

Thursday
11 June 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 11 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

Thursday 11 June 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Mass Transit Systems

1. **Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the delivery of mass transit systems. [900346]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

The delivery of mass transit systems has too often been slowed down by fragmented funding arrangements, difficulties in acquiring land and complex planning processes. Our new mass transit taskforce, made up of an independent panel of experts, will make practical recommendations on how we can speed up delivery and remove some of the blockers. We are also committed to devolving new powers, including Transport and Works Act 1992 orders, to ensure that local leaders have all the tools they need to deliver mass transit schemes quickly and efficiently.

Steve Race: People in Exeter love using the railway, and Devon was the first area to get back to and exceed pre-covid levels of rail travel, but our local and regional railway is hampered by under-investment. We do not need a new mass transit system, but we do want the one we have already to be frequent, reliable and resilient. Would the Secretary of State meet me and local stakeholders to see how we can make the Devon metro concept a reality?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all his work on public transport in Exeter and the wider Devon area. He and I have met colleagues in this place, and I am willing to continue that conversation about how we can ensure that people in Devon have a reliable, frequent rail service and the connectivity that they need as much as people do in other parts of the country.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): As the Secretary of State knows, the closure of the B3191 at Cleeve Hill in my constituency remains a major problem for the town of Watchet and has left it effectively dependent on single vehicular access. Such extreme situations without proper access have serious consequences for immediate emergency access and the local economy. Will the Secretary of State commit to addressing this gap through the new structures fund?

Heidi Alexander: It is important that we invest in our roads and structures on the wider road network. We have asked local authorities to come forward with proposals by 2 August for schemes that they think might be suitable for funding. We will look at all those applications carefully because I know the impact that disruption on the roads has on local communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Since coming to power, the Labour party has increased the bus fare cap by 50% from £2 to £3. But one area that has not seen that rise is Greater Manchester where the last Conservative Government gave over £1 billion to support its mass transit system, expressly including keeping a £2 bus fare cap. In *The Telegraph* this week, we read that Andy Burnham is now openly briefing—no doubt with the right hon. Lady's support, when he becomes Prime Minister after kicking out her current boss—that he would restore a national £2 bus fare cap. Does she agree with the current Prime Minister or the man she is trying to make the next Prime Minister on the Conservatives' £2 cap?

Heidi Alexander: The Mayor of Greater Manchester has led the way when it comes to keeping fares affordable and bringing public transport back under public control, including throughout the years of the right hon. Member's Tory Government. Funding provided by this Government led by this Prime Minister to the Mayor of Greater Manchester has been used to enable a more generous bus fare cap in the Greater Manchester city region, and it is right that we equip local leaders to take the sorts of decisions that are right for their local residents.

Mr Holden: Given the right hon. Lady's clearly close working relationship with the Greater Manchester Mayor, does she agree with the decision of the Prime Minister—sorry, Mayor Burnham—reported in *The Sun* to spend £35,000 of taxpayers' money repainting a train because he literally had nothing to announce and needed "something"? How closely does this expensive paint job with nothing behind it resemble Labour's ideas for mass transit?

Heidi Alexander: I am proud of the fact that we are renationalising the railways, bringing the train operating companies back into public ownership. We have launched the brand-new livery and train designs, but more importantly than that, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that train services that are now under public control are more reliable and have fewer cancellations than those still in the private sector.

Passenger Rail Services

2. **Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail services. [900348]

3. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester Withington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail services. [900351]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): Great British Railways will create a railway run by the people for the people, turning the

tide on a decade of decline under the previous Government. Eighty per cent of the rail journeys that will ultimately be run by GBR are now being run by publicly owned operators, and we are already seeing more reliable services as a result.

Mike Reader: The Minister will be aware that freight services using East West Rail infrastructure already terminate at Northampton Gateway. Will the Minister work with me to ensure Northampton is included in East West Rail's long-term vision for passenger services, ensuring connectivity across the Oxford-Cambridge corridor?

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy on this issue. He will know that, as set out in the recent project consultation, East West Rail services are not currently planned to serve Northampton. However, current work does not preclude that, and East West Rail will provide important interchanges with major rail lines. I would be very keen to work with my hon. Friend as he seeks to take this campaigning issue further.

Jeff Smith: We in the north have waited a long time for the trans-Pennine route upgrade—it is very important to us in Manchester, and very welcome. What progress can we expect on improving journey times and reliability and reducing cancellations, and what more investment can we expect to improve facilities for passengers across the north?

Keir Mather: The Department is investing in multimillion-pound rail infrastructure improvements across the north, including in Manchester. The £11 billion investment in the trans-Pennine route upgrade will electrify the 76-mile route between Manchester and York, increasing capacity and improving reliability with faster, cleaner and more frequent trains.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I dare not think how many years of my constituents' lives have been given over to points failures and signal failures, and the confusion that follows, on the line between Waterloo and the south coast. What can Ministers do about it?

Keir Mather: I thank the right hon. Member for his tireless advocacy on this important matter on behalf of his constituents. We need a railway that gets people where they need to go, on time and in an efficient manner. If he writes to me in more detail about the points failures that are affecting his constituents, I would be glad to pick that issue up with the Rail Minister.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Safety concerns are blighting passenger rail services. Constituents working at Leicester train station have raised serious concerns about security gaps, particularly the near impossibility of reaching transport police during emergencies. With nearly 80,000 offences recorded on our railways in 2023 and 2024 and the RMT reporting staff being punched, threatened, spat at and abused simply for doing their jobs, what assessment have Ministers made of whether private security contractors at railway stations have the enforcement powers they need to keep both passengers and workers safe?

Keir Mather: I thank the hon. Member for that important question. The safety of staff and passengers on our railway is of the utmost importance to this Government, and we are committed to working with the British Transport police to make that a reality. Although in some regards the statistics are positive—theft at railway stations has reduced—the hon. Member is right that there is always work to do to ensure our staff can deliver the railway services we need without fear of being assaulted. I will certainly pick up his point about security staff at stations and share whatever assessment I can make in writing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Last night, the Secretary of State claimed that the arrival of the class 701s at South Western Railway was an example of what a nationalised railway could do. As she well knows, those trains were ordered back in 2017 by a private company from a private company, using private finance. Her only involvement was some garish vinyl wrap and to turn up and claim the credit, all while ordering Avanti West Coast and, now, Govia Thameslink to cut services to the public. She told us that nationalisation would be

“more than a paint job”

and that passengers would come first. Why has she done the exact opposite?

Keir Mather: The trains that the shadow Minister references were sat in the sidings for years, underused, and have been brought into service by this Government. If he wants to improve the passenger experience and make sure that promoting the interests of passengers and future passengers on the railway is at the heart of how our system operates, he should have done the right thing and voted for the Railways Bill on Third Reading yesterday.

Jerome Mayhew: The Minister refers to yesterday's vote. Last night, he and his Secretary of State ordered Labour Members to vote against the protection of rail discounts for veterans and their families. He told us that the Government have “no plans” to cancel veterans' railcards. At the last general election, Labour had no plans for a family farm tax or to raise our taxes—in fact, they had no plan for how to govern the country. Surely that is all the more reason to protect veterans in the Railways Bill, so why will the Secretary of State and the Minister not stand up for our brave veterans?

Keir Mather: It is disappointing that the shadow Minister fails to recognise the fact that I confirmed at this Dispatch Box last night that none of the existing concessionary schemes for veterans are changing. More than that, we accepted a fantastic recommendation from a colleague on the other side of the House to increase the entitlements available for veterans and their families when attending Remembrance Sunday services. This Government are putting veterans and their families at the heart of our rail network.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Young people in Oxford, Bicester, Winslow, Bletchley and Milton Keynes are sitting their exams, but they continue to not

be able to use a train to get to school or for leisure, despite this phase of East West Rail opening 18 months ago. I have a little exam question for the Minister. What timescale will the Government commit to for the start of regular passenger services: Andy Burnham returning to the House of Commons, a change of Prime Minister, the formal creation of Great British Railways, or the next general election?

Keir Mather: I understand that Chiltern Railways is leading negotiations on this important issue, but the hon. Gentleman is right to be impatient about the need to get people where they need to go in his constituency. The Government are committed to trying to deliver at pace in collaboration with stakeholders, and I will ensure that he is kept abreast of any developments.

Summer Rail Travel

4. **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): Whether she is taking steps to incentivise summer rail travel. [900353]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): While we bring passenger services into public ownership, we have frozen rail fares so that passengers can travel for less this summer—the first fares freeze in 30 years, saving passengers £600 million. Alongside that, our £3 bus fare cap and free bus travel for children in August will help families make the most of the holidays. For road users, we are also keeping costs down by continuing the freeze on fuel duty for the rest of this year.

John Milne: Train travel to the south coast increases significantly in the summer months, but Horsham sits on a line to the south that faces severe delays and cancellations. Govia Thameslink's forecasts show demand continuing to rise sharply. Without a resolution to the notorious Croydon bottleneck, we risk undermining economic growth and confidence in public transport. Where does Croydon sit in the Government's priorities, and will the Minister commit to finally advancing these long-promised, endlessly postponed works?

Keir Mather: I understand that some of these temporary changes reflect lower summer demand, which falls by around 6% overall and 15% in peak periods. Aligning services to that reduced usage enables a more cost-efficient timetable. It reduces taxpayer subsidy and it unlocks savings. The hon. Member is right to point to where that might be causing an impact for his constituents, so I would be glad to pick that up with him to see what more we can do to advance the pace of works that affect his constituency.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): My constituents are concerned about the reduction in Thameslink services serving Slade Green and Abbey Wood during the six weeks of the school summer holidays. Is it possible to review the decision? Given that both Southeastern and Thameslink are in public ownership, will the Minister outline how their timetables and services can be better integrated at Slade Green to improve punctuality and journey times for my constituents?

Keir Mather: There is always more to be done to unlock more benefits from a cost-efficient timetable, and I recognise the importance of good-quality rail

services to my hon. Friend's constituents. I will ask the Rail Minister to write to him to set out what is possible in this particular case.

Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire: Transport Links

5. **Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve transport links between Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire in the context of the Universal United Kingdom resort. [900354]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): The Government are delivering a £1.3 billion package of transport and infrastructure improvements across Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, including £474 million of investment in strategic road and rail upgrades around Bedford, a new four-platform station at Wixams and improvements to the A421 serving the Universal United Kingdom resort. The Government have also committed £2.5 billion for East West Rail over the spending review period, with a new station at Stewartby to serve Universal. Just last week, we announced £117 million for a new eastern entrance at Bletchley. Together, these investments will improve connectivity, support economic growth and create opportunities across the region.

Ian Sollom: The Universal resort will be a major employer, as well as a visitor destination, and East West Rail is central to people getting there sustainably. For my constituents, that includes being able to access the railway sustainably. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the planning of the new stations at Tempsford and Cambourne will include the design of travel connections by bus, cycle and foot? Will she also confirm that provision for an additional new station to the east of St Neots will be reviewed?

Heidi Alexander: I am really pleased that we are accelerating the delivery of a new station at Tempsford, which will be the connection between East West Rail and the east coast main line. The Chancellor brought that forward in her Budget in 2024, and I want to make sure that public transport services are properly integrated with new stations, whether that is at Tempsford or Cambourne.

As for a potential new station east of St Neots, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the current proposals include new stations at Tempsford and Cambourne. We are pursuing further opportunities across the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, but any future station would need to demonstrate value for money, affordability and local support.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It has been announced to great fanfare that East West Rail will be the main transport connection from Cambridgeshire to Bedfordshire, as well as in the other direction to get to the new Universal park. However, if the Government cannot get the bit of East West Rail that has been built operational—we know that that is all down to a row with the unions—what hope does anyone in Cambridgeshire or Bedfordshire, or anyone wanting to go to Universal, have of being able to travel there by rail?

Heidi Alexander: I would caution the hon. Gentleman against his indignant tone, given the inheritance that we received from his Government on East West Rail. When we came into office, no operator had been appointed to run East West Rail; we got on with it and did it. We had to finish the work at Winslow station; we got on with it and did it. We need to ensure that services on East West Rail are fit for the sort of usage that is now likely to happen, given that planning permission has been granted for Universal, and that includes the nature of staffing on the rail line. As the Minister for Aviation said in response to a previous question, Chiltern Railways is leading the discussions, and we are keen to see services enter into operation as soon as possible.

Road Junction Safety

6. **Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): What steps she is taking help improve safety at road junctions. [900355]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Earlier this year, this Government published the first national road safety strategy in over a decade, setting out how we will cut road deaths and serious injuries on Britain's roads by 65% by 2035. In March, we announced the third road investment strategy, which includes a targeted fund to improve safety at junctions on the strategic road network, and we are investing £21 billion of local transport funding in regional and local authorities so that they are able to make improvements on the parts of the network for which they are responsible.

Dr Pinkerton: In my constituency of Surrey Heath, the M3/A322 junction between Bagshot and Lightwater remains a serious congestion bottleneck for local residents and a serious source of frustration for motorway users—it is notorious on all morning travel reports. Poor advance signage and a confusing road layout cause frequent near misses and dangerous last-minute manoeuvres. We can add to the mix a doubling of housing targets in our local area. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that critical junctions are safe, clearly signposted and fit for future population growth?

Heidi Alexander: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the M3/A322 junction, and I understand that some improvements have already been made to the northbound section. It is Surrey county council's responsibility to make improvements at the junction—I understand that it has the ability to make changes to traffic lights, for example. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman continue the conversation with Surrey county council. The Liberal Democrats, who now form a larger group on the council, may be able to influence the thinking of that local authority.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Little Parndon, Pemberley academy and Latton Green are three primary schools in my constituency of Harlow that have raised concerns about road safety outside their schools. They have asked the county council to consider introducing zebra crossings, but they are not eligible because they are too close to a junction. Will the Secretary of State or one of her Ministers meet me to discuss this issue

and whether we can change the guidance, so that young people can be safe when crossing the road outside their school?

Heidi Alexander: I am really keen to ensure that we have safe routes to school, and that we enable more children and their families to walk and cycle to school more often. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the particular situation in his constituency, and I advise him to look out for the publication of the third cycling and walking investment strategy tomorrow. It will have more information on the work we are doing to improve journeys to school for children.

Mr Speaker: Surely it will be coming to the House first.

Timetable Changes: Berwick-upon-Tweed

7. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of timetable changes on passengers using Berwick-upon-Tweed station. [900356]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): The new timetable improves capacity and journey times along the east coast main line, delivering over 60,000 additional weekly seats. Overall connectivity at Berwick has been strengthened, with more frequent regional services and better connections to Newcastle. CrossCountry now provides an hourly service, and TransPennine Express has increased the number of services between Newcastle and Edinburgh from five to eight a day in each direction, with further improvements planned.

John Lamont: In a survey I conducted in the Borders about Network Rail's new timetable changes, more than 70% of residents said they were now less likely to use Berwick-upon-Tweed station as a result. The timetable changes mean fewer direct services to London, with many passengers having to change trains. This is having a significant impact on elderly train users and disabled train users. Does the Minister agree that, if his plan for Great British Railways is to be a success, frequent and reliable services from Berwick-upon-Tweed station to London need to be reinstated?

Keir Mather: I thank the hon. Member for championing the needs of both elderly residents and people with disabilities, but also everybody who uses those direct services from Berwick-upon-Tweed station to London. I know that a small number of direct services have been cut, and I appreciate the fact that he has been doing community outreach on this important point. I suggest that he shares the results with LNER and Network Rail, which can use his findings to inform future planning, but I am very happy to work with him further on this important issue.

Buses: Tariff Harmonisation

8. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade on harmonising import tariffs for diesel and electric buses. [900357]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Following the UK bus manufacturing expert panel meeting in March, my officials and I continue to engage with our counterparts across Government—including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade and his team, who are responsible for UK Government tariff policy—on support for UK bus manufacturing and the transition to zero emission fleets.

Euan Stainbank: Imported diesel buses have a 16% base rate tariff, yet electric buses have a tariff rate of 10%. As we seek to transition fully to electric after 2030, and considering the existential risk that the under-investigation Chinese competition currently presents to the 50,000 jobs that depend on UK bus manufacturing, will Ministers consider raising this matter urgently with Business and Trade Ministers to encourage them to harmonise those rates at 16% at least?

Simon Lightwood: I regularly raise issues affecting the bus sector with the Department for Business and Trade and will continue to do so. I will raise the specific point my hon. Friend makes with the relevant Minister and write to him following that conversation.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Bus companies and local authorities are rightly being encouraged to buy electric buses. However, half of new buses in the United Kingdom are bought from China, which does not support our great British bus industry. Will the Minister elaborate on whether the current procurement rules for electric buses are suitable for encouraging bus companies to buy British?

Simon Lightwood: On the UK bus manufacturing expert panel, we have managed to strike an agreement with all mayoral combined authorities to insist on at least 10% social value in their contracts, which I think is a really important step forward. We will continue to work with operators and combined authorities to do our best to ensure that British manufacturers are able to compete.

Road Investment Strategy 3: Reducing Danger

9. **Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green):** What steps she is taking to reduce road danger through the third road investment strategy. [900358]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Safety is at the heart of the third road investment strategy, which includes a new national programme to deliver targeted safety improvements on higher-risk roads. It also sets National Highways a challenging target to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on our motorways and major A roads, aligning with our overall target of reducing the number of KSIs on British roads by 65% by 2035.

Siân Berry: The Secretary of State's new third road investment strategy requires a reduction of only 7.5% in the number of people killed or seriously injured on the strategic road network by 2031, yet meeting the 2035 target in the road safety strategy requires a reduction of about 55% across England's roads by that date. That means National Highways can get away with doing

almost nothing, while local authorities are left to make up the difference. How can the Minister justify handing £27 billion to this failing body, while councils across the country are crying out for funds to make everyday walking and cycling safer?

Simon Lightwood: Motorways are already among the safest roads in the country. The number of KSIs on motorways in 2024 represented 3% of the total for England, despite motorways carrying over a fifth of all road traffic. The target reflects that. The approach is challenging but realistic, focused on what National Highways can directly deliver over this period. Of course, that sits alongside wider action in the road safety strategy to dramatically reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries across all roads in Great Britain.

Transport Decarbonisation

10. **Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help decarbonise the transport sector. [900360]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): Decarbonising transport is vital for our energy security and to make the network fit for the future. We are turbocharging the roll-out of electric vehicles, overhauling public transport, supporting low carbon fuel uptake in aviation, and funding technology innovation for maritime through the multimillion-pound UK Shipping Office for Reducing Emissions research programme.

Amanda Martin: Portsmouth international port has invested significantly in shore power infrastructure, supported by Government funding, to enable ships to connect to grid electricity while berthed, rather than run diesel engines. However, the high cost of electricity is threatening to render the entire investment worthless. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that shore power infrastructure at UK ports is economically viable, given that grid transmission standing charges make shore power significantly more expensive than marine diesel and transmission costs nearly doubled in April?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is an absolute champion for Portsmouth international port and I am sure that she will be thinking of its 50th anniversary celebrations next week, when it will be bringing its pioneering work with Brittany Ferries on this issue to fruition. I recognise, however, that high electricity prices can impact the economic viability of shore power in the short term. The Government are working to improve shore power connection times, and will continue to engage with the sector and across Government on mitigating high electricity costs. UK SHORE, our £448 million investment in decarbonising maritime, will allow applicants to include onsite energy generation and battery storage to help reduce costs.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Can the Minister assure me that when the diesel trains that operate on the South Western Railway network are replaced with electric trains to decarbonise the network, there will be no reduction in service for my commuting constituents in Woking?

Keir Mather: We believe that the benefits of having electric rolling stock for our train services actually allow us to improve efficiency on the railway, and I hope that those improvements can be realised for the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Transport Hubs: UV Index Alerts

11. **Carolyn Harris** (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the potential merits of providing UV index alerts on public information boards at transport hubs. [900362]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): The Department has not made an assessment of the potential merits of providing UV index alerts on public information boards at transport hubs. UV guidance and forecasts are published by the UK Health Security Agency and the Met Office. They are included in TV and radio weather reporting and can be readily accessed on a range of weather apps.

Carolyn Harris: One of the key findings of the recent beauty, hair and wellbeing all-party parliamentary group UV safety report was that the public do not fully understand the UV index. With evidence showing that over 86% of skin cancer is entirely preventable, the report recommends that daily UV ratings be widely advertised across communities, including transport hubs. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how that could help to educate and protect the public, and ultimately save lives?

