.

The lack of buses disproportionately impacts people in small towns and villages, so it is crucial that we get this right. Fundamentally, we need to recognise that buses are a public service, not a commercial enterprise. I am pleased and proud that this Government have fully recognised that right from the start. The retention of the £3 bus fare cap and investment of £1 billion a year to support bus routes will benefit thousands of my constituents.

Looking forward, the Government's commitment to empower local communities to take control of bus services, along with the requirement on local government to identify "socially necessary" routes, has the potential to deliver the joined-up services we need. But our reforms will only succeed if we address the practical barriers to delivering the day-to-day changes that our communities require. To give one example, in Edgworth near Darwen in my constituency, residents rely on healthcare, shops and schools in Bolton, yet over the years, bus services have been occasional and short-lived. This transport isolation is the single biggest issue raised with me by the community. When I spoke to a group of teenagers, they were clear that the best thing we could

do to improve things for them would be simply to offer a bus into Bolton. Older residents say the same, so why have we not got one?

While there is a need for a subsidy, the fundamental issue seems to be that Bolton is in Greater Manchester, so the route would cross local authority boundaries. For years, no one seemed to want to take responsibility. Greater Manchester said it could not fund the route because residents of Blackburn with Darwen would be the beneficiaries, and Blackburn was unwilling to fund it because residents were going to spend their money in Greater Manchester—not exactly a joined-up system.

Things are changing, and I am pleased to say that a study commissioned by Blackburn with Darwen has finally recommended that the council get behind a new bus route. That is exactly the sort of thing that Government bus funding is supposed to enable; we just need to make it actually happen.

This cross-border issue is one that we face across Rossendale and Darwen. Its impact is compounded by the fact that so many of our crucial services are in other local authority areas, and that is true of so many other small towns. Solving this is a crucial test for the implementation of bus improvement policy, and I argue that it should be incumbent on existing mayoral authorities to work proactively with neighbouring councils to eliminate cross-border transport inequity.

Thirdly, I want to touch briefly on roads. Roads are an obvious and crucial connector. Many small towns are built around one or two key roads. Unlike in a city, where there are lots of options, when these roads are closed or disrupted by street works, the entire community feels it. For instance, in both Rossendale and Darwen, we have one main road that runs through the whole valley. When it is blocked or the traffic is severe, it is not just an inconvenience; it has serious impacts on local businesses and residents. Indeed, several well-established local businesses have told me they are considering leaving the area unless action is taken on congestion.

Unco-ordinated, overrunning roadworks are a constraint on small towns and must be treated as such. Councils need the powers to properly police contractors and incentivise quick completion. I welcome the Government's support for continuing the roll-out of lane rental schemes, which are proven to reduce congestion on the busiest roads. I will call on all local authorities, including Lancashire county council, to work with the Government and act with urgency to tackle this blight on our towns.

Finally, we come to rail. For so many small towns this is a crucial connection, yet services are often patchy and unreliable—if they exist at all. There are still far too many towns without an accessible rail link, leaving them on the edges of opportunity, not through a lack of ambition but through a lack of connection.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent speech that he is making on a really important debate. My constituency, similar to his, has a range of small towns with different access to modes of transport. One of them is Swanscombe, home to the collapsed Galley Hill Road, which I have mentioned several times. Its train station is in a deep chalk cutting, and there is no accessibility. Does he agree that it is about not just having modes of transport, but making them accessible to all?

Andy MacNae: Absolutely, and I know that several colleagues here have been great champions of accessibility to rail links. It is absolutely fundamental.

On the lack of connection, Rossendale remains the only local authority in the north without a direct rail link, despite thousands of residents commuting into Manchester every week—it is only 15 miles away. The old railway line still exists; all we need to do is reinstate it as a commuter line. Rossendale borough council has fully explored the costs and benefits in its City Valley link proposal. It is not a speculative idea, but a credible, carefully developed proposal with a strong business case behind it.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, when we think about growth, we need to think about being strategic in how we connect all our railways, buses and so on? A new airport is going to be opening in Doncaster. We need to be thinking about the future and how we connect that to the rail network as we go forward.

Andy MacNae: My hon. Friend makes a crucial point, and I will touch on this issue. Thinking of things as a whole, not as individual, isolated projects, is crucial for the transport systems that we actually need.

Rossendale has put forward its plan. Surveys show that the public overwhelming support it, because communities in Rossendale understand exactly what a rail link would mean. By opening up the valley, we could become a much more attractive destination for businesses looking to relocate to lower-cost areas. Existing businesses would have access to bigger skills pools and reduced supply costs. Jobs in central Manchester would become more viable, and footfall in our town centres would significantly grow. This is pretty much the definition of a growth no-brainer, yet like so many small-town infrastructure projects, the proposal has got nowhere. It has been consistently overlooked or rejected through a narrow use of old Green Book guidance, whereas just down the road we see multibillion-pound projects, which we cannot even connect to, being given the green light.

To add insult to injury, Lancashire combined county authority did not even include the City Valley link in its recent transport infrastructure plan, despite Rossendale being clearly identified as suffering from transport isolation. I hope that is just a simple mistake, and I call on the combined authority to ensure that this vital link is included in the final version of the plan. I hope the Minister will support me in this endeavour.

Similarly, I have been calling for the restoration of Lower Darwen station, which I am pleased to say is now in the implementation plan. This represents an opportunity to finally reconnect a community that has been cut off for too long. By providing easy access to the Manchester-Clitheroe line, the station would unlock new jobs and opportunities in the whole community. In both Rossendale and Lower Darwen, it is not just about a railway line; it is about finally giving our towns the infrastructure they need to thrive.

Outside the south-east, our small towns have felt left behind for far too long, and persistent poor connectivity is a stark indicator of this. We need to be honest: this has not just been an accident of fate; historical Government policy and practice have been key factors. The Green Book has been consistently misused, with assessors

simply relying on benefit-cost ratios, which inevitably favour better-off urban areas. Alongside that, our economic policy has defaulted to the city-focused, trickle-down approach.

Although the 2024 Green Book review and Government initiatives have put us in a potentially better place, issues do remain. We need a clear focus from Ministers to ensure that civil servants are genuinely implementing the Green Book recommendations and that local authorities—particularly non-mayoral areas—have the capacity and capability to develop robust business cases. We also need to move beyond the city-centric economic model and towards one that values all places. In that regard, we have a long way to go. If we look at the list of investment programmes, infrastructure projects and policy pathfinders—

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the recent changes to the funding formulas for public transport. Does he agree that the recent review is very much weighted towards population and is therefore further detrimental to rural communities like mine? In Chippenham, it is not a case of when the bus comes; it is a case of if the bus comes. Does he agree that the Minister needs to relook at some of the funding formulas?

Andy MacNae: The hon. Lady raises a range of complex points, which the Minister will probably deal with in detail. I do not agree with her about buses, because there is plenty of local flexibility to allow that. When it comes to the Green Book, it is the misuse of the financial case—its prioritisation over the strategic case—that is the fundamental issue. The strategic case should always take priority.

The investment projects that the Government have brought forward—infrastructure projects and policy pathfinders—overwhelmingly focus on mayoral strategic authorities, which are big-city-focused. That needs to change. We need to recognise the moral, economic, social and political imperative of joined-up policy that enables all our towns to reach their potential, with connectivity at the heart of that ambition. That means not just one solution but a joined-up approach, with better rail links, bus services, roads that can be relied upon and safe, reliable access routes for cycling and walking.

It is not an either/or. As my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) said, we should not see the big transport infrastructure projects in the pipeline in isolation or just as city connectors; rather, they are enablers of connectivity and growth along the whole route. In the north, we have Northern Powerhouse Rail, which is a huge opportunity for our region, but if small town connectivity is not addressed, places such as Rossendale and Darwen will feel little benefit and the opportunity will be missed. With that in mind, I ask the Minister to meet me and colleagues to discuss how to make big infrastructure projects such as Northern Powerhouse Rail a catalyst in delivering connectivity and opportunity to the small towns and communities that need it most.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I call the Father of the House, who has three minutes.

9.46 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on stressing the importance of small towns and transport links. We have debated a lot the scandal of High Speed 2—£100 billion down the drain. I want to talk about a small town that for 15 years has been asking for a direct train to London, the cost of which would be less than £1 million: 0.001% of the cost of HS2. We have been promised a through train from Cleethorpes and Grimsby, down through Market Rasen and Lincoln, to London, and we have been fobbed off with excuses again and again.

Market Rasen may be a small town, but it connects up to Grimsby, which has been represented for virtually the whole of the last half-century by Labour MPs. I do not complain about that. It is a levelling-up town. It is one of the largest towns in England not to have a through train to London. We are spending £100 billion on HS2, but we are not prepared to spend less than £1 million on getting a train from Grimsby to London. That is an absurd way of running the country.

Every time we try to talk about this issue, we are fobbed off with excuses. We are told that the platform at Market Rasen is too short. Well, we have all been on trains when we are told to go to the front three or four carriages, and we can get off perfectly safely. We are told that the platform is not high enough. Well, there is matting that can be put down. We are told that there is no bridge. There has not been a bridge at Market Rasen for 100 years.

The point I am making is that, instead of having a can-do attitude in this country, we are ruled by faceless bureaucrats in train companies, nationalised industries, agencies and Ministries. The Minister is sitting there; why does he not intervene? My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and I have been to see him and the Rail Minister, who promised help—but still no train.

At the other end of my constituency, we have Gainsborough Central station, which connects up to Cleethorpes. People might think that it would be lovely to take the train on a beautiful summer's day instead of driving all that way. It takes two hours to get there, and there is one train a day, so when the person gets to Cleethorpes after a two-hour journey, they have only an hour and a half there before they have to come back. There is barely time to dip their toes at the beautiful beaches of Cleethorpes—one of the finest resorts in England, which people want to go to. If people want to go in the other direction, to Sheffield or Meadowhall, they can get there from Gainsborough Central station, but there is no train back, unless they want to take a donkey.

Why is there so little concern for small towns? Why are we wasting so many resources on these prestige projects dreamed up by the likes of Ceauescu? It is a waste of money. Let us put the money and resources where it matters, in rural communities and small towns. That is why this debate, for which I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen, is so important.

9.50 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): As always, Sir Roger, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing such an important and timely debate.

As the MP for the largest constituency in England, I spend a lot of time speaking about local transport, whether that is rail, road, walking or cycling. Over the recess, I was lucky to cycle a part of the proposed Haydon Bridge to Hexham cycle way. I look forward to working with the community group that is trying to get funding for that.

I will spend a lot of my time focusing on a particular case: the ongoing campaign to bring rail back to the village of Gilsland, which sits half in my constituency and half in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns). Gilsland sits on the Northumberland-Cumbria border, at the heart of the Hadrian's wall world heritage site. The village is a central point for visitors to the incredible features of historical interest in the border country. There was a train station at Gilsland from 1836 to 1967, when it closed because of the Beeching report, along with thousands of other stations across the country.

There has been passionate community campaigning, spanning decades, by the Campaign to Open Gilsland Station and the Tyne Valley Community Rail Partnership, which are dedicated to the cause of reconnecting local people to their rail network. They have been challenging outdated assumptions, securing reports showing clear evidence of the credible economic and social case for reopening the station, and submitting multiple bids to multiple Government pots of money. Almost 60 years after closure, there is still no operating station, despite the fact that locals have to see trains passing the station on the Newcastle-Carlisle line every day. That is a living example of a rural community being left behind.

I am passionate about getting the station reopened. It would be fantastic not just for the economy of Gilsland, but for the economy of the whole of Northumberland. It would add to the county's already magnificent tourism offer and would make it easier for people to come into my region and spend their money. Visit Northumberland, the tourism body, spends most of its time—as does the Conservative-run county council—promoting the coastal regions of the county, rather than promoting west Northumberland.

I want to comment briefly on a subject that my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen touched on: road safety. There can be no good connectivity without road safety. On a summer tour last year, I held 80 surgeries in four weeks across my constituency; I will do it again this year. The No. 1 concern that comes up in almost every village is “Can we get a speed limit? Can we get a speed camera? Can we do something about road crossings?” It particularly affects those small villages where people have to cross the road to get the village hall or the shop. These are often communities where there is no available road crossing.

I would like to see the Government doing far more to push local authorities to address what are often ticking time bombs. Those cases are often acted on only after there has been a tragedy. We need far more proactive action from local authorities.

9.53 am

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing the debate. I agree with many of his comments.

Transport options for people across Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe are dreadful. Whether for getting to work, accessing healthcare, visiting family, attending college or simply participating in community life, transport options are often the difference between a thriving town and one that has been left behind. In one of the largest and most rural constituencies in Wales and the whole UK, too many residents feel that transport decisions are being made “to” them rather than with them.

One of the biggest concerns recently raised with me is the changes made to the T4 bus service. What was once the only direct connection between mid-Wales and our capital, Cardiff, now requires passengers to change in Merthyr Tydfil. For many residents, particularly older or disabled passengers and those carrying heavy luggage, that additional change is not a minor inconvenience. It makes journeys longer, more complicated and less attractive. That is made worse by the fact that the T4 and X4 timetables are poorly integrated, leaving passengers facing lengthy waits and unreliable connections from Merthyr.

Cardiff is the major destination on the route. It is where people travel for specialist NHS appointments, university and college education, employment opportunities, access to national institutions or simply a day shopping. For many residents across Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe, a reliable public transport connection to the Welsh capital is essential. Those changes to the T4 service may look minor on a map but, for those who rely on public transport, it has made travelling to Cardiff significantly more difficult. Rural communities should not be expected to accept a worse service while being told by their Government that it represents progress. The direct service to Cardiff must be restored, because it is leaving many elderly pensioners in my constituency stuck at home.

The Swansea valley has similar challenges with bus services. People in Ystradgynlais, Ystalyfera and Pontardawe have repeatedly reported buses on the T6 and X6 routes running late, being cancelled at short notice or not turning up at all in recent months. That is why rural bus connections are so important. Again, I thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen for giving us the opportunity to put these points on the record.

9.55 am

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this important debate. I have spoken previously about train services in my community; I will not spend a huge amount of my limited time on them, but I want to flag that we have been in government for two years, and train strikes in my constituency have written off our Sunday services for the entirety of that time. We talk a lot about bringing train services into public ownership, but those train services in my area were in public ownership. My residents are furious that they have no Sunday service from Congleton station and have not had one for a long time now. I would be very grateful if the Minister took that back to the Rail Minister with the utmost urgency, because this really needs to move forward.

We also have a long-standing problem with accessibility at Sandbach station, which is frankly disastrous. It is a huge problem for anyone who cannot manage the extremely

steep stairs. The service runs to a major city and an airport, so by definition people have luggage, buggies and so forth.

What I really want to talk about is buses. There are so many problems with buses in my area. The Government's transport improvement funds for buses have helped, and so have section 106 contributions from developers. I would like to praise my local council, which has been able to put on some additional services with those two sources of funds.

None the less, there are so many problems. When I spoke to young people at Shipton Explorer Scouts, they spoke at length about the difficulty of buses that are just too full: there are too many students trying to get on them, so the buses stop letting them on. I have GCSE students who are terrified. One called my office recently because his bus simply had not shown up. We eventually got to the bottom of it: the app was not working, the bus had been diverted because of roadworks, and no one had informed the school or the pupils. These buses only run once an hour. When children and young people need to get to life-changing exams, the consequences of unreliability—buses that do not show up or that do not stop because they are too full—are potentially devastating.

Local employers I speak to in places like care homes and nurseries, some of which are not in the centre of town, have huge problems recruiting because people simply cannot get to them without car access. In rural and semi-rural areas, this is a huge, long-standing economic problem. It makes it difficult for parents to work, because they cannot reliably get their children to school on public transport. The economic and other impacts for people are absolutely massive. My constituents also talk to me about a sense of rural isolation—which I would go into further, but I have run out of time.

9.58 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing the debate. When listening to his remarks at the beginning, the need to fix, or at least start to seriously address, transport isolation really resonated with me.

It will come as no surprise to the Minister that I am going to talk about Aldridge train station. Mine is one of a handful of constituencies that has a railway line but still does not have a train station. If we are serious about improving connectivity and the life chances of young people, we could improve so many things by simply getting on and delivering the train station.

I think the Minister knows the history, but I will gently remind him of it. Perhaps he can pass this on to the Rail Minister in the other place, because I have suggestions on how we can fix things. To take a step back, we have a track in place. The council has secured the land for the car park and some exploratory work is ongoing, which I am grateful for. A business case was approved to reopen the line from Aldridge to Walsall, which would give us the connections we need into Walsall and beyond. I am not even pushing for the completion of the rail hub; I just want the link into Walsall, please. Andy Street made the business case and everything was going swimmingly until, sadly, we lost the mayoral election. I appreciate that that is democracy,

[Wendy Morton]

but it is sad that Mayor Parker, the new Labour mayor, diverted the funds, meaning there was no money to deliver the project for Aldridge.

Alongside that, we are waiting for a decision from the Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway about an open access line that would enable a direct train service from Wrexham to Euston, coming through Aldridge. I back that service, but it must stop at Aldridge. It is incomprehensible that that line could be approved without a stop at Aldridge—I will not be the only one protesting if that is the case.

Will the Minister urge the Rail Minister to work with me to deliver a railway station for Aldridge? It is not just about Aldridge; some people describe it as a village but it is actually a big village and a big community, and a station would serve a big area. I would like help in getting answers out of the mayor; the last time I wrote to him, he failed to respond. My ask to the Minister is simple: please work with me and let us get the train station delivered for the residents of Aldridge, as was promised a few years ago.

10.1 am

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this important debate.

When it comes to transport links for small towns, few can boast the train to Hogsmeade station, where the Hogwarts Express ended its journey north from platform nine and three quarters. The real-life Goathland station, which starred in the Harry Potter films, is just one of the beautiful stations on the Esk Valley railway line from Whitby to Middlesbrough, which follows the route of the River Esk for much of its 24 miles, passing through verdant farmland, rolling moors and picturesque villages. Sadly, the scenery is far more beautiful than the train service. The villain of the piece is not Lord Voldemort, but Dr Beeching, the Minister who cut the Whitby to Scarborough line back in 1965, condemning Whitby to reliance on cars and buses.

That Whitby lost its train link to its coastal neighbour is bad enough, but to add insult to injury, the current service that connects Whitby to the nearest big town, Middlesbrough, is one of the worst in the country. That is not the fault of the not-for-profit Esk Valley Railway Development Company, a dedicated community rail partnership that runs the line with passion and flair. Indeed, the company fought hard to get a station opened at James Cook hospital in 2014. The whole point of that stop was to provide access to the hospital; instead, Whitby residents find themselves isolated from essential healthcare. There are only six trains a day, with four-hour gaps in the morning and afternoon. That makes it impossible to plan for a hospital appointment. Constituents have told me they have to stay over at Middlesbrough because they cannot get to and from the hospital in a day. It is not only hospital patients who are frustrated by the poor service, but constituents who want to work in Middlesbrough, where there are many more employment opportunities than in Whitby.

The lack of ambition and investment in this essential transport link for Whitby is laid bare when it is compared with another seaside town, in the south. Newquay in

Cornwall is not unlike Whitby in size, and it is also at the end of a branch line. Office of Rail and Road figures show that in 2023-24 the Newquay line carried 146,000 passengers, which was down 2%, while the Whitby line carried 257,000, which was up 6.3%. Until recently, both lines suffered from poor train services, but Newquay now has 15 trains on weekdays, 14 on Saturdays and eight on Sundays, thanks to a £57 million investment. According to a press release, there is also a through-train to London, while on the same day Whitby has just six trains.

I would love to hear from the Minister how Great British Railways can improve transport links to small towns like Whitby, and open up a world of possibilities for its residents.

10.5 am

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this debate on one of my favourite topics.

I represent the market towns of Frome, Midsomer Norton and Radstock, as well as many larger villages, such as Evercreech and Peasedown St John. On 18 May, five services failed to run on the 172 and 171 bus routes that serve Midsomer Norton, which meant that for nearly three hours during the morning rush hour, between half-past 6 and half-past 9, there was no bus service at all. I have had emails from constituents for whom it meant missing a shift at work or missing medical appointments. I raise this incident not to criticise one operator on one morning—in fairness, the operator has apologised—but because it illustrates something systemic, which is that when the margin for error is zero because there is no back-up or redundancy, any failure becomes a crisis. That is the reality for communities whose transport links are threadbare to begin with.

I have constituents who cannot take a job in the next town because the bus does not run early enough to get them there. I represent many young people, including those in my own family, who cannot get a job or see friends because there is no suitable public transport. My constituency is a radiotherapy desert—without a car, there is not one place in my constituency where you could reach radiotherapy treatment within the recommended timescales. Such stories represent the lived experience of a significant portion of my constituency.

The Government's briefing on the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill speaks of bringing power closer to communities, but devolution delivered through metro mayors in large urban centres offers little comfort to places like Frome and East Somerset. We have seen millions for buses being poured into the West of England combined authority, which is welcome, only to find that the focus is on getting people in and out of Bristol even more effectively than they currently are. Devolution that does not reach rural communities is not devolution: it is a redistribution of power to a slightly different tier of city.

We need a funding model for bus services that does not treat rural routes as commercially unviable afterthoughts. We need the franchising powers in the Bus Services Act 2025 to be accessible to county councils, not just combined authorities with mayoral structures. We need a duty on operators to provide genuine contingency

when services fail and guarantees that, when new housing developments are approved, transport infrastructure is not an optional extra or included in section 106 agreement only to be quietly watered down later.

I have spoken in this place before about the link between transport and safety, and in particular about women in my constituency who have told me that they gave up running, cycling or going out after dark in the winter because waiting at isolated bus stops on unlit country lanes did not feel safe. Transport is not just a technical issue, but a question of who gets to participate fully in public life and who is excluded from it, which is why I will continue to campaign for the Government to include mention of women and girls' safety in the national planning policy framework.

I welcome much of the Government's rhetoric about the importance of improved public transport and the fact they are making spending commitments to support it, but I urge them not to forget places like Frome and East Somerset, where the potential for economic growth is huge if only people could get where they need to go.

10.7 am

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing this important debate.

Too many towns, such as Mansfield in my constituency, have been left behind when it comes to transport infrastructure. We have seen bus routes cut back, unreliable services become the norm and communities increasingly isolated, and it has real economic and social consequences. I believe the action already taken by the Labour Government is beginning to turn things around. The Government's £3 billion investment in buses, alongside the Bus Services Act, represents the biggest reform for buses in a generation.

Although buses are vital, rail connectivity is equally important to the future prosperity of towns like Mansfield. My constituency is rightly proud of its railway heritage—we have already heard about the importance of strong local rail services—and I want to speak in support of two rail schemes. First, the Robin Hood line extension running from Shirebrook to Ollerton would reopen former stations, including at Warsop in my constituency, and directly link my residents back into the national rail network, with connections to Mansfield, Nottingham, Worksop and beyond. Secondly, the Maid Marian line would provide an alternative route into Nottingham, easing pressure on existing lines while allowing for expanded services that would better serve Mansfield and Ashfield, including through improved access to Derby.

The case for those projects is not simply about transport for transport's sake; it is about economic growth, regeneration and opportunities for communities that have been overlooked for too long. I hope the Minister will begin to work with regional leaders, local authorities and MPs across the east midlands to help to move both those schemes forward. Let us get Mansfield and neighbouring towns fully back on the map—let us reopen the Maid Marian line and extend the Robin Hood line.

10.10 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for giving us a chance to debate this issue. He can fairly draw a crowd—well done. The issue is important to us all.

As the MP for Strangford, I am frequently contacted about transport issues. There is a significant and growing disparity between urban and rural areas when it comes to transport provision. This affects access to key services such as health care, education and work, as well as access to social activities. There has been a wrongful assumption that focusing transport investment on urban areas will eventually lead to improvements in rural regions through a trickle-down effect. It just does not happen.

Research from 2025 demonstrated that almost a fifth of all rural bus routes in England alone had disappeared over the previous five years. As a result, many people have become reliant on their cars and it has left us in a so-called transport desert.

Hannah Spencer (Gorton and Denton) (Green): I met the Friends of Denton Station, who have spent two decades campaigning; despite that, we still have only two trains a week that stop at the station. The passengers and the infrastructure are there, but we remain cut off from Manchester and beyond in terms of rail access. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that towns like Denton deserve the same ambition for connectivity as communities in the south of the country?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. I commend the hon. Lady for her election and for bringing forward important issues that she has heard on the doorstep, and for taking the chance to come to Westminster Hall and put them forward.

The evidence from my Strangford constituency and across the UK indicates that social exclusion further compounds mental health issues and decreases the general wellbeing of citizens, with reports of reduced access to employment, education and healthcare. Many people are forced to rely on taxis, which is highly unsustainable, with people losing almost as much as they earn in a day's work. Employment should be encouraged and not hindered by lack of access to public transport.

As the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen clearly indicated, the consequences have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children and lower-income households. Given that rural areas often have an older population, access to transport is even more essential. Without support for public transport systems in small towns, a cycle of decline will continue, with reduced public transport usage due to its unreliability or inefficiency. That will be used as justification for further service cuts, reinforce dependency on cars and weaken the entire transport system.

As the MP for Strangford, I am frequently contacted by constituents concerned about the lack of accessible transport in small towns. There is no rail network and there is a heavy reliance on what bus service there is. Buses can be infrequent and the connections between smaller towns are poor. We have the Strangford ferry, but if the weather is bad, it does not sail. That means

[*Jim Shannon*]

that many people, including those taking children to school and those commuting for work, are forced to drive the 50-mile road alternative, putting pressure on the A20.