Keir Mather: I know my hon. Friend is producing a report on this critical matter and I would be very glad to meet her to discuss its findings. We ought to take every opportunity to ensure that people understand the impact of UV on their skin health, so I look forward to meeting her to discuss those findings further.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that answer and the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for bringing this issue forward. She always brings forward incredible issues for us all to be aware of. The figures for skin cancer in Northern Ireland are rising, and she has brought UV index alerts to the Minister's attention. It is important that he takes action after discussing the matter with the hon. Lady, but after that meeting will he convey his thoughts to the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that Ministers there do the same thing that the hon. Lady wants? If she wants it, then, in my opinion, we should support her.

Keir Mather: The hon. Member is right to say that skin cancer affects people across the United Kingdom and we need to work as one United Kingdom to deal with it. I will certainly take what I learn from my meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East and reflect it through to colleagues in both the Department of Health and Social Care and the devolved Administrations, including in Northern Ireland.

Bus Services

13. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What plans she has to work with local leaders to improve bus services. [900367]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): This Government passed the Bus Services Act 2025 to give local leaders greater control over their bus services, and we are supporting local transport authorities with over £3 billion of funding over the next three years to make the improvements a reality. We are also providing support and guidance on enhanced partnerships and franchising, giving local leaders the tools they need to ensure services meet local needs.

Liz Twist: People across the north-east, including in my constituency of Blaydon and Consett, have been benefiting from a £2.50 bus fare for a single journey, funded thanks to the Labour Government and Kim McGuinness, our Labour Mayor of the North East. With that fare, there have been over 100 million bus journeys and an increase in bus patronage. To build on that success, we need the national bus fare cap funding from this Government to continue. Will the Minister confirm that the Government intend to keep the £3 national cap on bus fares beyond March 2027?

Simon Lightwood: We recognise how important affordable bus fares are, which is why we have extended the £3 bus fare cap in England until March 2027. We are evaluating the impact of the scheme, including on passengers and value for money, to inform decisions on the future bus fare policy. Alongside the cap, this August we are giving every child free bus travel, building on the Kids Go Free scheme pioneered by Mayor Kim McGuinness in the north-east.

Transport Services: Epping Forest

14. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve transport services in Epping Forest constituency. [900368]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): London's Labour mayor is using part of the £2.2 billion settlement provided by the Government in the spending review to make Central line upgrades and refurbishments that will benefit the hon. Member's constituents. Essex county council and London boroughs will also receive over £500 million to maintain and improve local roads by 2030. In addition, Essex will receive over £377 million of funding over the next three years to support its transport priorities.

Dr Hudson: My constituents face many transport issues. We Central line users endure delays, overcrowding and graffiti. Meanwhile, residents in Waltham Abbey have no access to the tube at all and have been left with a limited bus network since Transport for London withdrew services. Young people are unable to get to the next stage in their education, and residents are struggling to get into London. I pay tribute to the campaign to bring back red buses to Waltham Abbey. Please can the Government press the Mayor of London, TfL and Essex county council to work together to give the people of Waltham Abbey and beyond the transport services they desperately need?

Simon Lightwood: The Government are investing over £2 billion in London's transport network, which is the largest Government investment in London's existing

transport network for over a decade. That means that London can invest £500 million in the Central line improvement programme to upgrade signalling and refurbish those 30-year-old trains. Some refurbished trains are already in operation, and the programme will complete by 2029. The hon. Member also referenced the issue with graffiti. I know that the mayor is concerned about that and has deployed a dedicated team of over 120 people to remove graffiti as quickly as possible; over 3,000 tags were removed from Central line trains in April.

Road Safety

15. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve road safety. [900369]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): In January, we published the road safety strategy, which envisages a safer future for everyone on the road through targets to cut deaths and serious injuries by 65% for everyone and by 70% for children by 2035. It also promotes partnership working between Government, local authorities, industry and others to save thousands of lives and ease pressure on the NHS.

Sarah Coombes: I was grateful to the Secretary of State for visiting Kenrick Way in my constituency last year, which is used as a racetrack by dangerous car cruisers, making residents' lives hell. I have been campaigning for a camera to be installed there, which finally happened a few weeks ago, and I found out yesterday that it has already caught people driving at 125 mph along this residential road. Other countries install technology to limit speeds for repeat offenders, so can the Secretary of State set out what kind of technological solutions we are looking at to limit speeds for repeat dangerous drivers in this country?

Heidi Alexander: I recall the visit to my hon. Friend's constituency, where I met her and the west midlands police and crime commissioner, Simon Foster. I remember being struck by how dangerous and pervasive that form of reckless behaviour is on her local roads. The Government are considering whether to mandate alcolocks in cars in cases of repeat and high-risk drink-driving offenders. My hon. Friend raises an interesting question about whether technological solutions could also be applied in cases of dangerous street racers. I will ask officials in my Department to do more work on what the possibilities are.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Residents of Park Avenue in Eastbourne like David Tomlinson and Cat Harris have been campaigning with the headteacher of Ratton school, Gavin Peevers, and folks in my team like Euan Morrison to make their road safer after cats have been struck by speeding cars and children have had near misses on the way into school. The previous Conservative-led county council failed to implement more traffic-calming measures to tackle speeding and road safety, so will the Secretary of State join me in encouraging the new Reform-led county council to tackle those issues on Park Avenue?

Heidi Alexander: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his campaigning on this issue. We do need to make the environment around schools safer for children. Some of

the most successful and enduring interventions to improve road safety have been things like school streets initiatives. If traffic-calming measures can reduce the number of people being killed or seriously injured, it is right that local authorities look at the local situation and do not hesitate to make the interventions that could make all the difference.

Topical Questions

T1. [900371] **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): The King's Speech promised to change the country for the better, and this Government are getting on with the job. Yesterday we completed the passage of the Railways Bill through this place, paving the way for Great British Railways and an industry that finally works for passengers instead of profit. We have already seen new trains on South Western Railway and more capacity on LNER, and the first GBR-branded trains are now in service. More than half of train operating companies are now in public ownership and are performing better, on average, than those still in private hands. *[Interruption.]* That is just one part of how we are transforming journeys.

Tomorrow I am launching the third cycling and walking investment strategy, building on the investment already announced, to enable more people to make safe and healthy choices to get around. We are progressing legislation—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry, Secretary of State. Mr Mayhew, this is continuous. It won't do to try and ask me, because obviously, these questions are not for me. I need a bit of silence; if not, I don't think we will need your company for the rest of the day.

Heidi Alexander: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Opposition like to chunter, but this Government are backing our aspirational words with real action. A stronger, fairer Britain is what we promised, and it is what we will deliver.

Alex Ballinger: I have been contacted by a number of residents including Stuart from Quarry Bank and Stephanie from Homer Hill about the dangerous use of modified e-bikes and e-scooters in parks across the constituency. Older people are particularly worried about youths riding dangerously without thought for road conditions. Will the Secretary of State set out what steps she is taking to help to improve safety and reduce the dangerous use of these modified e-bikes and e-scooters?

Heidi Alexander: E-bikes that are modified to go over 15.5 mph are illegal. We continue to support the police with the tools they need to enforce road traffic legislation. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Crime and Policing Act 2026 has given the police stronger powers to seize vehicles used antisocially without first requiring a warning and has introduced new respect orders, enabling police and councils to ban persistent offenders from areas where they cause harm.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): More than two thirds of driving test centres have a maximum 24-week waiting time, and the average waiting time for a test is 22.3 weeks—a month longer than in July '24. For all the Government's talk of recruiting new examiners, the instructor recruitment conversion rate is just 4%. When will the Government stop talking about taking action and actually get a grip of the driving test wait time crisis?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is continuing driving examiner recruitment, with 1,577 full-time driving examiners in May 2026—an increase of 147 compared with May 2025, when there were 1,430 full-time equivalents.

T3. [900373] **Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): It is a good time to be a commuter in Welwyn Hatfield. Trains from all five of our stations are now back under public control, and we have fast trains from Welwyn North to London King's Cross, which have been a big success. We are right on track. However, does the Secretary of State agree that it is really important to support commuters all across my wonderful constituency and that we should look at all options for increasing the number of trains serving Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, especially during peak time?

Heidi Alexander: The Government expect all parts of the new, publicly owned railway to plan services and timetables to meet expected passenger demand while maximising value for the taxpayer. A certain predecessor of my hon. Friend used to talk a good game on better rail services, but it is a fact that constituents had to wait until my hon. Friend was elected as their Labour Member of Parliament to get a Government who are prepared to put words into action.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): The current cycling and walking investment strategy includes a target for 55% of trips to be walked, wheeled or cycled by 2035. Is the Secretary of State confident that there is a realistic plan with sufficient funding to achieve that target?

Heidi Alexander: Unlike the previous Government, who took £200 million out of the active travel budget, this Government are putting £600 million into improving walking and cycling and ensuring safer routes to school and safer crossings more generally. We are making sure that we invest in safe infrastructure to enable more people to walk and cycle more often. It is a priority for the Government to get this right. Walking and cycling will save people money, since they will not have to fork out at petrol stations, and it is better for the country's long-term health and the environment. What's not to like?

T5. [900376] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): We are seeing Lime bike leg injuries, antisocial parking, and pedestrian crossings being ignored—and one constituent of mine has even had multiple surgeries after a hit and run by a child on a hacked Lime bike. Every week the costs to the NHS and local authorities

soar, while profits for the venture capitalists in California who started these companies go through the roof. I am really keen to see safer cycling in London—I am a keen cyclist myself—so will the Minister set out when the really important new regulations for the dockless e-bike sector will kick in for Londoners?

Simon Lightwood: I, too, want to see more cycling in London, and in towns and cities across the UK. Dockless cycles are one way to support that aim. We want to empower local leaders to shape shared cycle schemes so that they can deliver the greatest possible benefits and mitigate any possible issues. We will introduce local licensing regulations and guidance in the coming months.

T2. [900372] **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): The Maritime and Coastguard Agency's decision to discontinue hourly payments to volunteer rescue coastguards threatens the safety of Burnham-on-Sea in my constituency and coastal communities around the country. It is inevitable that fewer people will be able to volunteer to assist the coastguard if they cannot be reimbursed for time lost off work. The Minister will be aware that this decision follows a recent Court of Appeal case, so what steps will he take to ensure that the judgment does not lead to a reduction in the number of willing volunteers who keep our coast safe for residents and tourists?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): The hon. Gentleman is right that the Court of Appeal's judgment made clear that the current arrangements could not continue, but we are committed to protecting volunteers who preserve a valuable form of public service. The revised model protects choice, flexibility and the ability for people to serve alongside their primary employment. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman and Members across the House to ensure that we continue to have volunteers at the heart of our seafaring nation.

T8. [900380] **Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister has seen at first hand the disruption and misery caused by the closure of the Broadmead Road bridge for safety reasons. He will also be aware from his visit that the cost of repairs dwarfs what the London borough of Redbridge is able to afford. What support can the Department for Transport provide to make sure that the bridge is reopened, while minimising disruption to the Central line during the repair works, so that we can get Redbridge moving again?

Simon Lightwood: As my right hon. Friend mentioned, I have seen at first hand the impact that the bridge's closure is having on the local community. We announced a structures fund to support rundown bridges, decaying flyovers and worn-out tunnels. Local authorities have until early August to apply for this investment, and the Department is already engaging with Redbridge council on its application.

T4. [900375] **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): Delays and cancellations on the South Western Railway network are horrendous. Nationalisation has not gone to plan. Last week I asked the Leader of the House why that is the case, and he said that we do not need a debate on it because he expects things to improve.

Please can the Secretary of State tell the House what key performance indicators the Government are using to measure success?

Heidi Alexander: I speak regularly with the new integrated managing director of South Western, Lawrence Bowman, to ensure that he is doing absolutely everything that he can, from both a train operations and an infrastructure management perspective, to bear down on the disruption that the hon. Gentleman's constituents have had to experience. I accept that over the last year, performance at South Western Railway has not been up to scratch, but I assure him that we will leave no stone unturned in making sure that his constituents have a better travel experience in future.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Yesterday, the Transport Committee published the report on our inquiry into taxis and private hire licensing. Out-of-area working was a significant issue of concern in much of the evidence we received and for many of our witnesses, and the issue was also highlighted in Baroness Casey's report on group-based sexual exploitation released last year. What are the Government doing to restrict out-of-area working for taxis and private hire vehicles?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. She will be aware that we have already legislated to establish national standards and to reform the way that enforcement action can be taken against private hire drivers and vehicles, no matter where they are licensed. Those standards will provide a robust framework to make sure that people are safe wherever they live, work or travel. I believe that drivers and operators should be licensed where they intend to provide services. We are bringing forward a draft taxi and private hire vehicle Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny in this Session, and I would be grateful for the expertise of my hon. Friend's Committee in looking at that. We want to look at the issue of out-of-area working holistically to make sure that we do not reduce the availability of private hire services for everyone, while also making sure that we have very high standards in place.

T6. [900377] **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of the provision in the national planning policy framework that if a proposed development is within 800 metres of a train station, it is a presumed yes from the planning inspector's point of view. However, that creates a planning loophole in my Spelthorne constituency because Kempton Park station is the first one outside the Oyster zone, so no matter how many houses are built there, no one will use the station because they will all go one stop up the line to Hampton to travel much more cheaply. As a result of that loophole, Barratt Redrow is planning to put in a planning application to flatten Kempton Park racecourse and put 2,000 homes on it. Will the Secretary of State look at the planning loophole in the NPPF to ensure that it is not abused? How would she feel if she were indirectly responsible for the destruction of an internationally famous, iconic racecourse?

Heidi Alexander: It is right to prioritise development in sustainable locations, namely around railway stations. The establishment of Great British Railways will enable

us to look more holistically at the way in which the ticketing and fares system works, and we are expanding pay-as-you-go ticketing to give a more seamless experience to people who travel in the south-east. I do not know the details of the planning application the hon. Gentleman refers to. If he wishes to write to me, I will look into it in more detail.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): This Government have delivered the funding necessary to build mass transit in West Yorkshire, and I am very proud of that. However, the delay in the delivery timetable has left many of my constituents extremely frustrated that the Leeds and Bradford tram will not be delivered until the late 2030s. We have been stung too many times on mass transit projects in my part of the world. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she will do everything within her power to accelerate the delivery of mass transit in West Yorkshire? After all, both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have said that it is time for trams.

Heidi Alexander: I know that there is a long and painful history of failed attempts to build mass transit in West Yorkshire, and I understand why my hon. Friend's constituents feel let down by what has happened in the past. I assure him that this Government fully support Mayor Tracy Brabin's plans for mass transit, and we are working hand in glove with her. Indeed, I believe that at this very moment, the Minister for Rail is meeting her to discuss what more the Government can do to ensure that we finally deliver the mass transit system that my hon. Friend's constituents and West Yorkshire deserve.

T7. [900378] **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Coastguard rescue officers are brave men and women who work on the frontline to save lives, keep our coastline safe and, at times, arrive on the scene of small boat crossings. It is therefore shameful that the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has decided to strip them of the small payment they receive and rehire them as unpaid volunteers. Will the Minister meet me, my constituent Martin Groom and other brave frontline CROs to discuss a way forward and save the coastguard as we know it from collapse?

Keir Mather: I would be happy to meet the hon. Member, with whom I work productively on a number of issues in this space. He will be aware that the MCA is responding to a Court of Appeal judgment that made it clear that the current arrangement could not legally continue. We believe that protecting volunteering preserves one of the most valuable forms of public service, which he outlines. I look forward to working with him to support those volunteers.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): The Minister will know that I have been campaigning on the availability of driving tests, so I was pleased to see this week that our changes have released driving tests back into the system. Will he update me on how the demand for tests in my North West Leicestershire constituency will be matched with the supply of new driving tests?

Simon Lightwood: We are indeed going further to tackle this issue: since 31 March drivers have been limited to two changes of their driving test, since 12 May only learners have been able to amend and book their

tests, and since 9 June the area that a learner driver can move their test to has been limited. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency will also continue to use Ministry of Defence driving examiners to provide additional practical tests.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Lefarydd. Coastguards in my constituency were told only last week that they are to lose their remuneration, and they are furious that their specialist skills and dedication are now being undervalued. I heard the Minister say earlier that he was prepared to meet colleagues from across the House. I hope that the offer is extended to all colleagues with coastguard stations, because the risk to recruitment and retention, as well as to the work of other emergency services, such as the police, needs to be clearly understood.

Keir Mather: The right hon. Lady's question reflects the strength of feeling across the House about the volunteers who man the coastguard, as well as about the need to ensure that the consequences of the judgment are fully understood and volunteers get the support they need. I would be glad to meet her. I should also note that the chief executive of the MCA will be doing a drop-in with Members of Parliament; I will ensure that the details are shared with her.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Residents in Hertford and Stortford tell me that their bus services are too often irregular or delayed, causing unnecessary disruption and stress. I welcome the £19.5 million allocated to Hertfordshire county council through the local authority bus grant last year, but will the Minister say a bit more about how we will work with the Lib Dem administration to ensure that the money is used effectively, and about what this Labour Government are doing to improve bus services in semi-rural communities such as mine?

Simon Lightwood: We are doing a number of pilots to demonstrate the potential effectiveness of bus franchising in rural areas. That is on top of ensuring that, for the first time, rurality is considered in bus funding.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Passengers on Great Northern services to and from King's Lynn are fed up with repeated weekend closures. Given that the Secretary of State now oversees the track and those trains, does she agree that discounts should be offered when rail replacement buses are in operation?

Heidi Alexander: It is sometimes essential to do maintenance work over the weekends, and I appreciate that that can cause disruption to the travelling public. We try to keep that at a minimum and properly communicate with passengers in advance so they can plan their journeys accordingly. We would not be financially able to provide direct compensation at the current time, but I want to minimise the disruption that the hon. Gentleman's constituents and the travelling public across the country experience on those occasions.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety has outlined the potential benefits of changing default speed limits on

urban and rural minor roads to 20 mph. What is the Department's position on that, and will it be reflected in the next guidance for local transport authorities on setting local speed limits?

Heidi Alexander: Decisions about speed limits on local roads are matters for the local highway authority. I think that that is right, because local leaders will know their areas best. I am also acutely aware that if someone is hit by a car travelling at 20 mph, they are five times less likely to die than if they are hit by one travelling at 30 mph. Appropriate decisions need to be taken by the appropriate authority for local circumstances.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My constituent Sophia is 35, has cerebral palsy and numerous other difficulties and spends her life in a wheelchair as a result of poor NHS care when she was born. Her parents have a mobility wheelchair-accessible vehicle and take her to daycare four days a week, 13 miles away, for 48 weeks of the year, clocking up 49,920 miles for daycare alone every five years. She has numerous hospital appointments, which is a trip of 58 miles, and trips to the dentist and other specialists punctuate every single month. Under the Government's new legislation, Sophia's parents—her carers—will have to pay 25p for every mile over the new 50,000-mile threshold, which is likely to cost them several thousand pounds. Will the Minister impress on her colleagues the need to adjust that threshold for life in the country—

Mr Speaker: Order. One of us is going to sit down, and it will not be me. As a Whip, the hon. Lady well knows that topical questions are meant to be short and punchy. As important as this is, I am sure the Minister has got the answer ready.

Simon Lightwood: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: Much easier—just ask to meet the Minister, and save time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The previous Government set aside a designated fund to address the issue of coastal erosion. On the A20 in my constituency, coastal erosion happens with ferocity every winter and every spring. Will the Minister consider setting aside a designated fund for coastal erosion for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as the Government did in the past?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is Transport questions—there must be a link somewhere. Good luck, Minister.

Keir Mather: While I think this is, in the main, an issue for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Gentleman is right that coastal erosion can affect a variety of transport infrastructure, including our ports. The forthcoming national policy statement for ports will address the issue he raises.

Mr Speaker: I think it is his kayak—he cannot get it because of the erosion.

Compassionate Use Medicine Schemes: VAT

10.32 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the effect of VAT on the availability of medicines through compassionate use schemes.

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is very important for patients to have access to innovative medicines as quickly as possible, especially where there is unmet clinical need or no alternative treatment. We are working to streamline the decisions of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency so that NHS patients benefit from the latest medicines as soon as they are proven to be safe and effective.

Early access and compassionate use programmes can play an important role in enabling patient access to medicines ahead of routine commissioning decisions. However, we should be clear that these programmes are commercial decisions taken by pharmaceutical companies: companies choose whether and how to provide medicines free of charge to patients and the NHS before the medicines go through licensing, post-trial access or a funding decision.

The tax system is, as Members know, a matter for the Chancellor, so I will not get into details about that at the Dispatch Box, but under long-standing VAT rules, supplies of goods free of charge can still be treated as taxable “deemed supplies” where input tax has been recovered. That means that VAT can apply even where no payment is made, reflecting established principles of the tax system. We recognise the concerns raised by industry and others about the potential impact of this treatment on the provision of free-of-charge medicines. We are working closely with the Treasury and His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to explore options to address these issues, as witnessed by my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, who is here with me on the Front Bench. We will carefully consider the legal, fiscal and operational implications of any potential changes. Until then, we will continue to engage constructively with industry, the NHS and all our partners to make sure that British patients, who we have in our thoughts at all times, have access to innovative medicines.

Dr Johnson: I declare an interest as a consultant paediatrician. One of the worst moments as a paediatrician is when all treatments have failed and there is no suitable clinical trial. At that point, in those dark moments, compassionate use schemes can be a glimmer of hope, and new unlicensed medicines with clinical potential have been provided free to the patient, and free to the NHS. Last year, however, the Government started charging VAT on the deemed value of those drugs, meaning that companies had to pay tax to give the drugs away. When hearing that “every meeting” with Labour MPs was about

“who can we tax in order to pay benefits to others?”

few would have imagined that that would include potentially lifesaving, charitably given drugs for sick adults and dying children.

Following lobbying by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), the Government have paused enforcement while they review the situation, but they have said that liabilities remain, and they are taking too long. Bayer has now withdrawn from the scheme, and others could follow. Patients are at risk. Does the Minister recognise that that makes trials in the UK less attractive, and that HMRC’s pause is not enough? How much money do the Government expect to raise with this VAT? How did the Government find time to reduce VAT on fairground rides at Alton Towers, but not to sort out this problem? How many patients have missed out so far? Does the Minister recognise that this delay could cost lives, and who was the Minister who signed this off? Was it the Health Secretary when he was a Minister in the Treasury?

I understand that the Government say this situation is not new, and that it may apply to a law dating back over 30 years. I gently point out, however, that the application is new, and that the levers to change it—and change it quickly—lie in this Government’s hands. Patients need them to act swiftly.

Karin Smyth: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s service as a clinician, and she is right to say that, at times, for patients facing such situations, compassionate use schemes are a glimmer of hope, but I think the rest of her comments were ill deserved. I understand the desire of the Opposition to attack a new Secretary of State because he was in the Treasury, but I will move on to the actual issues, because patients care about this. The rules had been in place for a long time when this Government took office, and we have not changed them. We have inherited this system, and we are looking at how we can improve it.

The previous Government could have abolished VAT on such medicines, but they chose not to do so. What is more, since we have been in office, we have struck a deal with the USA that not only guarantees 0% on pharmaceutical tariffs, but changes the old formula that we use for medicines. For the first time in 20 years, the Government are spending more to ensure that our patients are first in the queue for innovative medicines. The previous Government could also have raised the threshold, but they chose not to do so. Now, for example, patients facing Duchenne muscular dystrophy, children as young as 12 who need a brain cancer drug, or those who have a type of rare and aggressive stomach cancer, are being treated.

We recognise the importance of the UK remaining a leading location for life sciences, investment and innovation. That is precisely why we are engaging with industry and partners across the Government to understand and address concerns, including the issue of VAT payable on donated medicines. In considering a way forward, it is important to safeguard the robust and fair system by which routine access to medicines commissioned by the NHS is determined. A range of options are being considered. No decisions have been made at this stage, and I will not pre-empt any.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her response—I am sure she is working hard to resolve this issue. As the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) explained, a pause was introduced. That was welcomed by charities

[Dr Scott Arthur]

such as Sarcoma UK, which asked for that pause to be made permanent. If the Minister is working hard to get the Treasury to understand the impact that the VAT charge is having on patients, will she invite a Treasury Minister to meet charities such as Sarcoma UK to hear first hand about the impact of charging VAT?

Karin Smyth: I commend my hon. Friend's work in this area on behalf of patients. As I said, no decisions have been made and we are continuing to work on this issue. The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is with me on the Front Bench and will be happy to keep engaging with all interested parties.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I was deeply shocked to hear about the change in HMRC's policy. It is extremely worrying that pharmaceutical companies must now pay VAT on drugs available through compassionate use and early-access schemes. In April, HMRC told the pharma industry that it would pause enforcing VAT bills while the Government considered measures to support the industry in supplying patients who desperately need these drugs. The changes have been mired in uncertainty and misunderstanding, and there has been poor communication from HMRC from the start.

The Government must ensure that they create a workable long-term solution for the pharmaceutical industry to support these patients who are in desperate need. Patients must not lose access to medicines as a result and HMRC must communicate with pharma and patients effectively. For patients of all ages with rare cancer types, schemes such as these are the only way to access potentially life-extending treatment. Has the Minister spoken to cancer charities about the real-life effects that the changes will have? We should be making it easier for patients to access life-extending drugs, not harder. Will the Minister confirm that patients will not be denied lifesaving drugs as a result of these changes?

Karin Smyth: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for her comments. She knows that we engage with the sector all the time and, as I said in my earlier response, we will continue to work with bodies across the life sciences sector and with patients, the NHS, HMRC and the Treasury. A range of options are being considered and no decisions have been made.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Minister is responding to this urgent question because the Government have decided to charge VAT on donated medicines used for compassionate EAM schemes. The Minister says, "Well, that is not our

fault—the scheme has been around for 30 years". That may be true, but they have decided to apply the rules for the first time. Why have the Government decided to impose VAT now?

Karin Smyth: It is important for hon. Members to recognise the deep concern caused to patients with unmet clinical need, who rely on the glimmer of hope provided by these medicines, when they hear these sorts of exchanges. These are long-standing rules and we continue to engage on the issue.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): It is utterly shameful that this Government are presiding over the imposition of VAT on drugs donated for compassionate use. The Minister referred to the previous Government. VAT was not put on those drugs under the previous Government, but it is being put on them under this Government. Was it the Health Secretary who signed this off when he was in the Treasury?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman's last comment reveals exactly why he is raising this issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Hon. Members have raised concerns for compassionate reasons and on behalf of their constituents who feel the pain. Compassionate access schemes are a critical lifeline for terminally ill patients, often stepping in when the NHS has exhausted all standard funding avenues. Any move by HMRC to levy, to barter or to impose deemed supply VAT on free clinical treatment places an unacceptable risk on voluntary patient provision. I say this kindly, but will the Minister ensure that the Treasury works collaboratively with the devolved health Executive to create a permanent and water-tight VAT exemption, so that no patient, regardless of their postcode, is left behind and compassion is a UK-wide attribute, not a postcode lottery?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman works very hard in this area. He is right to use the word "compassion", because that is exactly how we must approach the issue for patients who have an unmet clinical need and are desperate for innovation. That is why we are putting our collaboration and work with the life sciences sector front and centre and working closely with HMRC. My hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is on the Treasury Bench listening attentively to the issues and we will continue to work together. They are long-standing rules. As the hon. Gentleman would acknowledge, we have made huge progress in this area for patients in this category, particularly with our revision of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence threshold, and we will continue to do so, on behalf of the patients we all want to help.

Business of the House

10.44 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business, please?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 15 June will include:

MONDAY 15 JUNE—The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration, followed by a debate on a motion on NHS dentistry. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 16 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the National Security (State Threats) Bill.

THURSDAY 18 JUNE—General debate on the infected blood compensation scheme, followed by a further debate, the subject of which has yet to be confirmed. The subjects for these debates are determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 19 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 22 June includes:

MONDAY 22 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Bill.

Colleagues may also wish to be aware that on Monday 29 June and Tuesday 30 June the House is expected to debate estimates.

John Lamont: My thoughts, and I am sure those of the whole House, are with the man who was critically injured in the dreadful knife attack in Belfast on Monday evening. The bravery shown by members of the public who stepped in to help was nothing short of extraordinary.

May I wish all those taking part in the common ridings and festivals across the Scottish Borders a successful and enjoyable season? Communities are gathering to celebrate traditions that have been passed down through generations. Last week, I was in Hawick for the Hawick common riding. I pay tribute to the Hawick cornet, Jordan Nuttall and his lass, Alix Martin, for the dignified way in which they carried out their duties. Tomorrow, I will be in Selkirk for its common riding. I hope that the standard bearer, Sam Coltherd, has a successful and enjoyable day. These celebrations are a reminder of the strength of local identity, community spirit and public service that continue to define our part of Scotland.

On matters of wider public concern, can the leader of the House find time for a debate on standards in public life and accountability in Government, particularly in the light of the continuing questions surrounding the Scottish National party and the Peter Murrell scandal? Following Peter Murrell's conviction for embezzling hundreds of thousands of pounds, many people across Scotland remain deeply concerned that significant questions remain unanswered, particularly given reports that public money may have been involved. The Scottish Conservatives,

led by Russell Findlay, have rightly called for a full and independent inquiry into what happened and who knew what.

The Scottish public deserve answers. They deserve to know how such substantial sums of money could disappear over such a prolonged period without detection. They deserve to know what oversight and governance arrangements were in place within the SNP, and why those arrangements appear to have failed so comprehensively. They deserve to know what role senior figures in the party played during the period and what information was available to them.

There are also serious questions about the handling and timing of the wider investigation and about decisions taken throughout the process. Why did it take so long for these matters to come to light? Why were concerns not identified earlier? Why have so many questions continued to go unanswered despite years of scrutiny and investigation?

At a time when public confidence in politics is already fragile, the perception that there is one rule for those in positions of power and another for everyone else is profoundly damaging. Transparency is not optional. Accountability is not optional. The public have a right to know that those who seek elected office are subject to proper scrutiny and that serious failings will be investigated openly and thoroughly. Will the Leader of the House therefore consider providing Government time for a debate on transparency and accountability in public institutions, and in doing so support calls for all outstanding questions surrounding the scandal to be properly examined?

While the media and the Labour party are busy poring over every twist and turn of the by-election in Makerfield, the election that may tell us far more about the future direction of Scottish politics is the one taking place next week in Aberdeen South. There, the contest is now clearly a straight fight between the SNP and the Scottish Conservative candidate Douglas Lumsden. As public confidence in the SNP continues to be undermined by scandal and mismanagement, there is a growing recognition that only the Scottish Conservatives can defeat the SNP and send a message to both of Scotland's Governments that the jobs of thousands of workers in Aberdeen's vital oil and gas sector must be protected.

The people of Scotland deserve a politics that is open, accountable and focused on delivering results, rather than being distracted by scandal. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the importance of transparency in public life, and of ensuring that the many unanswered questions surrounding the affair are not simply brushed aside but receive the scrutiny and answers that the Scottish and the British public rightly deserve?

Sir Alan Campbell: Let me join the deputy shadow Leader of the House in sending our best wishes to the man who was injured in the Belfast attack; we wish him and his family well. Let me also place on the record our thanks to and support for the brave police officers and the wider community, who have shown incredible bravery in the face of such intimidation.

I want to start by mentioning some of the anniversaries that will take place before the next scheduled business question. Next Tuesday marks 10 years since the murder of Jo Cox. Jo was a relentless campaigner for equality,

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human rights and social justice, and a powerful champion for the world's most vulnerable and marginalised. Members will have the opportunity to pay tribute to Jo and her long-lasting legacy in this afternoon's debate, and I hope they will take the opportunity to do so.

This Sunday will mark the ninth anniversary of 72 people losing their lives in the Grenfell tower fire. I know that the thoughts of the whole House remain with the families of those who died in the Grenfell tower fire, the survivors and the wider community.

Let me turn to matters that have been raised with me previously during these sessions and report back on progress that has been made. An issue that has been raised frequently is driving tests, so Members will be pleased to see this week that further changes have been made to how and where driving tests can be booked. This is a final step in a series of changes that we are taking to make it easy to get a test and to stop the exploitation of learner drivers by online bots and reselling.

Similarly, a constant theme in these sessions has been the state of our roads and the plague of potholes. This week, we have unveiled new rules to get potholes fixed. Councils will be required to reveal exactly how well they repair their roads, thereby letting the public hold them to account. Long-term preventive repairs will be prioritised over costly patch-up fixes, saving motorists hundreds of pounds a year on pothole-related repairs.

Last week, the Modernisation Committee launched a new opportunity for Members to directly shape the work of the Committee by pitching ideas for what we should do next. More information is available on ParliNet, and I strongly encourage Members to take part and share ideas.

As the House will know, the world cup kicks off today, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing England and Scotland the very best of luck. Members will be pleased to know that pubs across the country are set to benefit from extensions to licensing hours and special screenings. As I have said before, England has only ever won a world cup under a Labour Government; I expect that theory to be tested in not just this world cup but the next one.

Let me turn to the remarks of the deputy shadow Leader of the House. He talked about the importance of the common ridings and festivals, and he is absolutely right that events such as the Borders common ridings are a reminder and a display of local identity and community spirit that have endured for centuries. I am pleased that he is able to attend and take part in such events, and join him in wishing all those taking part an enjoyable season.

The hon. Gentleman says he will be at the Selkirk common ridings, which I believe takes place tomorrow. It commemorates the town's last and only survivor of the battle of Flodden in 1513. I hope the weather is better tomorrow than it was on the day of the battle.

The hon. Gentleman raised two substantive points, the first of which was on standards in public life. I absolutely agree with him that it is important that the public get the answers they deserve when there are scandals like the one we have seen north of the border. I encourage people to be open about what has happened. If the authorities need to carry out further investigations, it is right that they do so.

Not surprisingly, in the context of next week's by-election, the hon. Gentleman talked about the important question of oil and gas. Let me point out two things. First, this Government are absolutely committed to new clean energy and to energy independence, and we will bring forward measures on the latter shortly, but oil and gas will continue to flow for many years ahead as we make the transition. The international situation has again underlined the importance of that transition.

Finally, we should be concerned about what happens to jobs in the transition, but I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that in 14 years of Conservative Government, 70,000 jobs were lost in oil and gas. I am sure that the voters of Aberdeen will want to bear that in mind.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): My constituents in Gravelly Hill in Erdington continue to raise serious concerns about the impact of air pollution on health and quality of life around the A38 spaghetti junction interchange. With almost 200,000 vehicles passing through the junction each day, residents remain concerned about the cumulative impact of emissions on surrounding communities. Despite repeated requests, a ministerial visit to discuss their concerns has yet to be arranged. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on air quality in urban communities, and ask the relevant Minister to visit spaghetti junction to see at first hand the challenges faced by local residents?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a doughty fighter for her community and the wider region, and she raises serious matters. There are opportunities for her to apply for a debate to hear directly from a Minister—perhaps in a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate—but I will certainly take up her request that a Minister considers visiting to see the issue for themselves.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I associate myself with the remarks of the Leader of the House and the shadow deputy Leader of the House on the knife attack in Belfast this week. I also thank the Leader of the House for the business.

I need to put on the record that this is a momentous weekend, with Scotland's first world cup match since 1998. I had just completed my final exam at university on the day of our match against Brazil in Paris, so it really was a long time ago. As Scotland take to the field against Haiti in the wee hours of Sunday morning, I trust that all Members will be cheering us on. I know my English colleagues and those from elsewhere are very good at doing that for Scotland. I wish Scott McTominay, John McGinn, Andy Robertson and the rest of the team the very best of luck. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you.

I want to highlight the fact that FIFA has done its level best to overshadow what should be a brilliant celebration and experience for fans, who are being squeezed until the pips squeak. Scotland fans are paying \$80 just for the privilege of catching a train to the match this weekend, and some cannot even get there due to late updates to ESTAs. In one report, someone found out an hour before their flight was due to take off that they were no longer able to travel, meaning they are

being prevented from travelling at all to the matches, having spent thousands of pounds. Liberal Democrats are calling for an international fans charter to protect against FIFA ever trying this racket again. I hope the Leader of the House will consider scheduling a debate on FIFA's treatment of fans at the world cup.

This week, Liberal Democrats set out fully funded plans to overhaul energy pricing and to permanently lower bills for millions of households across the UK. Families were already struggling with their bills before Trump started his war with Iran, and now, with the announcement that the energy price cap will rise by 13% from July, it is time for the Government to act. By clawing back the unexpected windfall made by energy network operator companies—a windfall made possible only by weak regulation by Ofgem—we can give every household in Britain a basic energy allowance at a discounted rate, cutting the average bill by £100. I ask the Leader of the House to raise these proposals with the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, and to schedule a debate on them in Government time.

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the hon. Lady in wishing Scotland well in the world cup. On the cost of attending for fans, the Prime Minister—himself a keen football fan—has already raised his concerns. The hon. Lady raises an interesting question about international action on the matter, and she may wish to do so again at Culture, Media and Sport questions on 18 June.

On the important question on energy bills, I should point out that the Government are taking action. We have frozen fuel duty for the rest of the year. We are delinking the price of electricity from the price of gas, which will protect many households and businesses from gas price spikes, and we are extending and expanding our scheme to recoup excess profits made during periods of high gas prices. There is also extra support, particularly £53 million for heating oil for rural communities. However, we keep these matters under review. The Chancellor takes a keen interest in them, and where we can further support people, I am sure the Government will want to do so.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Wales is not going to the world cup, but I will definitely be supporting both Scotland and England in the weeks ahead—good wishes to everybody.

I welcome the Government's programme to help young people into education, employment or training. In Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney we have two new hubs to boost their opportunities. May we please have an update on what progress has been made with the new jobs guarantee scheme to foster the talent of even more young people?

Sir Alan Campbell: I echo my hon. Friend's sentiment regarding the work that the Government have done on this important matter, but as he suggests, there is much more to do. We look forward to responding to the Milburn review once its full recommendations are published, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will want to keep the House updated once that process concludes.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business that the Leader of the House has announced, on Thursday 18 June there will be a statement from the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, followed by a statement from the Justice Committee, on their reports. Until yesterday we understood that there would be Government business on 18 June. We will instead have a debate on the infected blood compensation scheme, and we are asking colleagues who are on the waiting list whether they would like to take up the additional debate. If we are allocated Thursday 25 June, there will be a statement from the Work and Pensions Committee, followed by a debate on Windrush Day, followed by a debate on PANS and PANDAS—that is the short title. These will take place in the Chamber.

Turning to Westminster Hall, next Tuesday there will be a debate on community hospitals. Next Thursday there will be a debate on safeguarding human rights in supply chains, followed by a debate on public toilet provision for people living with a stoma. On Tuesday 23 June there will be a debate on fly-tipping in residential areas and the associated impacts, and on Thursday 25 June there will be a statement from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee, followed by a debate on ports and port connectivity and a further debate to be announced. As the Leader of the House has announced that estimates day debates are coming up, I should remind the House that tomorrow is the last day to submit applications, and the Backbench Business Committee will be considering those applications next Tuesday. Obviously, it is key that people who want to submit applications do so speedily, and we intend to offer as many debates as we possibly can.

Pakistan's illegal occupation of part of the Kashmir valley has been going on since 1947, and many MPs in this House have supported that position. However, the Joint Awami Action Committee, which operates in the illegally occupied part of Kashmir, has recently been demonstrating for basic rights to food, electricity and healthcare. The Pakistani authorities have launched a severe crackdown; they report that at least 11 people have been killed and many others injured, but the protester groups report 20 to 30 deaths and over 200 injuries. I believe a number of British nationals have been injured during these protests. There have been arbitrary arrests, and Pakistani forces have fired live ammunition at peaceful protesters.

I understand that 30 colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir have written to the Foreign Secretary to demand action. I echo that we want to see action from the Foreign Secretary, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office calling out Pakistan for taking this despicable action against peaceful protesters. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement on this issue next week from the Foreign Secretary?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the work of his Committee and for the strong leadership that he shows. He has announced an impressive list of debates, underlining the importance of his Committee's work. He mentions—as I did when outlining the business—the fact that there is a topic yet to be decided on 18 June. We will obviously publicise that in the usual way as soon as possible.

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On the hon. Gentleman's substantive question about Kashmir, India and Pakistan are both long-standing important partners of this country, and our long-standing position is that India and Pakistan should find a lasting political resolution on this issue, while respecting the wishes of the Kashmiri people. The Government encourage both nations to engage in dialogue and to pursue lasting political solutions to support regional stability. I will draw his remarks to the attention of the Foreign Secretary, because this is an important matter.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): From Hawkslade to Buckingham Park, there are parked vehicles that sit abandoned for months on our roads, causing obstruction and danger to local residents, and even attracting fly-tipping and antisocial behaviour. They are usually untaxed and without an MOT, so when we try to have them removed we are passed between Buckinghamshire council, the police and other local authorities, with no one taking responsibility for having these vehicles removed. Will the Leader of the House allocate parliamentary time to see what more we can do in government to expand enforcement and get these vehicles off our roads?