I believe these issues are really important, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I know he does not have responsibility for my constituency, but the issues that I have put forward are similar elsewhere. We need to ensure a lifeline and it must be strengthened.

10.13 am

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your distinguished chairship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) and for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on their cracking speeches.

It has been a bumper nearly two years for me in driving to improve the connectivity of the towns and villages in my constituency. I was lucky enough to bring back the No. 15 bus route that connects Woodthorpe and Bishopthorpe on Sundays. However, when I raised the issue in the Chamber, Quentin Letts said people should just get an Uber. We know that that is not an affordable option in towns across the country. The right-wing media bubble just does not get it.

With the Minister's help, I was lucky enough to secure over £5 million for park-and-ride services in my constituency. I might be the park-and-ride MP, with the highest number of services anywhere. I was also lucky enough to work with First Bus on fare caps for young people and on improving the fare arrangements for young parents who live in the University of York area. Of course, the big one has been bringing in a new station at Haxby, thereby improving connectivity for a town of more than 8,000 people. There is more to do, though, including in respect of the 412 bus, the No. 5 bus and the No. 6 service, and on capping prices for students on the No. 6 bus.

We have not heard too much about the need for active travel, including cycling and getting people on to fantastic bike lanes; I call on developers across York to invest in infrastructure. But I would like to raise a bigger idea that could improve connectivity across small towns. Earlier this year, I was taken over to look at the connectivity in Switzerland—I refer Members to my declaration of interests. What did I see there? Cable cars, buses, trains, trams and boats—all synchronised, end to end. It just works. Why cannot someone in York connect seamlessly on to Leeds, from bus to train, with a timetable that joins up?

I have also suggested a northern Oyster card. Why do we all bang on about London being so productive? The reason is connectivity—the Oyster card. Let's have it in the north: tap on, tap off, truly integrated transport and fares, not just for our great cities in the north but for the towns between them. Manchester's Bee Network shows that it can be done, and we also have the Weaver Network in Leeds and the People's Network in Sheffield. The question is whether we are truly ambitious enough to extend our thinking beyond the M25 to the 15 million great people of the north who would love to see that connectivity.

Small towns should never settle. Connectivity is what determines young people's futures, so we must do all we can, at all levels, to drive connectivity across our communities.

10.16 am

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing this important debate.

My constituency has 11 railway stations, the largest port in the country and an international airport, so people might think that it would be of major interest to the Department of Transport, with the focus entirely on the Brigg and Immingham constituency. Sadly, it is not as easy to get around the constituency as people might imagine. In addition, five railway stations in the Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituency also serve my constituents. Nevertheless, getting around my area is not as easy as it should be.

The Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), has outlined our long-running campaign—it has been running for 15 years now—to secure a direct service from Cleethorpes, through my constituency, to London. There are five trains a day from King's Cross to Lincoln, and it would take a small amount of money to run those Azumas through my constituency before they finish their journey in Cleethorpes. However, as my right hon. Friend pointed out, the Department for Transport has made endless objections and said that such a service cannot be delivered.

The Father of the House also mentioned the service from Gainsborough to Cleethorpes, which passes through Brigg. Brigg, a town of 5,500 people, should have better rail connectivity than it does. It has a railway station, and there used to be a roof over all of it. It was a fantastic station—very much like Gainsborough Central used to be—but sadly it is a pale shadow of its former self and now has only one platform, although, unlike Market Rasen station, it has a bridge to allow people to get over to the other platform, even if that other platform is out of use. Improving rail connections through to Cleethorpes is important. It would help the leisure sector considerably.

The service from Cleethorpes through my constituency to Barton-upon-Humber is a two-hourly service. The Barton Cleethorpes community rail partnership, which is very active and takes a close interest in the operation of the service, has been campaigning to increase that to one service every hour. I urge the Minister to consider that proposal if he can.

Let me return to the Brigg service. We hear much about the creation of Great British Rail, but Northern Rail, which runs the service from Gainsborough to Cleethorpes, has been in public ownership since 2020, so the Minister could have delivered on this. I acknowledge that previous Ministers could also have done so, but it is his job now. I challenge him to say, when he responds to the debate, that he will consider and deliver the proposal.

10.19 am

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this debate.

When I was campaigning for election in Amber Valley, people told me time and again that improving public transport was a priority, and it is now one of my local pledges. I am pleased that, after many years of hard work and campaigning by Labour town councillors, a lift has finally been installed at Alferton station. It has been truly transformational for many of my constituents. In a similar vein, I am now working to improve accessibility at Langley Mill station. The dream is to reinstate the direct train from Alferton to London, which was sadly cancelled in 2021, despite much protest.

In my remarks, I will concentrate on something raised by my constituent Paul Wright at one of the coffee mornings that I hold monthly so that people in Amber Valley can raise things with me. Ambergate in my constituency is about three miles from the neighbouring town of Belper, and I could get a five-minute train between the two towns for £3.60 today. However, if I take the train from Ambergate to London, it costs me £80.80, whereas if my friend gets on the train one stop later at Belper—and sits right next to me for the entire journey—she pays only £35.50. I love my friend very much, but why should she pay so much less for a near-identical journey?

That example illustrates the absurd situation that my constituents face. It is often cheaper to split their journeys and book them in two parts: from Ambergate to Belper, then from Belper to their end destination—it is not just journeys to London that are affected. That is unfair on multiple levels. Most obviously, it disadvantages those who are unaware of those loopholes, which people such as Paul have had to uncover for themselves. Unless that situation changes, many of my constituents will continue to pay an excessive amount, while their friends down the road pay a lot less.

The system also disproportionately affects those who might not be as confident in navigating split ticketing. The process is not intuitive, and it will alienate those who are already vulnerable or are less digitally literate. Those are exactly the people who depend on the system being simple, accessible, transparent and fair. Why should my constituents have to jump through hoops just to secure a fair price?

I know that the Railways Bill contains measures to bring greater transparency to fare structures, including through the establishment of Great British Railways. Will the Minister outline how those upcoming reforms will ensure that fairness and consistency are built into the system? Will he also outline what can be done in the meantime to resolve those price anomalies for my constituents?

10.22 am

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this important debate. This is a broad subject, but I will focus on bus services, because in my Dewsbury and Batley constituency and others like it, buses are quite simply the backbone of everyday life. For many constituents, especially those on lower incomes, buses are not optional but essential. They are how people get to work, to places of education, to hospital appointments and to see family and friends. When those services decline, the opportunity to live a full, happy and healthy life declines with them.

Bus services in Dewsbury and Batley, and across wider West Yorkshire, have undergone a sustained 20-year decline, driven by operator withdrawals, rising costs, driver shortages and reduced post-covid numbers. The pattern is one of progressive route cuts, increased reliance on emergency subsidies and shrinking commercial viability. Nothing illustrates the fragility of the system more clearly than the ongoing instability among local operators. The significant cuts by Arriva across West Yorkshire, rightly described by Mayor Brabin as “appalling”, are the result of a failing business model managed by overseas owners who appear to have little regard for the needs of our communities. Cuts to Arriva bus services between Dewsbury in my constituency and Wakefield in the Minister’s constituency have had a huge impact. The 205 between Dewsbury, Morley and Pudsey has been cut, as has the 117 from Ossett to Leeds—the list is endless.

Another failure is that of Yorkshire Buses, which operated services across West Yorkshire but has ceased trading entirely, citing a “continued rise in costs” that made the business “no longer sustainable”. The consequences are immediate and real. Services across the region have been affected, including bus routes across my constituency. The system needs long-term stability, not constant crisis management. I thank the West Yorkshire Mayor and the West Yorkshire combined authority for stepping in to provide emergency transport when companies go under, but this is not sustainable.

I will conclude my remarks by asking the Minister three questions. What steps will the Government take to ensure that small towns such as Dewsbury and Batley are prioritised in national transport policy, rather than left behind? Will the Government commit to providing sustained, reliable revenue funding for bus services so that routes can operate frequently and dependably, rather than closing constantly? What specific action will be taken to reverse the long-term decline in bus use, particularly among elderly and disabled passengers?

10.25 am

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for bringing forward this important debate.

It is a pleasure to be back in Westminster Hall to speak about the No. 1 subject in my inbox. Coalville and Ashby are the seventh and eighth largest towns in Leicestershire, so they are not small, but we still struggle with bus services. As the Minister knows, I rarely miss an opportunity to highlight that I do not have a single passenger rail service anywhere in my constituency. The campaign to reopen the Ivanhoe line is still ongoing.

Those are just the headlines from my constituency; the reality for our towns runs far deeper. Other rural MPs will know that improving transport links is a never-ending discussion. If a bus service is cancelled in North West Leicestershire, there is nothing else—no back-up, no alternative. People are simply stranded; hospital appointments are missed and shift patterns lost. My constituent went to watch Leicester City play football on a Saturday and caught the last bus back to Ashby at 5.30 pm, just a few minutes after the end of the game. However, when the bus terminated halfway in

[Amanda Hack]

Coalville, the seventh largest town in Leicestershire, they could not get back to Ashby, the eighth largest, after 6 pm on a Saturday. This is not just about getting to work; it is about our night-time economy and the impact on the growth of our towns.

Even when services do exist, they do not always serve people well. New housing estates, which are often just beyond the edges of our town centres, are left disconnected, meaning that residents cannot easily reach the high street, and the high street cannot benefit from the people who live just a few minutes away by bus. When we talk about transport in small towns, we are not talking about getting from A to B; we are talking about whether our town centres survive and thrive. We need to go much further.

I was proud to serve on the Bus Services Bill Committee, and of the work that our Government have done so far—I welcome their commitment to getting more funding to local authorities—but I have three questions for the Minister. First, HS2 was supposed to have gone through my constituency without stopping. Despite writing several letters, I still do not have any resolution for the 74 homes stuck in HS2 Ltd ownership. I want to use that money for the benefit of my constituency. Secondly, there needs to be a better path for concessionary fares, as the situation across the country is uneven. I represent an old population, who use concessionary fares more, so that is a problem for my local authority. Finally, I will say that bus services are for leisure as well as for work.

10.28 am

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for securing this important and timely debate. As MPs, we become champions of many local issues, and I know that for so many of us here today, public transport will be at the top of the list.

I have been banging on for months about improving the quality of the Weymouth to London Waterloo service. Passengers have faced unacceptable problems, including frequent delays, often at the weekend; patchy wi-fi; no on-board food trolley service; and, for many years, no accessible toilet at Weymouth station. Over the last few months, I have been working with South Western Railway to resolve some of those issues, and I am pleased to say that finally, after many years, we have reopened an accessible toilet at Weymouth station.

Although of course that is positive news, it is clear that much more must be done to improve the quality of the train service on the Weymouth to Waterloo line. Only this week, I received a complaint from a constituent describing her appalling trip on the late May bank holiday—one of the hottest days of the year, when passengers were unable to access water, and faced totally unusable toilets and bins overflowing with rubbish and used nappies. Last month I experienced all that for myself with a three-hour delay on my regular commute home to Weymouth. Since when did arriving late, dishevelled, hot and dehydrated become fashionable again? We must have work to improve the quality, reliability and speed of the service on the Weymouth to Waterloo line.

Buses are of course an essential way of getting around in a rural community like mine in South Dorset. They help people get to vital health services at Dorset County hospital and Poole hospital, and they ensure that people can get into the town centre and that pupils from rural villages can attend school. Yet, as we have heard repeatedly in today's debate, too often bus services have been undermined by worsening reliability, fewer buses and the steady loss of routes. For example, in Bovington in my constituency there is no regular all-year-round bus service, which leaves the community—particularly the armed forces families based at Bovington camp—effectively isolated. A similar situation exists in Harman's Cross, where the No. 40 bus service does not stop, despite serving neighbouring villages. I have met the council and bus operators to push for improvements, but we should not have to deal with a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing good-quality bus services in South Dorset.

I am pleased with the progress that the Government have made in bringing our railways back into public hands and bringing forward landmark new legislation for bus services, but I ask the Minister: what can we do to go further and deliver better buses in rural areas and improve the quality of the London Waterloo to Weymouth train line?

10.31 am

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing this important and timely debate. It is particularly pertinent to me as West Dorset is nothing but small towns and villages, and 60% of the population live outside of the towns.

For me, this is about opportunity and fairness. Transport determines whether a young person can get to college, an apprentice can reach a workplace, an older resident can attend a hospital appointment, and a business can recruit the staff it needs. Some 57% of the working-age population in England live in areas with low public transport access to jobs, and 66% of elderly people are unable to reach a hospital within 30 minutes by public transport.

In the recent Milburn review, transport repeatedly emerged as the hidden driver of youth detachment from education, employment and training. If a young person cannot physically reach a college apprenticeship, interview or job opportunity, every other policy intervention becomes irrelevant. The review found that in rural, deprived and coastal communities, transport is a significant practical barrier for those without access to a car or a driving licence. This matters because young people are far less likely to drive than previous generations; the proportion of 17 to 20-year-olds holding a full driving licence has fallen to just 29%.

At the same time, local bus services have disappeared. In the last 15 years bus journeys outside London have fallen by 21%, and bus frequency in West Dorset has fallen by 62%. Some local authorities are experiencing reductions of up to 80%. Entire small towns and villages have lost evening and weekend services. A young person offered a hospitality shift that finishes at night in a neighbouring town without a return bus service has not really been offered a job at all.

That is why transport connectivity must be central to any serious effort to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training. It is why the Liberal Democrats have argued consistently that we need a fundamentally different approach to public transport in small towns and rural areas. We need properly funded local bus services, and we would replace the current patchwork of funding streams with a single integrated transport fund that gives local authorities the flexibility to deliver the service their communities actually need.

The move towards multi-year funding settlements and the increase in funding for local transport are both welcome. They provide the degree of certainty that councils have been calling for over many years and are a significant improvement on the short-term, stop-start approach of the past. However, they are not enough on their own to reverse the years of decline. Areas outside urban hubs have seen some of the deepest service reductions. They need targeted investment if we are to rebuild sustainable networks, rather than simply to continue managing the decline. We would restore the £2 bus fare cap and ensure that local authorities have resources to expand services where demand exists.

We must also recognise the role that community transport can play. The CB3 community bus service in Beaminster demonstrates what is possible when local communities work together to maintain essential connections. Such models can help bridge gaps where traditional commercial routes are no longer viable, but parish councils and volunteers cannot be expected to carry this burden alone. Community transport needs secure, long-term grant funding from central Government. We would also support pilot programmes and new technologies such as on-demand transport services. Those schemes have proven particularly effective for young people travelling between villages and market towns.

We must also rebuild confidence in our railways. For too long, investment has focused overwhelmingly on cities and flagship projects, while small towns have been left behind. The Liberal Democrats would establish a railway fund, allowing local authorities to bid for funding to improve stations, restore local rail connections and strengthen links between neighbouring towns. We would implement long-term rail fare freezes in line with inflation, introduce a “rail miles” loyalty scheme and create a passenger charter to improve reliability, accessibility and service quality. That would improve things like wi-fi, seating and toilets and put customers at the heart of our railways. We would also reform ticketing by introducing a national tap in, tap out system, bringing the convenience enjoyed by passengers in London and Manchester to the rest of the country.

Local authorities must have greater influence over transport planning, so that rail and bus services work together, rather than operating in isolation. Transport is not just about buses and trains; it is also about giving people safe alternatives to cars. The Liberal Democrats want a nationwide active travel strategy that creates safe walking and cycling networks, linking homes, schools, town centres and transport hubs. For small towns, active travel presents a huge opportunity. Distances are often short enough for cycling to be quicker than driving or public transport, yet frequently the infrastructure is absent. That is why we must support investment in

dedicated cycle routes, safer road infrastructure and the conversion of disused railway lines into walking and cycling corridors.

If we are serious about tackling regional inequality, reducing the number of young people who are not working or in education, and delivering genuine economic growth, small towns cannot continue to be an afterthought.

10.36 am

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. The importance of connecting our small towns, villages and wider urban areas is evident from the number of Members who have taken part in the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing it.

What unites the vast majority of travel needs across our small towns and villages is the importance of personal vehicles and—not instead of—affordable, reliable and useful public transport. Those two elements are critical to connecting small towns. The 2024 national travel survey showed the dominance of the car and other private vehicles, particularly in rural areas. That was alongside buses, which are paramount to supporting local travel. However, I am afraid that under the current Government, there is a mentality that, despite some worthy funding promises and powers to local authorities, risks damaging links to our small towns.

The 2024 travel survey showed that car trips made up 76% of distance travelled. The 2022 survey paints an even stronger picture for those in small towns. Those in rural towns and fringes used their car to travel twice the distance of those in urban conurbations. People in even more isolated areas used their car to travel nearly three times the distance of those in most urban areas. It is critical that the Government's policies reflect this fact and support drivers in going about their everyday lives. Any other approach would impose self-inflicted damage on our small towns by disrupting the mode of transport most widely used, which in turn contributes to economic growth.

Although I recognise that the classifications are different, as it uses the more traditional rural urban classification system, some of the proposals in the Government's integrated transport plan, published this April, highlight a complete misunderstanding of the public's transport needs. The plan says:

“we will consider how we set clear expectations that local authorities and developers should maximise sustainable transport interventions before considering any increase in road capacity.”

That is accompanied by comments in the section on rural and suburban areas that give the impression that cars should only be used as a last resort—a statement devoid of real life. It is the state telling people what it thinks they should want, not listening to what they actually want. Talking about them being relied on in this way completely misses why many people choose to use vehicles—they are making a choice.

Supporting public transport and improving it to enhance links between our small towns is clearly also important—no argument there. In my constituency, I am a supporter of delivering the Haddenham to Thame greenway. However, we cannot do so by sacrificing or denigrating motor vehicle usage. That is indicative of why the Government struggle so much with economic growth. Rather than

[Greg Smith]

considering what they can do to improve one form of transport, their integrated transport strategy appears more comfortable trying to encumber drivers either by not increasing capacity or by putting in place policies such as bus priority routes, which in larger areas have done a great deal to restrict the ability to enter towns and some cities.

It is easy to talk about this issue broadly and for it to sound like hyperbole, but we can all reference local examples of our failure to take a balanced and practical approach to transport spending. In Buckinghamshire, the Aylesbury spur of the East West Rail project was originally viewed as an integral part of the scheme. It was removed from the plans during a major cost-cutting exercise about eight or nine years ago, yet the case for restoring it remains as strong as ever. It would vastly improve connectivity between Winslow and Aylesbury, both of which are expected to grow significantly in the coming years, while strengthening onward links to London and the north. Importantly, it would do so in a way that supports economic growth, which the Government repeatedly tell us is their overriding priority. Better connectivity means greater access to jobs and opportunity.

That example, along with the excellent examples from my right hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), demonstrates the wider point. The challenge facing small towns is not that people have too many transport options; it is that in too many places they do not have enough. The answer is not to make driving harder in the hope that people will choose another mode of transport; it is to improve all forms of connectivity, whether road, bus or rail.

Andrew Cooper: Would the hon. Gentleman like to reflect on the fact that what makes road transport more difficult is the massive pothole backlog that built up under his Government through the systematic underfunding of local government? Does he accept that this Government have put significant resources into fixing that?

Greg Smith: I agree with the fundamental point that the state of the roads in this country is getting worse and worse. The Government crow about the amount of money they have given to Buckinghamshire, my local authority, for pothole repairs, but it is absolutely and completely inadequate to fix the problems. Conservative-run Buckinghamshire council is spending £120 million—tenfold what the Government have given in a grant—to get the roads fixed. Anyway, let me get back to my point—it was a good try.

We need to allow people to make the choices that best suit their circumstances. Indeed, the condition of our roads is why the Conservatives have proposed targeted measures to repair potholes and limit damaging policies such as 20 mph by default, which have cropped up in authorities both in urban areas and where small towns are situated.

Furthermore, the bus fare increases that we have seen under this Government pose significant challenges to increasing demand. Although the Government have been reticent to admit it, the fare cap increased on their watch by 50%, and in many areas there have been further increases in the price of buses. That is simply

factual. Those decisions impact bus users in our small towns, and it is this Labour Government who are putting the price of buses up. It is inevitable that increasing costs disincentivises travel between these areas. Some authorities are taking on the cost of bus services, and it remains to be seen whether a balance can be struck and services can be improved in a way that persuades people to use bus routes.

This is occurring at the same time that the Government are taking on their project of rail nationalisation, after a period of significant passenger growth over the past three decades. We can debate the challenges around rail and whether the solution could ever be nationalisation, but that increase in numbers is irrefutably beneficial when we consider connections between small towns. I therefore hope the Government consider the measures put forward by the shadow Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), which highlight the importance of passenger growth in the Government's proposals.

Small towns do not need transport policies that pit one mode of travel against another. They need practical solutions that improve mobility across the board.

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) on securing the debate, and thank all Members for their insightful contributions. If I do not manage to get to all the individual points, I will follow them up with hon. Members.

My hon. Friend has spoken consistently about the importance of reliable and affordable transport connections for communities across Rossendale and Darwen. For too long, small towns have been held back by poor connectivity, whether because of limited bus services, unreliable rail links or the day-to-day frustrations of deteriorating local roads. We are determined to change that.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) talked about connectivity. Transport in this country has been fragmented for too long. Through the Better Connected strategy, we are changing that. We are setting out a national vision for an integrated, accessible and safe transport network that people can rely on to make the journeys they need to make easily, wherever they live across England. By taking a holistic approach to transport, we can make a real difference for communities through improved connectivity, integrated ticketing and improved cross-modal connections, so that even those without direct rail links are connected to the wider network. Transport should feel like a single joined-up system, not a series of disconnected parts.

Local leaders are key to delivering this vision. They know the transport challenges their areas face and are best placed to decide how to improve transport in their areas. We are backing local leaders in every local transport authority to make improvements by providing £21 billion of local transport funding through simplified multi-year funding settlements.

Wendy Morton: Picking up on the point I raised in my contribution, if the Government are working with mayors and local authorities to deliver transport, will

the Minister commit to working with me to get some answers from Mayor Parker to deliver Aldridge train station? Yes or no?

Simon Lightwood: I am sure that the right hon. Lady is quite capable of representing her constituents directly with the Mayor of the West Midlands, and I gently remind her that she was Transport Secretary at one point, and could have done some of this work herself during that time.

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I will not—I have to make progress.

The majority of local transport funding is allocated by formula to give a fair share of funding for all areas. For example, our formulas take into account the length of roads, population size and rurality, so that funding reflects an area's circumstances and need.

Sarah Russell: Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I have a lot to get through, so I am going to push on.

The multi-year settlements will give areas the certainty they need to plan ahead, so that they are more flexible and local leaders can invest in the transport priorities that are right for their areas. Places with an elected mayor will benefit from either integrated settlements or a single mayoral transport fund, giving them more flexibility over how they use their funding. That reflects the fact that mayors are recognisable figures in their areas and accountable to their citizens, with mandates to represent them on the national stage. However, local transport authorities without a mayor will also benefit from simplified funding and will receive transformative multi-year flexible integrated transport funds and bus services funding. To support local leaders further, we published updated local transport plan guidance earlier this year, setting out what we expect local transport authorities to deliver in their areas and how to make the most of their transport funding.

Improvements to buses are vital, particularly for communities in small towns, communities in rural areas and—I say this before my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) gives me the look—coastal communities. Buses are the only transport option in some places, but through the Bus Services Act 2025 we have given local leaders the tools they need to ensure that local bus services meet the needs of local people. These tools are accessible not only to mayoral authorities, but to all local transport authorities across England, with the Department for Transport providing support through the franchising support fund and franchising pilots programme. This work includes funding to develop pilot programmes that test different models of franchising through a small number of rural LTAs.

DfT is also funding a franchising expert group, which will provide expert support and advice on bus franchising to authorities and could be engaged to aid with troubleshooting and challenges such as cross-border services, which we addressed in the Bus Services Act but are important for local areas to consider when drawing up their bus service improvement plans. As well as targeted franchising support, we are providing meaningful funding to support and improve bus networks—a total of £3 billion over the next three years.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The Minister mentions the new pilots, and I place on the record my thanks for the fact that Cumberland is one of those areas. Is he aware that Cumberland council is already using the money that the Government have given it? It has introduced a series of bus links, including the HW1 bus route, which offers visitors the opportunity to visit our historic, wonderful Hadrian's Wall. May I invite the Minister to join me on that bus? Roman togas are optional.

Simon Lightwood: I am afraid my Roman toga is at the dry cleaners, but I would like to take up my hon. Friend's offer at some point soon.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) talked about the challenges in West Yorkshire, which I absolutely understand. I am sure that he will welcome the move by Mayor Tracy Brabin to introduce the Weaver network, and that he is as excited as I am to see the difference that it will make.

To ensure that rural areas are not disadvantaged, the individual allocations were determined using a revised formula that considered the needs of each local transport authority, taking into account population size, levels of deprivation, bus service provision and, for the first time, rurality.

The hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine) asked about ensuring that all areas can take advantage of bus franchising. Back in September 2024, I laid a statutory instrument that opened up bus franchising to all local transport authorities—one of the first things I did on coming into government. Lancashire combined county authority's funding settlement includes £56 million for buses, which can be used to enhance local bus services in rural areas.

Active travel has a really important role to play, particularly in making shorter journeys to shops, GP practices and leisure facilities in our towns. Funding for high-quality active travel infrastructure is critical, and this Government are providing significant investment. In December, we announced £626 million for local authorities between 2026-27 and 2029-30 to deliver walking, wheeling and cycling schemes—enough for 500 miles of new walking and cycling routes. That is in addition to almost £300 million of funding announced in February 2025 and a further £108 million in March 2026.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen mentioned pavement parking. The Government are taking action to ensure that pavements are for people, including parents with young children, people using wheelchairs and those with sight loss—everyone. We will legislate to allow local transport authorities to prohibit pavement parking. They will also have powers to exempt locations where pavement parking would still be necessary to ensure traffic flow, such as narrow streets, and we will monitor the effectiveness of these measures through baselining and evaluation of research.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), has some cheek to talk about potholes! For many constituents, the most visible sign of under-investment is the condition of highways. We are taking action to support local authorities in tackling the pothole plague inherited from the previous Government, including by providing a record £7.3 billion of multi-year funding for highways—it will have almost doubled by the end of this Parliament.

[*Simon Lightwood*]

We are clear that local authorities should focus on long-term preventive maintenance, as well as long-lasting repairs.

However, I recognise that smaller and more rural communities are particularly vulnerable to disruption caused by street works. Lane rental can play an important role in tackling such disruption by allowing highway authorities to charge those carrying out works up to £2,500 per day when they occupy the busiest roads at the busiest times. That creates a clear incentive to plan works more effectively, shift activity outside peak periods and complete works more quickly. The Government strongly support the continued roll-out of lane rental, and we are currently finalising our assessment of 13 further applications. At the same time, we are developing approval powers for mayors of strategic authorities. That will support faster, more responsive delivery of schemes while reducing congestion, improving journey reliability and improving disruption.

Rail has a critical role to play and was mentioned numerous times by Members. I am sure that the Rail Minister will have heard about all the individual schemes mentioned today, so I will not go into them, but connecting small towns is critical for the wider economy. Reliable commuter rail services can transform opportunities, making it easier for people to access jobs in nearby cities while continuing to live in the communities that they value. We are working with industry partners to improve the reliability and performance of commuter routes and ensure that smaller stations are not overlooked. That includes looking at how timetables, capacity and infrastructure can better support passengers travelling to and from smaller towns, including those in Lancashire.

My hon. Friend is a great champion for the people of Rossendale and Darwen. He will be aware that the Department is not currently funding any development work on either of the proposals that he mentioned, but my officials are very happy to support Lancashire county combined authority should any local funding be prioritised on either the City Valley rail link or the new station at Lower Darwen.

The Government are also committed to ensuring that non-mayoral authorities are fully engaged in GBR's work and not disadvantaged as the new rail system is implemented. All tiers of local government will benefit from an empowered local GBR business unit that is outward-facing and engages local authorities on their priorities and their local transport plans. That structure will provide a single point of accountability for local authorities, rather than baking in the fragmented structure that we have today.

That engagement will ensure that there is sufficient opportunity for local authorities to collaborate with GBR on their priorities and consider their proposals. That approach is designed to ensure that GBR is as close as possible to local communities so that it can understand and respond to their needs, while being clear that they are part of a national system that needs to work coherently as a whole.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) rightly raised rail fares, which are a real concern for many passengers, especially when services are unreliable. The current fare system is complex and confusing, and passengers do not always trust that they are getting the right ticket. We are simplifying fares and ticketing so that passengers can easily find the best fare for their journey and get more consistent offers across the network under Great British Railways. Alongside reform, we have also frozen regulated fares for the first time in 30 years, which will help with the cost of living while improving reliability and service quality.

In closing, I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen for securing this debate and to all Members for their contributions today. Improving transport in small towns is central to this Government's mission to drive growth and opportunity across the whole country. We know there is more to do, but we are already taking meaningful steps to ensure that wherever possible, wherever people live, whether that be in a city, a rural area, a small town or a coastal town, they have access to the reliable, affordable and integrated transport that they deserve.

10.57 am

Andy MacNae: I thank everyone who has contributed. I was pleased that so many colleagues were able to cover areas that I was not able to address in my speech. I will not deal with every aspect, but it made me reflect that when we talk about growth, we sometimes default to the idea that it is just about a GDP number, but good growth has to matter and be felt in every single community. Transport is a crucial part of that. I was pleased that the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) mentioned youth detachment, which is a fundamental indicator of how transport connectivity connects to growth opportunities and the good society we want to create where everyone feels a sense of opportunity.

Although I thank the Minister for all he said and all the positive moves that are being made, I respectfully say that there is still a disconnection between what we are doing in mayoral strategic authorities and non-mayoral areas, where so much is left to whether a given non-mayoral authority has the capacity and capability to bring forward these schemes. The Government may be doing great things and bringing forward great opportunities, but if a local authority does not have the capacity, capability, or indeed desire, to grasp these opportunities on behalf of their communities, we are left behind, as in Lancashire, Shropshire, Cheshire and so many other places.

We need to do more to make that connection and finally recognise that the big infrastructure projects have to impact our small towns. That requires proactivity in the project design and spending envelopes. We have £46 billion allocated for Northern Powerhouse Rail—surely some of that needs to go to connecting our small towns.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered transport links for small towns.

Youth Mental Health Support

11 am

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I will call Anna Dixon to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. Other Members can participate only if they have had prior permission from both the Member in charge and the Minister. I know one or two other Members have indicated that they wish to speak. Interventions, if they are taken, are permitted, but speeches are not, unless they have been cleared in advance.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered youth mental health support.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. There is no doubt that we have a mental health crisis among our children and young people. The statistics are shocking. At the turn of the century, just over 2% of 14 to 24-year-olds had presented to primary care with a mental health problem; by 2023, that figure had risen to around 8%. Similarly, referrals to children and adolescent mental health services have trebled since 2016. Sadly, that is part of a wider decline in children's happiness. The Children's Society estimates that five children in a class of 30 are likely to have a mental health problem.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): This is a very important subject. I have disability issues, and I tried to take my life when I was at school. My youth club saved my life. We really need more youth clubs, but in Somerset we now have none. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need better youth provision in our rural communities?

Anna Dixon: I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's experience as a young person. I am very glad that he is with us, and that that support made a life-changing difference. I will come on to say more about the importance of youth services.

Behind the statistics are children and young people who are struggling, families who are stressed and teachers and doctors who are overwhelmed. Many of us will have a personal story of someone we know. My niece suffered with anxiety as a teenager and struggled with the transition to secondary school. She refused to go to school, and her absence was treated as truancy. After years of trying to get support from CAMHS, it was only when she was at a crisis point that she was seen. It took a further two years and several therapists before she was assessed and diagnosed with autism. That was a turning point, and the understanding it gave to both her and the family enabled her to recover and manage her mental health, but those lost years while she was waiting for support are impossible to get back.

Although neurodiversity is not a mental health issue, it can cause mental health issues if undiagnosed and unsupported. One of the top issues raised with me across the Shipley constituency is concern about children and young people's mental health and the lack of support. As an MP, I am frequently contacted by desperate parents looking for help, particularly parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Poor mental health impacts not just the lives of children and their families but wider society. I was shocked by the recent interim report by Alan Milburn on young people and work. It found that nearly 1 million

young people are not in education, employment or training—equivalent to one in eight. Long-term sickness was the primary driver of the increase in youth economic inactivity, and mental health conditions were the most common cause.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): Amber Valley has been selected for one of the new youth hubs that will be rolled out soon, and I am delighted about that. The hub will not only help people in my constituency into work, but provide them with access to mental health services. Does my hon. Friend agree that a holistic approach such as that is essential to ensuring that our young people, who have it harder at this time than ever, have the opportunity of a bright and fulfilling future?

Anna Dixon: I agree that youth hubs bringing everything together for young people are key to tackling these issues. Poor mental health harms young people's life chances, and the long-term scarring effects are a major issue. That is why we owe it to our children to stop the harm and heal the wounds.

I am not a psychologist or a psychiatrist, but a number of factors seem to be at play: covid causing children to miss out on school and play, more intense pressure at school with testing and exams, living in a more insecure global environment, levels of abuse, discrimination and bullying, exposure to trauma due to family breakdown, insecure housing and homelessness, poverty and, of course, the role of social media and the online world—a very topical issue that I will return to. While the Government cannot address all those factors directly, we can shape a healthier environment for our children to grow up in and ensure that the support is there when they need it.

The previous Government's crippling austerity hit our schools and the NHS. They failed to address the crisis in SEND, narrowly focused school performance on academic achievement and refused to fund the covid recovery recommended by Sir Kevan Collins. Their actions did nothing to help the mental health of our young people. In fact, they did the opposite, and it is noticeable that nobody from the Conservative party is here for this debate.

This Labour Government are already doing so much more—an ambitious and comprehensive set of reforms to SEND, an inclusive curriculum, additional funding for youth services, tackling homelessness and ending the use of B&Bs as temporary accommodation for families and children—but there is more to do.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): On youth provision, does my hon. Friend agree that it is incredibly important that we have sport provision and mentorship, which can play a key role in tackling the youth mental health crisis? Will she join me in thanking my local charity, BEST, for the work that it does?

Anna Dixon: I would love to join my hon. Friend in thanking his local organisation, and I thank him for being such a great champion for sport in this place.

I will focus specifically on three areas: the NHS and access to CAMHS—to which I hope the Minister will reply—and youth services and action to tackle online harm. As of late 2025, more than 550,000 children and young people were on NHS mental health waiting lists

[Anna Dixon]

in England, and more than half had waited for over a year. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has warned about how harmful that is, recently declaring that a lack of prioritisation to treat children with mental illness in England is turning treatable conditions into lifelong recurring illnesses, and that as many as 75% of children and young people who experience mental health problems are not getting the help they need.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important speech about the state of child and adolescent mental health support in England. I will just make the point about what is happening in Scotland, which is also very poor. In January to March this year, almost 40% of referrals to CAMHS support were rejected by the NHS in Scotland. I think that is ultimately a way of managing waiting lists so that they seem like they are meeting their target, even though young people are being failed. Does my hon. Friend agree that supporting young people in Scotland is critical, and will she join me in calling on the Scottish Government to get a grip of that?

Anna Dixon: I happily join my hon. Friend in calling on the Scottish Government to address this issue. I believe that waiting lists are too long UK-wide, and that too much rationing is happening. My constituent Joseph, a young man due to start secondary school in September, is an example of that. He has been unable to get assessments for ADHD and autism for 18 months, and his mum is incredibly worried about his ability to cope if he does not have the assessments and appropriate support. I will speak some of her words:

“This delay is already having a significant impact on Joseph”, his emotional wellbeing has deteriorated,

“he has started to pull out his hair and eyelashes, his ability to sleep, educational functioning, peer relationships, and ability to...interface with healthcare providers has been extremely challenging and traumatic to the point where he has refused treatment.”

It is not just about the waiting list to get an assessment; after a diagnosis has been received, children may still need to wait for long periods to get medication and other support. GPs are severely overstretched. One of the GPs at Grange Park surgery in Burley in Wharfedale in my constituency shared their concerns with me about the pressures they face. Again, I will read a short extract from her letter to me:

“The mental health services are not working. They are massively under capacity. It’s easy to say we can’t afford more staff but these children are waiting throughout most of their secondary education to be assessed and then helped. It is not acceptable.

I no longer can make a difference. I write to everyone I can think of. I complain. I personally find it distressing. I have decided that the only people who can institute a change is the government. There needs to be urgent money put into children’s mental health services. A wait of 2 years for a teenager to see someone is just unacceptable. Think about the effect on the family and on the whole life outcome of the child themselves. We cannot give up on these children.”

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): In Greater Manchester, we have the BeeWell programme, which tracks young people’s wellbeing and is critical in helping local areas identify needs, and designs more targeted, preventive approaches. More young people are now reporting good levels of wellbeing through this programme, so does my hon. Friend agree that we need to invest in

locally driven, data-informed approaches to prevention, working in partnership with integrated care systems and local authorities?

Anna Dixon: I thank my hon. Friend for raising such a great example of wellbeing and prevention. It is vital that, alongside the specialist services that are needed, we do more on prevention and early intervention.

Before I move on to youth services and prevention, I want to make a final point about the health service. In West Yorkshire, the integrated care boards introduced a cap on appointments for ADHD and autism spectrum disorder assessments. When they reached the cap, they simply stopped seeing patients, which meant that more patients had to wait longer. I urge the Minister to look into this ICB practice and implement funding and workforce plans to tackle the waiting times in mental health with the same gusto with which Ministers have successfully addressed elective waiting times for surgery and cancer diagnostics.

I will briefly move on to youth services, which has already been mentioned by my hon. Friends and colleagues. Early intervention and prevention are key. Schools and families play a role, but for many young people the opportunity to play, be physically active and participate in activities with other young people can boost their mental health. That is why youth services in our community and voluntary sector are so vital.

The previous Government crippled our youth services, funding for which declined by 73% in England between 2010 and 2023. Despite that, the previously Labour-led Bradford council fought to protect our local youth services. Reform is now in charge in Bradford, and I hope it follow the leadership shown by Labour and ensure that youth services remain available for young people across my constituency.

I have had the pleasure of visiting some of the fantastic provision for young people in my constituency. I would like to shout out Bingley Youth Café, Bolton Woods Community Centre, Denholme Youth Café and Health Action Local Engagement in Bradford, which all provide a safe space for young people to meet; outdoor facilities such as the skate park in Myrtle park and the fantastic new pump track in Burley in Wharfedale, which opened at the weekend—I thank Bradford Community Trust and parish council for all their work to support that project.

I want to shout out the brilliant sports clubs, such as Harden cricket club and Crossflatts cricket club, which both have very popular youth sections, as well as many football, rugby and running clubs. Many uniformed organisations, including Scouts, Guides and Cadets meeting across the villages and towns of my Shipley constituency, provide young people with a huge variety of opportunities to learn skills and develop; and finally, churches and mosques also provide vital support to children and families.

I am excited to soon visit the Slice of Life project run by the Methodist church in Burley in Wharfedale, which runs a pizza van to engage young people on the street. These amazing organisations rely on volunteers giving up time to work with young people. I would like to give a huge thank you to everyone involved. However, they also need money, which is why funding and grants for grassroot sport and youth organisations is so vital.

It is also essential that we have professional youth workers, police and other formal services available to support these voluntary community groups. That is why this Friday I am bringing together youth organisations, community groups, and other key local stakeholders to see how we can strengthen the youth offer in Shipley. I would be grateful if the Minister could work with colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure funding for this sort of provision is prioritised, given the positive contribution it makes to supporting young people's mental health.

As I mentioned, before I finish, I want to talk about social media, which is clearly a crucial factor in the rise of young people's mental health problems. As part of Mental Health Awareness Week this year, I asked constituents to share their personal experiences with me. I would like to thank the almost 700 constituents who have been in touch. My constituent Michael is a parent of three. He wrote about the nightly battle with his children when they were between the ages of 14 and 16, over their desperation to have their phones in their rooms with them overnight so that they could check social media and not miss out on contact with friends.

Despite the exhaustion of the continued struggle and the resulting strain on family life, Michael persisted, because he knew how damaging social media can be to sleep health. By the age of 16, his children had given up the fight. Michael had protected their sleep through crucial years of development and study. This is a battle that parents should not be fighting alone, and they are in desperate need of stronger regulation of social media access and function.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share the concern I have from conversations in Plymouth about the deep harm caused to mental health by some social media? Is she aware that the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has warned of an epidemic of harm to children

"continuously exposed to hateful, addictive and grossly distressing content"?

Anna Dixon: I have great respect for the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and my hon. Friend's work to highlight the harms of social media and its addictive nature. I agree with him, and we must do all we can to protect children from these impacts and to hold tech companies to account when they continue to exploit young people through addictive algorithms and expose them to harm and abuse. I therefore fully support the measures in the Online Safety Act 2023 and the Government's consultation to go further to protect our children from online harms.

I urge the Minister to call this out as a public health emergency, and to work closely with colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and urge them to act boldly and decisively to put the wellbeing of children and young people above the financial interests of tech companies.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a great speech. I would like to raise awareness of paediatric acute-onset neuropsychiatric syndrome and paediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcus, conditions caused by an abnormal immune response

that results in brain inflammation and leads to obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety, children feeling pressures that they have never felt before and unbelievable overnight behaviour changes.

There is little awareness about these conditions, but they lead to poor mental health. Some of the children from the PANS/PANDAS UK board came to Westminster not too long ago. They talked to us about the conditions, and one of those young lads made a heartfelt plea for us to get behind him, as he had considered taking his life because of PANS/PANDAS, and the conditions are not recognised or diagnosed. Would my hon. Friend join me in encouraging the Minister to think about PANS/PANDAS in any conversations she has around mental health?

Anna Dixon: I am sure that the Minister will have heard my hon. Friend's remarks and will take on board the information and testimony that he has provided.

Our young people deserve to be given the best chance to grow up healthy and happy. Sadly, too many are not given that chance. That requires action across Government to ensure timely access to NHS services, a thriving youth sector in every community and a safer online environment so that kids can spend more time enjoying life in the real world rather than the virtual one. The Tories tore down the social infrastructure that supported young people in dealing with mental health issues. The safety net was cut and our children fell through the gaps. It falls to Labour to repair it and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) for securing this important debate. This is an issue I care deeply about, and I thank her for sharing such a personal story about her niece and the lost years that she faced.

I also thank hon. Members for their contributions, including the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance), who shared how his youth club saved him at a time of very clear mental health distress, my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), who talked about celebrating youth hubs in her area, my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone), who talked about the powerful example of sports provision to support mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee), who talked about the issues with CAMHS in Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas), who talked about his concerns about the impact of social media, and my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), who talked about PANS/PANDAS.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley mentioned Joseph and the delays in the SEND assessment. I am keen to work with the Minister for School Standards on the Health response to SEND reforms. The ICB is responsible for ADHD assessment and treatment services, and I hope that the NHS's medium-term planning framework is clear that a system should use existing and new guidance to reduce long waits and improve the quality of assessments.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

The message I want to give today is clear: the country is right to expect a children and young people's mental health system that is simple, faster and stronger at every stage, from early support in the community through to specialist CAMHS support where needs are most severe. We have to be honest about the pressure on that system, which includes long waits and uneven access, but equally clear in our determination, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley said, to improve it and build a system that delivers for every child and young person. For parents, as my hon. Friend shared, that means knowing where to turn when they are worried about their child. For young people, it means getting help through schools, their GP, community services—many Members mentioned them and the power they have to engage young people today—mental health support hubs or specialist NHS care, depending on the level of need. For families, it means a clear local offer, more joined-up care and fewer children becoming more unwell before help arrives.

To improve services, we have to be honest about how families experience them, and my hon. Friend shared some really powerful examples. Needs may first be identified at school, then raised with a GP and addressed through a community service, or they may come to attention only when there is a crisis, as my hon. Friend says. Support should become more intensive as need grows, but families too often do not experience a clear pathway and instead describe a search for help that is confusing, fragmented and exhausting.

The pressure points are well understood: confusing local offers, different referral thresholds and delays that allow problems to escalate until a child presents in crisis. More children and young people are starting treatment, but too many are still waiting. At the end of March 2026, nearly 40,000 children and young people had already been waiting more than 1,000 days for a first contact.

The pressures are visible nationally and matter locally too, including in Shipley. In Bradford district and Craven, young people can access support through schools and colleges, primary care, specialist CAMHS across Bradford and Keighley, and innovative community provision such as the Shipley Wellbeing Hub on Westgate, which offers walk-in support and links to wider services. Those are strong foundations, but we also know that in West Yorkshire ICB, where Shipley sits, almost 23,000 children and young people are still waiting for support, with median waiting times longer on average for England.

Let me be clear about CAMHS, because a number of Members have raised it. CAMHS is central to our current system of support and treatment. It is not one service, but a specialist pathway that covers community teams, crisis support and in-patient care. It is where children and young people are assessed and treated when needs are more serious and complex. However, CAMHS is under sustained pressure: referral volumes have risen, waiting times vary too much between areas and too many children are waiting too long for an assessment or treatment. Delay is not neutral; anxiety can become absence from school and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley described, low mood can deepen into self-harm and eating difficulties can become much more entrenched.

At the earliest stage, support should be available where young people already are, through mental health support teams in schools and colleges, open-access hubs, GPs and primary care, and community and voluntary services. For emerging needs, that should mean advice, brief intervention and practical help before problems escalate. For more severe or complex needs, it should mean timely referral into specialist CAMHS. For those in acute distress, it should mean a responsive crisis pathway. What good looks like is clear: visible local entry points, no wrong front door, support while families are waiting, stronger links between schools, GPs and community services, and better outcomes for children.

Anna Dixon: I thank the Minister for describing what good looks like. Does she agree that we are very far from that in most parts of the country, and that it is now a matter of great urgency that the Government act to ensure that the good she describes is available to all children in all places?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why I will now set out what the Government are going to do to address the fragmented system that we all find. We will strengthen the whole pathway, not just one part of it—I think that is really important, from listening to my hon. Friend today. I also want to thank her for raising the subject of the NEET population—those not in education, employment or training—because none of this can be done in isolation; we have to work across Government if we want to truly address the fragmented system.

First, we are expanding earlier intervention. We are accelerating access to NHS-funded mental health support teams in schools and colleges so that, by 2029, all pupils and learners will have access to that early support. Alongside that, the Government have provided more than £20 million of funding to early support hubs over the last three years. That will deliver more than 30,000 additional mental health interventions for children and young people. These hubs offer open-access, community-based help without requiring a clinical referral. I think that is very important.

This year, the Government have also launched young futures hubs. The first eight early adopter hubs are now operating in Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Bristol, County Durham, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham and Tower Hamlets, with a further 42 hubs to follow across England over the coming years. Together, they will help young people get to the right support sooner.

Secondly, we are improving consistency in navigation. A modern service framework for children and young people up to the age of 18—up to 25 for those with mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions—will set clear expectations about what services should provide and for whom, and how those services should work together across the pathway to improve outcomes.

Thirdly, we are increasing capacity in specialist services. We have already delivered on our commitment to recruit an additional 8,500 mental health workers for children and adults, three years ahead of schedule. Almost one in five are working directly in children and young people's services, including within mental health support teams in schools and colleges—more than 10,000, actually—and in community CAMHS teams. Those staff are helping children and young people access support more quickly and closer to home.

Fourthly, we are acting on the drivers of the crisis as well as the consequences. Children's mental health is shaped by what happens at home, in school, and—as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley powerfully said—online and in their communities, which is why this cannot sit in the NHS alone. We are working across Government to tackle root causes, including taking action on social media and screen use, expanding perinatal mental health support and tackling inequalities and child poverty.

As my hon. Friend has already stated, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has undertaken a consultation on children's online safety, which received more than 70,000 responses. That is a national conversation we need to have. Guidance has been issued for nought to five, and I think it is important that we have a statutory footing on phones in schools. The measures are all there to assist parents and professionals in navigating what I know, with the Online Safety Act, lots of young people are evidencing: the impact of online harms on mental health.

To bring this all together, we are developing a new cross-Government mental health strategy for England. The call for evidence is now live until 10 July. I urge hon. Members to please feed in and share that with their constituents, so that frontline services, experts and people with lived experience can help shape the next phase of reform. Alongside that, we have commissioned an independent review into mental health conditions, ADHD and autism to inform the longer-term changes needed for a more coherent and effective offer. Again, that report is due to be published at the end of July.

The message to the country is this: we understand where the system is under pressure; we are being honest about the challenge; and we are acting where it matters most, which is on earlier help, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley has raised, clearer routes into CAMHS, more capacity in specialist care, and better support in the community. Every child deserves the chance to be well, stay in school, build relationships and look to the future with confidence. That is what this Government want for children, young people and families in Shipley and across the country, and that is the system we are determined to build.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Improving the UK Visa System

[GRAHAM STUART *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of improving the UK visa system.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. Immigration is one of the defining policy challenges of our time. It determines who our neighbours are and with whom we share our country, our culture, our values, our communities and our public services. Britain is operating an immigration system based on a high level of trust that the gangs who ruthlessly tear through our borders in the English channel will stop before thinking to exploit loopholes in our visa system. As a consequence, Britain is now an outlier in the world of self-interest, and our immigration system must reflect that. It must be robust enough to attract the best and the brightest from around the world, who can enrich our communities and boost our economy, but it must slam shut the back door to migrants who do not benefit our country and who burden our public services.

The simple truth is that immigration has been unsustainable for a long time. In a little under two years, more than 1.3 million people have come to live, work and study in the UK. That is more than the total population of Birmingham, leading to strain on our public services, competition for jobs and increasing pressure in our housing market. Although some migrants will have brought talent and experience, far too many have not. This has been facilitated by a visa system that is too generous and too vulnerable to exploitation. It cannot continue.

Last year I began researching the UK's visa system, and what my team and I found was shocking. Glaring loopholes in compliance must be closed—for example, by requiring visa holders to provide an up-to-date home address during the visa period and not just at renewal or settlement, and by matching national insurance records with visa status so that illegal working can be identified and enforced in near to real time. This is legal compliance 101, and there is no excuse to keep the back doors to Britain open.

Around 140,000 organisations are eligible to sponsor work visas. The vast majority are small and medium-sized enterprises, and some of them are tiny. Nearly 17,000 have five or fewer employees. More than 3,000 have just one employee, with so-called skilled workers sponsored to work in vape shops, convenience stores and takeaways. To those looking to exploit the UK visa system, Britain is sending an open invitation to set up a bogus company and sell pretend jobs that give people the right to live in the UK.