Sir Alan Campbell: The situation in my hon. Friend's constituency sounds untenable. The police and local authorities have legal powers to deal with dangerous, abandoned and obstructive vehicles, and they work closely with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to target untaxed vehicles. Should my hon. Friend wish to apply for a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate, I am sure that it would be well attended. She could then hear directly from the Minister what the Government could do further.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Ofcom is an important regulator, and it is something that my residents regularly raise, whether it is failings in the postal service, the lack of internet in suburban areas, concerns about bias on TV or political interference on social media. We now have elderly people plagued by scams and frauds on landlines, when Ofcom could easily intervene to block ghost numbers. Ofcom is now looking to take on the issues around nudity, children online and the potential social media ban, but the public is already being failed in so many areas. May we have a debate in Government time on the role and effectiveness of Ofcom?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady talks about the matters that Ofcom is looking into, such as nudity and social media, and I am sure she shares the view that those are important. They are the first step that the Government are taking to address a wider issue. On the success of Ofcom, or lack thereof, she could seek an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate, where she could make these points directly to the Government. It is important that Ofcom does a good job, and if it is being given important jobs to do, it must do so with the confidence of this House.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I have been campaigning alongside healthcare professionals who are concerned about risks arising from the unsafe handling of hazardous medicinal products. The BBC broadcast

footage last month inadvertently showing a nurse handling a potentially hazardous new cancer drug without the correct protective equipment. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on introducing a framework to protect healthcare workers from exposure to hazardous medicinal products?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for his work campaigning on this issue. The safety of NHS staff is non-negotiable. There are clear legal duties on employers to ensure that healthcare workers handling hazardous medicinal products are properly protected at all times. I understand that the Health and Safety Executive is actively reviewing whether any further action or clearer guidance is needed, and I am sure that the Department will come forward with an update on that at some point.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The Royal Mail is failing my constituents. Letters are arriving late, and as a result hospital appointments are being missed. We have even had travel documents arriving on the day of departure. When I raised those concerns with Royal Mail directly, it took five months to send me a wholly inadequate reply, and it was not even lost in the post. Will the Government please ensure that a statement is made announcing real consequences for Royal Mail for it failing in its statutory duties?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important matter. I know that Royal Mail listens closely to these sessions, and I hope that it has heard what he has said this morning. The Business and Trade Committee has previously called Royal Mail into Parliament over its performance, and I know that the Secretary of State takes these matters very seriously. I hope that Royal Mail is listening, and if the hon. Gentleman seeks a meeting with the relevant Minister to make his points, I will help him to arrange it.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I have been working with the Met police on stolen mobile phones. We are making some progress, but the mobile phone companies need to be held to account. The Met commissioner is now calling on the Government to introduce legislation to ensure that mobile phone companies implement a kill switch so that mobile phones, once stolen, are not valuable. Will the Leader of the House make time for us to discuss this matter and pursue legislation?

Sir Alan Campbell: There are important developments in this matter. The Met police are working with the mobile phone companies, because they are absolutely crucial in supporting the delivery of this endeavour, and I am sure they want to make it less worthwhile for people to steal phones. I will raise the matter with the relevant Minister and see if we can get an update for the House on what the plan is, and on what further measures we can introduce.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): As the Leader of the House is only too well aware, there has been a big political change in Havering, with a new Reform council and 23 Reform councillors elected in my constituency. Despite that, outer Greater London boroughs are still subject to the Labour mayor's plan, which mandates boroughs such as mine pursuing astronomical building

targets that necessitate huge high-rise buildings that do not fit in a town like Romford. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the Floor of the House on these disproportionate plans, so that local people in areas like mine have the autonomy and a stronger voice, enabling them to defend their way of life and the character of our town and country borough?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman showed last week, he is very keen—I understand his keenness—to say what happened at the local elections in his patch and to mention the Reform victory. But as I pointed out to him, he should get his campaigning shoes out, because Reform councillors sometimes discover that they do not want to be councillors or that their local authority decides that they are ineligible to be councillors. Collectively across the country, they usually underperform and let people down. I congratulate Reform on its success in the local elections, but I advise the party to prepare for by-elections, as we are seeing elsewhere in the country, particularly when local residents find out what it has done.

The hon. Gentleman made his point about Greater London last week, and nothing has changed between then and this week. His area is still part of Greater London. If he wishes to campaign, that is a fair thing to do—I know he did so when he sat on the Conservative Benches. He has campaigned in order to get an independent voice, and I know that he will always be an independent voice for his area, but it is still part of the same set-up.

The wider point is that it is very tempting to go down the route of the politics of division, but it is not very helpful. I would urge caution.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Two local sisters in Breaston are seeking to turn the former Hidden Ivy garden centre into a new nursery to provide much-needed childcare for local families, but they face a lengthy and costly change-of-use process, including the requirement for a professional bat survey. Although proper environmental protections are important, many small community projects are being discouraged by burdensome planning requirements and excessive costs. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the planning rules surrounding change-of-use applications and the barriers they create for great projects such as the proposed new nursery in Breaston?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government agree with my hon. Friend that there must be a balance between planning rules and practicality, and we did consult on changes to the national planning policy framework to emphasise the need for proportionality in these matters. Through the nature restoration fund, we will also remove the need for site-by-site approaches to mitigation to support protected species at the strategic level. My hon. Friend may wish to raise this issue directly with Ministers at Housing, Communities and Local Government questions on Monday to get the latest thinking.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Across the country, children's football teams often do not have access to a toilet. This issue disproportionately affects girls, and I have been told that girls in my constituency have stopped playing football because they cannot use the loo. Will the Leader of the House make

time in the Chamber to discuss my constituent Natalie's campaign calling for the provision of these essential facilities?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this matter—she is a champion for sports and inclusion—and I am sorry to hear of the experience of some girls in her constituency. The Government are committed to ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality grassroots sports facilities, which are such an important part of our local communities, and we are investing £85 million in those facilities to increase participation, particularly among women and girls. That includes providing funding for clubhouses and changing rooms, and I hope that clubs will pay attention to that and make it a success. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this matter at Culture, Media and Sport questions next week.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): A constituent of mine who runs a small specialist defence and security business in my patch carried out £250,000 of work on a nationally significant submarine disposal programme for the Submarine Delivery Agency during a contract renewal period. The work was accepted and used, as has happened at contract boundary times on seven occasions in the past four years, but this time payment has not been made on the grounds that no purchase order was issued. Would the Leader of the House ask the Defence Secretary to look into the agency's failure to pay for this work, which was delivered and accepted, even though it is the agency lead and all operational stakeholders have said that the work was of value and should be compensated? Could he also arrange for my constituent and me to have a meeting with the relevant Minister to resolve the matter of this outstanding bill?

Sir Alan Campbell: This Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, we use British businesses for our contracts. I am sorry to hear of the experiences of the hon. Lady's constituent, and I will raise the matter with the Secretary of State, if she gives me the details later. Following that, should a meeting be necessary, I am sure I can help to arrange one.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Abandoned caravans are causing an eyesore across Hastings, particularly along St Helens Road and Cinque Ports Way, which are being treated as a dumping ground. It is very frustrating for local residents, and the police tell me they are getting higher levels of antisocial behaviour in those areas. For the past 18 months, I have been writing to East Sussex county council, run by Reform, and Hastings borough council, run by the Greens, urging them to act. Instead, they are dragging their heels, and not using the powers in section 143 of the Highways Act 1980. I want to get this issue sorted for local residents, so I am organising a meeting with the two local councils and local residents to hear what the councils are going to do to sort this out, and I will try to knock heads together to get it sorted out. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that those local councils must treat this issue with the urgency it deserves?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I do. My hon. Friend raises an important matter, and I am concerned that she has not had the engagement from the councils that they

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should be offering. I hope they do respond with the seriousness that this warrants and take an active role in ensuring that such problems are sorted out on behalf of residents. Unfortunately, this is yet further evidence of Reform councils underperforming.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The democratically elected majority of the Scottish Parliament has once again voted in favour of holding a referendum on Scottish independence. Therefore, the UK Government cannot simply continue to ignore the demands of Scottish people and hope that they will go away. Can we have a statement from the Government on how they plan to implement the democratic wishes of the people of Scotland, outlining the democratic route and timetable for the independence referendum that they voted for?

Sir Alan Campbell: There has been no change in this Government's position, and therefore there is no need for the statement that the hon. Gentleman is asking for.

Jeff Smith (Manchester Withington) (Lab): Manchester city council has done a great job of bringing empty homes back into use in recent years, but too many properties still sit empty while people need accommodation. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the council's latest campaign to tackle this issue, and in encouraging Manchester residents to report long-term empty properties to the empty homes team through the council website? May we have time for a debate in this place on what more we can do to bring empty homes back into use?

Sir Alan Campbell: I welcome the approach of my hon. Friend's local council, because the Government share the ambition of wanting to see more empty homes brought back into use. Local authorities have access to a range of powers and incentives to bring empty homes back into use, including grant funding, and levers to take ownership of a property. We have also implemented high street rental auctions, bringing long-term vacant high street properties back into use. In the King's Speech, we announced legislation to bring further reforms to housing, including the improvement of the stock of social housing. I look forward to the Government working with his local council and other local councils to take this issue forward.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I have a constituent whose 15-year-old daughter is living with acute functional neurological disorder, a too often misunderstood condition that has profoundly diminished her quality of life. Despite the severity of her symptoms, the pair have been refused disability living allowance and receive no support, whether through carer's allowance or otherwise. Will the Leader of the House find space for a debate in Government time on the urgent need to establish a critical pathway and improve support for people living with functional neurological disorder, and to raise the profile of this very debilitating condition?

Sir Alan Campbell: If the hon. Lady gives me the details of that case, I will certainly raise it with Government colleagues. She is right to raise these matters, which will be of huge concern to the family. If she wishes to have a

meeting with the relevant Minister to explain why such a pathway and change is necessary, I will help her to arrange one.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I was delighted when the Labour Government supported Church Street GP surgery in Bishop's Stortford with the funding for much-needed improvements last year. I recently had the opportunity to visit the surgery and see at first hand how its modern improvements are delivering for patients and supporting staff to expand capacity. We know that bricks and mortar are not the sum total of our health service; it is the people on the ground who make it happen. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Dr Sian Stanley, Leigh Evans, Sarah Carter and everyone at Church Street not only for delivering this project, but for keeping the surgery open for more than 16,000 patients while work was ongoing?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is heartening to hear of the success of schemes to ensure local people have access to local services. I certainly pay tribute to everyone involved and thank them for making it a success in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The rebuild at the Royal Berkshire hospital has been delayed twice: six years by the Conservatives and seven years by this Government. At Prime Minister's questions, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), asked whether the Government were considering slashing the hospital building programme to fund the defence investment plan. He did not receive an answer. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement to the House to find out the Government's intention to fund both the new hospital building programme and our national defence?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Prime Minister was very clear at Prime Minister's questions. We are putting more money into the health service. However, we are not always able to move with the speed the situation demands, not least because we inherited a whole series of plans from the previous Government that were simply not funded at all. We are making sure that where plans exist, the funding exists too. The Prime Minister was very clear that it is not a choice between funding the NHS or funding defence. We intend to fund both properly.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): In March, I met the Women's Health Minister, Baroness Merron, to discuss how women's voices must be central to policymaking and clinical care. I was glad to see that clearly reflected in the refreshed women's health strategy. However, after the Holyrood election, the role of Scottish Minister for women's health was abolished and a single, dedicated voice on women's health was lost. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on women's health inequalities across the UK and the need to centre women's voices in their care?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend has been a champion for women's health issues, particularly as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis, and I pay tribute to her for that. The news she brings is disappointing. Our renewed strategy will tackle the

issues that women face every day and ensure that no woman is left behind in fighting to be heard. I encourage her to apply for a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate to allow other hon. Members to share their views on the matter. The Scottish Government's decision to not continue with that particular role is a matter for that Government, but I have to say that it shows their priority—or in this case, their lack of priority.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I have submitted a series of precise written questions to the Minister for Trade to confirm whether the terms of licences for UK arms exports to Israel are being adhered to. Each time I have received an evasive answer. I am driven to conclude that if the Minister is correct that he is genuinely unable to usefully answer any of those questions, he must also admit to having no clue about the final use of sensitive military materials, which would mean that the whole notion of Government control over arms exports is an illusion. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate so that we can establish once and for all if the UK arms export rules—whether to Israel or anywhere else—are doing their job?

Sir Alan Campbell: With respect, the hon. Gentleman may be jumping to the wrong conclusion on the matter, but he has been around long enough to know that if he does not get the answer that he wants first time—or indeed second time—he can keep going. It is also up to him; if he wants to hear directly from Ministers on those matters and put those questions to them, then there are Adjournment and Westminster Hall debates. I am sure there would be a lot of interest in the topic from across the House.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): The north-east has the highest number of young people not in education, employment or training anywhere in the country—64,000 in total. I recently joined the Centre for Social Justice and Fenwick Newcastle for a “Big Listen”, with 120 employers and frontline charities all committed to tackling the crisis. The CSJ will publish its findings later in the year, alongside the Milburn review, so will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on youth inactivity, and ensure the House has an opportunity to consider the recommendations?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of NEETs. She is a great champion for her constituency, the region that we share, and young people in the area. The Government are committed to taking action, including the biggest reforms to apprenticeships in a decade and extending our youth guarantee, but as she suggests, there is more to be done. We will use Alan Milburn's interim report to build on our reforms, and we look forward to receiving the full recommendations in the autumn. When that has happened, as I said earlier, the Government will want to update the House and find time for a debate on those matters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to bring an issue to the Chamber for the Leader of the House to consider. Will he ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on the protections of religious leaders in Colombia, following reports that some 11 religious leaders have been assassinated, extrajudicially executed,

forcibly disappeared or kidnapped since 2024, and on whether the Government will raise the restoration of protection measures for vulnerable faith leaders with the Colombian authorities?

Sir Alan Campbell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a serious issue on the freedom of religion or belief. The particular events he refers to are exceptionally concerning. The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion and belief for all. I would encourage him to raise the issue at Foreign Office questions next week, so that he can put it directly to Ministers. I will also take it up with the Department and ensure that he gets the response that he needs.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Hatfield is a vibrant town, and we have much to be proud of, but we have a serious antisocial behaviour problem in the Parkhouse Court area. There is daytime drinking and visible drug use, and the problem is compounded by the fact that it is happening just yards away from Safari Stars nursery. It is completely unacceptable. I have visited twice and raised it with the chief inspector and the leader of the council, but things are not moving quickly enough, particularly on the need for a public spaces protection order to give the police the powers they need to move people on and sanction them. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on how we can expedite the establishment of a public spaces protection order, especially when there is a risk to children?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a deeply concerning matter. Local agencies already have strong powers, including public spaces protection orders, to address persistent antisocial behaviour and protect communities, and it is for those local agencies to determine whether their use is appropriate. I hope, however, that they will have heard what my hon. Friend has said today as he quite rightly stands up for his constituents. We have also strengthened penalties for breaches of PSPOs through the Crime and Policing Act 2026.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): On 21 May, the Government laid the Equality and Human Rights Commission's draft code of practice for services, public functions and associations before the House. Since then, a litany of trans-led organisations, human rights groups, charities and trade unions have come out in opposition, citing the harm it poses to trans people, the contradictions it contains and how unworkable it will be to implement. Last week I tabled early-day motion 240, which would disapprove the draft code of practice.

[That the draft Code of Practice for Services, public functions and associations, a copy of which was laid before this House on 21 May, be disapproved.]

This is the mechanism set out in the Equality Act 2010 for MPs to be able to prevent the code from coming into force. In less than two weeks, 128 MPs have signed—almost one in five—making it the most-signed early-day motion since the last general election. It is supported by trans-led organisations, Amnesty International, Unison, the GMB and ASLEF. Would the Leader of the House not agree that this level of widespread, cross-party concern warrants the code being debated and voted on, and will the Government therefore allocate time to do so?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am aware of the high level of interest in this matter and of my hon. Friend's long-standing campaigning and commitment on these issues, and I pay tribute to her for that. As she knows, established mechanisms are available for Members to seek debates, including, as she has alluded to, praying against particular measures. I am sure she will want to press further on this matter through the usual channels, as well as through the other ways in which matters can be discussed in the House.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): One in four women and one in six men experience domestic abuse in their lifetime. Members of Parliament employ more than 4,000 staff in this place, yet there remain minimal protections for staff who are victims of domestic abuse. I thank Mr Speaker for our meeting yesterday to discuss strengthening this policy in the House. Will the Leader of the House join my campaign to encourage every MP's office to adopt a robust domestic abuse policy and offer training so that we can safeguard our staff from domestic abuse?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to bring this matter to the House today. It often takes tremendous courage for victims of domestic abuse to seek help. She is an assiduous campaigner for the implementation of a formal domestic abuse policy for all Parliament offices, and I certainly join her in that regard. She may wish to raise this specific matter with the Members' services team, who provide Members' offices with best practice safeguarding advice.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Growing numbers of my constituents have been contacting me about e-bikes and e-scooters. They know the law, and they know it is not being enforced on pavements, in parks or in public spaces. There is clearly a need for a debate on this matter. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate not just on the state of the law on e-bikes and e-scooters, but on whether the police have the resources they need to enforce it?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to champion these concerns on behalf of his constituents. The police do have a number of powers to seize e-scooters and e-bikes that are being used illegally or antisocially. We will be consulting further shortly and are committed to pursuing legislative reform in due course. As my hon. Friend points out, it is a question of not just having the legislation but using that legislation. Were he to seek a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate, he could put his frustration and concerns directly to the relevant Minister.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As Portsmouth is home to one of the largest concentrations of Royal Navy personnel, I regularly hear from service families and the charities supporting them that two weeks' paternity leave is simply not enough, particularly when deployments can mean missing the birth of a child or losing the chance to take leave meaningfully. With allies such as the United States now offering significantly more generous paid parental leave arrangements, will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on reforming parental leave for service personnel and addressing the impacts of deployment on family life?

Sir Alan Campbell: Access to good parental leave is vital to create those initial family bonds, and I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to the House, especially in relation to our brave Navy personnel. I am aware that the question of increasing paternity leave is currently being reviewed within the Ministry of Defence, and I will make sure that the relevant Minister has heard her contribution and gets back to her with a response.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Powering Futures is a fantastic social enterprise based in Falkirk. Every year its Challenge programme invites pupils to tackle real-life workplace challenges and matches them with workplace mentors from local businesses. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Braes high school and St Mungo's high school pupils James, Josh and Gabriella, who won Ken Muir awards for exceptional displays of problem solving, communication and teamwork skills through the programme, and can we schedule a debate in Government time on the role that social enterprises such as Powering Futures can play in tackling youth unemployment, especially in Scotland?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating James, Josh and Gabriella, along with the other students at Braes and St Mungo's. I thank Powering Futures for its important work.

As my hon. Friend knows, we are committed to turning around the broken system that we inherited and to getting more young people into work. I encourage him to join up with other Members, some of whom have raised these issues today, to look at applying for a Backbench Business debate where he could talk not only about how proud he is of his constituents' campaigning but about what further action could be taken in future.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): One of my favourite schools in my constituency is Balerno high school, so it was great to visit last week and celebrate it getting gold status as a UNICEF rights respecting school. This is the second time that the young people at the school have won this award, and they were absolutely delighted—so much so that they shared some baking with me. At a time when tensions are so high in communities across the UK, our schools are doing fantastic work to create a more inclusive, respectful society. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is time we had a debate in this House about the role of the rights respecting schools award programme in creating a more inclusive society, both to celebrate its successes and understand how we can build on them?

Sir Alan Campbell: As an honorary kindness ambassador—I know that is quite hard for some to believe, but it is true—I agree that it is very important to celebrate the contribution of schools to public life and the work of the rights respecting schools award programme. As my hon. Friend points out, schools often rightly take leadership on these matters in local communities, and they take parents and others along with them. For Balerno high school to achieve gold status not once but twice is certainly impressive, and I pay tribute to everything that the school is doing.

Point of Order

11.37 am

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As you and Members across the House know, there has been widespread speculation in the press and this House over the last 24 to 48 hours that either the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Defence will announce the defence investment plan in whole or large part tomorrow, on a non-sitting day and in a non-parliamentary location. I wonder whether you can advise the House on the correct protocols for announcing such nationally consequential measures. What should our expectations as Members of this House be, and is there anything that we can do to compel the Government to make nationally significant announcements here in the House, where democratic scrutiny can immediately follow?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. Mr Speaker has made his views on this matter very clear. The defence investment plan is a matter of great interest to Members across the House. The Government's own ministerial code makes it clear that important policy announcements should be made in the first instance to this House when it is sitting. If that does not happen, I am sure that Mr Speaker would look favourably on any request from Members to raise the matter with Ministers at the earliest opportunity in the House.

Legacy of Jo Cox

11.39 am

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the legacy of Jo Cox.

It is an honour to move this debate on behalf of the Government. I thank Jo's family for being with us yesterday in Downing Street, and for their incredible leadership and friendship. Throughout the past decade they have all been an inspiration. Their tenacity and guts have given us all strength, and Jo's children are more than a credit to her.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater)—she is my friend—for everything. I thank her for her sheer unrelenting energy. I thank her for deciding to come here, stepping into public life in circumstances that most of us cannot comprehend. I thank her for her dogged persistence on everything from the importance of physical activity for all and of addressing loneliness and community, to access to green spaces. I thank her for building Jo's legacy and for securing this debate today.

I am conscious that we meet today with events in Belfast causing fear and distress for affected children and their families. Hateful rhetoric is never just words; it has consequences. I think of all those who are dealing with the consequences: those who are hurt and those who are helping to care for people who need it.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I did not serve in this Parliament at the same time as Jo Cox, but I have served here at the same time as my friend, the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). I recognise on my behalf, and that of a number of MPs who she and I engage with cross-party, that she really embodies the legacy of her sister—that, cross-party, there is more that unites than divides us—and it is an honour to be here today.

Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Lady for her words, which are spot on.

Ten years ago next week, I was in Portcullis House next door when I received a message from the now Chancellor of the Exchequer telling me that our friend Jo Cox, the then Member for Batley and Spen, had been murdered in her constituency. It remains the worst moment of my life in politics. That someone so courageous and strong, someone small in stature but enormous in spirit, should be killed like that is as horrific today as it was in that moment. At the time of her killing, her loved ones and friends decided that it was she who should be talked about, not the person who killed her. Her life, her work, her beliefs are important; helping her murderer achieve any notoriety is not. Today, we meet to put her legacy on the record again.

Jo was a parliamentarian for just a year, yet her life before becoming an MP had been so adventurous and full, and she had already seriously influenced politics. There is therefore much about her whole life to talk about.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Minister for leading the debate. I recall well the Friday morning in my constituency office when the news broke.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I immediately penned a letter because at that stage, Jo was still with us, although injured. I had hardly finished the letter when, unfortunately, the sad news came through that she had passed away. To her sister, the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), and to all her family, I will say that we very much think of them and our prayers are with them as well. We always remember, as the Minister said.

I cannot be here for the whole debate, as I am leading another debate in Westminster Hall, so I want to put these words on record. I admired Jo for her courage and for her advocacy of her constituents. No one doubted her determination, and when she spoke we were always moved by what she had to say. Today, 10 years later, we still remember her with fondness.

Alison McGovern: On behalf of us all in this House who have ever received the kindness of a letter from the hon. Gentleman, I say to him that he embodies the “more in common” spirit and we are so grateful to him for doing so. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Whether someone is inspired, as we all are, by Jo’s work in international development—travelling around the world to stand up for women in the most dangerous environments—the impressive physical challenges she undertook, or the manner in which she included people, whatever their background or beliefs, this is the story of a woman whose life may have been cut short, but whose contribution will be remembered and will continue always. Members from across the House will share their own stories today, and I encourage them all to do so with joy.

For my part, I will never forget sitting on the Opposition Benches during a turbulent time in Labour politics, when Jo showed leadership on the horrors in Syria while far too many others equivocated or looked the other way. I will never forget her sense of humour and fun, or her unrelenting hope that there was always something we could do.

Much has been achieved in Jo’s name and in that spirit in 10 years. From the Jo Cox Women in Leadership graduates to the thousands of people who have been along to a Great Get Together, her impact on the people of this country has never weakened.

Jeff Smith (Manchester Withington) (Lab): Jo was a shining star of our 2015 intake; she was loved by us all, and is missed and remembered every day. I am pleased that the Minister mentioned Jo’s work on Syria, which the Minister was herself involved in. We worked together on that. The fact is that Jo is remembered not just by people in this House but by people around this country, including the Syrian diaspora community in Manchester. I know through my work with the community that they remember Jo very fondly, as do all the vulnerable communities she stood up for so passionately and brilliantly.

Alison McGovern: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend for making that intervention, because it is not possible to visit the Syrian community in Manchester without talking about Jo, given the impact she had on them.

Jo’s foundation has led the way in campaigning for decency and civility in politics and taking forward her pioneering work to achieve a public policy response to the loneliness epidemic. The foundation has also worked

in West Yorkshire to maintain the local constituency community work that Jo did in Batley and Spen and beyond.

As we have said, Jo’s concern for civilians in the face of horrendous war led her to become the co-chair of the friends of Syria all-party parliamentary group, alongside the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell). In her 104 contributions in the House of Commons, she was a constant voice for the child refugees pouring out of the hellhole that Syria had become. She pioneered the use of urgent questions, particularly from Back Benchers, to harry the Government into action. With terrible conflict raging, threatening the lives of children and other civilians, we can only imagine how much more forceful the response of the House of Commons to these horrors would have been if Jo had remained here. Notwithstanding that, there are Syrian refugees alive and safe today because of Jo. That is a lesson to us all about the opportunity we have to speak up in the face of outrage and indignity.

In the form of the Jo Cox memorial grants, her legacy reached around the world, helping 85,000 people, empowering women and preventing identity-based violence. At her home, Batley and Spen, the 10th Run for Jo will bring people together again for a day of fun and celebration.

All those good things happened because of Jo. They did not happen because she died; they happened because she lived. Her love was felt so far and so wide, and so is her legacy. I look forward to hearing all the contributions that Members will make today, with the memories and moments they wish to share. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley once again for securing this debate, and all those across the country who are determined that Jo’s legacy will go on, always.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Opposition spokesman.

11.48 am

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak opposite the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern), with whom I have worked extensively over many years on international development, thereby demonstrating one of Jo’s core beliefs: more in common. The hon. Lady spoke so movingly about Jo and encapsulated perfectly the essence of who she was and what a politician should be: decent, principled, clear and determined.

I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), who secured this debate, in her place. She exhibits all of Jo’s brilliant qualities in fighting for the causes to which she is devoted, such as assisted dying, on which I am proud to work alongside her. The whole House recognises that on this very divisive issue, she showed incredible decency and probity in the way in which she pursued it.

I cannot quite believe that we are commemorating a whole decade since Jo’s life was brutally cut short. Ten years on, it is just as painful to comprehend. Jo was both my colleague and my friend. We were different in our politics and backgrounds, but on the issues that we were both passionate about, we moved in lockstep. Like the Minister, I remember exactly where I was when the horrific event took place.

Our paths first crossed when Jo and I marched together against injustice in Darfur through the centre of London. Subsequently, I met her in Sudan, in Darfur, in 2006 on two separate visits, one of which included the then Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron. Jo was a huge presence all those years ago, and I remember her also for her trademark scarves. I marvelled at the way she discharged her role at Oxfam in Sudan, supporting women and children and helping to secure water for the thousands of refugees living in camps. I still wear the green wristband she gave me then, as a reminder of the desperate plight of people caught up in what President Bush rightly described as a genocide.

And yet today, 20 years later, Sudan is still in crisis, with ethnic cleansing practised with impunity. Whereas 20 years ago the international community, through the United Nations and the African Union, put military forces on the ground to stop it, sadly today unbridled barbarism continues in plain sight, and the international community is doing nothing to stop it. I am sure the whole House will be grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for leading a debate on this issue in Westminster Hall later today.

Shortly after her election in 2015, Jo asked me whether we could team up to run a new all-party group called friends of Syria. Without hesitation, I agreed. Syria was ablaze. She knew that I took a great interest in the Syrian refugee crisis from the Back Benches, watching with despair as the situation got worse and worse, as the Minister described so well. Jo was determined to use her experience and expertise to champion the dispossessed, and felt we might be well paired to campaign together. As she said in her maiden speech back in 2015,

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

We would do well to reflect on her words and especially her character—fearless determination, unintimidated by tribal political pressures, putting the greater good above personal ambition and placing policy above party.

Jo and I worked closely together for a year until she was murdered. I loved every minute of it. We had a rather useful good cop, bad cop routine. Unusually for me, I found myself as the good cop. Needless to say, Jo relished the bad cop role, especially when confronting the villains of the piece, and believe me when I say that she took no prisoners. On one occasion, we were taking tea with the Russian ambassador to remonstrate about the appalling crimes committed in Aleppo in Syria. The ambassador had recently complained to the Foreign Office that in the House, I had compared Russia's bombing of Aleppo to the Nazi bombing of Guernica during the Spanish civil war. During the meeting, Jo did most of the hard-ball talking, and at the end of it she had triumphantly reduced a seasoned diplomat to incoherence, laying bare his inability to defend the indefensible. I very much doubt he will ever forget that meeting.

Today, we need more people like Jo. The climate 10 years after her murder is even more febrile and more divided. We have all seen the shocking examples of that recently, and we must not forget that in the end, Jo was a tragic victim of those divisions. Her murder sent shockwaves through us all, yet lessons have not been learned, and a few years later, the wonderful Sir David Amess paid the same price. We must also not forget the MPs who were murdered before: Airey Neave in 1979;

Robert Bradford in 1981; Anthony Berry in 1984; and my beloved friend and colleague Ian Gow, on Monday 30 July 1990, as he left his home at the Dog House in Hankham near Eastbourne to serve his constituents. All were murdered by terrorists while serving their constituents.

Today we are witnessing more and more the consequences of polarisation, wrought by fear and cynical exploitation. Divisions are growing and principled politicians are declining, yet this debate underlines that in these dark days there is more that unites us, and so much of the work we do in this place is not characterised by division. Jo would have been appalled by Boris Johnson's decision first to vaporise the Department for International Development, and secondly to slash the development budget. I suspect she would have been even more incandescent to learn that a Labour Government had gone even further, and I have no doubt in my mind that were she alive today, she would have fought tooth and nail to stop it from happening. Unfortunately, very few people have put their heads above the parapet, for reasons that we all understand—fear of missing out on promotions, of facing demotions, or of generally rocking the boat. Politics is a fragile business.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The importance of international development aid cannot be overstated. I recognise the need for a nation to be prepared to defend itself against threats from outside and from within, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that funding for that should not come from international development aid?

Sir Andrew Mitchell: Yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. International development is the other side of the defence coin. The two work together, and the role of soft power is enormously important in preventing conflict and war. I see that the Leader of the House is with us today, and I hope very much that he will restore the old custom that once a year there should be a debate on international development in the House, in Government time. When I next have a chance to speak during business questions, I shall perhaps ask him whether he will consider that.

The passage of time will never erase Jo's memory and legacy, and her profound impact on those who had the pleasure of knowing, loving and working with her. I am looking forward to hearing contributions from many hon. Members, as we all take comfort in the memory of a truly wonderful human being.

11.57 am

Kim Leadbeater (Spen Valley) (Lab): I thank the Minister and shadow Minister for their beautiful and thoughtful opening remarks, and I thank colleagues and friends from across the House for attending this debate, during what I know is a busy time in politics—it was ever thus. I also thank the many colleagues who have contacted me to let me know that, sadly, they could not be here due to other commitments. Their messages have been gratefully received.

Today, 10 years since her murder, we gather to remember Jo. Jo Cox was, yes, an MP, and that is how many people do and always will think of her. But while being an MP is of course a very important job, like all of us Jo was so much more. She was a daughter, a mum, a wife, a

[Kim Leadbeater]

colleague, a friend to many in this place and far beyond, and she was my sister. She was a very special person who embodied compassion, courage and an unwavering belief in the goodness of people. She was a woman who dedicated her life to public service, to fighting injustice and to bringing people together.

Helen Joanne Leadbeater—I know, who knew?—was born at Dewsbury and District hospital in West Yorkshire in 1974. She did not come from privilege or a political dynasty; she came from ordinary roots, and she carried with her throughout her life a deep understanding of ordinary people's struggles, hopes and fears. We had a great childhood—nothing fancy or posh, but always surrounded by love, family and friendship. We had two wonderful parents who gave us the freedom and space to find our own way in life, and the support and stability to develop the confidence to do so. We had a close-knit family and a wide-ranging group of friends. And, of course, we had each other.

I have reflected a lot on our childhood over the last decade and I am so lucky to have an abundance of happy memories. The early years: walking to school, climbing trees, pretending we were in the A-Team, making up dance routines to Wham! and playing out until it was dark and we got called in for our tea. The teenage years and beyond: exams, holidays, parties, boyfriends. On more than one occasion I have been very grateful for there being no camera phones back then; I am not sure that either of us—or possibly any of us here today—would have ever had a career in public life if there had been. We certainly had plenty of fun.

Jo and I also had instilled in us a core set of values and beliefs. Our parents taught us to treat everybody with respect, kindness and empathy. They taught us simple principles, like treating people how you would wish to be treated; listening to different views and perspectives; compromising when necessary and agreeing to disagree; and, in true Yorkshire style, how sometimes, if you do not have anything good to say, to just keep your gob shut. These things were not drilled into us—they were more inherently included as part of everyday life, and they stayed with us both throughout our lives.

We were always both incredibly interested in other people and always had lots of questions when we met someone new. From a young age, we took great pleasure in hearing stories of people from a wide range of backgrounds. The differences were not a focus, but nor were they invisible; they were to be cherished and celebrated.

Jo was genuinely one of the nicest people you could hope to meet, but she was not naturally confident—she was actually very shy when we were kids. I am always really honest about this when I speak to people, particularly young people and often women, because sometimes when we see successful people in public life, we assume that they have always been really confident and self-assured, with no self-doubts, hang-ups or anxieties. In my experience, that is often not the case—and it is certainly not for me and it was certainly not for Jo. When we were teenagers, she would ask me to ring up to order the takeaway or check the bus timetable.

Over the years, Jo worked incredibly hard to overcome her fears and doubts. She made no secret of the difficulties she had settling into life at Cambridge University. As a

working-class northerner, it felt like a world away from life in West Yorkshire, much like this place, in many ways. We missed each other desperately and both felt acutely lonely, but in true Jo style, she stuck it out and battled on. She was very grateful for the education that she received and, more importantly, for the strong friendships she made.

Before entering Parliament, Jo spent years working on humanitarian causes, helping vulnerable people around the world. She worked for organisations that sought to alleviate poverty, defend human rights and support those devastated by conflict and disaster. Her politics were never rooted in power or glory. They were rooted in empathy and humanity. When she became the MP for Batley and Spen in 2015, she brought that same humanity into public life. She spoke passionately about loneliness, inequality, refugees and community cohesion. She believed politics should improve lives, not inflame hatred. Perhaps her most famous words, from her maiden speech in this place, capture her entire philosophy: her belief, as has been said,

“that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

It speaks to something essential in our society—something that in recent times we seem to be seriously at risk of forgetting.

I could talk all day about how great Jo was—and she really was—but you need only to look at the many tributes that came in from across the world when she was killed to see that for yourself. It is always very important for me to remember that it was Jo, and more specifically her murder, that brought me to this place, and all of us together today.

Jo was murdered on 16 June 2016, just one week before the Brexit referendum and a week before her 42nd birthday. Jo had worked in some of the world's most dangerous countries, but she was killed not in some distant place or in a war zone, but on the streets of her constituency, while carrying out her democratic duty as an elected representative, 10 minutes from where we live. Jo's murder shocked the nation, it horrified the world, it left our family utterly bereft and it left two small children without their mum.

Those children are of course Jo's most important legacy, and I am delighted to report that they are doing brilliantly. They are very like Jo in so many ways and they are annoyingly good at everything. They are musical, they are sporty, they are academic and they are really nice human beings. When they come up to Yorkshire, we try to find something that we can beat them at—and we fail every time. They are very much in my thoughts today and every day. As a family, we have ensured that they have been bathed in love for the last 10 years, just as Jo would have wished, and they are thriving as a result.

We have worked incredibly hard as a family to stay positive and strong, and we have been supported by so many wonderful people who have done so many amazing things in Jo's name, which I will come to, but this year I feel that we also need to address more directly why Jo was killed. We must be honest about the atmosphere in which Jo's murder took place. The Brexit referendum was one of the most divisive periods in modern British history. People were encouraged to see each other not as neighbours with differing opinions but as enemies. Public

discourse became increasingly toxic, fear was weaponised, anger became political currency, complex issues were reduced to slogans and compromise was portrayed as weakness.

Of course, disagreement is part of democracy, debate is healthy and passion in politics is natural—Jo would be the first to say so—but what developed at that time went beyond disagreement and became something much darker. Social media amplified outrage. Politicians and commentators often chose confrontation over understanding, because division attracted attention. Entire communities were fractured. Families argued, friendships broke down and trust in institutions collapsed. In that climate, hatred found oxygen.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I am so moved by my hon. Friend's words about her sister. I commend her for her amazing bravery and courage in stepping into her sister's shoes and being an amazing MP for Batley and Spen. I thank her for her words. As some hon. Members may know, I was a contemporary of Jo's at university; I am just sorry that although we knew people in common, I did not know her.

I fear that the division and hate that my hon. Friend is speaking about, which fuelled Jo's murder, continues to spread, and that if anything abuse and threats against MPs is on the rise. Does she agree that all hon. Members across the House must redouble our efforts to uphold civility in politics, to follow Jo's shining example? I commend the continuing work of the Jo Cox Foundation to support civility in our politics.

Kim Leadbeater: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is lovely that she, a fellow Yorkshire MP, is with us today. I absolutely agree with her. We can reflect on that time in 2016—to me, a lot of it is a blur—but to say that Brexit was responsible for Jo's murder would be simplistic and untrue. There is one individual who committed that heinous crime: a far-right neo-Nazi, whose evil act was his and his alone. However, things do not happen in a vacuum, and we cannot ignore the broader social and political atmosphere that surrounded it. Toxic rhetoric, scapegoating and the dehumanisation of opponents all contributed to a society under immense strain.

Words matter. The language we use in politics matters, because language shapes culture and culture shapes behaviour. When people are constantly told that others are traitors, enemies, invaders or threats to the nation, eventually some individuals begin to believe that hostility and violence are justified. Tragically, we have seen that again in recent weeks and days. We must all call it out. That is why remembering how and why Jo was killed matters so deeply. If we reduce her death to an isolated act, we learn nothing. If we refuse to examine the environment of anger and polarisation that surrounded it, we fail both her memory and our democracy.

Sadly, a decade later, many of the same forces are still with us—perhaps even stronger. Today, polarisation dominates public life. Across politics, media and online platforms, people are increasingly pushed into opposing camps. Nuance disappears, and every issue becomes a battle. Every disagreement becomes moral warfare. We see a growing blame culture in Britain. When the economy struggles, when public services let us down, when communities feel left behind, someone must be blamed—

migrants, politicians, the poor, the rich. The young blame the old, the old blame the young, cities blame rural communities, rural communities blame cities, and through all of that we risk losing sight of our shared humanity.

Social media algorithms reward outrage, because outrage keeps people engaged. News cycles thrive on conflict, because conflict generates clicks and views. Politicians can gain more support more easily by telling people who to fear than by offering difficult and complex long-term solutions. This constant division creates loneliness, mistrust, resentment and cynicism. It makes people feel unheard and angry. It encourages us to see one another not as fellow citizens, but as opponents to be defeated. That is dangerous for any democracy. A healthy society cannot survive if its people stop believing in one another.

I also want to pay tribute today to Sir David Amess—another colleague and friend to many in this place—who was murdered by an Islamist extremist in 2021. His family and friends have been very much in my thoughts in recent weeks. We cannot allow ourselves to be divided by the evil actions of ideological extremists, whatever sick views they are peddling. So the question becomes: what do we do about it? How do we honour the memory of Jo, not just with words, but with action?

In the past 10 years, we have seen an abundance of action in Jo's name. In the face of the worst of humanity, we have seen the very best of it, in so many ways, including of course through the work of the Jo Cox Foundation—the charity set up by Jo's family and friends in the months after she was killed. It works on issues as diverse as the protection of civilians in conflicts, such as in Syria; the promotion of women in all aspects of public life—it is great to see so many sisters here today; on loneliness and isolation; and on the related work to build closer and stronger communities at home and abroad.

The trailblazing work that Jo started on loneliness resulted in the world's first ever Minister for loneliness—my good friend and colleague, Tracey Crouch—and the first ever Government strategy on loneliness. The UK is still seen as a world leader on this really important subject, and I strongly urge the Government to update the cross-departmental strategy to ensure that we do not lose that reputation.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I am sorry to say that I did not know the hon. Lady's sister, but she sounds like a remarkable woman. I am one of two sisters, and I recognise very much from growing up the sort of family structure that the hon. Lady describes. What a testament it is to Jo as a person that, having grown up in such a family and known what the opposite of loneliness is—what companionship and family are—she thought first of people who did not enjoy that. That is a real testament to the person she was.

Kim Leadbeater: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. That is a testament to Jo's empathy—something that we could all learn from in this House.