None of this is hypothetical. During my research, I read an investigative report by *The Times* that uncovered visa agents selling fake jobs with companies that hold Home Office sponsorship licences. It is a lucrative business model for fraudsters who cheat our visa system, and for migrants who are desperate enough to do the same. Back in January, I asked the Minister on the Floor of the House how we could be sure that tiny companies sponsoring visas were not bogus. He promised to look

[Blake Stephenson]

at it and come back to me. He responded to me only yesterday, presumably as he was preparing for today's debate. That is not good enough, because these are serious and urgent issues for all our constituents.

We must draw a line at the smallest of organisations being able to sponsor visas, and we must set clear limits on the proportion of an organisation's workforce that can be made up of people on work visas. For that to be possible, the Home Office must publish the relevant data, rather than fobbing off MPs by saying that it can only be collected at a disproportionate cost. The real cost is in turning a blind eye to loopholes in our visa system. Inspections need to be regular and transparent, so that the British public can see the system working for them.

The Home Office has claimed that it regularly reviews the organisations eligible to sponsor visas, but just a cursory check finds organisations that are long defunct. The former Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy remains on the list, despite being abolished in February 2023. If Government are not joined up enough to remove historical Departments, how can there be any faith in the adequacy of checks on tens of thousands of smaller organisations across the country?

Employees who break the rules get a slap on the wrist, and repeat offenders are allowed to get back their licence to sponsor visas in as little as two years. We must be tougher. Bans on sponsoring visas should be incurred after one failed action plan following a B rating. Those bans should be permanent, with penalties for directors to stop them moving on to sponsor visas at their next rogue outfit.

In addition, too many public bodies have come to rely on immigration to fill job roles. That is ludicrous at a time when 1.1 million young British people are not in employment, education or training. The public sector should lead from the front and only sponsor visas in cases where candidates bring genuinely world-class expertise.

Astonishingly, thousands of visas are also being issued for religious and charity work to those who meet pathetically low financial requirements. Would you believe that £2,270 in the bank is enough for a religious minister to bring in a family of five for three years? A robust visa system would scrap those routes entirely. The hard truth is that they are being used to take advantage of Britain's good will, and that must stop.

Work is not the only area where there is a problem. If someone has a high-paid, skilled job in the UK and their passport is from all but one country, they can bring their non-British spouse to the UK on a five-year dependent visa for around £1,500 in application fees. However, if a British citizen is bringing their non-British spouse to the UK for five years, that will set them back over £3,200 in fees and require two family visas. That is madness. What possible justification can there be for it to be more expensive and more difficult for British citizens to bring a non-British spouse to the UK? Even the family visa is not exclusive to citizens. Settled individuals have the same right to sponsor family visas that British citizens do. That is not fair to British citizens.

On student visas, our universities have a commercial incentive to fill lecture halls with international students, and the UK's visa policy hands international student

graduates the right to live and work in any job they like through the graduate visa. As a result, the UK takes the second largest number of international students of any country in the world—750,000 in the past couple of years. Far from attracting the best and the brightest, the visa system fails to distinguish between the quality of students.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. International students have always come to the UK and it is not because of the visa system; it is because we have fantastic universities. The hon. Gentleman will know that our very best universities do not actually rely on the graduate visa scheme.

Blake Stephenson: I agree that we have a thriving university sector, and we must maintain it. However, the reality is that many students arriving in the UK are doing so to attend poorly performing universities, and not just the best ones. That is doing long-term harm to our country and our economy. We must close down that route by establishing a minimum academic standard for incoming students and setting a cap on institutions, based on the quality of educational provision.

Eligibility for graduate visas should also be linked to academic performance, to keep the best and the brightest while slamming closed this back-door route for low-skilled migrants. Universities should be stripped of their power to assess English language skills for incoming students, which allows them to bypass the official secure English language testing system. Those with a commercial incentive to bring in as many students as possible should not be allowed to mark their own homework. That has created an unacceptable loophole, one that trashes rules designed to ensure that the most basic of requirements is satisfied—that those who come to the UK can speak our language.

On English language testing, the Government are acting without sense and rationale. The Home Office is pressing ahead with plans to move official English language testing to a fully remote model, despite serious security concerns. Having initially ruled out remote testing, the Government U-turned after being lobbied by Peter Manderson's firm, Global Counsel, on behalf of Duolingo. That US tech firm is now expected to win the £816 million contract, after a consortium of leading British firms withdrew from the application process, warning that the proposal exposes the UK's immigration system to weaker security. Remote tests are extremely vulnerable to organised criminal gangs and cheats who, as I have seen at first hand, can easily overcome safeguards with technological workarounds, some of which use cheap equipment readily available on Amazon.

The Government have repeatedly promised to smash the gangs, yet they are opening a new back door to Britain for organised criminals to exploit. In a further insult to the British public, the Government initially denied meeting with Duolingo, yet a recent response to a freedom of information request shows that the Minister for Investment met Duolingo in September 2025 to discuss its offer on English language testing. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that and apologise to the British public.

All that raises serious questions about the Government's seriousness on UK border security. There are also questions to answer about whether the £816 million contract is good value for money. The Department will have received

a letter from the Public Accounts Committee, on which I serve, inviting officials to brief the Committee, and I hope the offer will be taken up. It is clear from a YouGov poll that the majority of adults from across every political party, gender and socioeconomic group oppose a move to remote-only testing for an English visa application, so why on earth would the Home Office pursue that course?

In answer to my written parliamentary questions, the Minister alluded to the changes delivering a “net positive” financial benefit for the Department. In plain English, that means that the Home Office are looking to trade the security of high-stakes English language testing for cash for the Department. I would appreciate a response from the Minister on that point. What other reason could there be for the Government’s diverging from our Australian and Canadian allies, who have both recently rejected proposals to move testing online?

We do not permit remote-only testing for driving theory tests, “Life in the UK” tests or GCSEs, so how can we, with a clear conscience, permit it for the test that decides who makes the UK their home? Has the Home Office consulted the National Cyber Security Centre on the threat model for fully remote testing? The reality is clear for all to see: a fully remote model cannot match the security of in-person supervised testing. Are Ministers so naive that they cannot see the disaster coming down the tracks?

I hope that much of my speech will not come as a surprise to the Minister—I have asked him enough questions on this topic, and I have been told that my “Backdoors to Britain” report, which I published in March, has been read. I am grateful for the responses to it that I received from the Department. However, given the inadequacy of the Government’s response so far, I am not satisfied that they have listened to my concerns and those of many in the country.

I hope that the Minister’s response will reflect on the seriousness of these issues and demonstrate that the Government understand the problem. The British people do not want a blame game; this problem is too important for point scoring. I recognise that the responsibility for the problems in our visa system lies with both the current and with previous Governments, but the responsibility to act now lies with current Ministers. They need to be ambitious and brave but also thorough and serious.

It is crucial that we improve the visa rules and the compliance and enforcement system. More than almost any other system, it defines who we are as a nation and what it means to be part of our community. The conversation about how we get our visa system to work in the national interest must involve all of us, regardless of our politics. I look forward to hearing contributions from colleagues from right across the political divide.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. A Member has come in rather late and did not apply to speak in the debate, so I suggest that he does not speak. I call Daniel Zeichner.

2.43 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I commend the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on introducing this important debate.

He will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree with everything that he said. The city I represent, Cambridge, has fantastic universities that rely strongly on international students, who we are very proud of. We rely on a functioning visa system to make the city prosper, but my constituency office deals daily with a steady flow of immigration and nationality cases from across a range of routes, including skilled worker visas, dependant visas, and family reunification, settlement and naturalisation applications. I suspect we will hear the same story from other Members.

A city like Cambridge probably has a disproportionate number of such cases. A consistent theme across them is delays in the system and, I have to say, sometimes limited communication with the Home Office. It is hardly a new problem. I have been an MP for 11 years and it has always been the case. In many ways it may be improving, but it is still not good enough.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way so early in his speech. He hits on the issue that communication with the Home Office is challenging. I would go so far as to say that there is a cultural problem in the Home Office, whether for visa applications or naturalisation applications. A family in my constituency applied for citizenship in 2022, and after months—years—of me and them chasing, and being pushed back and told by the Home Office, “These things take a long time; please be patient,” it transpired that there was an administrative error in the Home Office. It was noticed after three years, and four years later the family finally got naturalisation. Does the hon. Member agree that the culture at the Home Office needs to change?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Member is absolutely right. I remember notorious problems with the system based in Croydon from when I was a teenager living there, so the issue goes back 50 or 60 years.

The issue is important because it creates such uncertainty for so many people, with knock-on effects for employment, housing and family life. We are seeing cases where constituents are seeking to reunite with family members through refugee family reunion routes, including applications made, exactly as has been suggested, prior to recent changes in the immigration rules. That includes cases where people are trying to be with seriously ill relatives, but still facing delays even when urgent expedition routes exist. Importantly, those routes prioritise only case consideration; they do not guarantee that a faster decision will be made.

Frankly, in many cases, I have found constituents unable to take up confirmed job offers or proceed with planned family relocations because applications remain unresolved or there is insufficient clarity around timelines. Alongside the delays themselves, a recurring concern is the difficulty that constituents face in obtaining any information—again, exactly as has been pointed out—which leaves them unable to plan with confidence or understand their position within the system. I think that point will be repeated throughout the debate.

My second point refers to a time when I was fisheries Minister. Last summer, late in my occupation of that post, I visited the constituency of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I was alerted to problems in the Northern Ireland fishing industry, where a relatively

[Daniel Zeichner]

small number of visas are essential to its continuation. I wrote to the Minister with some suggestions for working with the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations. I gently say that that offer stands if he wishes to take it up.

My final issue refers to the points made by the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire about language testing. The Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a major employer in Cambridge, is one of the players that bid and then withdrew its bid because of concerns about the changes to online testing. It asked me a number of questions that I will put to the Minister today, echoing the points that have already been made. Is he really satisfied that a fully remote model can match the security of in-person, supervised testing? These are high-stakes tests because the number of people coming to our country depends on their accuracy. I echo the point calling for an explanation of why are we diverging from Australia and Canada, which have rejected this approach, and I ask whether the Home Office will publish the risk assessment underpinning the move to remote-by-default testing, including its assessment of fraud, impersonation, AI-enabled cheating, hidden devices and organised malpractice.

Could the Minister also tell us whether the Home Office has consulted the National Cyber Security Centre on the threat model for fully remote English language testing, including AI-enabled cheating, impersonation, organised fraud and cross-border cyber-risks? Perhaps he could explain why the Government are moving towards remote-by-default testing when other high-stakes assessment bodies are moving in the opposite direction. For example, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants is ending remote invigilation, and the Law School Admission Council, which runs the law school admission test for US schools, is returning to in-person testing to protect security and integrity. Could he tell us whether the Home Office English language testing system will be independently regulated to the same standard as the current secure English language tests, and whether Ofqual will have a formal role? What fall-back arrangements are in place if security, reliability or integrity problems emerge after the contract is awarded, including whether the Home Office could realistically switch provider or return to higher-assurance in-person provision?

I appreciate that the Minister and his colleagues inherited a system that was buckling under the strain, and I also appreciate the hard work of the many civil servants trying to make it work, but I would appreciate any answers that the Minister can give.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. Given the number of speakers here, it is going to work out at about four and a half minutes each. I am not going to bring that in strictly for now, but if everybody is considerate of that, we will be able to get through.

2.50 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing this debate.

This debate is about more than simply improving the UK visa system; it is about creating an economy that delivers for families, workers and employers alike. It is crucial that we get this issue right. If we are serious about economic growth, supporting public services and helping British businesses succeed, we must be honest: the current direction of travel is deeply damaging. What is worse is that many people are either celebrating it or complaining that we are not moving quickly enough. Now is not the time to accelerate; it is time to slam on the brakes before we drive our economy off a cliff.

The visa system is becoming too harsh on workers, too costly for employers and it is bringing too much uncertainty for families who came to this country in good faith. They followed the rules, paid the fees and contributed to our economy and our communities. The proposal to double the standard qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain from five years to 10 is particularly concerning. Roughly 2.2 million people with temporary visas that ended in 2024 were on a path to settlement and all of them have had the rug pulled from beneath them by this Government.

People came to the United Kingdom under one set of expectations. They built careers, enrolled children in schools, rented or bought homes and made long-term plans. Now, after years of working, paying tax and contributing to our country, they are being told that they must do more to earn their future here.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that one of the worst aspects of the new system is how it treats husbands and wives separately? If a husband has gained five years of work experience but the wife has stayed at home to look after their children, she will be treated separately under the new rules such that her path to indefinite leave to remain will become much longer than his. That is having a damaging impact on families.

Ayoub Khan: Of course, it creates further uncertainty and, I suspect, further costs because families are having to pay lawyers thousands of pounds. I absolutely agree that the level of uncertainty should be resolved.

The system is not cheap for those who use it. For workers and families, the costs are extraordinary, with the total cost from entry to citizenship ranging from about £12,000 for a lone skilled worker visa holder to more than £40,000 for a parent and child. The immigration health surcharge alone is about £1,000 per person for each year of leave, which is paid up front. A family with one adult dependent and one child on a five-year skilled worker visa will be charged nearly £15,000 to access the NHS. When we take income tax into account, they are paying twice over for the public services that many of them help sustain. They paid their duties in full and then some, and now they are being told that is not enough.

The system is also not cheap for employers. When visa fees, health surcharge payments and compliance costs are included, the five-year sponsorship cost for a single skilled worker can reach £14,000—and that is assuming that everything goes smoothly. The idea that businesses casually choose to sponsor overseas workers instead of hiring locally is simply not credible. If employers could easily recruit British workers with the skills they need, they would do so. The truth is that successive

Governments have left this country with serious skill gaps. Now, instead of fixing those gaps, the Government are punishing the employers and migrant workers who have stepped in to fill them.

The consequences are already being felt. Skilled worker visa applications in 2025 were 59% lower than in 2023 when work migration peaked. Construction companies, health trusts and care homes are facing chronic staff shortages. Universities are also under pressure, as tougher restrictions on international students reduce applications and cut vital tuition income. Migrant workers are at the heart of the systems that care for our sick and elderly, build our homes, grow our food and drive innovation.

Public opinion recognises this, more than Ministers often admit. British Future's latest immigration tracker survey has shown that more than 60% of the public support increasing or maintaining numbers of nurses, doctors, care home workers, engineers, seasonal agricultural workers, academics, teachers and IT experts, while more than half support increasing or maintaining numbers of construction workers, catering staff and lorry drivers.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be winding his speech up soon.

Ayoub Khan: In conclusion, Britain should be a country that attracts talent, rewards contribution, and keeps its promises. The current approach does the opposite: it prices people out, damages competitiveness, and leaves families with great uncertainty.

2.55 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart.

I want to start by welcoming the Home Secretary's measures to get a grip on the visa system and rebuild the public's trust in it. This is a debate that, if I am frank, my party too often shies away from. I want to be honest: I have been on the doorsteps in Makerfield and in industrial towns right across Yorkshire, and I have to admit, I often hear the same thing, even from those I speak to who are hesitant about illegal immigration. Most people have got absolutely nothing against legal migration, managed well.

I want to come to this debate with some thoughts on how we can build a visa system that is based on contribution, is more place-based and has devolution at its heart, maximising British values around fairness. Let me start by saying that legal migration is a positive thing that is felt across most households in Britain, left or right. Take the NHS. The statistics tell us that, when my youngest boy, Louis, was born a year ago, on average, one of the NHS workers in that delivery room was born overseas. That is a wonderful thing and a story I will tell him in the years to come: that someone born overseas chose Britain to be their home, to deliver him into this world. We must never forget that, under Reform's policies on ILR, the NHS would crumble overnight.

Let me frame things, though, in a different way. The world cup is coming shortly, and we have a squad of incredibly talented players from right across the country—even if we can debate whether Tuchel's final 26 was the right choice. I have no doubt that we will see Reform politicians putting on three-lion shirts, singing the national anthem and cosplaying as the football fans they never

seem to be throughout the rest of the year. But many of those players' parents were born overseas and came to the UK. Many of their family members would never have been allowed here in the first place if it were down to Reform. Just remember that when we see them wearing England shirts, and let us not forget that some of them have even boycotted games before. Patriots? Yeah, right.

Moving on, one of the most heartbreaking things I have heard about from my constituents in York Outer was the case of some asylum seekers who were trying to get to a maternity appointment—unfortunately, they do need taxis to get to some appointments. I recently wrote to the Minister for Border Security and Asylum about this.

We have to recognise that there are unique circumstances and take things on a case-by-case basis. If asylum seekers need urgent support to get to critical medical appointments, for example a 20-week scan, then I think a compassionate Britain says that we should support them.

Around 12 years ago, the Institute for Public Policy Research published a report—one that stands the test of time—calling for a greater sense of people's contribution in the visa system. Under what I would call something like ILR contribution-plus, community champions such as carers or nurses saving lives in the NHS should maybe, just maybe, have a faster route towards ILR. We should seriously look at that.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): It is apposite that I should intervene at this point, because I believe I might have been the author of that IPPR report from 12 years ago. One of the things about contribution is that it needs to be managed. We need to be able to check whether people are contributing, obeying the rules and interacting with the labour market correctly. Only two months ago, the Government created the Fair Work Agency, under the Employment Rights Act 2025. Does my hon. Friend agree that it will be critical in ensuring that we can measure the contribution to the labour market of those in the immigration system?

Mr Charters: I can assure my hon. Friend that he does not look old enough to have written that report 12 years ago. Regarding the Fair Work Agency, there is an important deterrent effect that gangs exploiting people overseas should recognise that it is not worth their time to proceed with illegal activity.

I want to touch on—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Briefly.

Mr Charters: I briefly want to mention a very tough bloke at one of my surgeries, who was in tears over his wife's visa situation. I do have concerns about applying changes to ILR from five to 10 years retrospectively. I am not convinced that is the best way forward. We should move to an ILR and visa model based on the contribution that people make to their place and communities, linking it to the devolved power of regional mayors.

3 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this timely debate.

[*Robbie Moore*]

We are here to talk about improving the UK visa system. That has to start with addressing one of the most cynical flaws in our system, which is the domestic abuse loophole. That loophole involves migrants falsely claiming to be victims of domestic abuse in order to stay in this country. That is a national issue, and a local one for me in West Yorkshire.

Before I continue, let me be clear that those who are genuine victims of domestic abuse must be afforded the utmost protection by society and lawmakers, no matter their gender, the colour of their skin, the language they speak or where they come from. We cannot, however, allow that obligation to be used to allow people to con their way into this country and ultimately claim citizenship, falsely accusing those they relied on to get here of heinous crimes, potentially causing lifelong impacts for the innocent people with whom they entered a relationship. Under UK law, migrants who claim to be the victims of domestic abuse and who are on temporary visas as the partners of British citizens, can apply for permission to settle permanently if the relationship has broken down because of domestic abuse or violence.

Permission to settle gives them the right to live, work and study here for as long as they like, and to apply for benefits if they are eligible. They can use that to apply for British citizenship. That rule, known as the migrant victims of domestic abuse concession, was brought in to help genuine victims of abuse to secure permanent residence more quickly than through other routes, such as asylum. There is stark evidence, however, that that it is being used by male and female migrants to dupe British partners into relationships and marriage.

Ayoub Khan: It is not just the scenario that the hon. Member highlights. There is evidence of false domestic violence cases, where partners get indefinite leave to remain and British nationality, and then bring over their true partner, which is a further exacerbation. Is the hon. Member aware of that?

Robbie Moore: I am aware of that, as it resonates with some of the casework I get in my constituency in Keighley. I am also aware of people being encouraged to fabricate false allegations by so-called online legal advisers. The scale of the problem has been amplified through a freedom of information request from the BBC. It found that a total of 5,596 migrants made applications for indefinite leave to remain as victims of domestic abuse in the 12 months up to September 2025, the most recent period for which the data was available.

The BBC reported one case where a British mother, who had left her male partner after reporting him for rape, was subsequently accused by him of domestic abuse. She said that was a false allegation, made so that he could stay in the country. The allegations were never proven, but the partner was able to use them to avoid having to return to Pakistan. I know from the correspondence I get through casework in my constituency that there is a noticeable increase in the issue.

There was one mother whose son and spouse came to reside with her family after a marriage had been entered into. A complaint of domestic abuse was made, not only against the son but the wider family, which resulted in the mother losing her job in a local school. The police

explored it, which resulted in them taking no further action, but because the claim had been made, it caused huge stress for the family. The individual who made the claim was protected by the state, through the money they were being paid to reside in a different place and by being able to claim benefits. That is wrong, and I hope the Government will look at that loophole.

Let me reassure Members across the House that it is, of course, right and proper that we offer the utmost protection to victims of domestic abuse. Immigration authorities will not get it right every time, but the numbers I cited earlier and my experience from constituency casework prove that this loophole is getting traction, and is being promoted for others to utilise. What reassurance can the Minister offer me that the Government are aware of this issue, are taking it seriously and have a plan to stop it escalating further?

3.5 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairing, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing the debate, but I say to him, as gently as I possibly can, that he could barely be more wrong about the emerging situation concerning immigration and what we must do to equip ourselves for the future. What he, in fact, described was a situation that is quickly vanishing and proposed solutions that can do only more harm than good. The UK is actually experiencing one of the steepest declines in net migration in recent history, which is at one of its lowest points since 2012. All we hear, from what can only be described as a Westminster consensus, is that there is a crisis around immigration and a perception that it is out of control and must be curbed.

Let us have a look at what is actually going on. The latest figures from the Home Office and the Office for National Statistics show that net migration has dramatically fallen to 171,000 in the last year. That is almost half the figure for the previous year. It is more than three quarters below the post-pandemic peak of more than 900,000 in 2023, which was achieved under the Conservatives, who did not quite understand their own asylum policy. Far from migration continuing to spiral upwards, it is dramatically decreasing. Whether for work visas, study visas or family routes, it is all down.

Those real figures do not seem to matter a jot to a Government and Opposition still trying to convince us, for what I can perceive only as political reasons and purposes, that immigration is out of control. British Future has done us a great favour by describing this disconnect between what is actually happening—decreasing migration—and the public's perception of what is happening. Politicians have been so successful at garnering their arguments about immigration that the public still believe that immigration is out of control and is rising.

The Home Office is happy to continue to paint a picture of escalating migration, and therefore tackling immigration is the core mission for all its activities. Again, it has been spectacularly successful. Just look at some of the figures for visas. In the year ending March 2026, work visas were down 17%, family visas were down 17%, refugee family reunion visas were down by 17%, and asylum claims were down by 12%. The sharpest and most invidious decline is in the number of visas issued to care workers, which, in effect, has

collapsed after restrictions introduced by the previous Government and taken up with aplomb by the current Labour Government.

Visas issued to workers in caring personal service occupations have fallen from 108,00 at their peak to just 1,400 last year. There are real-life consequences to that. Public services have been impacted. The general economy is starting to suffer. Such is the situation that in the next couple of years we might have negative net migration. Who knows, it might actually be coming this year. If they think immigration is bad, just wait until they see the consequences of immigration and population decline.

Just look at one country—Japan. Ten years ago, it was No. 2 in the GDP leagues. It has been resistant to immigration for nearly all its history, and it is now going to collapse to No. 6, such are the demography issues and constraints.

There are also issues across southern Europe. In Italy, houses are being sold for €1 to try to get people to come to those communities. Countries are now looking at their immigration systems to see whether they are fit for purpose. Spain is attracting immigration to try to resist some of these problems. That is the agenda that we have to get into. If Members think immigration is bad, just wait until they see what is going to happen with emigration.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I am going to call the first Opposition spokesman at 3.28 pm, so the remaining speakers have less than four minutes each—more like three and a half minutes—if I am to get everyone in.

3.10 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I want to bring a case of injustice in the visa system to the attention of the Minister. It concerns two residents in my constituency, Mary and Geoff—not their real names. My office has tried every means of finding a solution through the Home Office, but without success. We now face a very pressing time constraint. That is why, in desperation, I have taken the opportunity of this debate to raise the matter.

Mary is British. Her husband, Geoff, was born in Zimbabwe but later became an Australian citizen. They now live together in Horsham. Mary relies on her British citizenship, and Geoff on a spousal visa. When Geoff's spousal visa was approaching renewal, Mary tried to contact the Home Office for advice. It took her a month to get any kind of answer, and after she finally got through, she followed that advice and submitted what she reasonably believed was a correct visa renewal application. Unfortunately, it was not. She had been incorrectly told to apply for an e-visa, rather than a spousal renewal. That was invalid, so Geoff passed his renewal date unaware and was informed that he had overstayed. That was not a matter of carelessness or neglect; they tried to follow the rules, but the Home Office is a very difficult organisation to get to talk to, even for MPs.

To resolve the issue, Mary and Geoff instructed a lawyer and submitted a fresh application, along with supporting evidence. The Home Office has since accepted that Geoff meets all the substantive conditions required

for him to stay, but it again refused him on the single ground that he was declared to have overstayed—the very problem that it created itself in the first place by giving them the wrong form. This is going round in circles.

It took more than six months to get that decision, and the nine-page refusal gave no recognition of their circumstances, their good faith or their deep family ties to the UK. They have been forced to appeal again, but have been told that it could take up to 12 months for a tribunal hearing. They simply cannot last that long, because they now have no income. This whole time, Geoff has been unable to work. He is a skilled mechanical engineer and a key worker in a local industry, but he is not permitted to work. His employer, very considerably, has kept his place open, but that cannot go on forever.

The couple face the real prospect of losing their home, and have spent £7,000 on legal fees, but the view of the Home Office is that they should simply go back to Australia, where they have no ties and no income. Mary is not sure whether she would be able to face that, so frankly their marriage is also at stake.