I think about what happened in Jo's constituency of Batley and Spen after she was killed. An amazing group of volunteers came together under the “more in common” banner to ensure that our community was not torn apart by Jo's murder. It is a non-political group made up of people from a wide variety of backgrounds who,

[*Kim Leadbeater*]

on the surface, may appear to have very little in common. It is a strange and somewhat dysfunctional family, but it works. We have seen groups like it across the country, and they achieve some fantastic things, which Jo would have loved. The Great Get Together is at the heart of this work, and the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the “more in common” ethos in action.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and her sister was an absolute legend.

I want to make a very light-hearted comment. As everybody knows, I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary beer group. I was really honoured this morning to stand with my hon. Friend behind the pumps in the Strangers Bar, with a beer that has been made in memory of Jo Cox. It is for sale in the bar. That is a testament to the people she reached and the lives she touched.

Kim Leadbeater: It was an absolute joy to be pulling a pint with my hon. Friend this morning in the Strangers Bar—just to be clear, we did not drink it. I am grateful to everybody involved in the Great Get Together beer. Through it, we have shown the power of the pubs, clubs and venues that we all have in our constituencies, where people can come together and share a drink, share a conversation, cross lines of division and have a good old time, because the Great Get Together is also about having fun. I remind colleagues that they are all invited to the Great Get Together event in Speaker’s House next Wednesday after Prime Minister’s questions. We will be catered for by Batley’s finest, Fox’s Biscuits, and I hope Members can join me.

Thousands of events take place across the Great Get Together weekend. Friendships are formed, bridges are built and communities are united in a way that is rarely seen, and nowhere more so than in Jo’s beloved West Yorkshire. We have organised rugby matches, bake-offs, iftars, coffee mornings and the annual Run for Jo, when hundreds of people run through the woods at Oakwell Hall in Birstall, and there is live music, food and entertainment. It is not about the running; it is about the coming together of families, friends and strangers alike.

This year’s Run for Jo takes place on Sunday 21 June, and the good news is that all Members are invited—woo-hoo! I believe that you will be down for it, Madam Deputy Speaker. People do not have to run—they can just come and enjoy the day—but I hope that they come up to Yorkshire, even if only to take part in my cheesy ’80s aerobics warm-up, in which I get to revisit my previous career as a fitness instructor. Leg-warmers and leotards are always very welcome.

We also have the beautiful Jo Cox community wood in Spen Valley and the Jo Cox Way bike ride, which sees cyclists travel 280 miles from Yorkshire to London every summer. We have the Jo Cox sixth-form centre at Heckmondwike grammar school, which Jo and I attended and where mum and dad met and fell in love. We have the Place Jo Cox in Brussels and the Rue Jo Cox in Avallon in France—Jo’s legacy spreads far and wide.

So much has been done over the last 10 years to remember Jo and to ensure that her name and her values are never forgotten, but, as Jo herself would say,

there is undoubtedly always more to do, and I believe that we can and must all play our part. We must rebuild respectful dialogue. We need to rediscover the ability to disagree without hatred. Democracy depends on argument, but it also depends on mutual respect. Someone who votes differently from us is not automatically ignorant, wrong, evil or beyond redemption. We must resist the temptation to caricature entire groups of people. We must challenge toxic rhetoric wherever it appears.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her amazing speech. I also have sisters, and I cannot imagine standing here and doing what she is doing, so I thank her for her bravery. I never met Jo, but her legacy absolutely lives on through my hon. Friend.

Some of our opponents would have it that Britain is broken, that we are at war and that people do not care for one another any more, but my hon. Friend is showing that there is a huge swathe of people across the United Kingdom—including in Wales, where I am from, and in my seat of Monmouthshire—who care for and constantly look out for one another and support people, and who do not want the worst for our country. Does my hon. Friend agree that the idea of coming together and community is alive and well in our community and that we must all celebrate it?

Kim Leadbeater: I thank my hon. Friend and could not agree with her more. No one is pretending that we do not have challenges or that there are not difficult issues to tackle, but that is not the story of our country. The story of our country is all the amazing people we are elected here to serve and who are doing brilliant things in our communities across the whole country. That makes it even more important that we challenge toxic rhetoric wherever it appears. That responsibility belongs to everyone, including politicians, journalists, broadcasters, online influencers and ordinary citizens alike. We cannot stay silent when language becomes dehumanising or inflammatory. Freedom of speech is vital, but it comes with moral responsibility.

We have to invest in our communities. Polarisation grows when people become isolated from one another. Strong communities create empathy, because they bring different people together. Local organisations, youth groups, charities, libraries, sports clubs, faith groups and community centres—all of which we have in our constituencies—play a vital role in strengthening our social bonds. When people know each other personally, hatred becomes much harder to sustain.

We must also teach critical thinking, political education and media literacy, which are really crucial parts of our education. We live in an age of misinformation, manipulated outrage and online echo chambers. Young people especially need the tools to navigate a world in which anger spreads faster than truth.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I never met the hon. Lady’s sister, but I absolutely remember when she was taken from us. I admired her hugely, and I still do. The fact that there are so many new Members of Parliament in the Chamber this afternoon tells a story—that her memory is still alive and well, and we still hold her dear.

On the hon. Lady's point about children needing more education, the late Sir David Amess was very keen that we set up something called the Children's Parliament, and I was very privileged to be asked to be the chair of the relevant APPG. Again, Jo's memory goes on, hopefully not just for my rather elderly generation but for children and generations afterwards. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is a commendable aspiration?

Kim Leadbeater: I wholeheartedly agree and thank the hon. Lady for her intervention—and also for calling me a young lady. [*Laughter.*] Having just turned 50, I will take that! She is absolutely right: we need to do so much to support our young people who are growing up in a world with so many challenges that most of us in this place just did not face.

We have to encourage curiosity, evidence-based discussion and thoughtful engagement, rather than knee-jerk reactions to things. We have to remember that politics should serve people, not consume them. Politics matters enormously because it shapes lives, but when political identity becomes the sole measure of a person's worth, society becomes tribal and unstable.

Finally, we must choose empathy. Empathy is not weakness. Compassion is not naïveté. Understanding another person's fears does not mean abandoning our principles, and Jo understood that.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I did not know Jo, but I acutely remember the day when Jo was murdered. I was working as a doctor across the river in Guy's hospital. I remember being unable to sleep that night, and seeing my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) on television mourning their friend.

I have subsequently had the pleasure of getting to know my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). She is a credit to her sister and to this place, and in the way she has taken forward the assisted dying debate, on which we have differing views. Does she agree that the space and the toxicity she talks about is a social media landscape now, much more than it was even 10 years ago? We have a responsibility not to leave the next generation alone as they navigate that space, and we must be compelled, as a Government, to regulate that space and protect young children's impressionable minds there.

Lastly, as a teetotal doctor, I encourage everyone who is not bound by religious obligation—perhaps even the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Hannah Spencer), who is absent today—to go and partake in Jo's beer.

Kim Leadbeater: I thank my hon. Friend for his most marvellous intervention, and for wearing a beautiful coloured tie, which perfectly co-ordinates with the Jo Cox Foundation logo. He is absolutely right, and he is such a valuable addition to this place. I thank him for his friendship.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham Yardley) (Lab): She would have loved you, Zubir.

Kim Leadbeater: She would have loved you.

It is so important that we keep empathy and compassion at the heart of our politics, and Jo understood that better than most. She believed deeply in human dignity.

She believed that people from different backgrounds could live together peacefully. She believed that Britain is strongest when it is open-hearted rather than fearful. That belief cost her her life, but it must not die with her.

If there is one lesson we should take from Jo's legacy, it is this: hatred grows when good people become indifferent to division. The answer to polarisation cannot be more polarisation. The answer to fear cannot be more fear. The answer must be courage—the courage to listen, the courage to speak responsibly, the courage to reject extremism in all its forms, the courage to defend democratic values even when emotions run high and, most importantly, the courage to remember that we belong to one another.

In remembering Jo today, let us not simply mourn what was lost; let us ask ourselves what kind of country we want to become. Do we want a society defined by outrage and suspicion, or one defined by compassion and solidarity? Do we want future generations to inherit division, or do we want them to inherit hope? That choice is ours. Perhaps the greatest tribute we can offer Jo is not merely to repeat her words, but to live by them and to show in all our actions and behaviours that we really are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.

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

12.23 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): My goodness, how do you follow that? I thank our friend the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for that wonderful tribute to her sister. I am grateful to speak in this debate and to have the opportunity to honour the work and legacy of Jo Cox. Jo served in the House before my time here began, but I want to speak in the debate because of the way she approached politics, always understanding that we have more in common than divides us.

In preparing for the debate, I looked not just at how Jo is remembered but the work she did. What stands out is a woman who did politics that was practical, human and rooted in the lives of people who too often went unheard. In her work on Syria, when she pressed the House to look clearly at the reality facing civilians and to recognise that sympathy was not enough, she said:

"It is now time for us to listen and to act."—[*Official Report*, 12 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 140.]

That, for me, is the heart of Jo's legacy: not just compassion, but compassion turned into action. That is the message we need to reflect on today.

Too often, we see how easy it is to create anger or mistrust—to develop rhetoric to tear things down. We see that today in those stoking racial hatred and religious division. It is much harder to make real positive change, but that is exactly what Jo did. The Jo Cox Foundation has carried that work on, and the Great Get Together is a fantastic example of that. It is not complicated and it does not ask people to agree on everything; it simply asks people to come together to share food, to talk, to meet neighbours and to remember that community works in all its diversity.

We see that in our own constituencies, too. I invite Members to Sked's Garden on 21 June, where we are having a massive barefoot ceilidh as a free event, which

[Susan Murray]

everyone is invited to. In Mid Dunbartonshire I see other groups, such as the Men's Shed, Apna Ghar, the Hive, GRACE—Group Recovery Aftercare Community Enterprise—and Gavin's Mill, everything from heritage groups to community development trusts, offering people a safe and welcoming place to rebuild lives, reduce social isolation and promote wellbeing at home and internationally.

My own life took an unexpected turn when I became a full-time carer, and I experienced how important the support of community is. Jo understood that loneliness is not a side issue; it is something that can quietly shrink a person's life. It affects old people, younger people, carers, bereaved families, and many people who would never say out loud that they are lonely. Her work helped Parliament to take that seriously, and we should keep taking it seriously.

We all have lessons to learn from Jo's example. We can disagree strongly, and at times maybe we should, but we cannot treat each other as enemies because of our differing views. We must look for common ground to build solutions on. The best tribute we can pay is not just to remember her, but to continue the work she left for us: to encourage more women to choose to enter politics, to choose to listen, act and build community, and to choose to make our politics a little braver and a little kinder.

12.27 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham Yardley) (Lab): I do not have any notes written down, because when I tried to write things down this morning, I just kept crying, but I shall try to get through this regardless.

Many brilliant things will be said about Jo today, and my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) has given us much insight. I want to start my remarks where she ended hers, in that we have to live the values of Jo's words, not just say them. When I was reflecting this morning about my friendship with Jo, I thought about how Jo was a doer. She was always coming up with a scheme of some kind or another—some of them ridiculous, I have to say. I text the Minister on the Front Bench this morning, saying, "We do have to remember that sometimes she was quite mental!"

I reflected on the fact that she made me into one of her projects. When I arrived here, I did not know many people—I was not the popular girl I am now—and I did not live in London. My family were at home in Birmingham, and I had been to Parliament one time before working in this building. She made it so that I always had somewhere to go. She sought me out, she made friends with me, and she took me to have dinner with her family, because I could not go home to mine. She invited me to events—she tried to make connections for other people. There has been a lot of talk recently about the boys' club in politics—we have seen a little bit behind some curtains—but Jo was definitely trying to make a girls' club. She would make sure that you were introduced to the right people. If she heard you talking about things that you were interested in and she had a connection, she wanted you to have it.

But the greatest connection that Jo gave me was to invite me into her family. To this day, the place where I go when I am sad or things are difficult, or just when

I fancy a drink and a celebration, is the moorings where Jo lived. When I resigned the other day and I was all a-tizz, I went to sit with Cuillin and Lejla, to eat a takeaway and do Cuillin's GCSE homework with him—I kept shouting "oxbow lakes" at him repeatedly, which yesterday he told me was not all that helpful.

The legacy of Jo Cox in my life is that she gave me a family to be part of when I was away from my family. There is not a time when things have been hard and they have not been there for me. I recently lost my sister-in-law, and the people who were there for me—to make sure I could help raise my nephews without their mom—were Brendan, Cuillin and Lejla. They are the most important legacy that Jo has, and I am eternally grateful that when we first arrived in this place together, she tried to make sure that we had connections; that nobody would be lonely; that somewhere would always be available for you to have a cup of tea or a curry, or do geography homework. It is mundane—it is the small mundanity of kindness.

The way that Jo's family have kept her alive in Cuillin and Lejla's minds is so phenomenal. Yesterday, Lejla made a speech in No. 10. She said, "My mom was a brilliant mom, she was a brilliant Member of Parliament, and she was a brilliant friend." I know, because she told me, that her mom felt like she was not good enough at any of those things, but the way Lejla remembers it—the way she has grown up remembering her mother—is far more accurate than the way her mother felt about herself.

I try to encourage young women to get involved in politics, so Lejla came out with me once to go door-knocking in an election. I remember her sat in the back of my car as we were driving to the meeting point—I think the election was for the West Midlands Mayor; I am sure Lejla was deeply involved in wanting to do that—and talking about a memory that must have been given to her. She said, "When my mom was standing for election, because we don't have the right accent, we had to be taught how to say, 'Vote for Jo!'" [Laughter.] There was just total delight in this little girl faking a Yorkshire accent while in the west midlands.

What Jo gave me in life was friendship and family that has endured to this day, and what she gave me in politics—which I think actually is still quite rare—was to show me that you have to be courageous, you have to be brave, and sometimes you have to stick your neck out quite a long way. I often think of that—certainly in relation to Gaza, for example—and constantly wish she was here. I still sometimes send her text messages, as if she is alive. I wish she was here to talk us through these things in this House. I think, "What would Jo do now? What would Jo say in this circumstance?" I can think of no better person who could be here right now, in the politics we face today, than Jo. The remarks that my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley has made today—it is now really hard for me not just to say her name—are not just a nice speech to hear, but the embodiment of living like Jo and loving like Jo.

It does not matter which political persuasion or flavour you are, the idea that everybody in this Chamber is some sort of baddie over there is the easiest political line. If the line that you have to take to get likes, clicks and popularity is that there is some sort of shadowy institution in this place made up of people who will never understand the world, and that is why we are the

better alternative, or if you are saying that the only reason things are bad in our country is because of x or y over there—when I was a kid, it was single moms; now it is immigrants—it is the politics of stupidity. Any fool can behave like that. There is no value in it whatsoever.

We did not allow that kind of politics to creep in at the time of Jo's death, because we did not want her death to be politicised. We wanted her life and her legacy to be politicised; we did not want to stare down what it was actually about at the time, because we wanted to forge her legacy. That was the right thing to do, but every single day in this place and outside it, there are people doing the exact opposite: using people's deaths to sell their political narrative. They should be ashamed of themselves.

If anything you say or do does not drive forward a good outcome for our country, do not do it. Do not say it. Jo would be a beacon in that regard, as her sister is, and I beg everybody to be much more like the actual people in our country, who—as my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley says—are good. If we all lived more like Jo and looked for somebody who needed connections that we might be able to give them, who maybe needed a cup of tea and a place to call home away from home, there would not be any of the division that there is today.

I did not meet Jo Cox on social media; I met her around a table with a cup of tea. I ask people to put down their phones—both in politics and in how we deal with our communities—to pick up a cup of tea, and to live and love like Jo did.

12.38 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): It is a privilege to follow the wise words of the hon. Members for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) and for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who have done a great job of embodying the various aspects of Jo that we are in the Chamber today to talk about. I join all the other Members who have spoken in paying tribute to Jo's sister. She is a great parliamentarian—she is admired across the House for the way she works so diligently and courageously on so many issues, many of which I have in common with her. I am grateful to have learned today that we also share a legacy of dancing around to Wham! with our sisters. I will also be definitely trying the Great Get Together beer, but only after I have voted. I am so appreciative of every single one of Jo's friends who are speaking today and who shared their parliamentary careers with her. I feel so sad, but so warmly towards them all. Their fortitude and the work they have all done in securing her legacy are huge.

In June 2016 I was not an MP, but I was a London Assembly member working at the old City Hall by Tower Bridge. I remember how I heard about Jo's murder, like everybody, but I remember in particular seeing Jo and her young family speeding across the Thames in what I called later their plucky remain boat. I have a lovely photograph—I did not know it was of her until days later—of her and the family with an “In” flag whizzing about on the Thames as part of Bob Geldof's rival flotilla in the final days of the referendum campaign. I remember feeling so delighted that day to have seen this example of good-spirited, memorable campaigning just outside my workplace. Obviously, all that changed.

Politics is supposed to be a way of resolving our differences creatively through communication, not violence. Losing Jo was a harrowing sign that that consensus, which many people were trying to keep going, had been somewhat shattered. We could have done, and can do, so much better in the UK in politics, in the media, online and in our communities by investing in what I call the real resilience—the real antidote—to hate, which is by keeping communities feeling valued and invested in. The most shining part of Jo's legacy is undoubtedly the foundation, which works towards that goal. It embodies her spirit and her work, as does the incredible work carried out by the More in Common Network to build up communities and to call for connection over division. Ten years on from losing her, Jo's “more in common” message feels more vital and urgent than I can say. The awful scenes we have witnessed this week, which other Members have mentioned, alone serve as a brutal reminder of how quickly anger can evolve into violence when people are turned against one another in our communities.

Finally, I turn to the question of how the anger that killed Jo was seeded and how it grew. It is a question that my predecessor, Caroline Lucas, thought a lot about. It led her to travel around the country in the months following the EU referendum to talk with people whose political views differed vastly from her own. Through that experience, she proved that Jo's now infamous words from her maiden speech in this place were absolutely correct. Caroline has said about those conversations:

“More often it was refreshing and reassuring because there was so much more that we agreed on than held us apart. Many people were angry. Of course they were. But if you took the time to go, and paid them the courtesy of listening, then common ground could emerge.”

As MPs, we do not and certainly cannot agree on everything, but we must always strive to seek common ground.

Alison McGovern: I worked with the hon. Lady's predecessor at that time. If I may, I send through the hon. Lady my very best wishes and thanks to her predecessor. I thank the hon. Lady for reading those words into the debate. It was a difficult time, and her predecessor played a full part.

Siân Berry: I thank the Minister for that, and I will certainly pass on that message. As MPs, we do not always agree on everything. It is our job to disagree, but to disagree well, with standards, compassion and ethics. We must always seek to find common ground where we can. When we disagree, we should do so with patience and respect, as Jo always did.

12.43 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry). I will pick up on her last point, which was a challenge to all of us. There is always a danger, especially when you are a politician and you aspire to a better type of politics and a better type of discourse, that people will go through years-old media interviews, and increasingly your social media timelines, and say, “What about that time?” The point is—this was true of Jo, too—that none of us is perfect. We all aspire to be better, but we have to work at it.

[*Wes Streeting*]

If it were the case that everyone behaved brilliantly all the time and was always the best versions of themselves, we would not have the challenges of division, and if it is the case that we cannot change hearts and minds, and that people who are racist—or prejudiced in another way, or brutal in the way they go about their lives—cannot be better, why do we bother with anti-racism campaigns? Why do we fight for equality? Why do we do offender rehabilitation? We do so because we know that people are not born perfect, but nor are they born bad. The whole point of life is to aspire to be a better person, and to leave something better behind us—and my goodness did our friend Jo do that.

I can well understand why the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) can scarcely believe a decade has passed since Jo's murder, because when he looks in the mirror every day, the same image is staring back at him. He has not aged a day, and I wish the same could be said for the rest of us.

In the short time this debate has been taking place, it has been really nice when people have got to their feet and opened by saying, "I did not know Jo," because you did not need to know Jo; she always let you in. Even if you had not met her before, if you did not connect with her in some way, or if you did not have mutual friends, the door was open and she would let you in. In the short time we were in this place together, I realised how lucky we were to have become friends.

One of my abiding memories of Jo is in the Members' Lobby around votes, because she was never standing still. She was always running around—ducking and diving, bobbing and weaving—trying to sort some deal out, or trying to get some motion signed or some cause over the line. She was a real troublemaker, in the best possible way.