Members across the House agree that we need a robust immigration system with clear rules, but when well-intentioned people who have done everything in their power to comply fall foul of those rules, that cannot be a fair outcome. In all likelihood, the Home Office will find in Mary and Geoff's favour at the appeal 12 months from now, but by that time they will not be in the country anymore. It will be too late, but there is nothing in the system that allows us to expedite the case. I hope the Minister will agree to work with me and meet me to ensure that Mary and Geoff can remain in their home, contribute to their community and continue supporting their family here in the UK.

3.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for highlighting this vital thread in the UK fabric.

I will speak about fishing visas. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for bringing the issue forward and for his suggestions. We had a very good meeting with the Minister six weeks ago—we thank him for that—and I hope he can tell today us what progress has been made since then.

I make no apologies for again speaking on behalf of the proud, resilient fishing communities of Strangford and, indeed, the whole of the Northern Ireland coastal fishing industry. For generations, men and boys from places such as Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel have braved the cold, dark waters of the Irish sea to put food on our tables. They are the lifeblood of our coastal villages, yet right at this moment their very livelihoods are anchored by a clunky, inflexible UK visa system that simply does not fit the realities of life at sea.

Let me be absolutely clear about the foundation of this issue. We must never conflate the safe, legal, hard-working migrant fishermen on which our industry depends with those who illegally enter the UK. Our fishermen are the first to say that they rely on skilled, legitimate foreign workers to keep the nets down and their boats moving. What are the Government offering them? That is the big question. The skilled worker visas are proving entirely unavailable to the fishing industry post 2026.

[*Jim Shannon*]

We are looking at a potential loss of up to 70% of crew members on Northern Ireland vessels, which would tie up almost 100% of the local nephrops fleet within just a few years.

Just to explain the issues back home, I recently heard that a local agency put out a trawl for job vacancies, advertising across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Europe. However, out of hundreds of expressions of interest, only a handful were suitable, and a mere five people actually took up the jobs. Why? Fishing is cold, wet and demanding work. Our local boys and men do not begrudge paying a fair wage, but the workforce is simply not there on our shores. The foreign crews are seafaring folk with invaluable skills and form a vital and vibrant part of our fishing culture.

Just recently, we have seen restrictions such as the visa changes by the Isle of Man authorities, which directly impact Northern Ireland trawlers that have legitimately purchased permits to fish and negotiate neighbouring waters. Our fleet has been squeezed from every angle. We are not asking for a lowering of standards, and nor are we asking to open the floodgates; we are asking for common sense and flexibility. The industry has long called for an immigration route modelled on the seasonal worker visa or a dedicated, bespoke visa for fishing crews. That would protect British businesses while allowing long-term recruitment drives to bear fruit.

Let us be clear: food security is national security. If we want to maintain an affordable, sustainable food supply, we must give our fishermen the tools and crew they need to get out to sea. I have repeatedly pressed the Home Office and the relevant Minister for a solution. With the greatest respect, I say to the Minister today that perhaps now is the time to give us that. The Government need to step up and listen to the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation. We need flexibility, and we need a bespoke visa. Give our fishing communities the helping hand they deserve, and let our boats get back to work.

3.17 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing the debate, although the sentiment of my speech is not quite aligned with his. I was first elected in 2024, which marked 50 years since my mother came here from Malaysia, and I absolutely believe in the rich tapestry and diversity of this country. Just as we can see from my mum, who built great businesses and employed lots of people, and just as we can see from the doctor and oncologist who have helped my mum and dad through very difficult times, there is absolutely a value to the tapestry of the United Kingdom.

The Liberal Democrats have always been clear that we need fair, controlled immigration. However, for Hongkongers with a British national overseas visa in my constituency, that has not been the case. I have constituents in Harpenden and Berkhamsted who moved to this country based on clear promises from the Government, including five years' residency, B1 English

and no income threshold. They have built their lives here, found employment, bought homes and contributed to our communities, just like my mum, only to be told that the goalposts have now moved.

The Government's proposed retrospective changes to the qualifying criteria for indefinite leave to remain undermine the fundamentally British values of fairness and respect, leaving those people in limbo and uncertain of their rights to be here while they invest in this country. Does the Minister agree that changing those residency requirements in this way risks damaging not only the economy but trust in the commitments this country makes to those who come here in good faith?

Such changes to the UK's visa system also risk harming businesses and economic growth. At a time when many businesses already face pressure from national insurance increases and energy prices, which keep the cost of running a business high, further uncertainty around visas can make it harder to retain skilled workers and talent. And that is not to mention the frontline staff I alluded to, whom many Members have highlighted today.

From my perspective as a technology spokesperson, that talent particularly matters to this Government's ambition on AI and quantum technology. As techUK has argued, if the UK is to remain world leading in this field, it must "remain open and attractive" to international innovators and the talent that supports them. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the Government to reform the visa process to make Britain the obvious destination for AI companies. What is the Minister doing on these policies to support those ambitions, while also investing in home-grown skills?

The previous Conservative Government got immigration badly wrong. After Brexit, they presided over a series of chaotic immigration policies that failed to deliver control, failed to meet the needs of the economy and contributed to a sharp rise in net migration. What Britain needs is a controlled, fair and responsive visa system that works for businesses, supports our public services, attracts the skills our economies need and commands public confidence. It is that balanced and compassionate approach to immigration that the Liberal Democrats believe in, and it is that approach that this country deserves.

3.20 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing it. In doing so, I acknowledge the complexity of the issue and the dynamics, which many Members may agree with, or be susceptible or exposed to, in their constituencies. I do so also as the MP for Belfast South, which is a diverse and integrated constituency—it is certainly the most mixed population of people on the island of Ireland—and home to Queen's University, one of the UK's finest, welcoming students from all over the world.

The context I am speaking within is the dynamic of an island economy, with a relatively more flexible immigration system in the Republic, and some of the challenges that that creates, particularly for businesses around the border, which experience competitiveness issues. I am also aware of the experience of centuries of the Irish people feeling it necessary to travel to other

places for reasons of poverty or marginalisation in Ireland. That is our national story, but the national story of this country is welcoming people, and of people being able to find opportunity and acceptance. That is part of the national story of Britain and the UK; many people have had to flee and have come to contribute, including not least my parents, early in their married life.

I will reflect on a few specific dimensions. My good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) well covered the issues around seasonal visas and visas in agriculture and fishing—issues we have both worked on over many years. Those visas sustain coastal and rural communities in Northern Ireland and are under pressure that cannot be solved in other ways—we have both tried.

I also want to address, as others have, the proposed changes, the most egregious of which is the moving of the goalposts on leave to remain and the breach of good faith that that will represent to so many people who came in good faith. The tiered aspect of earned settlement will not only disadvantage many people in lower-paid sections of the economy—I do not know about here, but we certainly could not do without those workers, not least in health and social care—but expose some groups to the risk of exploitation. I credit Unison and the Law Centre Northern Ireland, which are campaigning broadly on this issue.

I have spoken before in Westminster Hall about the lack of access for some of the most vulnerable people in Gaza. Nobody is suggesting that everybody in that beleaguered place would or should come here, or would wish to, but people are facing entirely irrational barriers in not being able to access biometrics, with those who are bombing them effectively having the say over who can leave to access those. I think of my constituents Omar and Dalal, whom I have been supporting. They are facing daily terrible news while they work in our health system and education system, but the visa system will not facilitate them.

My third point relates to the ETA—electronic travel authorisation—and the impact of electronic visas in Northern Ireland. Protecting the UK's border is a perfectly fair and rational thing to do. It does not work for the island of Ireland, for many reasons. We have an integrated island economy. An Estonian software engineer cannot come to the Belfast office. An Italian backpacker cannot pick up work in Derry. The hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) mentioned sport: 50,000 Indian citizens living and working in Dublin, sustaining the tech sector, cannot come up to see Ireland playing India at cricket—there is an all-Ireland team playing in Belfast. Those are irrational outworkings. The visa system does not work for the region I represent.

3.23 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. The UK needs a humane, efficient, fair, secure and just immigration system. I will raise two issues drawn directly from cases in my Dewsbury and Batley constituency, but before I do, I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing the debate.

The first issue is e-visas. The Government's move towards a digitally based system has the potential to modernise immigration status and make it easier to

improve one's rights. That is welcome, but the transition must be managed competently and compassionately, and the evidence suggests that far too often it is failing on both counts.

In my constituency, one resident holds indefinite leave to remain through the older, physical sticker or stamp placed in someone's passport that proves they have settled status. As we transition to an e-system, my constituent has done exactly what was asked of him: he has applied, reapplied, uploaded documentation and followed all due process. Yet despite repeated attempts, he has been unable to access the e-visa route, due to unresolved technical issues with photograph verification. This is not a minor inconvenience; without secure, accessible proof of immigration status, he faces the very real risk of being unable to travel abroad or to re-enter the UK. That example highlights a fundamental problem: the system is being digitised faster than it is being made error-proof.

Moreover, there is a communication failure. Many people with legacy documents—whether physical stickers or physical biometric residence permits—should have received clear, proactive communication from the Home Office explaining the transition to e-visas and what steps they must take. What contingencies are in place for individuals who are struggling to access their e-visa due to technical faults, and why were all affected individuals not directly notified in writing of the need to transition to digital status?

Secondly, I turn to the skilled worker visa programme. This route is meant to attract talent and fill genuine labour shortages, but in practice it is being manipulated by sham companies to exploit migrants. A second constituent's case illustrates this deeply troubling reality. He arrived in the UK in good faith on a valid skilled worker visa, but upon arrival his sponsor did not provide him with work. My constituent turned up to the registered address of business, only to find that nobody was there and that the business did not exist. He was then extorted by his sponsor and asked to pay thousands of pounds to maintain his immigration status. He refused to pay the extorters, and as a result his sponsor withdrew their sponsorship and lied to the Home Office, saying my constituent had failed to start work. Consequently, his visa was cancelled.

My constituent was not given a meaningful opportunity to find an alternative sponsor or to make his case as a victim of fraud. He was placed on immigration bail. In his own words, his life has been placed on hold. He cannot work, he cannot repay his debts, and his future is in jeopardy through no fault of his own. That case exposes a critical weakness in the system: when sponsors act improperly, it is too often the worker who bears the consequence.

In both the cases I have raised, people followed the rules and engaged in good faith, yet the system failed them. I go back to my initial point: the system must be fair, functional, humane, secure and just.

3.27 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing the debate and introducing it in the way he did. It will not surprise him to know that I do not agree with

[Mr Will Forster]

all of what he said, but he did raise valid concerns about the abuse of our visa system and the loopholes in it. The Liberal Democrats are willing to work cross-party with the Conservatives and the Labour Government to tackle those issues.

The Liberal Democrats believe in a fair and controlled immigration system that works for our economy and our public services. It must function effectively, command public confidence and bring benefits to the United Kingdom and its people. We want a controlled immigration system, with a visa system that meets the demands of our economy and public services, but that must go hand in hand with a credible plan to boost domestic skills. However, this country's visa rules can hurt our economy, damage families and fail to fully support refugees fleeing conflict, and that is what I will use my time today to talk about.

The Lib Dems wholeheartedly oppose the Government's plans to retrospectively change the rights to seek indefinite leave to remain, and I know that many Labour MPs do as well. Moving the goalposts in this way violates the fundamental British value of fairness. I am particularly concerned about the impact it will have on Hongkongers, who are fundamentally British. Many now reside in my constituency of Woking, and they are really concerned about the unreasonable financial and language requirements being put on them. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on that, and particularly any reassurance he can give Hongkongers in my community and across the country.

As well as being unfair to the individuals involved, visa requirements can damage our economy. Thousands already contributing to our society and economy have made an investment in this country, and their firms have made investments in this country and offered them jobs knowing what ILR means. The lack of certainty from moving those goalposts is massively damaging—I have heard that from businesses in Woking, the Law Society and many others. It is not right or fair to change those rules.

The immigration system also damages our economy through the visa costs charged. The five-year global talent visa now costs £6,000—20 times higher than in competitor countries. Cancer Research UK has said that several pieces of its research have been affected by soaring immigration costs, which have risen by 126% since 2019 and are up to 17 times higher than comparable countries such as Australia, France or the United States. The amount that the charity has had to pay the Government in visa fees or other immigration surcharges has nearly doubled since 2022-23, rising from less than £500,000 to almost £900,000 this year. That money could have been enough to train 40 PhD students, and I know where I would prefer the money to go.

A report from Oxford University's Migration Observatory has found that there is very little evidence to support the Government's belief that employers will train or rely on domestic staff because of hiking charges. It just does not agree with the Government. That is why I urge the Government to rule out retrospective changes to ILR and agree transitional arrangements, and to review visa charges based on genuine benchmarking against other similar countries.

Visa rules are not helping us grow our economy, and they are also undermining the right to family life. British citizens who wish to return to the UK with a foreign-born spouse encounter complex and costly application requirements. The application fee varies depending on whether someone applies in or out of the UK, but it can be more than £2,000. UK citizens should have the right to have their family come to the UK, provided that there are proper checks to verify their relationships. The Liberal Democrats think that minimum income and asset requirements for those with visas should be structured to ensure that there is no recourse to public funds, rather than being tied to arbitrary earning levels.

Last year, British citizens were required for the first time to present British passports at the UK border or present a certificate of entitlement attached to a non-UK passport. Dual nationals were really hurt last year by this Government. The current fee for that certificate of entitlement is £589. At the time, on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I called on the Government to implement a grace period to allow British dual nationals to travel home without being caught out. There were families with children, children trying to take exams and families with sick relatives who were caught out, not only by the Government's rules but by their refusal to compromise and adapt based on a poor information campaign. The Home Office did not listen to us, and I hope that it starts to listen to us again.

Finally, I worry that this country's approach to visas can undermine our very humanity. We should welcome those fleeing war and support them when they are here. I am proud that my constituency of Woking has welcomed over 500 Ukrainians who have fled their homeland following Vladimir Putin's appalling illegal invasion of Ukraine. I hear from Ukrainians that, as well as being anxious about their homeland and what is happening to their friends and family back in Ukraine, they are also anxious about their immigration status here in the UK. The Liberal Democrats think that the Government should automatically extend visas for Ukrainians who are already granted the right to be here to stay in the UK. It is vital that we remove the uncertainty that hangs over those families and children.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed these issues about Hongkongers and Ukrainians before. We often talk about the Boris wave and the large numbers of immigrants who came to this country. But within those numbers, there were a good half a million people who we wanted to come to this country—who we invited—including Hongkongers, Ukrainians, Afghans and others on humanitarian visas. Does he agree that the language we use and the numbers that we talk about need complete reframing so that we recognise those humanitarian visas, which the vast majority of the British population support?

Mr Forster: I completely agree, but I suggest that the hon. Member takes it up with his Government, who seem to be more focused on the hatred from the Reform party than on agreeing with our quite welcoming rhetoric. He should take that up with his Ministers rather than with me as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson—he might risk crossing the Floor, if he is not careful.

The Ukrainian scheme is the only humanitarian visa scheme that does not have the pathway to permanent settlement. I hope that the Minister will start to correct

that injustice. Everything about this country—apart from its weather—should be fair. But our visa system is not fair, and it is not working for this country and the people in it. My hon. Friends the Members for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins), for Horsham (John Milne), for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) have shown real-life examples of that unfairness and failure. I urge the Minister to start correcting it.

3.36 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Thank you, Mr Stuart, for chairing today's debate. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing this important debate. As he has highlighted, his thoughtful and comprehensive report sets out a series of practical proposals to close loopholes and strengthen our legal migration system. At a time when immigration remains one of the most important issues facing the country, any serious attempt to examine the system as a whole and identify where improvements can be made deserves careful consideration. Whatever view one takes of his recommendations, nobody could accuse my hon. Friend of lacking ambition. His 30 proposals provide a clear direction of travel, including tightening loopholes, strengthening incentives and ensuring that our immigration system works in the interests of the British people.

Policy decisions matter. The Oxford Migration Observatory noted that the recent decline in net migration was driven largely by policy changes introduced by the previous Conservative Government. Those measures included restrictions on dependants, higher salary thresholds and tighter work visa requirements. They showed that when Governments are prepared to take difficult decisions and close obvious loopholes, migration can be brought down without compromising the principle of attracting talent.

Those measures addressed mistakes that had been made, and it is notable that the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), acknowledged those mistakes early in her leadership and accepted the need for change. She also rightly recognised that, since the change in leadership at the Home Office, the Government have taken some steps in the right direction. While many Labour MPs appear reluctant to support tougher measures, we have consistently said that where the Government bring forward sensible proposals to strengthen the immigration system, we will support them. I hope that the Government move quickly to implement their proposed changes to indefinite leave to remain and to increase the qualifying period for settlement. Such reforms are long overdue.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that it is not simply unfair but un-British to change the rules for people who were told that they could qualify for settlement if they stayed in this country for five years, by moving the goalposts to 10 years?

Matt Vickers: There are real challenges in our immigration system, with real costs and pressures on our public services. We have to do something about it. What might be halfway for somebody at this point in time is day one for somebody else. We back the Government.

We will look at what they bring forward and take it from there, but we are determined to support them where sensible measures are brought forward.

As today's debate has demonstrated, immigration policy cannot be reduced to a single issue. Settlement matters, but so do work visas, family routes, student migration and enforcement. The system must operate as a coherent whole. Focusing on one area while weakening another risks undermining the overall objective.

That brings me to one of the recommendations highlighted in the report of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire. This is an issue on which I would welcome clarification from the Minister: the proposal to make remote English-language testing the default method of assessment. It raises a broader question about the future direction of the immigration system: in seeking efficiency and convenience, are we risking the robustness and integrity of existing safeguards? For many years, the Home Office has relied on a small number of trusted providers delivering secure English language tests in controlled environments, but the Government now intend to move increasingly towards remote assessments.

Iqbal Mohamed: On those tests, does the shadow Minister agree that the historical role played by the British Council in various countries across the world to support a more rigorous assessment should be reconsidered to play a role in this?

Matt Vickers: There is a role for the British Council, but when it comes to remote testing, we have had a standard that the public has confidence in, and although this might be more efficient, it might undermine public confidence in the process. As has been said, organisations such as the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants are moving back to in-person examinations in order to protect test security and integrity. Is the Minister confident that the safeguards proposed will be sufficient?

Although it may seem to be a technical issue, it illustrates a wider concern. Every change to the immigration system should strengthen and not weaken public confidence. Those of us who spent many hours serving on the Public Bill Committee for the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025 debated numerous proposals to strengthen the Government's response to both legal and illegal migration. Unfortunately, many of those measures were rejected.

One proposal that continues to warrant serious consideration is the introduction of an annual migration cap approved by Parliament. The Government have repeatedly opposed such a measure, but they are quick to celebrate any fall in migration figures. If migration levels matter—and clearly, they do—Parliament should have a greater role in scrutinising and setting expectations around them. Such a system would provide greater transparency and accountability. Parliament would have oversight of visa numbers across different routes and Ministers would be required to justify the choices they make.

Shockat Adam: Is there not a real threat of politicising immigration at a time in which universities in my constituency are really struggling because there is a lack of international students, who are no longer willing to

[Shockat Adam]

come to this country? The amount of money they bring to our economy is phenomenal. Pursuing this type of policy will disrupt the foundations of our universities.

Matt Vickers: The idea that we, as a Parliament, have the right to scrutinise the decision-making process, to decide how many people should come and by what means, is a real positive. It is a real positive for public confidence and it improves transparency, so I support the idea of a cap for that very reason. It would be for us to debate and decide in this very House who should and should not come to this country.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the shadow Minister explain why his party did not introduce such a cap during the 14 years that they ran the country?

Matt Vickers: That is a very good question. As the Leader of the Opposition has said, a lot of mistakes were made along the way. We have looked at what worked well. In fact, much of the reduction in those legal migration numbers is, as we have said, a result of the moves made by the last Government. We are looking at this afresh. We have talked about leaving the European convention on human rights and we have come forward with a real plan that would allow us to control our borders.

Alongside greater accountability, we must continue to close temporary visa loopholes and move towards a system focused firmly on attracting high-skilled talent. That requires robust salary thresholds, clear eligibility criteria and, crucially, a determination to equip people already living in this country with the skills that employers need.

At present, we find ourselves in an absurd situation where vape shops on our high streets have been able to sponsor visas on the basis that they require skilled migrant labour. At the same time, the National Farmers' Union is forced to lobby the Home Office for greater flexibility on seasonal agricultural workers. Whatever view one takes of individual visa routes, that cannot represent a coherent approach to immigration policy.

I recognise the challenges associated with relaxing restrictions in any area of the system, but there must be consistency. If the objective is to prioritise highly skilled migration, the system should reflect that objective in practice. The fact that some of the businesses currently able to sponsor visas appear far removed from that aim suggests that further reform is needed.

For too long, Governments of different colours have relied on immigration to fill shortages that should also be addressed through training, apprenticeships and investment in the domestic workforce. The answer is not simply to import labour indefinitely; it is to build skills at home while ensuring that, where genuine shortages exist, our visa system can respond effectively and competitively.

On that front, the Government's record is disappointing. Rising unemployment, particularly among younger people, demonstrates the need for a more serious focus on training and workforce development. This improvement needs to be reflected in the numbers. The recent immigration data, while a step in the right direction, still shows significant non-EU migration, higher than in the equivalent

period in the 2010s. That is accompanied by still large numbers of people, including British nationals, leaving. We need a visa system designed to support a high-skill, high-wage economy, not one that allows people to game the system.

I recognise that the Government remain sceptical of many of the proposals put forward. Nevertheless, I hope Ministers will give serious consideration to the recommendations outlined in the report produced by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire. Reducing migration numbers matters, but so too does restoring confidence that the system is fair, controlled and working in the interests of the British people.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, let me say that I will look to call the Member in charge of the debate to make a winding-up speech at 3.58 pm.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this important, wide-ranging and interesting debate.

We inherited a difficult system from the previous Government. At its peak, net migration hit nearly 1 million in one year. We saw around 600,000 individuals enter the country to fill just 40,000 vacancies in health and social care. One in 30 people currently in the country arrived in just four years. In our time in government, we have seen net migration fall by 82% from its peak and by 48% in the last year, and emigration, despite what it says on X, has remained flat.

I will do my very best to respond to each of the many specific points that were raised during the debate, but Members should feel free to intervene near the end of my speech if they feel that I have missed one. I will start by setting out this Government's overarching approach to legal migration, of which our visa system is an integral part.

For generations, people have come here from around the world to visit, work and contribute to our society, and that will continue to be the case. Of course, this topic excites very strong views, but I continue to believe that this is, at heart, an open and tolerant country. At the same time, the public rightly expect their Government to have a firm grip on who can come here and who must leave. They expect the rules to be enforced and the numbers to be controlled. We can debate the intricacies of different policies, but the fact remains that on all those counts, the system this Government inherited was failing. Since taking office, we have acted decisively to put that right.

We have placed new controls on legal migration routes, the impact of which was laid bare recently with official figures, and we have moved to crack down on abuse of our immigration system. In under two years, we have tackled abuse to a level that surpasses action taken by the previous Government over the preceding decade. Illegal work and enforcement visits are at the highest level in years. In 2025, we carried out nearly 13,000 visits, resulting in more than 90,000 arrests. Since the Government came to power, more than 5,800 work-related sponsor licences have been revoked, meaning

that more employers have been stripped of their sponsorship privileges in just two years than in over a decade under the previous Government.

Allegations of visa abuse are taken incredibly seriously and will always be investigated. We are removing and deporting more illegal migrants and foreign criminals, and, for the first time, deploying a visa brake on certain routes for nationals from four countries following a surge in visa-linked asylum claims. We are doing all that and more because we recognise that without order and control, public trust is impossible. The people of this country rightly expect an immigration system that is fair but firm, and that is what this Government are determined to deliver.

Iqbal Mohamed: On deporting illegal migrants, people who do not have a right to be in our country should not be allowed to stay and should be removed, but will the Minister reflect on the way in which deportations have been publicised—the videos that go on X, which he mentioned, and the dehumanisation? Whether legal or illegal, human beings are human beings. Could he explain the thinking behind the Government's publicity around deportations?

Mike Tapp: I thank the hon. Member for his important question. It is right that we keep the public informed of what we are doing. In the current atmosphere, there is a lot of misinformation. When we tell the public that there are deportations and removals going on, we are simply not believed—that is the climate that we currently operate in. There have been some representations of illegal migrants boarding planes, but the faces are always blurred and it is not possible to tell who they are, because I completely agree that it is important to respect an individual's dignity.

I will move on to compliance and enforcement. In under two years, we have tackled abuse to a level that surpasses action taken by the previous Government. Since the Government came to power, more than 5,800 work-related sponsor licences have been revoked, meaning that more employers have been stripped of their privileges in just two years than in over a decade under the previous Government. Through the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act, the Government have introduced tough new laws to clamp down on illegal working. That means that, for the first time, right-to-work checks and associated sanctions for non-compliance will be extended to cover businesses hiring gig economy and zero-hours workers in sectors such as construction, food delivery, beauty salons, courier services and warehousing. Those changes will restrict rogue employers' ability to take advantage of illegal workers and encourage businesses to provide work opportunities for those permitted to work in the UK. They will provide parity across industries and set a level playing field for businesses to uphold their responsibilities.