It is hard following my hon. Friends the Members for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) and for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), but they have given me courage today. Ten years ago, in the wake of Jo's murder, I was asked to say a few words in this House on behalf of all of us who were elected alongside her in the 2015 intake of Labour MPs, and I could not do it. I did not think I would be able to hold it together, and I feared I would not find the words to do justice to the truly wonderful and powerful woman she was or to just how much she was loved—and is loved—by all of us who had the privilege to know her. My God, do we miss her. Her wisdom, experience and insight are so desperately needed now in our national life.

There is always a danger that when words are repeated often, they lose meaning or become a cliché. It is with that risk in mind that I dwell on those words, so well known from Jo's maiden speech, where she said:

"While we celebrate our diversity, what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 674-75.]

I feel exactly the same about my community—my home—in Redbridge as Jo did about her community in Kirklees.

Jo's words were never intended to be sentimental; they were meant to be challenging. "More in common" does not mean pretending that our differences do not exist—Jo knew they did. She represented a constituency

of proud Yorkshire towns and villages with different histories, different faiths, different traditions and different politics. "More in common" does not mean a politics without argument—Jo argued. Yes, she was able to work across party lines, but she was tribally Labour. She knew that change does not happen because people wish for it, or just because it is the right thing to do; change comes because people organise, campaign, persuade, demand and refuse to give up.

"More in common" certainly does not mean a politics without courage—it demands it. Jo had courage in abundance, whether it was courage to stand up for refugees fleeing war, courage to demand action to protect civilians in Syria, courage for women and girls facing violence wherever in the world they face that violence, or courage for the people of Batley and Spen, whose dignity and decency she reflected to the whole country.

To be courageous requires strength. Jo was strong, but there is a difference, especially in politics, between being strong and being brutal. Jo showed us that courage and kindness are not in competition, and they are two qualities that obviously run in the family. We are so blessed that Gordon and Jean gave our country two daughters to serve Batley and Spen, and now Spen Valley, and my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley gives true meaning to the words "honourable" and "friend". It is a regular complaint of my mum's that we use such language, by the way, because as far as she is concerned, there are not many honourable people in this place and she does not think I should be friends with any of them. [*Laughter.*] That is a consequence of social media.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley has warned that our country faces increasing polarisation. Her family, including Brendan and Jo's two wonderful children, know better than anyone where extremism can lead. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we face a choice about what kind of country we want to be. The Britain that I love, and the England that I love, is open, confident, generous and kind. It is serious, but with a great sense of humour, and it is a country that loves an underdog as much as being the top dog. We are a small island that has led the world in every industrial revolution, and whose language and literature, and songs and science, are enjoyed throughout the world. That is the Britain that we have to fight for and stand up for. I think it is the Britain of the majority of people in this country, and we must not let others grab the microphone or social media feeds to paint a picture to each other, or to the rest of the world, that does not reflect the true nature of what it means to be this United Kingdom.

In the week that Jo died, she brought together a whole group of us down in Wapping, where she lived, and we had the most wonderful party. There was a lot of laughing, a lot of talking and a lot of drinking. Awards were given—one day we should publish the list of the winners and ask, "Where are they now?" That was the last time I saw Jo.

That brings me to the political culture that we need to live by. We all came together as a tribe on that boat, and what was remarkable about the 2015 intake of Labour MPs is that we spanned the full spectrum of our wonderful and sometimes slightly dysfunctional Labour tribe. At a difficult time for our national politics, but also for our Labour politics, we were reminded in those moments of joy and laughter how much we have in common. When Jo sat on the Opposition Benches and looked at the

other side of the House, she did not see enemies; she saw political opponents. She also saw opportunities, because her politics was about seeking converts, not traitors. It was about trying to reach across the aisle, where possible, to get things done and change things in a progressive and positive way. That is the kind of politics that we can provide when we are collectively at our best.

In this information and attention economy, where it is the sensational, the most outrageous and the most divisive language or words that grab attention, the tragedy is that the country does not get to see much of what goes on in this place—the all-party parliamentary groups, the camaraderie behind the scenes, and the overwhelming kindness of this place when people experience tragedy, as I found when I was going through cancer. The country does not get to see inside that Commons that we get to see every day, and we need to show more of it to the public, because they need to see in us what so often people here see in each other. That is what makes this country a wonderful country to live in.

I still believe that this country's best days are ahead, not behind. We have a proud history, but ultimately there is no hope in nostalgia. The purpose of our politics is to be a better path to a brighter future, where opportunity and security are shared by all. We will build that future if we live like Jo, love like Jo and remember that we have far more in common than the things that divide us.

12.54 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I did not know Jo Cox, and Jo Cox did not know me, but what I do know is that Jo Cox was my friend. Hers is a legacy that we must not just honour with words, but live in practice. This is an opportunity to remind the country of Jo's passion, drive and reason for being, why she was in this place and why she is so deeply missed. I am privileged to speak in this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater)—my predecessor and constituency neighbour—for continuing Jo's wonderful work and legacy. I salute you, my friend.

I was elected in 2024, so I did not have the honour of working with Jo, but—I am not saying this to cause offence to any Member—I feel that I know Jo Cox better than I know many Members of this House today, and it is not for want of trying. I absolutely adored the description given by the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), who said that Jo was “quite mental”. I would qualify that by saying she was quite good mental. There is mental and then there is mental, and she was of the good kind.

Having been elected as the Member of Parliament for Dewsbury and Batley, I feel extremely privileged to speak in this debate. Jo was born in Dewsbury and represented Batley and Spen, the two towns that I now represent, making it a special honour for me to be able to speak today. The values that she embodied and championed—tolerance, fairness and kindness—still echo powerfully across our communities. Much has rightly been made of Jo's maiden speech, in which she spoke powerfully and eloquently about how

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 674.]

That is an apt mission statement or motto for this place, but I have gone through *Hansard* to see what Jo said immediately before those remarks, which are now

internationally recognised. The remarks that she made before that are just as important, even though they are less commented on. She said:

“Batley and Spen is a gathering of typically independent, no-nonsense and proud Yorkshire towns and villages. Our communities have been deeply enhanced by immigration, be it of Irish Catholics across the constituency or of Muslims from Gujarat in India or from Pakistan, principally from Kashmir.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 674.]

As we look at the unsavoury scenes that have unfolded across the UK in the past week, from Belfast to Southampton, Jo's belief in the strength of diversity and the power of connection has never been more important. Listening, respecting differences and building bridges where others might be tempted to build walls all matter today more than ever, and they matter in this place. As we reflect on Jo's legacy, we must be honest about the marked deterioration in the state of our public life since her heinous murder. Civility, the basic respect that underpins democratic disagreement, has been under unprecedented strain and attack in the past decade. We see it in the abuse increasingly directed at elected representatives, in the growing normalisation of unsavoury discourse and, perhaps most pervasively and drastically, in the digital spaces that increasingly shape our national conversation.

Jo understood that vehement disagreement is fundamental to any functioning democracy, but she also understood that democracy cannot function without a basic sense of humanity and a willingness to listen to the views of others in good faith. That is why we must confront one of the defining challenges of our time, which is the role of big tech and social media in poisoning our social fabric. Referring back to some of the comments we have heard, we must confront the wider ecosystem of public commentary from prominent political figures, media personalities and online influencers whose reckless or inflammatory language can help to create the conditions for real-world harm.

In the run-up to periods of unrest in communities across our country, we have too often seen divisive narratives, misinformation and the amplification of fear and grievance. Social media platforms have allowed such content to spread rapidly and without sufficient accountability. Why would they do so? Because every click, every like and every forward earns them more pounds or more dollars, and more money for their shareholders. The result is an environment where tensions can be heightened, trust eroded and, in the worst cases, communities pitted against one another. Yesterday, we heard about the violence and riots in Belfast, where masked people—men predominantly—went around the streets shouting, “Foreigners out!” They also went into people's homes, evicted them and set their homes on fire. This cannot be accepted, tolerated or encouraged.

If we are to honour Jo's legacy, we must be clear that freedom of expression carries responsibility, and that those with large platforms—whether in politics, media or tech—must be held accountable for the impact of their words. Too often, we have allowed these platforms to become amplifiers of anger, division and dehumanisation, without any restrictions. It is a far cry from the open, respectful dialogue on which democracy depends. The Jo Cox Foundation has rightly called for more actions to reduce online harms, but we in this House must be crystal clear that regulation has not gone anywhere near far enough or fast enough. Algorithmic systems reward outrage over empathy. They monetise violence and

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

incitement to violence. Abuse and disinformation spread faster than compliments and the truth, and anonymity acts as a shield for those who seek to bully and threaten. These companies must be brought to heel both for the health of our younger generations and for the health of our democracy and our society.

There is a deeper, more insidious link between the toxic nature of online spaces and the growing crisis of loneliness in our society, of which Jo was such a prescient observer. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness put this issue firmly on the national agenda, and its relevance has only grown since. There are now half a million more people experiencing chronic loneliness than before the pandemic, with young people among the most likely to feel isolated. The evidence is clear that loneliness weakens social cohesion, reduces trust and leaves individuals more vulnerable to political polarisation and extremism, so when people feel disconnected from each other, our democracy itself becomes more fragile.

Jo instinctively understood that connection more than most parliamentarians, which is why her legacy is not just about remembrance, but about the responsibility we have in this House and the other place. It is a responsibility to rebuild civility in our politics and to calm tensions, not inflame them, both in this House and in our wider nation; a responsibility to strengthen the social fabric of our communities, not undermine them by pitting different groups against each other; and a responsibility to ensure that the technologies shaping our lives serve humanity, not damage it. That means taking seriously the call for a renewed cross-Government strategy on loneliness, and one that recognises social connection as fundamental to physical health, mental wellbeing and social cohesion. However, it also means going further. It means holding big tech companies to account for the environments they create, embedding safeguards against online abuse and disinformation, and investing in digital literacy so that people of all ages can navigate these spaces safely and critically.

Above all, it means leading by example, because every one of us in this House has a role to play in setting the tone of public debate. I promised in my maiden speech, to this House and to our nation, that I would not deliberately say or do anything to harm any other person. I try to live by that principle, and I apologise to Members of this House and to members of our nation if, in the 23 months I have been an MP, I have failed in that promise, but I will try to do better. We cannot call for civility while engaging in division, and we cannot demand respect while tolerating abuse. If we are to honour Jo's memory, we must embody her values, not just invoke them. That starts with recognising, as she did, that our shared humanity is greater than our differences, and it continues with the choices we make about how we speak, how we listen and how we treat one another. So I end by echoing the words of the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) that we must love like Jo, live like Jo, care like Jo and serve like Jo.

1.8 pm

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): What an honour it is to be here in the Chamber, alongside 2015 friends—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) and my right

hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting)—and obviously my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), to share my memories of Jo and talk about her legacy in a world that, quite honestly, could do with a lot more people like Jo in it right now.

On 7 May 2015, I was one of 177 new MPs elected for the first time. Fifty of us were Labour MPs, and 11 years later, 36 out of those 50 remain, but I have no doubt that, if it were not for the tragic and senseless act that day, there would be 37 of us now. Jo was a fellow newbie back in 2015, a respected colleague and someone I was proud to call a friend. She stood for everything that is right, and she was never afraid to share her beliefs or call out injustice.

My final and lasting memory of Jo is of just two days before, when she invited those of us in the 2015 intake to her houseboat to celebrate our first year in this place. I do not understand why—I have never quite understood it—but I am almost certain I won the prize for the best accessories and earrings. What I do remember is that we were greeted by a beautifully decorated chalkboard that the children had written, welcoming us—I'm getting choked thinking about it—to their home. None of us could have known that in less than 48 hours she would be gone. The memories of that evening are so precious and remind me of what an exceptional woman she was, opening up her home despite already juggling her responsibilities in Westminster and in Batley and Spen with being a devoted wife, daughter, sister and, most importantly, mother to two wonderful children. She was remarkable: passionate about everything she stood for and determined to make our country a better place for everyone who called it home.

It feels inconceivable that 10 years have already passed since we lost Jo. Returning to Parliament just days after her death and sitting on the Opposition Benches listening to the shock and horror felt across the House is something I will never, ever forget. Voices from every party spoke of how Jo was the very best of us, how her values were shared by us all and how important it was that we all lived by her words. Jo truly believed what she said in her iconic maiden speech: that in our diverse communities, right across the country, we have far more in common than the things that divide us. It is a message that perhaps even needs to be told more today than 10 years ago.

Much of my work in this place over the last 10 years has been on things that I know Jo would have taken an interest in: the ongoing campaign to encourage more women to stand for office and achieve a 50:50 Parliament; standing up against abuse in public office, particularly of female MPs; and our campaign to improve menopause support and services in healthcare, in the workplace and across society. I wish she had had the opportunity to fight those causes with us, because her voice would have been one well worth listening to. Jo always spoke with real conviction about the things that mattered most, and she cared immensely about those who felt targeted, isolated or alone. She celebrated diversity, she believed in the value of community, and she used her platform to be a voice for those who felt marginalised and silenced.

Jo's legacy has already written itself. Indeed, the very words she herself spoke in this Chamber and beyond are just that. Hate and division should not be tolerated. Nobody should feel comfortable knowing that others

are experiencing loneliness. If Jo's one voice on its own could get that message across so clearly, imagine the impact if we all used our voices together to spread those words of love and hope.

Iqbal Mohamed: Does the hon. Lady agree with me that Jo was the change she wanted to see? That is a real example for all of us in this House and across our nation. We should follow in her footsteps and be the positive change we want to see.

Carolyn Harris: I certainly do. Jo's vision is something I have tried desperately to live up to in all my political career.

In Jo's memory, 10 years on from her tragic and untimely death, I urge colleagues from all parties—even those who are not with us today—to remember what she stood for, to amplify her message and to encourage others to celebrate the wonderful diversity of our country.

1.14 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the reflections of my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). It is in the nature of this place that, when called to rise to the moment, the House does so. I think that that has been reflected across the Chamber today.

We often say that we should be more like Jo; it has become part of our common exchanges. However, I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) that I would like to be a bit more like Kim. She stewarded a very testing private Member's Bill on a matter that was so profound and made us all think about those final moments when our time comes to an end, and she created a safe political space for all views on such a sensitive issue to be reflected. She does not just say the words; she embodies them. I really appreciate that and thank my hon. Friend for it.

Jo's words really matter to us because they challenge us to be better. All of us come into politics because we have a desire to change the bit of the world we care about and feel connected to—our community, our town, our borough, our city—which we know can be so much better and often feel is held back from realising its potential. We come here to try to make a difference. This is a fairly odd place, let us be honest, with its quirk and its custom, and I think at times we do not always credit ourselves for the amount of work that goes on cross-party, when we pull together. That common interest—Members of all parties really care about and, I would say, love the place they represent—drives most of us in politics. Perhaps if we displayed that a bit more, we would build more trust in politics and its ability to make a difference. Jo's words, that

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us"—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.] are not just an anchor; they must be a challenge to all of us.

Sometimes we can meet that challenge through small acts of kindness such as saying hello to somebody walking down the corridor; they do not always have to be big gestures. If somebody is sitting at a table in the Tea Room by themselves, we should pull up a chair and join them. If a Member is feeling under pressure in their

constituency—we all feel that, and try to get through it and keep our own house in order—reaching out to them and saying, "Do you know what, I saw what was going on in your town or city and I was thinking about you" goes a long way in recognising that we are not isolated. When we come down here to London, many of us are away from our support networks: our families who love us are not there when we go back to our accommodation at night. The people we rely on are generally the people in this place and sometimes that bit of decency means a great deal.

When I eventually move on to a different place, I will reflect on my time in Parliament. Of course I will think—hopefully—about the big things that I was able to achieve with the special privilege of being an MP, but I will also reflect on those small moments of kindness that made me realise why I got into politics to begin with. I think we can all do those things a bit more.

I came into Parliament on a by-election. By-elections are, as a number of Members will know, very weird things. You are caught in the storm of the noise of hundreds of thousands of people descending on your town—my thoughts are with the people of Makerfield at this time. I was going to say that it is a circus, but that does not quite do it justice. It is inspiring that so many people rally to get you over the line, but of course you soon realise that you were a mere legal necessity—a name required on the ballot paper. You arrive here among your new friends, and you wonder where your locker is, how to get your IT to work and so on. Jo was one of a number of people who reached out to me as a by-election candidate. She invited me to the party on the houseboat to make me feel a part of the 2015 intake. That is who she was. She did not know me any more than anybody else did in this place. I had not met her before, but she made an effort to reach out. I cannot say just how much that meant to me, when I came here. I see friends in the Chamber who did the same and I hope they feel that at times I have repaid that. Being a good person in this place goes a long way.

The reason why "more in common" strikes a note today is that it should endure. It feels self-evident: of course, we have more in common. Whatever troubles we have in our country, in the place we call home, our futures are bound together. What else have we got in common if not that shared endeavour and the future for ourselves and our families? In politics, that feels more contested today than it has ever been before. That is not because we have less in common, but because a lot of the political debate is consumed by what differences there are and what divides us. Too often, our politics encourages us to see what separates us before we see what binds us together. At times, those who take a different view are treated as not simply having a different perspective, experience, or background—simply coming at an issue from a different way—but as wrong and somehow lesser.

Jo understood that politics involved disagreement. She would never have pretended that there were not difficult issues to confront, but she also understood that words matter, and that those in positions of influence have a responsibility not merely to represent divisions in society but to lead people through them. Many Members in this place, as well as our mayors and our councillors, will have experiences that illustrate just how toxic parts of our political environment have become.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I am sorry not to have known Jo, because she seems like someone who I would have got on incredibly well with. I am delighted that I have got to know her sister, the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), and that we have worked cross-party on a number of issues. I know that Jo would have campaigned on similar issues, such as violence against women and girls. Recently, we had some awful protests in Epsom; they were about women's safety, but they were hijacked by the far-right. Rather than being peaceful, the protests were violent and protesters attacked a property that housed vulnerable adults. They were trying to find immigrants. Does the hon. Member agree that today more than ever we must come together? As he mentioned, we need to discuss and debate the differences that we have, and if we protest we must do so peacefully, because we absolutely do have more in common than that which divides us.

Jim McMahon: I will come on to social media and the way that division is amplified and monetised, and how bad behaviour is often rewarded more than being a good citizen in that debate.

I am proud of our country and believe that the vast majority in this country are decent, hard-working people who want the best for themselves and their neighbours, whatever their background, race or religion. However, we have to look in the mirror collectively, as a country, and ask what has taken us to the point where an attack that all of us see as horrific, which has played out in Belfast over the last couple of days, could in any way justify the scenes of a family—women and children—running away from their house, which has been left in flames and smoke. That is where division has got us. How can we find ourselves in a situation where a woman fleeing war in Ukraine who has been homed in Belfast, finds her house being attacked, while violent protesters are egged on from Russia?

We have to reflect on the fact that cohesion does not happen by accident. People do not come together unless there is leadership that brings them together. Maybe we all need to be a bit more determined in calling out what is in plain sight. We must also accept that it has been a characteristic of politics in Britain since the EU referendum. At that moment, something changed. Being online has of course made it worse; the way that those divisions are exploited, and how extremism now has a platform that it did not have in the mainstream before, is all part of that.

I am not convinced that mainstream politics is adequately responding to the scale of the challenge that is in front of us. I do not feel that we have the regulations. At some point—my god!—Ofcom might realise that it is a regulator, and then who knows what it could achieve. We must ask whether the architecture is in place to deal with the scale of the challenge.

As we see homes set on fire, businesses damaged and people attacked, I would say that this is a national emergency. In a civil emergency, we would respond as a nation and a Government in a more determined way than we have seen. I fear that the power being held by a handful of very wealthy, powerful, connected individuals, who control our social media in the way that the old media was controlled by the wealthy and powerful for vested interests, is almost placing the Government into a position of fear—fear of the response if they take

action. These things are not easy, but taking no action—or cautious action—is not rising to the challenge ahead.

I have three reflections on where we find ourselves. First, every elected representative has a responsibility not just to challenge views they disagree with but to build bridges across political differences and seek common ground wherever it can be found. We are elected to represent whole communities, not factions of communities. We should lead by example in the tone we set, the respect we show, and the openness with which we are willing to engage. That is not always easy—political disagreements are deeply felt—but little can be achieved without it.

Secondly, I continue to believe—although this is tested on a regular basis—that social media can be a force for good. It offers opportunities to connect people, to learn to organise, and to bring people together around shared interests and common causes. In fact, we all use it in this House—there is no one here who is not on one social media platform or another for those reasons. I do not begin by looking at social media from a point of cynicism about the technology itself. We have got to be honest about social media's flaws, however, because too often the incentives that are built into platforms reward outrage over understanding, division over dialogue, and conflict over compromise. In many respects, previous generations could have barely understood the scale and pace of that, but the Government have to recognise and step up to the scale of the challenge.