A number of Members mentioned work visa sponsorship. The ability to sponsor overseas workers is a privilege and not a right. That privilege must be earned by meeting strict criteria, which establish that the organisation is lawfully trading or operating in the UK, is suitable and trustworthy, and is capable of offering roles that meet the requirements of the immigration rules that we set. That comes with specific duties and responsibilities through which sponsors are held to account. The Home

Office will not hesitate to act when organisations fail to meet those standards, and licences can and will be refused or revoked as a result. Arrests involving illegal workers are up by around 60%. I take the point that there are defunct employers on the list, and I will ensure that officials look at that.

I will turn briefly, because I am strapped for time, to data. I agree with the sentiment that the Home Office data falls down in many places; that has been a problem for decades. We are looking to combat it, and I will ensure that we work hard to improve it. I always find it unacceptable when I have to respond to written questions and we do not have the data.

I will talk briefly about the religious routes, which were also mentioned. The immigration system maintains two dedicated immigration routes for religious workers—the religious worker and minister of religion routes—in acknowledgment of the valuable contribution that faith groups, including religious institutions from overseas, make to our society. All visas are kept under regular review to ensure that they are operating as intended and remain properly controlled, and there are no plans at this point to close those routes.

Turning to student and graduate visas, the Government continue to welcome and value the contribution made to our society, economy and higher education institutions by those overseas students who choose to come to our great country. We have the best universities in the world, and we want the best minds in every country to aspire to complete their education here. International students can apply for a student visa if they demonstrate that they meet the requirements of the route, including a sufficient level of English, the ability to support themselves financially throughout their stay and an offer from an approved institution, and pay the immigration health surcharge. We are looking at basic compliance, and there will be more information on that coming—tomorrow, I believe. I was with a number of university stakeholders on Monday. It is important that we work together with the universities to ensure compliance, but that we still attract the greatest minds to the country. Abuse on that route is down by 30% since we came into government, but last year we still saw 11,000 individuals enter on the student route and go on to claim asylum.

Jim Shannon: I hope that the Minister will forgive me for pressing him on the issue of fishing and seasonal visas, but we really need an answer, please.

Mike Tapp: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am conscious that I only have two minutes before having to hand back—

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Tapp: Let me just make a little progress. I will touch on fisheries. I have had important meetings with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and we are working to ensure that we come to the right conclusion on that. We have provided whaleboat fishermen—and sheep shearers—with concessions, but I think the agricultural sector needs a more holistic approach, and we are absolutely looking at that and working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

[Mike Tapp]

Before my time comes to an end—my apologies if I have not been able to get through all the many points that were made—I will talk about earned settlement, which is vital. Someone who is looking to settle has to contribute to and integrate into the country. We saw unprecedented numbers arrive, as I have already detailed—I will not go through that again. We have had a massive consultation—the 200,000 responses are being analysed—and I and the Home Secretary will make it our personal mission to ensure that we provide a system that is firm but also fair and that absolutely rewards contribution, because that is what makes this country great.

A number of hon. Members raised specific cases with me. Please can we talk about those afterwards rather than trying to address them in this debate?

Robbie Moore: I appreciate that the Minister is short for time. Will he write to me in response to my question about the loophole associated with domestic abuse claims?

Mike Tapp: I will touch on it very quickly. I think “loophole” is a misrepresentation; I think it is an abuse of the system. We have new guidance, which came out in March, but there are other abuses—for example, those who say that they are gay when they are not—and we are ensuring that we deal with that.

I will conclude now, with apologies to Members that I could not get through all their many points, but we can of course talk outside the Chamber.

3.58 pm

Blake Stephenson: I thank everyone who has contributed to this wide-ranging and interesting debate. I am afraid that I do not have time to reflect on each contribution, but I thoroughly appreciate Members coming and providing their thoughts on this important subject.

I thank the Minister for answering my many written parliamentary questions as I was doing my research, and for considering thoughtfully the recommendations in my report and writing to me with his thoughts. I know that he had limited time, but I was disappointed that he did not pick up on the move to remote-only English language testing, which is a very important topic to both me and the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). I want to emphasise that it is important that there is confidence in the system before the Home Office goes ahead, and I encourage the Minister to encourage his officials to accept the invitation to brief the Public Accounts Committee on that.

Fixing our visa system, closing the loopholes and putting the British people and their Government back in control of who our neighbours are should not be controversial. It is the norm throughout the world, and we need to make it the norm here in Great Britain.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of improving the UK visa system.

Rail Freight

4 pm

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I will call Lisa Smart to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from both the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. If that has not been secured, you should not speak. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of rail freight in the transport network.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. Compared with many other aspects of the transport network, rail freight rarely gets the attention I feel it deserves, yet it can help us to achieve so much of what so many of us say we want for our communities, our economy and our planet. From cleaner air and less congested roads to building new homes and a more resilient economy, rail freight is not a niche industry concern but a national infrastructure priority.

The Tarmac site at Bredbury in my Hazel Grove constituency receives daily freight trains carrying construction materials from the Peak district, North Yorkshire and south Wales. I was lucky enough to be invited to visit last year and don my hi-vis. What struck me was how tangible the benefits were. I was joined by Huw Merriman from the Rail Freight Group and Chris Swan, among others, from the great team at the Tarmac facility. A single train delivery to that site can provide enough materials to build up to 30 new homes and, in doing so, removes around 60 HGV movements from the A6 and the surrounding residential streets. That is 60 fewer lorries on roads that my constituents use every day to get to work, school or the shops.

The north-west is one of the busiest regions in the country for rail freight. Aggregates move daily from Peak district quarries through my constituency and beyond. Container trains run on the west coast main line bound for Scotland, Trafford Park and Seaforth in Merseyside. Those flows matter not just to the industries that depend on them, but to every driver who would otherwise be sharing a road with the lorries that would replace them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I envy her region's constructive approach. We unfortunately do not have any rail freight in Northern Ireland, and it is very disappointing, but there is a need to emphasise and build on the east-west relationship. We are all part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so it is really important. Does she agree that, when it comes to looking at rail transport links, maybe the Minister should cast an eye towards Northern Ireland? Maybe—just maybe—she might be able to encourage the Minister there to do something.

Lisa Smart: The hon. Gentleman has, in his customary way, championed the needs of his constituents and the whole of Northern Ireland. I agree that rail freight is a very good thing of which there should be more. I am very keen to hear what the Minister has to say.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): We had a rail freight line going down to the docks in Falmouth, but it was closed about 20 years ago. I am trying to reopen it, and we are working with the docks and potential customers to do so. Does the hon. Lady agree that this is something that the Government and Great British Railways, when it is set up, should be looking to support?

Lisa Smart: I agree on the importance of rail freight infrastructure. It really matters that the lines are in place and able to be used. I will talk about capacity and the importance of having dedicated rail paths for freight. I do not know the line the hon. Lady mentions, but perhaps I can visit her beautiful part of the world on my summer holidays.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): The hon. Lady is being extremely generous with her time. In Reading, which is in the same rail region as my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), there is an excellent example of where co-ordination between track and train is already emerging in freight. It is offering great benefits to passengers and taking vehicles off the road, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) mentioned is happening in the north-west.

Lisa Smart: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about the positive impact that good rail freight infrastructure can have on passengers. We should not look at the two as separate entities; they work together and use some of the same infrastructure. More rail freight means fewer wagons on the road, so it is better for all passengers, whether in cars, wagons or on the railway.

As has been shown, this goes beyond my local area. Rail freight prevents 7 million HGV journeys every year across our nation, according to the Rail Freight Group. That means less wear on our roads, because HGVs cause disproportionately more damage to road surfaces than any other vehicle. The cost of that falls on all of us as taxpayers. It also means less congestion on already overstretched routes, resulting in cleaner air in the towns and villages that lorries would otherwise have passed through.

Rail freight can deliver real benefits to real communities, and we are still not using it nearly enough. According to independent research by Deloitte, rail freight currently contributes £2.5 billion in economic and social value to the country each year. Yet, according to the Rail Freight Group, the UK moves only about 7% of its freight by rail, which is less than half of the European average of 19%.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): On continental freight, the hon. Member mentioned volumes coming from the European Union. In my constituency, we have so much traffic coming in and out of Eurotunnel that there is not the gauge capacity for trains to come all the way through, so they have to offload and reload. Does she agree that the Government should support the enhancement of that gauge capacity, so that trucks can come all the way through, increasing demand and capacity for the whole system?

Lisa Smart: I am grateful for the hon. and learned Member's insight based on his local understanding, and I strongly agree. For the Government to look at the whole of our rail infrastructure, not just that sitting on

these islands, would be good for our economy, our environment and how we relate to our European neighbours and partners. We are moving more goods than ever across the country but the share going by rail is barely shifting, and we are falling further behind our European neighbours.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): My constituency has one of the busiest rail aggregate goods yards in the country, with about 300 trains delivering construction material each year. That replaces 14,000 long-distance lorries, which is 2.5 million HGV miles. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to do much more to support the rail freight industry to improve our environment, to reduce congestion and, above all, to build the homes we need?

Lisa Smart: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. The way he lays out the scale of the impact of rail freight on his constituency and the neighbouring area shows its importance. I will come on to a couple of suggestions for the Government that I hope will address some of his point.

Rail freight provides clear environmental benefits compared with the alternatives. Even when diesel-hauled, a freight train produces around 76% lower carbon emissions per tonne-kilometre than a lorry on the road. That figure improves dramatically with electrification, as electrically hauled freight cuts emissions further still, while also consuming far less track capacity because electric locomotives accelerate significantly better than diesel ones.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I have been supporting a project called Kernow Connect alongside Cornwall council, and it looks to advance freight capacity to Cornwall significantly. We have Falmouth, one of the deepest ports in the world, and fantastic resources such as critical minerals, but we do not have the infrastructure to take the freight to the rest of the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister could start thinking about such projects, which are potentially ready to go, and get some feasibility study money to see if they are viable so that we can have the freight revolution the country needs?

Lisa Smart: My hon. Friend gives yet another tourist advert for the beautiful area he represents. He is right that long-term thinking about investing in our infrastructure for our environment, our communities and our economy is good and sensible. That work with Kernow Connect sounds interesting and worth further exploration.

As we continue to push towards net zero, as we must, that gap matters enormously. Moving freight off the roads and on to rail should be a core part of our decarbonisation programme, but we face several barriers to improving our rail freight network, and I am keen to hear from the Minister about the Government's plans to address them.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Rail freight moves everything from Tesco containers to Cornish clay on its way to Stoke through my constituency. I would like to raise the issue of the rail freight workforce, because drivers' wages and employment conditions can be very variable in the sector. Will the hon. Lady join me in recognising the value of ASLEF's "Rail Freight

[Laurence Turner]

Future” campaign? It backs many of her calls and emphasises the need for proper sanitary, welfare and rest facilities for freight drivers.

Lisa Smart: I am glad the hon. Gentleman raises the question of those working in the rail freight industry. It is vital to all of us that those employed in the industry have safe and sanitary working conditions. We should applaud the work they do to keep the industry going.

In the UK, we have consistently prioritised passenger services, and freight is often squeezed around and between them. The fundamental problem is the speed differential. A freight train typically runs at 60 to 75 mph, a limit set in the 1960s and barely reviewed since, while inter-city passenger trains run at 100 to 125 mph. That gap consumes enormous amounts of capacity. The Netherlands recognised that problem and built the Betuweroute, a dedicated freight-only railway completed this century, running directly from the ports of Rotterdam into Germany and relieving pressure on the existing network. We have no equivalent.

The second barrier is electrification. Nearly all rail freight in the UK is diesel-hauled. That is partly because our electrification coverage is derisory but also because electricity costs have perversely led some freight operators to switch back from electric to diesel traction. The west coast main line north of Warrington has inadequate power supplies for the current level of traffic. That is another reason why a lot of freight, and indeed the new London-to-Stirling Lumo open-access passenger service, is diesel rather than electric. In relative terms, even though the costs are not that high, agreement from the Treasury would be needed, and as far as I understand has not yet been obtained. It makes no sense for diesel trains to run on electrified railways because of power supply constraints.

The third barrier is signalling. Modern digital in-cab signalling, also known as the European train control system, makes far better use of existing infrastructure by creating uniformity in how trains brake and accelerate. It is planned as part of the TransPennine route upgrade, but there is no clear roll-out plan more widely. Would the Minister confirm whether there are any additional plans to use that form of signalling in other parts of the train network?

Rail freight supports our supply chain resilience, as it reduces road damage by replacing HGVs that cause disproportionately more wear on road surfaces than any other vehicle, but it also reduces congestion and supports key industries such as house building, which receives key supply chain components through rail freight. The materials needed to deliver the homes this country needs can move by rail at scale in a way that road haulage simply cannot replicate without adding to the gridlock on roads running through my constituency like the A6, Bents Lane or Stockport Road.

The Lib Dems are committed to a national freight strategy. We want planning law to be changed so that new developments provide freight access to manufacturing and distribution facilities, building the infrastructure for a modal shift in the economy rather than trying to retrofit it later. For that strategy to work effectively, we also need a network that can accommodate rail freight. Freight operators need guaranteed access to train paths.

They need capacity on the network to be actively planned and protected, not squeezed out incrementally as passenger demand grows.

The Railways Bill creates Great British Railways, providing it with a duty to reserve capacity for its own services. Without explicit protections for freight, there is a real risk that freight corridors will be eroded over time. As currently drafted, the Bill could dilute the regulatory oversight of network capacity allocation in ways that could entrench the prioritisation of GBR's own passenger services over private sector freight operators. The Government should be setting ambitious freight growth targets within GBR's remit and outline plans on how to achieve them. That is why I urge the Minister to ensure the creation and protection of strategic freight corridors.

There are also opportunities for improvement in my constituency. Enabling infrastructure works at Ashburys and Ardwick via Northern Powerhouse Rail would enable the much-needed tram train services to Marple. I would welcome the Minister's assessment of how the Northern Powerhouse Rail programme can support freight and passenger ambitions in the north-west.

Rail freight is already quietly doing a great amount of work every day in communities across the country. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about how the Government intend to match that ambition with action.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) on securing this debate, and I thank her for providing this welcome opportunity to discuss the critical role that rail freight plays in strengthening supply chain resilience and supporting our economic and decarbonisation goals. Many hon. Members have taken part in the debate to highlight the important role that rail freight plays in their constituencies and the potential for its greater use, and to acknowledge the role of rail freight workers, on whom the industry depends.

As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove set out clearly, rail freight is at the heart of our transport and logistics networks. It moves materials to build our homes, food to stock our shelves and fuel to keep our lights on, and it does that with significant environmental and social benefits. It emits far less carbon than road freight. It takes lorries off congested roads, leading to less wear and tear on our local roads. Many communities recognise that it is valuable to shift heavy goods from road to rail, and that they would benefit from it.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Teesport is one of the country's most important freight gateways, yet freight from the east coast main line, which is very congested, still has to travel via Darlington because the Northallerton to Eaglescliffe line lacks full W12 gauge clearance. Will the Minister commit to meeting me to discuss that issue and see what we can do to get those upgrades in place?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that concern in his part of England. I will ensure that the Rail Minister writes to him about that matter, or arranges a meeting if that is more appropriate.

In a world of increasing uncertainty and geopolitical volatility, it is vital that we have secure, resilient supply chains. Rail freight, which is a fuel-efficient way of transporting goods, is a core node in those supply chains. That is why the Government have been absolutely clear about our ambition to encourage the growth of the sector and to strengthen its role in our transport network. To that end, we have committed to the target of increasing rail freight by at least 75% by 2050.

Rail reform is a significant opportunity to realise that ambition. Members have been closely scrutinising the Railways Bill over the past few months, and it will of course return to this House for further debate shortly. Members know that the current system has failed to unlock fully the potential of rail freight, and lacks the incentives and the structural framework to drive growth. Nor do we have a single entity with strategic overview of the railway deciding what network capacity should be made available for freight.

The current model for network access is an application-led first come, first served market model with no whole-system oversight. The concept of strategic freight capacity, designed to reserve space on the railway for new freight, is broken. Train paths labelled as strategic freight are not actually strategically planned—often, they do not even join up to form useful routes—and even those limited paths are nigh-on impossible to safeguard because they are given the very lowest priority in the timetable rules. That has meant that, over time, the capacity earmarked for future freight has been eroded.

Great British Railways can and will deliver better outcomes for freight. It will have two freight-specific statutory duties: first, to promote the use of rail freight and, secondly, to have regard to the freight growth target set by the Secretary of State for Transport. Taken together, those duties will ensure that freight is embedded at the heart of GBR's decision making.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It was great to welcome the Minister to my constituency to visit the east midlands rail freight terminal, which has huge potential to take vehicles off the road and on to rail.

Bardon has a quarry, and a private spur of the Ivanhoe line is used. In the conversation about reopening the Ivanhoe line, only a passenger assessment has been undertaken. Will the Minister consider both freight and passenger rail in future conversations about bringing rail lines back into use?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. She is a great champion for the freight industry more broadly, and I know how important it is to her constituency. I will certainly ensure that the Rail Minister, my noble Friend Lord Hendy, considers the issues that she raises.

A representative on GBR's board will have responsibility for freight, and a central freight team will provide customers with a single point of contact for promoting freight across the organisation. Taken together, those measures will ensure strong leadership at the top and advocacy at the heart of the organisation.

The sector will also benefit from a new capacity allocation framework. That framework will support a more strategic and proactive approach to allocating

capacity. It will have one single directing mind—Great British Railways—taking a whole-system approach to make best use of the available capacity. The access-and-use policy required by the framework and by the Railways Bill is being developed and will be consulted on in September.

We know that we alone cannot achieve our ambitions for the sector. That is why we are setting up GBR as an astute commercial entity. It will be equipped with the right incentives and mechanisms to engage with private investors and offer them commitments that secure a return on investment. That will encourage third parties to invest in rail, helping to drive modal shift and grow rail freight, which many Members, including the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, have called for.

The hon. Lady raised a number of questions, a few of which I will attempt to pick up on. She asked about the expansion of more modern signalling, which will be helpful. The east coast digital programme is fitting signalling in a number of locomotives. That will be the first part of the network to have the signalling that she described, which can then be rolled out further. I recognise the importance of modernising our rail network to ensure that we take advantage of the new technologies available to enable trains to run closer together, for example, and therefore to create more capacity.

The hon. Lady also asked about the freight growth target. Under the duty set out in the Bill, GBR must have regard to the freight targets set by Ministers. It is expected to demonstrate how it has considered those targets and how its activities align with the goals set out by Ministers. Additionally, GBR's business plan will be expected to demonstrate how it plans to work towards achieving the freight growth target. The Secretary of State will sign off that plan only once they have received expert advice from the Office of Rail and Road and are satisfied that the plans set out meet the Government's expectations and priorities for the railways, including on rail freight.

Of course, the ORR has powers of appeal where freight operators are not happy about the way in which GBR has carried out its duties or feel that it has not taken decisions that are consistent with its policies. GBR is obviously bound by the Competition Act 1998, and will not be able to prioritise its own services. Its decision making must be fair, transparent and subject to challenge in the ways that I have set out.

I also want to take this opportunity to touch on the ongoing crisis in the middle east and the impact that it might have on the rail freight sector. The effects of the crisis have highlighted the importance of having a strong rail freight sector as a node in our resilient, diverse supply chains. Last month, the Chancellor cut fuel duty for red diesel users, such as rail freight operators, by more than a third until the end of the year. That means that rates are at their lowest level in more than 20 years. That will help to keep costs down and protect those vital businesses. As I think we all recognise, the economics of freight transport have sometimes disadvantaged rail freight. My officials will continue to work closely with rail freight operating companies on routine resilience planning as a sensible precaution to protect supply chains.

Finally, I emphasise again that rail freight will continue to be an integral part of our transport network as we transition to a new operating model for the railway. Our

[Lilian Greenwood]

ambitious programme of reform will mean that rail freight can continue to prosper under a transformed rail sector. That will bring benefits for all our constituencies, including that of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove. I recognise the importance of aggregates, not just in her constituency, with the example of tarmac, but across that whole part of the country, stretching into the east midlands—I have been and seen that for myself. That is why we want rail freight to thrive and prosper, and why, in setting up Great British Railways in the way that we have—with important duties in relation to rail freight—we are confident that we can grow this sector for the future, delivering the many benefits that she and other hon. Members have set out.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Seasonal Hospitality Businesses in Coastal Areas

4.30 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for seasonal hospitality businesses in coastal areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. This debate concerns a set of issues that affect about one third of UK constituencies directly—constituencies with a coastline, including estuaries. It is therefore not a niche set of issues that affect only my constituency on the Isle of Wight, although they are vital for my constituency. It is a set of issues that go to the heart of so many constituencies in our island nation and so many out-of-the-way communities with long-standing structural challenges. I am grateful to cross-party colleagues who are attending this debate.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour knows that the last Conservative Government created the coastal communities fund, which supported Hayling Island in my Havant constituency. Under the current Administration, there is not a specific equivalent fund to support employment, hospitality or the business community. Will he join me in calling on the Government to create a specific fund to make sure places like Hayling Island are properly supported?

Joe Robertson: I agree with my hon. Friend; I will join him in that call. Indeed, he has dealt with an element of my speech nice and early, so I thank him for doing so.

According to UK Hospitality, the sector accounts for around 10% of all UK jobs nationally. In tourism-led coastal communities it provides as much as 50% of local employment. On the Isle of Wight, tourism accounts for 38% of economic activity and is the biggest employment sector locally. When the sector suffers, coastal communities suffer in a way that is greater than elsewhere.

Coastal areas have faced challenges for decades, with cheap competition from holidays abroad, changing holiday preferences, an increase in the relative cost of travel, older population demographics, fewer job opportunities, and a lack of investment in infrastructure. High streets have suffered from dereliction and neglect, with all the societal challenges that follow.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point and an excellent speech. In west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly in my constituency, the situation is just as troubling. Indeed, it is an existential crisis. Does he agree that unless we address the current rate of VAT and/or the business rates that burden our hospitality businesses, many of them, including in my constituency, will not see the end of this year?

Joe Robertson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is ahead of me: I will address the issue of business rates and VAT presently.

There are plenty of green shoots, however, in many of the communities, and brilliant local leaders trying to drive change, such as Lawrence Bates at the Wildheart Animal Sanctuary in Sandown, and Ian Boyd, founder of the Common Space. Start-ups and small businesses in hospitality are a major driver of regeneration and

innovation, for example the Point in Bembridge, Braai in Brading, and the Sandown Boulevard street food market. But the Government have a role in creating an environment for hospitality to thrive.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): The hon. Member talks about the hospitality sector thriving. Does he share my concern that if the Government introduced a tourism tax, our areas could really suffer?

Joe Robertson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is also ahead of me: I will address the tourism tax in my speech.

As I say, the Government have a role in creating an environment for seasonal hospitality to thrive, but in my view this Government have done the opposite. I do not accuse the Government of setting out to make life harder for tourism and hospitality in coastal areas, but I do hold them responsible for being careless about how their policies, in particular taxation, have fallen on communities such as mine. It is time for the Government to recognise that and make amends.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I have heard from countless hospitality business in my constituency, be it the Bullers Arms in Bude, which has seen astronomical business rates, or Stir café in Wadebridge, where VAT is a huge struggle. National insurance contributions, wage costs and energy costs are going up. Does the hon. Member agree that the sector needs long-term support from the Government, such as the 5% VAT cut that the Liberal Democrats have proposed?

Joe Robertson: I agree with the hon. Member that there needs to be long-term support, but also immediate relief. Again, he pre-empts some of the points I am going to make—I realise that my introduction was perhaps a bit longer than it should have been, considering that other Members are making all the excellent points that I am about to.

Since the 2024 Budget, the hospitality industry has lost more than 100,000 jobs. Between January and March of this year alone, the equivalent of three hospitality businesses closed every single day. The sector was hit with a £3.4 billion annual cost increase from that Budget. The 2025 Budget added more through business rate changes and wage increases. It is therefore hardly a surprise that we have seen job losses on this scale.

The Government are refusing to take responsibility. How can they do the right thing now if they do not recognise the harm that is being caused and felt from their own tax policies? Some of the most significant damage done by the Government is to the employment opportunities for young people. Youth unemployment is up; indeed, it is now higher than in the period coming out of covid. The Government's hike in national insurance, extending it to more part-time work, and changes to the minimum wage that reduce the competitive advantage of employing young people are also major drivers of that unemployment. It is not just theory; we are seeing the real-world consequences in the data and in our communities.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. On support for young people, I will be talking to

the Skills Minister soon about what the youth guarantee scheme could do in hospitality. Does the hon. Member agree that the two would be a perfect match?

Joe Robertson: I would urge the hon. Member to do all that she can to encourage her ministerial colleagues to improve the lot for young people. The fact remains that youth unemployment is going up and coastal communities are suffering. I would welcome any intervention that the hon. Member can bring about through her powers of persuasion.

In coastal communities, hospitality provides flexible, accessible, seasonal work that simply does not exist in the same volume anywhere else in the local economy. More than half the sector's workforce is part time. For many young people—students, carers, people managing health conditions—that flexibility is what makes work possible. Job postings for temporary hospitality work were down by 25% in 2025, year on year. For many people, summer jobs are their first job. They are jobs that give a young person in Ryde, Shanklin or Ventnor their first pay slip and their first employer reference.

There are 67 pubs in Isle of Wight East, four breweries, and 1,200 jobs in the sector, generating £40 million for the local economy. Nationally, the pub and brewing sector contributes £34 billion and generates £17 billion in tax. Those are not small numbers. Of course, pubs are about more than just pints. A third of drinks sold in hospitality are spirits, such as Mermaid Gin on the Isle of Wight. When distillers suffer, pubs suffer and vice versa.

The Bugle Inn in Brading sadly closed its doors for the final time just four days ago. Jasmine and Daniel were clear about the reasons why:

“We have become another victim of the current pub crisis. In the past 2 years, many of the taxes we pay to the Government have increased drastically, our gas and electricity has increased by almost double, the cost of ingredients has increased, some by as much as quadruple, wages have risen rapidly and business rates have increased.”

They go on to say:

“We have made the decision to leave the industry that we love and close the Bugle down.”

The Pointer Inn, in Newchurch, has taken aim at the Chancellor herself:

“The absolute legend Rachel Reeves”.

It also took aim at her “nice pub tax”, adding an AI image of what the pub might look like shortly. Then there is the Hare and Hounds, which is located just outside Newport and dates back to the 1730s, but has now been shut.

I turn to the holiday tax, or the visitor levy, which has already been referred to. This is an overnight visitor levy, which is the wrong policy at the wrong time. Coastal tourism visits have already fallen by 10% since April last year. Analysis by Oxford Economics suggests that if a 5% levy of the kind operating in Edinburgh was fully introduced by 2030, we would see a £1.8 billion reduction in tourism spending, 33,000 jobs being lost and 9 million fewer nights being spent in accommodation. These are not small margins. In coastal communities, where summer trading keeps businesses viable through the winter, the damage would be concentrated and severe.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The visitor levy is the wrong policy at the wrong time, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, and I have discussed it with UK Hospitality. Does he agree that we need to stop this tax, at the same time as cutting VAT? If we do not, we will end up with an effective VAT rate on hospitality and tourism businesses of 27%, which, compared with the rates in Ireland and Germany, for example, at 9% and 7% respectively, is just not competitive.

Joe Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is right, we need both. Our tourism and hospitality sector is one of the most highly taxed tourism and hospitality sectors, compared with our European neighbours, who already have a cost-competitive advantage.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): The hon. Member is talking about holidays. Our Chancellor has just announced the great British summer savings, which will see VAT slashed from 20% to 5% on activities, children's meals and attractions. Does he welcome that move?

Joe Robertson: I understand that the hon. Lady is trying to sell her own Chancellor's policies, but this support is pretty thin—a short, indeed temporary, VAT tax giveaway, set against the severe damage done by two successive Budgets, which runs into the tens of billions of pounds.

On business rates, the hospitality sector pays 10% of all eligible business rates but accounts for only 2% of relevant economic activity. That equates to an overpayment of £1.8 billion. The Government legislated for a 20% discount; what they have delivered is a 5% discount. Without a sector-wide solution, 963 restaurants and 574 hotels could face closure this year, and we are already seeing closures.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way again; he is being very generous with his time. We are talking about the importance of hospitality in our coastal communities. Given that hospitality is such a cornerstone activity in our coastal communities, providing many young people with their first jobs and providing jobs for the entire supply chain throughout our coastal communities, does he agree that the Government should consider hospitality as a cornerstone profession in these areas? Instead of hammering it with national insurance contributions, high VAT and now a visitor levy, the Government should do everything they can to boost hospitality, to put a rocket underneath employment in these communities?

Joe Robertson: I agree with all those comments. The Government should do all they can to support this sector. I say again that coastal communities face some of the biggest structural challenges, in terms of both demographics and geography, of any of our communities. That is why the Government should have a particular focus on these areas.

I will finish by speaking briefly about transport. A House of Lords Select Committee identified in 2019 and again in 2023 that poor transport connectivity is holding coastal communities back. The Isle of Wight knows that better than most places. The Government have made no specific investment plans for transport in coastal

communities. Instead, for the Isle of Wight, the Government have increased the already rip-off costs of crossing the Solent by car—of course, the Isle of Wight is completely reliant on ferries for transport to and from the island—and have done that by introducing a new emissions trading scheme tax, which they have not applied to Scottish islands with smaller populations and have not applied in full to Northern Ireland with a bigger population. It is insulting and inexcusable.

The Government say that they want coastal communities to succeed, but a whole string of policies and tax-and-spend decisions do not support that aim. Indeed, many directly undermine it. I therefore call on the Government to support seasonal hospitality in coastal areas by scrapping their plans for the overnight visitor levy, introducing a national insurance holiday for businesses employing young people and those not in employment, education or training, and scrapping business rates for thousands of hospitality businesses up and down the country permanently. The Government should stop trying to convince businesses, whose rates are going up, that they are going down—businesses know what their rates are. They should urgently publish the promised visitor economy growth strategy and disapply the ETS tax on car ferry travel to the Isle of Wight, bringing it in line with every other UK island that will pay nothing.

Our hospitality businesses are resilient and have survived a great deal, but resilience has limits. I hope that the Minister can offer the House and my constituents some genuine reassurance this afternoon.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): We have a lot of wannabe speakers in this very short and time-constrained debate. I will set and stick to a speaking limit of three minutes, which might mean that we do not get everybody in, so if anybody feels like being shorter and punchier, that would be great.

4.46 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart.

Coastal hospitality businesses are central to communities such as mine in South East Cornwall. It is not a niche sector for us; accommodation and food services count for around 16.7% of our employment, which is more than double the UK average and shows how crucial they are for my community. It is important to recognise that they face very different challenges. They generate a majority of their annual income in a very short trading window, and a few weeks of poor weather, transport disruption, energy costs, labour shortages or antisocial behaviour during the peak season in Cornwall can really impact their year ahead.

One of the greatest challenges is workforce retention and recruitment, and businesses cannot function without their staff. Our communities are not sustainable if we do not have local people who can afford to live and work locally. I therefore want us to move away from the view that coastal communities' economies function only in these short windows of time, and one way to do that is to invest in local people for year-round employment. Greater support for skills through apprenticeships and training can help to create opportunities, and I welcome the work of the youth hub in Liskeard, which was developed through a partnership between Cornwall council and the Department for Work and Pensions. Early results

show encouraging improvement in retention and young people accessing work and training, including in hospitality businesses.

I also want to highlight that transport infrastructure is crucial for allowing people to get to work and continue a thriving community such as mine. The value of our local identity and heritage, with Cornish culture, language and food, adds an extra impetus to visit us and work with us in our local community, and we can strengthen that further by securing procurement opportunities with local providers wherever possible, which I know many of my pubs do.

The challenges are very real for hospitality businesses in South East Cornwall. I welcome the temporary reduction in VAT on children's meals and family activities to 5% throughout the summer. As I have discussed, free bus travel for young people will really help them get to work. The extension of the 5p fuel duty cut, reductions in red diesel duty and increases to tax-free mileage allowances will help families, workers and businesses, and I encourage the Minister to visit us in Cornwall to see that in action.

However, businesses tell me about the pressures of VAT. This month, we will see the loss of valued venues. I held a meeting recently with local pubs and heard their concerns at first hand. Those concerns affect my community and are a part of a much-needed wider conversation about VAT rates and the campaign led by Tom Kerridge. Given that we want thriving coastal communities—I know the Minister does—will the Government set out how they are ensuring that policy on licensing, staffing, apprenticeships and business support reflects the realities of communities like mine? I look forward to working with her and the Government to deliver just that.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Admirably done. I call Richard Foord.

4.49 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. This debate on coastal hospitality has come just at the right time—just before the summer holidays. While many might be thinking about relaxing, the prospect of a visitor levy or tourist tax represents real concern for the hospitality industry, not least in my east Devon constituency. It is sobering news for many in the industry who depend on the summer months to turn a decent profit for the whole year round.

Before I dwell on the tourist tax, I will talk for a moment about two of my constituents, Martin and Shelley from Seaton. In 2016, they purchased a small chalet park in east Devon, which is open for seven and a half months of the year. Despite investing their life savings in the park and working full time, they are concerned that their future livelihood will be wiped out by the unintended consequence of leasehold legislation. We all know that leasehold legislation is rightly required to crack down on rogue landlords and rogue property management companies, and to prevent them from exploiting relationships with tenants, but it is not designed to capture chalet parks. However, my constituents find that under the legislation their chalets may be classed as long leases, subject to the ground rent cap. They fear

being caught in the lease extension problem: when the leases expire in about 40 years, they will have to issue an extension, but then they will be able to charge only a peppercorn rate. They are concerned that the very modest park fees they charge, which the current lessees are very happy with, will not be sufficient to sustain the business. The Government should recognise that their leasehold legislation is catching people who were not intended to be caught by it.

Let me turn to the tourist tax. Many young or part-time workers at holiday parks and hotels depend on seasonal work opportunities in our local coastal hospitality industry. Local businesses such as Forest Glade holiday park in Kentisbeare support local jobs, local suppliers and the wider rural economy. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), who talked about the visitor levy as the wrong policy at the worst possible time; he has done us a favour by securing this debate. I, too, implore the Government to engage with coastal communities and hospitality, understand their opposition to the measure and abandon the tourist tax before the inevitable economic harm hits our areas.

4.52 pm

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for securing this important debate.

For too long, coastal towns such as Blackpool were overlooked by previous Governments in Westminster, so I am proud to stand here and represent my home town as its MP. In Blackpool, local partners have worked together to build, as much as possible, a year-round visitor economy. Blackpool Tourism Ltd, Blackpool council, Blackpool Business Improvement Districts and many others have helped to diversify our calendar of events and extend the traditional tourist season. Events such as Lightpool, Christmas By the Sea and Blackpool Restaurant Week are bringing more people into the town throughout the year and helping local businesses benefit from increased footfall beyond our summer months. Blackpool is also longlisted to become the UK city of culture in 2029—even though we are a proud seaside town—which is welcome recognition of the creativity, ambition and culture that exists in our coastal town.

We are now calling on the Government to match our ambition with investment and support. That is why I continue to make the case for a world-class arena in Blackpool, including by taking my plan to the Prime Minister just three weeks ago. Three thousand residents have already signed my petition, because they recognise what an arena could mean for our town. We have incredible attractions, a growing independent creative scene and world-class historic venues, but we are still missing a major indoor arena capable of attracting large-scale concerts, conferences and sporting events throughout the year. An arena would strengthen our visitor economy, support hospitality businesses, create jobs and bring more people into Blackpool during the traditionally quieter periods, cementing our position as a year-round resort. We want to unlock private investment, but Government support will give us the confidence needed to make that vision a reality.

[Chris Webb]

I welcome the Government's summer savings scheme, which will reduce VAT on summer attractions. That is good news for families and businesses that rely on a stronger visitor economy. It is an important step and begins a vital conversation about the potential merits of reducing VAT across the whole hospitality and tourism sector, bringing us closer in line with our European competitors—something I have been calling for as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism.

Hospitality can be a thriving, driving force for job creation and economic growth, but the Government, industry and local communities must work together. We need targeted investment in the sector, we need to help businesses grow and we need to back coastal communities, which have been overlooked for far too long. Blackpool has shown what can be achieved through local ambition, partnership and determination. With the right support, we can build on that momentum. We can create more opportunities for young people, strengthen our local economy and unlock our full potential.

4.55 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. People are drawn to North Norfolk's beautiful coastal communities and they stay for our fantastic hospitality sector. The sector is the backbone of our tourist economy and creates hundreds of jobs, contributing millions to our economy. It is a crucial part of our local identity, but it is also an industry, like so many, that faces challenges. It could deliver huge growth in areas that desperately need it, but unless the Government face up to the challenges, there is an existential threat to many coastal businesses.

The elephant in the room is the soaring costs that businesses face, driven partially by international affairs, but also massively by the Government's avoidable jobs tax. Many of the cost increases the Government have caused could be absorbed by a huge business with a sizeable bottom line, but they can push a small shop in Wells-next-the-Sea or a hotel on the Norfolk broads into a really difficult position, making it unviable to bring in more staff and grow the business.

A further staffing challenge concerns training and skills for our hospitality industry, which could provide a skilled profession to many, particularly young people. A coastal community such as North Norfolk is a hotbed of opportunity.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): The data suggests that vacancy levels in hospitality remain very high. One element of the difficulties facing hospitality businesses is, in fact, skills shortages. Would the hon. Member agree that the anticipated youth mobility scheme for EU youths and the Government's youth guarantee scheme, which will be supported by youth hubs such as the one coming to my constituency, will be an important part of addressing those skills shortages?

Steff Aquarone: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I thank him for his intervention. Those things are all great, but I gently say that in rural and coastal communities such as mine they will be useless without the public transport accessibility options that will get young people to those opportunities. So it is a "Yes, and".

The availability of training, the funding for it and the challenges of accessing it are all blocking young people and employers from benefiting. The Government need to see the opportunity to tackle unemployment and deliver growth by backing businesses and young people.

Finally, transport challenges are a choke point for growth in our communities. I want to see better connected, more affordable public transport in our coastal communities, such as between Wells and Norwich, to make it easier for people across the county, the country and the world to come and see North Norfolk and our world-class hospitality businesses and to support our communities.

4.58 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on securing this important debate, which matters enormously to communities like Hartlepool. For far too long, politics in this country has been obsessed with helping the wrong people. Big business gets bigger, shareholders get richer and large cities grow. Meanwhile, the people who keep our towns alive are fighting for survival: the family businesses, the independent hotels, the cafés, pubs and restaurants, and the people who get up before dawn and work seven days a week and take all the risks.

Take Lee and Claire Dexter, who run the Marine Hotel on Seaton Crew seafront in my constituency. Their family-run business has been there for more than 30 years, yet thanks to rising costs, higher business rates and changes to employer national insurance, they face almost £30,000 in additional costs. For Westminster, that might seem like a line on a spreadsheet, but for family businesses, it can mean the difference between investing or standing still, hiring staff or cutting hours, and staying open or closing the doors. Hospitality is not some niche sector in Hartlepool; it is one of our major industries. Restaurants and catering generate more than £95 million in turnover, support 3,400 jobs and contribute more than £47 million in economic value—that is before we even count our hotels, pubs and visitor attractions. Hospitality is not a side issue for Hartlepool; it is jobs, livelihoods and local pride—and it is a huge part of our future.

I ask the Minister: can we be bolder? First, will the Government ensure that business rates reform properly reflects the pressures facing seasonal coastal businesses, including hotels and restaurants as well as pubs? I welcome the action taken on pubs by the Government. Secondly, will Ministers look again at the impact of employer national insurance increases on family-run hospitality businesses? Thirdly, will the Government consider regional variations in jobs taxes to drive investment into left-behind communities? Fourthly, will Ministers recognise that visitor levies are often inappropriate in coastal towns that are still trying to grow their visitor economies? Finally, will the Government bring forward a joined-up plan for coastal hospitality covering taxation, staffing, transport, skills and visitor attractions?

Hartlepool has everything it needs to succeed, and our hospitality businesses have done their bit. They have shown resilience through covid, rising costs and economic uncertainty. Those businesses deserve a fair deal. It is time that Westminster finally gave them one.

5.1 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on securing this important debate. West Dorset is home to the world famous Jurassic coast, a UNESCO world heritage site. Tourism contributes more than £320 million annually to the West Dorset economy and supports over 5,000 jobs—all thanks to the 4 million day visitors and 2 million people who stay overnight annually. However, behind the postcard image, many of the businesses that support our economy are under immense pressure.

I have been contacted by countless constituents who run pubs, hotels, restaurants, cafés, campsites and holiday parks. They tell me that they are now operating on margins so thin that a single, unexpected cost increase can put their future at risk. Business rates remain one of their biggest concerns. The George in West Bay told me that its business rates bill increased from £8,000 to £27,000 in a year. That is not a sustainable increase for a local hospitality business trying to serve its community and employ local people.

The Liberal Democrats have long argued that the business rates system is fundamentally broken. We would replace it with a commercial landowner levy based on land values rather than the capital value of buildings. We would also maintain the existing 75% relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses until that reform is delivered, while freezing the small business multiplier. Hospitality businesses should be rewarded for investing in their premises and communities, not punished for it.

National insurance increases have also added pressure. The hospitality sector relies heavily on part-time and seasonal workers. Many businesses in West Dorset have told me that the recent hikes have significantly increased their staffing costs. The Liberal Democrats oppose those changes and continue to call for their reversal. Businesses are job creators.

Then there is the ongoing cost of living crisis. Businesses across West Dorset tell me that visitor numbers remain relatively strong, but spending behaviour has changed dramatically. At a hospitality and tourism roundtable that I hosted, West Dorset Leisure Holidays explained that visitors are increasingly making decisions based solely on price rather than quality. Understandably, when households are facing rising costs, eating out becomes a luxury and is often one of the first things that they cut back on.

I welcome the Chancellor's recent decision to implement the summer savings scheme, but that alone is not enough. That is why the Liberal Democrats have proposed a reduction in VAT for hospitality, accommodation and leisure businesses until April 2027. That would help businesses, support jobs and encourage consumers back into the local economy. Hospitality businesses in West Dorset are doing everything that they can and doing everything right. They create jobs, support communities and welcome visitors to our part of the country from around the world. They deserve a Government who recognise their value.

5.4 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I represent Exmoor, the northern edge of which runs

along west Somerset to the coast. There, the visitor economy supports about two thirds of all employment: there are 8.4 million visitor days a year and economic activity of upwards of £700 million. However, my constituent Cathy Britton, who runs Eduardo's pizzeria and café in Porlock, tells me that her turnover is down by 50% from last year. Rising business costs and falling footfall have left her feeling squeezed. Napoleon called England a "nation of shopkeepers"—disparagingly, as it happens. But Cathy says that European visitors, who frequently come to walk in the steps of Ada Lovelace along the South West Coast Path, are bemused by how quiet the high street is and by how few shops are open.

The ripple effects of dwindling visitor numbers are felt beyond the seafront, too. My friend Paul Hardy, an antique dealer in Dulverton—some 10 miles away from the coast—tells me that business is down 70% on last year. He relies significantly on passing custom from the tourist trail: visitors who come for the coast and the moor, and who spend along the way. He now fears the additional impact of an overnight visitor levy, a measure that risks compressing the season on which businesses such as his depend. It is worth making the obvious point that coastal seasonal hospitality is not a self-contained economy; it is the engine that drives commercial activity across a much wider hinterland.

No economy functions without movement, and in west Somerset, movement is precisely what is missing. Take the B3191 at Cleeve Hill between Watchet and Blue Anchor, which has now been closed for two years. Both towns are coastal, with some 6,000 people and over 100 businesses. They are effectively dependent on a single vehicular route. Should that remaining route fail, the towns could be cut off entirely, with access gone—and with it, the tourism trade on which that coastal economy depends. I ask the Government directly: will they draw on the Department for Transport structures fund, a £1 billion pot established precisely for situations such as this one, to fix it?

Butlin's in Minehead is a major employer for my constituents. It hosts some 6,000 holidaymakers a week during the peak season. But west Somerset is in many respects a cul-de-sac—difficult to reach and navigate after arrival. That is bad for visitors, and for the businesses and workers who depend on that footfall. Supporting seasonal hospitality in coastal areas is a question of business rates, business rates relief and tourism, but it is also a matter of sustained investment in our roads, bus routes and rail connections—the transport infrastructure that makes these coastal places accessible in the first place.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. With apologies to Mr Shannon, I now call Seamus Logan as the final speaker and give the Liberal Democrat spokesman three minutes' notice.

5.7 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for securing this important debate.

Report after report has complained about the impact of the Labour Government's national insurance hikes, which are felt in my constituency no less than in others.

[Seamus Logan]

Aberdeenshire North and Moray East is the very definition of a coastal community, from Cruden bay to the Spey. Businesses are coping with the hikes by cutting back on hiring or cancelling increases in their workforces, by adding the extra cost to prices and by reducing employee benefits and compensation packages. That is not how to grow an economy; it is the opposite.

We were promised that the coastal growth fund would be the antidote to the effect of the Labour Government's deal with the European Union. In Scotland, we got less than 8%, despite the industry there representing more than 50% of the entire industry of the UK—another insult.

I could go on about the Scottish Government, but in the interests of time I will touch on two other issues. My party has been clear for quite some time about the need to create a bespoke Scottish visa for Scottish businesses, but we have been met by deaf ears from this Government and particularly the Home Secretary. Labour's Muscatelli report recommended that the Scottish Government push for a bespoke immigration system that tackles the unique issues faced across the Scottish economy, including in my constituency. In her response, can the Minister undertake to make representations to the Home Secretary on this point?

Farming, fishing, the NHS, social care, hospitality and tourism are all suffering in my constituency because of this Government's policies. We need an immediate and lasting reduction in VAT until we have passed the current cost of living crisis. I hope that the Minister will have something to say about that.

5.9 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on obtaining this important and illuminating debate. I look forward to the Minister's comments. I was heartened that a number of Members said that transport was significant for our coastal communities. That is a massive pinch point for me and colleagues in Devon and Cornwall.

At least in Torbay, my part of Devon, our audience is mostly the west midlands and south Wales. The route down is sometimes a bit of a car park on the M5 in high season, so making sure that we enhance the offer of our railways is extremely important. We have an unfinished job at Dawlish—section 5 of the scheme is yet to be done. Significant upgrades to our railways across Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset are extremely important to enhance the offer of travelling by rail and get more people off the roads into more sustainable transport. At the moment, Lumo is looking at running additional trains via Bristol to Paddington from Paignton. If people could take advantage of those, it would provide an opportunity to get more vehicles off the roads.

Let me move on to what Torbay has to offer when people arrive. Rock Garden is one of my favourite pub restaurants. David, the manager, told me that his business rates are crippling him; it is a great pity that we saw only tinkering around the edges of business rates from the Government rather than the wholesale reform that we were promised. As a colleague has already mentioned, Liberal Democrats want to see a commercial landowner

levy, which is a lot more sustainable and would encourage growth, rather than people being punished for investing in their businesses.

As for the cost of running a business, David is paying £3,000 a month for heating and running the kitchens. The Liberal Democrats called on the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate that last autumn, but sadly it chose not to. The Liberal Democrats ask the Minister to see what she can do to support small and medium-sized businesses with their rocketing energy bills, which they are often locked into. As colleagues have already mentioned, we have a plan to cut VAT by 5% for hospitality until next spring, which would drive positive change and footfall up and down our high streets, and not just in our coastal communities.

Beverley holiday park is an incredible, multi-award-winning family-run business, but it has been crippled by the double whammy of the national insurance hike, with the challenges around the number of people it can employ, and the lowering of the threshold to £5,000—particularly for seasonal workers. That is significant for the park. It has crippled its ability to offer the jobs it has traditionally been able to. The park also faces the challenge of taking on seasonal workers for the short peak of the season and training them up. That is a challenge for younger people, who are not in quite the same place as people may have been 40 years ago and need a bit more support, as the Alan Milburn report highlighted. There is progress to be made there.

Finally, I would like to reflect on something really special to a lot of our seaside resorts: the amusement arcade. Earlier this week, I was speaking to the people who run Golden Palms in Torquay. They have exactly the same challenges with national insurance hikes and energy costs. Before the general election, they were assured that there would be changes to regulations in that world, and it was lost in the wash-up. Minister, can we please look at that?

5.14 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart, and to be responding today on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. I begin by sincerely congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on securing this debate, and I thank all Members who have spoken so passionately about their constituencies.

As my hon. Friend is well aware, hospitality is far from just another part of the economic picture in coastal Britain; in many coastal towns, it is the local economy. Whether the café on the seafront, the family-run hotel, the pub overlooking the harbour, the fish and chip shop or the restaurant by the beach, these are businesses that come to life when the sun comes out and, more often than not in this country, even when it does not.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I can testify that, for Northern Ireland, cost increases have forced almost 90% of hospitality businesses, many of which are found on our coastlines, to operate at below 90% of the required capacity. Tax rises have forced 50% of hospitality businesses to cut their workforces, and 68% have had to increase their prices, limiting the growth of this sector. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government must step in? Wherever we are in the United Kingdom, we are all under pressure.

Rebecca Paul: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, as I often do. Hospitality businesses are valued employers, community anchors and, for many young people, the first step on the career ladder. I think we all agree that such businesses should be supported right across the country—a point that the hon. Gentleman just eloquently made—but that support especially matters in coastal areas, as has been highlighted so clearly.

The first point I want to make is that seasonal hospitality is, by definition, seasonal. That may sound obvious, but from studying the Government's approach to employment regulation, one sometimes wonders whether Ministers have grasped it. A seaside café does not have the same staffing needs on a wet Tuesday in January as it does on an August bank holiday. A hotel in a resort town cannot pretend that February occupancy and summer occupancy are the same thing. This sector hinges on the weather, the school holidays, domestic tourism and the reality that coastal footfall rises and falls sharply across the year.

When Ministers push forward employment laws that make flexible and seasonal working harder, they are striking at the operating model that has sustained the coastal hospitality sector for generations. The Employment Rights Act 2025's approach to guaranteed hours puts seasonal employers in an impossible position. The Opposition have warned the Government of this, which is why a future Conservative Government would repeal every job-destroying, anti-business, anti-growth measure in the Act as a matter of urgency.

Additionally, the Government's national insurance rise has made it more expensive to employ people. The threshold has fallen, the rate has risen and labour-intensive businesses, especially hospitality, have been hit particularly hard. At the same time, business rate relief for retail, hospitality and leisure was cut from 75% to 40%, and it is next set to end entirely. For seasonal businesses of all types, that is a brutal combination. Tragically, and infuriatingly, I know that many will not survive it.

The truth is simple: this Government are hammering hospitality left, right and centre, with higher employer national insurance, higher business rates, more regulation, more risk and more costs piled on to the very businesses they claim to support. Ministers say they want growth, but their policies are doing the opposite. Businesses are closing. Pubs that have stood at the heart of their communities for generations are wondering how much longer they can last. Cafés and restaurants are looking at the bills landing on their doormats and asking whether they can afford to open their doors at all.

However, there is a better way. This Government could adopt our policy of taking 250,000 high street businesses, including pubs and hospitality businesses, out of business rates entirely. That would make an immediate difference—for many, it would be the difference between thriving or closing up for good. We would also repeal the family business tax, because family firms should be able to last across generations, rather than being bled dry by the Government when one generation tries to pass a business on to the next.

I will be visiting the Isle of Wight myself later in the summer for my friend's wedding at Osborne House, which I know will be the wedding of the year. My friend has deep ties to the communities there, and she has told me much about the brilliant local businesses—from the Gossips Café in Yarmouth to traditional rural pubs such as the Horse and Groom and the Chequers Inn,

whose owner, Mark Holmes, has been commendably vocal in calling for more support so that pubs can survive. These are exactly the sorts of unique places that give coastal and island communities their character.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) on securing this important debate on Government support for seasonal hospitality and leisure businesses in coastal areas. I thank all hon. Members for talking about businesses in their communities and constituencies. I could really hear their passion as they championed their local areas and businesses.

The debate is important because the sectors are important. They provide accessible jobs, drive tourism and generate significant economic activity. They support local economies, particularly in coastal and seaside communities, where tourism, hospitality and leisure form the backbone of economic activity. They support wider social objectives, creating vibrant places where people want to visit, work, live and invest.

Creating the economic and social environment that hospitality and leisure businesses need to thrive cuts right across Government. Members have raised so many issues that cut across the responsibilities of many Departments, and I thank them for that. Co-ordinated action from the Department for Businesses and Trade and myself, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Home Office and His Majesty's Treasury is required to ensure that the great British seaside has a secure and prosperous future.

That is especially important when many coastal communities are entirely dependent on hospitality and leisure businesses to provide the vast majority of employment and opportunity for local people. They prop up the vital local government services that residents rely on, too. These businesses are not simply part of the local economy; they are the local economy.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Last year, I worked with some of the businesses in my coastal community to develop a local economic growth plan. Would the Minister meet me to discuss that plan and some of the policies that we would like to see?

Kate Dearden: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend and his brilliant local businesses. I thank him for his intervention.

I regularly meet local businesses from across the hospitality sector, and I hear at first hand about the pressures that seasonal and coastal operators face. I recognise the importance of hospitality businesses in our coastal communities. I have been delighted to meet many hon. Friends representing coastal towns and cities to understand the challenges that hospitality and leisure businesses in their constituencies and across the UK face.

I recently spent the day visiting Blackpool with my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) to meet business owners, workers and residents who have come together to extend their peak season and reduce the structural issues of operating seasonally. Visiting in April came with a breeze, but that was never

[Kate Dearden]

going to stop the magic of going up Blackpool tower, having delicious fish and chips and talking all things hospitality. I thank my hon. Friend for his hospitality on that day. It was particularly useful to meet those leading Blackpool's tourism sector who are using hospitality as a launch pad for social mobility, high-quality employment and local regeneration.

It is clear, both in Blackpool and across the UK, that future-proofing our coastal communities is only possible by developing those strong partnerships between public, private and third sector organisations. I have taken the learnings from meetings with colleagues and from contributions to the debate, and I will continue to do so with my colleagues across Government. I assure hon. Members that I will work with them and their communities to continue to deliver for coastal towns and communities.

I thank hon. Members for raising the issue of business rates with me on numerous occasions on behalf of businesses in their constituencies. Members will know that we have introduced permanently lower business rates multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties. I know that the Conservative party put temporary relief in place, so it is right that we give businesses permanent relief. We did not think that was right, which is why we stepped in and made our announcements. In addition, we have provided support to pubs and live music venues.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her replies to all our questions. We need to encourage more people from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to take home holidays. Looking at all the problems across the world, we should encourage our own people to have their holidays at home. Does the Minister think that that is a good idea?

Kate Dearden: I am always happy to hear suggestions of how we can do things better and raise awareness of the support that is available. I am really happy to take the hon. Gentleman's points on board, and I thank him for them.

We will ensure that the business rates system better reflects the realities faced by businesses in the visitor economy. As part of that, the Government are committed to reviewing the methodologies used to value pubs and hotels and will, if necessary, make changes at the next revaluation to ensure valuations accurately reflect the rental market for these properties. Unfortunately, the Conservative party did not take that approach, but we will. We have worked with businesses since we came into government, and will do so in the coming years, to get that right.

On labour costs and workforce models, I recognise the concerns about the potential impact of changes to employment rights on businesses that rely on seasonal and flexible staffing. We have talked about that topic at length, and I thank the shadow Minister for raising it today. It is important that we get the balance right to support workers while ensuring that businesses can continue to operate and create opportunities, which is why we will consult closely with businesses, trade unions and workers over the coming months to understand the impacts in full.

I recognise the strength of feeling a number of hon. Members expressed on such proposals as the overnight visitor levy. As they will know, those powers have been devolved to local metro mayors, and although many have already clarified how they plan to use them, all measures that may be introduced will be subject to consultation with local stakeholders, including hospitality and leisure business owners and advocacy groups.

Members will know about the wider support measures the Government are taking, from our small business strategy to make sure that we create the conditions for short-term resilience and long-term growth, to raising the employment allowance, replacing the apprenticeship levy with the new growth and skills levy, tackling late payments and reviewing the licensing system, alongside our upcoming high street strategy.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I extend to the Minister a warm invitation to visit the wonderful Ceredigion Preseli coastline in the summer. We have heard much mention this afternoon of a possible reduction to the rate of VAT for hospitality and tourism businesses. Would the Government consider that? It would give many hospitality businesses not only a hope of survival but confidence that they might be able to invest in their businesses.

Kate Dearden: I would have a busy diary if I said yes to everyone in the room, but I will take the hon Gentleman's kind invitation away with me. He will know about our recent announcements on boosting summer demand, delivering temporary and targeted VAT cuts for family-focused hospitality and leisure businesses, alongside our wider cost-of-living support measures. Those are really important, because when money is back in people's pockets, they can spend and support our local high streets and brilliant hospitality businesses. As he will know, the Government keep all taxes under review as part of the policy-making process, and the Chancellor will announce any changes to the tax system at fiscal events, in the usual way.

I will finish on the high street strategy before moving on to further points that were raised by Members. We are delivering more than £150 million to turn the tide on the challenges and pressures facing our high streets, including those in the coastal communities that need it most. Getting those back to being the proud economic hubs of towns and villages is really important; once again we want to see thriving businesses and communities, and a true sense of pride in place. The Government will shortly publish our visitor economy growth strategy, which will establish an ambitious, long-term plan to increase visitor flows, boost value and deliver sustainable growth for the entire UK, including our coastal and rural communities.

Supporting growth in hospitality and leisure sectors through both tourism and skills is absolutely essential to the Government's approach. This debate has reinforced the importance of tourism as a driver of economic activity in coastal communities. Visitor spending support jobs, sustains local businesses and underpins the vitality of many seaside towns. That is essential, and will maintain the UK's position as a competitive and attractive destination, while ensuring that local areas have the tools that they need to support sustainable growth.

As has been mentioned, hospitality and tourism sectors also play a crucial role in providing accessible employment, particularly for young people and those entering the labour market. As colleagues may know, my first job was in hospitality—that was the route that I started on, as it was for many Members here today and across the House. It gives skills for life. That sector is valuable for young people: it is the third largest employer in the UK, with 3.6 million people working in the sector, and plays a crucial role in providing those jobs. Given that nearly 40% of the wider visitor economy workforce is aged 16 to 24, the sector will play a key role in the Government's plan to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training. If I had more time, I would talk to hon. Members about the youth guarantee, national insurance relief for those under 21 and those under 25 in apprenticeships, and so much more that we are working on through Skills England and the apprenticeship levy.

Only two minutes of the debate are left and I know that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East will want to wind-up shortly, so to conclude, we recognise where we can further support different communities all across our economy. That is why we have, for example, significantly

increased the hospitality fund. That will provide lots of opportunities to help rural areas in particular, and I am keen to work closely with colleagues on that. It will be £10 million over the next three years, which is significant funding. I assure Members and industry that this Labour Government recognise the importance of hospitality and leisure businesses, and we will work closely with them and colleagues across Government to do so. As the proud Minister with that responsibility, I assure them that I will work tirelessly in the time ahead to represent sector interests, including those of businesses at the heart of our coastal communities.

5.29 pm

Joe Robertson: I thank the Minister for her response. Obviously, it falls short of what we are calling for, but I thank her for her consideration. I urge her to continue to consider providing more support and better relief for those living in coastal communities.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 3 June 2026

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Universal Theme Park and Resort: Bedford

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This is a joint statement made with the Department for Business and Trade.

We are pleased to publish an update on the proposal for the construction of a Universal theme park and resort in Bedford. This follows the statement made on 22 April 2025 after we had reached the agreement in principle stage of negotiations—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 29WS.]

The Government have now formally signed an agreement with Universal Destinations and Experiences (“Universal”), a division of Comcast NBCUniversal, in which it has confirmed it will move ahead with its plans to develop an entertainment resort complex which contains a world-class theme park in Bedfordshire. The new development – which will be called “Universal United Kingdom Resort”—will join existing attractions around the world, in Beijing, Osaka and Florida, and will be Universal’s first world-class visitor attraction in Europe.

As part of the agreement, Comcast NBCUniversal has committed to invest over £5 billion in the entertainment resort complex during the expected five years of construction, as well as an additional £1 billion in capital investment over the first 10 years of operation. The Government will support the project with an investment of £1.3 billion on regional and local community infrastructure to ensure the park can operate successfully, with improved transport links for local residents and visitors from across the UK and abroad.

This is expected to be one of the most significant investments made in the United Kingdom in this Parliament, and remains among the largest single investments ever in the UK tourism and entertainment sector.

As previously outlined, the benefits of the project are substantial. Universal estimates that it will deliver over £50 billion for the economy by 2055; and that 8.5 million visitors will come to it in its first year of operation in 2031. Construction work has already begun, and over the next five years during the construction period, 20,000 jobs will be created, with a peak of 5,000 workers on site at the busiest time. The park and resort will employ 8,000 people in its first year, which is anticipated to rise to 10,000 by the 20th year of operation. Some 80% of the roles are expected to go to people in the local area, and Universal has already received thousands of expressions of interest from individuals and companies looking to be a part of this transformative and exciting venture. Jobs of all kinds will be created, giving opportunities to develop careers in a range of creative, administrative and technical fields. The development is expected to become the biggest visitor attraction in the UK, surpassing our current top attraction of the Natural History Museum, and be one of the largest in Europe.

The UK is open for business, and we will continue to engage with businesses and investors who can make a positive difference here. This is evidence of the confidence international investors have in the UK. The deal we have reached delivers value for money for the British taxpayer and secures Universal’s investment in the UK. As part of their commitment to the investment, the Government plan to provide a grant of £400 million through the exceptional regional growth fund. This grant is subject to compliance with subsidy control regulations, with which we are moving forward; and parliamentary approval. We will in due course ensure that an appropriate motion under section 8 of the Industrial Development Act 1982 is tabled in the House of Commons.

DCMS will be making a separate grant of £438 million to invest in the public infrastructure necessary for the park to function including improvements to the local road network. The Department for Transport is also going ahead with plans to upgrade the strategic road and rail network, on the A421 and at Wixams station, which will provide wider resilience and improved connectivity within the region, at an expected cost of £474 million.

As one of the key investment commitments in “The UK’s Modern Industrial Strategy 2025”, this project directly supports the Government’s ambition to increase business investment in the creative industries from £17 billion to £31 billion by 2035, contributing to the broader UK growth mission. The UK’s creative industries are a global engine of innovation and growth, generating £124 billion for our economy and supporting over 2.3 million jobs. As a cornerstone of our modern industrial strategy, this sector drives creativity, competitiveness, and opportunity. The investment is also aligned with our ongoing work to unleash the potential of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, following previous investments announced in the region.

As we move into the delivery phase, it will be more important than ever to work closely with local stakeholders. We will continue to work with Bedford borough council and other stakeholders in the region to make this a success for the local area, and will continue to engage with neighbouring councils and local stakeholders in the coming months. Bedford borough council has been excellent partners in this project and we thank it for its ongoing dedication and commitment.

We welcome the ongoing support of colleagues across both Houses for this transformational investment. We commit to providing further updates at appropriate times.

[HCWS87]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Appointments

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): Baroness Griffin of Princethorpe has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of Baroness Drake CBE.

The hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of Stephen Gethins.

[HCWS86]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing Negotiations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): I would like to update the House regarding the ongoing negotiations at the World Health Organisation's Intergovernmental Working Group to secure an annex to the pandemic agreement on a new Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing system.

This Government's last update to the House was on 2 February. Since then, the IGWG held three rounds of negotiations, including a resumed session, ahead of the deadline of the 79th World Health Assembly to report on the outcome of negotiations.

Some good progress was made at these IGWG meetings, including on issues such as key definitions and use of terms, and the governance of the PABS system. However divergence still remained on several key issues, including on how pathogen samples and genetic sequence information will be shared through laboratory networks and databases to ensure timely access, benefit-sharing provisions for manufacturers who choose to sign up to the system, and the links between PABS and other international access and benefit sharing frameworks.

Given the number of complex and highly technical issues to resolve, the IGWG decided that additional negotiating time is needed. Member states therefore submitted a recommendation for an extension to negotiations to the 79th WHA, seeking approval for an additional one year of negotiating time. On 22 May, the WHA approved this extension. The deadline for the IGWG to submit the final outcome of the negotiations has now been extended to the 80th WHA, to be held in May 2027, or, as may be necessary, earlier by a special session of the WHA in 2026. The next round of negotiations will be held in mid-July.

The UK remains fully committed to securing a PABS annex that serves both the UK and global public health, and we support this extension to provide more time for member states to reach consensus. It is crucial that we continue our essential work to conclude the PABS annex, so that the pandemic agreement can be opened for signature and ratification by member states, and the wider benefits for pandemic prevention and response can be realised.

This Government will only agree to a PABS annex that is in the national as well as global interest, and we will continue to engage constructively in the process to deliver an effective, implementable, and equitable PABS system.

[HCWS82]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Greater Cambridge Development Corporation

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Today I am updating the House on the Government's decision to establish a centrally led development corporation, to be known as the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation, to promote ambitious, high-quality, sustainable growth and unlock the full potential of Greater Cambridge, for the benefit of its communities and the country as a whole.

Between 4 February and 1 April 2026, the Government sought views through a public consultation on the development corporation's proposed objectives, governance, geographical boundary and powers. The consultation received over 700 responses, including from residents, local government, businesses and academia. I am grateful to all those who took the time to engage and provide thoughtful and constructive feedback.

Greater Cambridge faces a set of deeply interconnected challenges, particularly in relation to infrastructure and housing provision, with which the majority of consultation respondents agreed. Complex governance arrangements, fragmented decision making and long-term funding uncertainty have made it difficult to plan, finance, and deliver infrastructure to support growth at the scale and pace required.

Sustained economic growth is the only route to improving the prosperity of our country and the living standards of working people. That is why it is this Government's No. 1 mission. Greater Cambridge has the potential to make an even greater contribution to the UK economy and this Government are determined to make that happen, and it is why the Government have committed £800 million to kick-start development around Cambridge and Oxford and leverage major public-private investment.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed) has reviewed the feedback on the consultation proposals, and has determined that establishing the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation is in the national interest and is the most effective way to unlock sustainable, nationally significant growth in Greater Cambridge.

Today, the Government response to the consultation has been published on www.gov.uk, which sets out the development area, objectives, governance and accountability, and powers to be granted to the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation. With direct access to central Government, the development corporation will provide Greater Cambridge with the tools, certainty and investment to bring national and local partners behind shared priorities.

The development corporation will be focused on the delivery of strategic, nationally significant growth in its boundary and will work collaboratively with councils, both within and bordering the development area, transport bodies and utilities providers to help supercharge growth and unlock development opportunities, supporting the delivery of new homes, infrastructure, and business and laboratory space. Accountable to the Secretary of State, the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation will bring together powers, financing and national influence,

while working in partnership with local authorities, the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service and local representatives, as part of a joint national and local endeavour.

Delivering nationally significant growth in Greater Cambridge requires a combination of leadership from central and local government, alongside professional expertise in infrastructure and placemaking.

Next steps

The statutory instrument establishing the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation will be laid on 4 June. Following this, subject to parliamentary scrutiny and approval, the development corporation will be established as an entity.

Following establishment, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will appoint an interim board comprised of experts in fields relevant to development, such as transport and placemaking, who will sit alongside the local leaders. A full and open public appointments process for the permanent board will be commenced as soon as possible once the development corporation is established.

A powers and functions statutory instrument will be laid later in the year, which will grant the development corporation both plan-making and development management powers.

[HCWS85]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland: Springhill Inquest Findings

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I am making this written ministerial statement following the findings of the Springhill inquest, which investigated the 1972 killings at Springhill and Westrock of Father Noel Fitzpatrick, Patrick Butler, Margaret Gargan, David McCafferty, and John Dougal.

While many of those serving were operating in a challenging environment, the coroner's findings are clear: it was not reasonable for soldiers to have fired the shots that caused these five deaths. The Government accept and deeply regret these findings and recognises their gravity. It is the duty of the state to hold itself to the highest standards. This includes acknowledging and apologising where it has fallen short.

On behalf of the Government, I would like to join the Prime Minister in placing on record my sincere apology for what happened and for the grief and trauma experienced by their families. Their loved ones should not have been killed. And while no apology can lessen their enduring pain, I hope that the families may take some measure of comfort from the answers they have secured. This Government are determined to ensure that, in future, families can obtain answers without such distress and long delay.

We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to our armed forces, including those who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles and helped to create the conditions for peace. The vast majority of those who served did so with great distinction, honour and professionalism. It is also clear that in some cases terrible errors were made, and the state must never shy away from this.

As the coroner noted, some of those serving had already lost colleagues during their time in Northern Ireland. They were operating in a challenging environment, which contributed to what the coroner described as a “hyper-vigilant and highly defensive” mindset. They were none the less required to use only such force as was reasonable in the circumstances, which did not happen in this case.

Any loss of civilian life in situations involving the use of lethal force by military personnel is profoundly regrettable. The Government are determined to learn lessons and do all they can to prevent such tragedies in future.

The events at Springhill and Westrock form part of the complex legacy of the troubles, which affected so many families and communities across Northern Ireland and more widely. This Government remain firmly committed to enabling victims of the troubles and their families to seek information and acknowledgment, including through the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill which I am currently taking through Parliament.

I am placing a copy of the coroner's findings in the Library of the House.

[HCWS84]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Revised Telecommunications Security Code of Practice

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital Economy, Baroness Lloyd of Effra.

The UK telecoms supply chain review 2019 identified the need to establish an enhanced legislative framework for telecoms security. In response, the Government established a stronger telecoms security framework, which consists of:

The Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021—primary legislation that established new duties on public telecoms providers to prevent security compromises within their networks and services.

The Electronic Communications (Security Measures) Regulations 2022—secondary legislation setting out specific cyber-security requirements with which the public telecoms providers must comply.

The Telecommunications Security Code of Practice 2022—technical guidance on how providers can comply with the requirements set out in the regulations.

The UK's future prosperity rests on the public electronic communications networks and services—PECN and PECS—that provide our telecoms and internet connectivity. It is important therefore that the telecoms security framework keeps pace with the scale of the threat to UK telecoms networks and services, adapting to evolving threats to network security and new innovations in telecoms technology.

The UK National Cyber Security Centre's annual review 2025 highlights how state actors continue to pose a persistent and escalating cyber-threat to UK critical national infrastructure, including telecoms, leveraging sophisticated cyber-capabilities and working closely with

a growing commercial intrusion market. This threat is becoming increasingly diffuse and dangerous, with cyber-attacks a key tool in geopolitical competition. The volume of nationally significant incidents managed by the NCSC continues to grow, and we are seeing high-profile campaigns like Salt Typhoon, targeting over 80 countries worldwide.

At the same time, innovations in technology are redefining both the cyber-security threat and the tools available for cyber-security and resilience. The growing use of AI, for example, delivers significant operational benefits for telecoms, but it also introduces new risks. Adversaries can exploit AI to automate the discovery of network vulnerabilities, and more rapidly identify high-value targets within networks. Maintaining a proactive, adaptive security posture is essential to safeguard the UK's telecoms networks and services against these evolving and increasingly sophisticated threats.

Within the code of practice, to account for this changing threat landscape, the Government stated their intent to

“review and update the Code of Practice periodically as new threats emerge and technologies evolve.”

Following discussions with the NCSC and Ofcom, and regular feedback from industry, last year the Government consulted on proposals to update some areas of the technical guidance within the code of practice in order to:

Provide some further clarity on specific security measures in the code of practice—some providers suggested the code lacked specific guidance in some areas. The proposed updates intend to give clearer direction to support compliance with legal duties in the legislation. This includes clearer guidance on the use of privileged access workstations, approaches to security testing, and the encryption and protection of data.

Reflect evolving technology—since the code of practice was published, increased use of certain technologies warrants updated technical guidance to support safe adoption. The proposed updates include new security guidance on the secure use of public cloud, automation, and application programming interfaces.

Reflect emerging security threats—recent hostile state-linked attacks underline growing risks. The code of practice must evolve to help ensure providers respond appropriately. The proposed updates ensure the code of practice reflects the need for providers to take appropriate and proportionate steps to protect their networks against such threats.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has considered in detail the feedback received in response to the consultation and has made amendments based on this feedback to the draft revised code of practice where appropriate.

Following the conclusion of this work, the Department is today laying the draft revised telecommunications security code of practice—the revised code of practice—in Parliament for scrutiny under the negative procedure. A copy of the Government response to the consultation on proposals to update the telecommunications security code of practice 2022, which details the changes made in response to feedback, is published on gov.uk.

The revised code of practice represents an important step in ensuring that the UK's telecoms security framework remains robust and effective in the face of rapidly evolving cyber-threats and technological change. By providing clearer and more up-to-date technical guidance, the revised code of practice will help telecoms providers to comply with their statutory duties, strengthen the security and resilience of the UK's public electronic communications networks and services, and protect citizens, businesses, and critical services that rely on the networks and services.

[HCWS83]

Petition

Wednesday 3 June 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Use of shops for illegal activities

The petition of residents of the constituency of Southgate and Wood Green,

Declares that there needs to be an increased and coordinated effort to crack down on shops being used for illegal activities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to provide greater enforcement powers for local authorities to crack down on shops being used for illegal activities, to support the work of trading standards officers and specialist financial investigators, and to enable a framework for greater communication between trading standards officers and the police.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Bambos Charalambous, *Official Report*, 28 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 870.]

[P003193]

Observations from the Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):
The Government are fully committed to preventing and tackling the use of shops for illegal activities and protecting our local high streets from such criminality.

At the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced the creation of a dedicated cross-Government taskforce to tackle money laundering and associated criminality on our high streets, supported by £30 million over the next three years. This cross-departmental taskforce—set up in the Home Office—is working at pace to develop a long-term response to this problem. It is considering the full range of powers and mechanisms needed by local responders to tackle high street illegality to determine where existing capabilities need to be strengthened.

I am pleased to confirm that the Crime and Policing Act 2026 created a regulation-making power for the Home Secretary to extend the duration of closure orders under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. The Government are aware that these are important powers that local authorities and the police rely on to tackle those shops where criminal activity is being conducted. We intend to launch a consultation soon to help inform these new regulations. As mentioned above, the taskforce is also considering the broader range of powers that trading standards and the police require in tackling this problem, and will support the work of the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government's soon-to-be published high streets strategy.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 3 June 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
NORTHERN IRELAND	1147	NORTHERN IRELAND—continued	
Defence Growth Deal: Economic Impact.....	1150	Supreme Court Dillon Judgment:	
Defence Industrial Strategy	1152	Policy Implications	1147
Public Service Reform.....	1155		
Replacing the Northern Ireland Troubles		PRIME MINISTER	1157
(Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023	1152	Engagements.....	1157

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 3 June 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	101WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND	
Universal Theme Park and Resort: Bedford.....	101WS	LOCAL GOVERNMENT	104WS
		Greater Cambridge Development Corporation	104WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND			
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	102WS	NORTHERN IRELAND	105WS
UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly		Northern Ireland: Springhill Inquest Findings	105WS
of the Council of Europe: Appointments.....	102WS		
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	103WS	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	106WS
Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing		Revised Telecommunications Security Code of	
Negotiations	103WS	Practice	106WS

PETITION

Wednesday 3 June 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	29P
Use of shops for illegal activities.....	29P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 10 June 2026**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 3 June 2026

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1147] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Prime Minister

South East Water: Disruption of Supply [Col. 1171]

Answer to urgent question—(Emma Hardy)

Lebanon: Israel Defence Forces Operations [Col. 1186]

Answer to urgent question—(Hamish Falconer)

Lord Mandelson: Response to Humble Address [Col. 1201]

General debate

General Strike Centenary Commemorations [Col. 1265]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Agriculture [Col. 1279]

Motion, on a deferred Division, agreed to

Westminster Hall

Small Towns: Transport Links [Col. 163WH]

Youth Mental Health Support [Col. 191WH]

Improving the UK Visa System [Col. 200WH]

Rail Freight [Col. 226WH]

Seasonal Hospitality Businesses in Coastal Areas [Col. 234WH]

General debates

Written Statements [Col. 101WS]

Petition [Col. 29P]

Observations