Thirdly, we have to address the underlying tensions that drive fear, anxiety and anger. Where people feel insecure in their jobs, worried about their family's future, unable to access housing, or disconnected from the opportunities available elsewhere, those concerns cannot simply be dismissed or ignored. We must respond with great urgency to the conditions that people feel, particularly when they say that they are unheard and feel left behind.

Alongside all that, we have to recognise that social cohesion is not a passive state. It does not happen by accident. It requires effort, compromise, and a willingness to listen, understand and sometimes disagree without condemning, rather than everything being a culture war or about identity, where the winners of the argument are those who can shout loudest, not those who can convince. That was the lesson that Jo Cox tried to teach us, and it remains as important today as when she first said it.

For some, those concerns might sound abstract. Quite often, we talk around the houses about social media regulation and its impact, but in a town such as Oldham, where we are now 25 years on from the Oldham riots, we know the cost when communities are torn apart and division is normalised. We know the cost when people live completely separate lives, not interacting in communities, the education system, the housing system or even in the economy; where the opportunities to meet people from a different background are the exception, not the rule; where people self-select to live a separate life, because it is easier and maybe more secure than making the effort to reach out and build bridges across different communities.

Iqbal Mohamed: To highlight the hon. Gentleman's point, after the murder of Mr Nowak, Tommy Robinson said:

"The whole system is set against white people. And it must be smashed!"

In recent days, Musk has reposted messages claiming that the British Prime Minister hates white people and “millions must go”. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is the language of incitement to hatred and violence, and that wherever it is possible for our law to reach, the Government and law enforcement agencies must tackle that behaviour with the strongest force of the law?

Jim McMahon: It is clear that extremists will capitalise on the anxiety, fear and frustration that people feel in the country, and on the everyday problems they face. People are facing difficult circumstances now when trying to get a house that is affordable and secure, keep a job that can provide a good standard of living for themselves and their family, and feel safe in the community they call home where they are raising their kids—those are real issues that people face—and it is the oldest trick in the book to blame thy neighbour rather than the real cause of the problem.

I remember doing a kind of test at secondary school—I am not sure whether this is still done—in which the classroom was divided by the eye colour of the children in the class, with the blue-eyed kids on one side and the brown-eyed kids on the other. I was on the side with the blue eyes. We were given a handful of sweets to share among ourselves—a much bigger group of kids—while the brown-eyed kids were given a big bowl of sweets. There was more than enough for everybody in that group—they were stuffing their face and enjoying themselves. Within seconds, we had stopped looking at where the bigger bowl of sweets had gone and started squabbling among ourselves over the few sweets left on the table. Of course, the message was that when people are left to fight for scarce resource, they fight the person nearest to them, who is trying to fight for the same resource; the lesson was to look where the resource had been taken before it got anywhere near our table.

I say that because in a town like Oldham, people from every background are working hard, but there are not enough sweets to go around the community to give people a good standard of living and to make them feel safe in the communities where they live. I hear it from the white community and I hear it from the Muslim community. I hear it from people from every background, because we are all part of the same place, with the same hopes, fears and concerns about the future. It poses a real question for the Government about the economy and the fact that the wealth that we are creating is not being fairly distributed among society. The workers who are creating that wealth are fighting for scarce resource in a society that is, frankly, still setting working people against other working people.

The fact that race, religion or however many generations someone happens to have been British are dividing lines in an argument makes me really fearful. When it comes to matters of asylum and refugees, my town has a strong history of supporting people fleeing persecution. I have always thought that when looking into the eyes of a child in such a situation, we must think to ourselves: there but for the grace of God go I. If that was my child, what would I want as a response to protect the child I love? I expect our country to provide what it would for my child for children who are fleeing war.

Let us be honest, though: our asylum and immigration system is not working for people who are fleeing war and persecution any more than it is for anybody else.

We have to get a grip of the system. It can be a bit too easy in politics to talk firm without outlining what is fair. We need to make sure that there is balance and equity in that debate. If we do not, those divisions will be exploited.

Oldham has had to literally rebuild itself and its community from the ashes of riots in which the town set itself on fire. Looking at our history, I think we can be a bit too complacent in our assumption that the malign forces might suddenly go away and we can regulate the online world better and sort out the algorithms.

By the way, we should not allow Members of Parliament to be paid by platforms for their insightful posts. Parliamentarians should, of course, post on social media, but they should post in the public interest. They should not be doing so for the financial kickback they get. I do not know whether this is the case, but they certainly should not be using paid parliamentary staff to post content online in order, ultimately, to get paid a fee through the back door on these platforms. We should all be driven by public service and by wanting to represent our constituents.

What we learned in Oldham was that every politician in every party has to take responsibility. It is the one thing that I feel we have lost in some of this debate.

I also want to reflect on David Amess. We are here reflecting on a decade passing since Jo passed away, but many of us were also affected by David being killed in his advice surgery.

My final words are not for the people in this Chamber—we speak about ourselves quite a lot. Instead, I want to thank the families of Members of Parliament for allowing their loved ones to serve in politics. I am sure that when Members set off on a Monday morning to head to this place, or when they go out on a Thursday or Friday or on the weekend in their constituencies, there will be times when their family members wonder whether the person they love will return. Our politics have to be better than that, but we should not underestimate what families who support MPs offer.

1.34 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Before I begin, I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for an absolutely outstanding speech.

It is a real privilege to take part in this debate to mark the 10th anniversary of the tragic death of our wonderful former colleague Jo Cox, with those amazing words of hers as important now as ever—words that she spoke in her first speech in Parliament, when she said that

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

Those words have inspired so many initiatives up and down the country.

I want to pay tribute to the enormous amount of amazing work that Jo Cox did in her life, both before becoming an MP and in her short time here, whether it was with Oxfam, helping Syrians or in her constituency of Batley and Spen. Jo did so much in developing countries around the world, particularly to help women, and there was then the outstanding work she did with the Syrians. In her short time as an MP, she certainly made a major impact in this place: feisty, forthright,

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

sticking to her principles, holding the Government to account, not taking no for an answer and driven by a determined optimism—she really did believe in people. She was an amazing example to us all.

I also pay tribute to David Amess, the other MP who has been murdered during my time in Parliament, who was murdered at his surgery. He was a thoroughly decent and courteous man who did so much to help others.

Next weekend—the nearest to 22 June, which was Jo Cox's birthday—we will be commemorating in Llanelli with two events. On Friday 19 June, we will be launching the Llanelli More in Common partnership, a partnership of organisations working to bring people together, celebrate all that we have in common and help to build a stronger community where everyone has a sense of identity and belonging. It is the culmination of a lot of work on the ground, and I want to thank all those who have contributed. There are too many to name everyone, but I want to pay a special tribute to Steve Kelshaw, who has been the driving force behind it. I know that he met my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley at No. 10 yesterday; I thank the organisers of that event—it was such a privilege for him. What will matter now is what they do going forward, and what difference they can make and how all the partners play their part.

I would also like to extend a special thank you to Jane Hutt, who recently retired from the Welsh Senedd. In her role as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice in the Welsh Labour Government, she was very supportive of initiatives to foster community cohesion in Llanelli, as indeed she was for many communities up and down Wales in her various ministerial roles.

On Saturday 20 June, Llanelli will be commemorating the life of Jo Cox with the Great Get Together picnic, as we have done in previous years. Of course, this year is so special because it is the 10th anniversary of Jo's tragic murder. The Great Get Together is inspired by Jo Cox's belief that we have more in common than that which divides us. I hope that as many people as possible will join us on the green in front of Llanelli town hall. I want to say another big thank you to all those who have organised it.

Sadly, as many colleagues have referenced, we have once again recently seen violent scenes in towns across the UK, which I utterly condemn. Violence is so destructive and counterproductive to our communities. No one should feel that they are a likely target because of their skin colour, religion or accent. Many people are living in fear, which must make us all the more determined to bring people together, absolutely shut down violence, speak up for decency and bring our communities together.

I would also like to make a special appeal for people to stop insulting and abusing trans people online—just let everybody get on with their life.

Let me turn now to another area that Jo championed: tackling loneliness. At its very extreme, we have seen some awful so-called lone-wolf mass killings—individuals who have spent long periods on their own in front of a computer screen, where powerful algorithms have fed them ever more extreme and violent material. It is so important to continue our work for safety online. That includes implementing the current legislation in full and looking to see what more can be done.

More than that, we must not let people get lonely. It is really important that people come together and that we talk, express different opinions and have a good old ding-dong. We must hear and listen to different opinions, which is why Jo's work on loneliness remains so important. It is not just about one age group or social group; loneliness is as much a problem among younger people as older people. We are social animals. Tackling loneliness is integral to our own wellbeing as well as that of our communities. Let us make sure that Jo Cox's legacy lives on in all that we do.

1.40 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to my wonderful friend the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for her courage and determination and for constantly inspiring all of us in the work that she does in her own right and to celebrate the life and legacy of our friend and colleague, the wonderful Jo Cox.

The House has heard so much about our friend Jo as a politician, feminist, socialist, internationalist, mother, wife, sister, friend and Member of Parliament. In London, Jo lived with her wonderful family in a houseboat on the Thames, moored at Hermitage moorings in Wapping, not far from where I grew up and in the borough that is home to my constituency.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): I have similar fond memories, as I was also a member of the Tower Hamlets constituency Labour party for many years. I am sure that my hon. Friend remembers the important role Jo played there, not least because it has frankly been a difficult place to do politics for many years. Having the light of someone like Jo was so transformational for those of us who were really involved in the area all those years ago.

Rushanara Ali: My hon. Friend highlights just how much Jo meant to the people of Tower Hamlets and to our local party, along with her husband and her family. Jo and her family, as she points out, have a special place in our hearts and our diverse east end community.

I first met Jo in October 2011 when I was a newly elected Member of Parliament serving as shadow International Development Minister. Jo, Brendan and I were at a reception celebrating the work of international development leaders. Jo and her husband were among the "40 Under 40" individuals listed among a new generation of global leaders by Devex. She was standing there across the room holding her baby son in her arms while meeting and greeting those of us around her. There was an instant warmth, that big smile, and a connection that left me feeling like we were long-lost friends, when we had only just met. That was her gift.

Following Jo's election in 2015, we would meet and talk about the conflict that was raging in Syria. I had visited Lebanon a couple of years earlier and met Syrian refugees—there was a million of them by then—who had escaped the war. By 2015, that war had raged on for a number of years. Jo was a passionate advocate for Syrian refugees, working hard to highlight the plight of all those who were suffering. Her internationalism brought together many of us who care deeply about global conflict, poverty and global emergencies. For years she

worked as a board member of the Burma Campaign UK, working to support the struggle for human rights and democracy in that country.

When speaking in favour of Lord Dubs' amendment on refugee children, Jo said,

"Syrian families are being forced to make an impossible decision: stay and face starvation, rape, persecution and death, or make a perilous journey to find sanctuary elsewhere. Who can blame desperate parents for wanting to escape the horror...? Children are being killed on their way to school...I know I would risk life and limb to get my two precious babies out of that hellhole."—[*Official Report*, 25 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1234.]

Jo cared deeply about children around the world, as much as she loved her precious babies, as she said.

Jo also cared deeply about her constituents and her constituency. While speaking in this House and working tirelessly for her constituents, she always saw the bigger picture—the global picture. As a Member of Parliament, a humanitarian and a former aid worker, she continued to use her agency in this place to speak up for those suffering here at home and globally. Her work with Oxfam, the Gates Foundation and Save the Children shaped her politics and informed her work in this House.

Jo was an internationalist in the truest sense of the word. She was the living embodiment and definition of internationalism. She shared a belief in humanity, strong institutions, and collaboration between Governments and peoples to tackle hunger and famine and to build a more peaceful world.

We have heard in this debate and over the years the famous quote from Jo's maiden speech on 3 June—she said that we are far more united and have far more in common with each other than that which divides us. It serves as her epitaph, and it is reflected on her coat of arms in this Chamber. We should also reflect on the words that preceded it. She said:

"Our communities have been deeply enhanced by immigration, be it of Irish Catholics across the constituency or of Muslims from Gujarat in India or from Pakistan, principally from Kashmir. While we celebrate our diversity, what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 674-675.]

Our communities have been deeply enhanced by immigration. That was her view then, and she was right. It rings even more true now, and we must redouble that commitment to being an inclusive society when we face challenges such as those we have seen in recent days, weeks and months. Had Jo lived through these past 10 years, I am sure that her conviction would have remained undimmed. She would have taken the fight to whoever sought to sow discord and division, whether that person was from here or abroad. She would have taken on ethno-nationalism and extremism in all its forms. She would have made the case for a confident, outward-looking, tolerant and inclusive Britain, because that is who she was. That should always inspire and motivate us to speak up.

Jo's murder as she was heading to her constituency surgery to help people who trusted her and elected her is something that affects so many of us here and across the country. Like many colleagues here, I remember that day vividly. I was in Parliament. In the minutes that passed, we hoped and prayed that she would survive. To this day—and, I suspect, for the rest of my life—I will

wonder whether we could have spoken out more about the harassment, intimidation and threats towards elected representatives that some of us experience, and whether we could have warned others. Perhaps that warning might have allowed more awareness. But we will never know—I will never know.

Alison McGovern: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and her words. She has been an incredible champion for all that she stands for in this House. I agree with all that she says.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Minister, who knew Jo very well—much better than I did. We experience that loss deeply, but I am heartened by the work that my hon. Friend and others across this House, including in other parties, continue to do in Jo's memory.

We must never forget that Jo was murdered by a far-right terrorist who believed in white supremacy and was obsessed with fascist and far-right groups. She was a target because she stood for everything that the far-right hates: community, understanding, compassion, love. The sad truth is that there is more anger, hostility and hate a decade on in our country. There is more disinformation, more lies, more racism, more misogyny and more hate. There are more people making money from sowing discord—monetised hatred made possible by social media algorithms and pernicious AI fakery. Deepfake content and disinformation are infecting our online space and spilling over into hate, hostility and violence on our streets. Online hate, with its real-life consequences, has cost us dearly.

Jim McMahon: In her parliamentary career, my hon. Friend has dealt with a lot of hostility and a lot of hostile actions from malign forces, and she has always risen above it. However, she should not have had to—the system should have been there to step in and intervene sooner. We talk about social media on one side, but we also need to reflect on the police. Police forces in different parts of the country approach this very differently, but I think there are two main issues. First, does my hon. Friend agree that they just think that this is all politics and they just accept it as par for the course, when it ought not to be? Secondly, they have not quite understood that online is on-street too, and that these are same people, creating the same content and making the same threats.

Rushanara Ali: What my hon. Friend says highlights the fact that when some of us entered politics—I did so in 2010—we were outliers in the hostility and harassment that parliamentarians and candidates experienced. Sadly, that is becoming increasingly mainstream. My hon. Friend has also experienced threats and intimidation. It is staggering that our system is still not fit enough to deal with those threats systematically.

One of my greatest fears is that, despite the tragedy of what has happened, lessons have not been learnt fast enough. If they had, perhaps we would not have seen further fatalities and the loss of another dear colleague, Sir David Amess. I, and I know others, do not want to see the day when yet another elected representative—a Member serving our public—finds themselves under attack. Too many have been under attack.

[Rushanara Ali]

We must redouble our efforts to protect our democracy, and that means protecting those who stand for public office. Too many are being put off. Too many—particularly women and particularly those of colour—are being targeted and being driven from the public square and out of frontline politics because the price paid for being in politics has become increasingly difficult and costly. It is costly when it takes the form of losing our colleagues. Frankly, in the 21st century, in this democracy, I never thought that would happen.

I never thought that, and I do not think any others who came into politics at that time could have imagined a situation where our politics could have descended into the spectre of losing a dear colleague from our party and then, again, another colleague from the Conservative party. And we must not forget the far-right extremist, radicalised on the internet, who attacked my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) in 2010.¹ Thankfully, he survived and is providing a great service to our nation as a Minister, but that should have raised the alarm bells then, because a number of us were on that person's target list.

As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) mentioned, in the past we have seen assassinations in our country. Now, however, the online space is creating an even greater threat. That is why we must ensure that Members of Parliament do not have to live with the fear of threats against their families, those who are close to them and their staff. Too many mistakes have been made, and we must ensure that we really do learn from them if we are to protect our democracy.

Catherine Fookes: I thank my hon. Friend for her incredibly moving speech. Does she agree that we must dial down the rhetoric in this place? Only last week, a male colleague of ours was punched in the face out on the street. I believe that is directly as a result of people using inflammatory language and being incredibly toxic.

In this place we do not work in the cross-party way that I think we should. Last week I visited the Swedish Parliament, which has a semi-circular chamber in which the members sit by region rather than by party. They were saying how that makes a big difference, and I was thinking, as I sit here listening to all the incredible speeches about the wonderful Jo Cox, that would it not be an incredible legacy if we did politics in a much more consensual and cross-party way?

Rushanara Ali: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She highlights the importance of the way we work together and conduct ourselves in politics, and we have heard that in other speeches today. Sadly, that is not happening and more is required to bring parties together on as much as we can possibly agree on—to reduce the hostilities, the anger and the often-manufactured outrage online and offline, which is creating hate and hostility on our streets.

The level of threat in our politics has to be addressed. No Member should have to step out of their home wondering whether they are watching their last ever sunrise, whether the person staring at them is intent on harming them, whether they will make it home again, and whether it is their last day in this world. Too many colleagues whom I have spoken to, too often, fear for

their lives. That cannot be right. That is not healthy for our democracy. That is why I am proud that this Government are working to tackle harassment and intimidation.

As a Minister, I worked on the election strategy and on the Bill that is now going through Parliament, but the situation is moving very fast. We need to redouble our efforts to tackle online hate and hostility. Incitement to violence online has to be tackled. I therefore welcome the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology's commitment to taking action. We have to take action fast, before there are further fatalities. We see how that is spreading in the form of riots on our streets, and we see how hate and racism are spreading like wildfire, and not only against elected representatives but in wider society. We have to act quickly. We have to act together. We have to be united.

We need stronger action to ensure that we work together, as we have heard, and on civility. We need to make sure that our political discourse is about a unified country, about taking action against hostility and hatred together, and about collective action. We all have a responsibility, as citizens and as representatives, to come together to tackle hatred and the rhetoric of racism and intolerance. We need police and security services with the resources to tackle far-right extremism and terrorism, as well as other forms of extremism.

We need to ensure that we celebrate goodness and the things that bring us together. We have heard so much about the work of the Jo Cox Foundation. The annual Great Get Together reminds us of the wonderful things that we have in our country and the ability for communities from all backgrounds to come together. In my constituency, where Jo and her family have a special place in our hearts, I see the way in which diverse communities come together. We all have a responsibility to do everything we can to bring communities together.

I finish by saying how inspiring it is to see the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley, and of course the work of her wonderful family—Jo's children, her husband, and my hon. Friend and Jo's parents—and all their friends. We are so inspired by all that they do for our country—for all the diverse communities that make up our great country. Jo will always live in our hearts. She will always inspire us, both in life and in death. Jo means the world to so many of us, and I will think about her in the work that I do, whether here or elsewhere.

2.1 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) and to have heard all the incredible speeches today. I thank my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for securing this debate on the legacy of Jo Cox—her sister and our friend. The debate has brought the House together in considering where we should be as a House and a society. The Opposition Members who really need to listen to this debate are not here—I do not mean the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry), who gave an amazing speech, or the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed). There are others who sit on those Benches who we know—we are dancing around it—are the agitators of a lot of hate. That is their hallmark.

1.[*Official Report*, 15 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 3WC.](Correction)

I want to talk about a sunny evening. I grabbed my karaoke machine, two microphones and a bottle of vodka, and headed to a boat party for the 2015 intake, hosted by Jo Cox in Wapping. We croaked out some amazing songs. As we drank, the songs got better and longer. I think Jo sang “I Know Him So Well”—the extended version by Elaine Paige—which I know she sang many times with her younger sister. They even had dance moves—I have seen the videos. It was an evening of joy and laughter, and I actually forgot about the awards that we gave out. It was a wonderful evening of fellowship and love. Actually, I have a confession to make, so I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) is not in the Chamber: I got us a taxi there and he got me a taxi home, and I may have had to ask the driver to pull over so I could be sick. If my right hon. Friend’s Uber rating went down a bit, that may have been my responsibility. I feel like now is the time to make that confession—it just feels right.

On 16 June, as I lay on the sofa recovering from the boat party, it flashed up on the news that an MP had been stabbed. The WhatsApp group exploded. We were all thinking, “Who’s that? Who could that be?” It was unbelievable when somebody said that it was Jo—it can’t be Jo. I also thought, “How can it be Jo? We were just together.” The fact that Jo was going to her surgery on that day is a testament to who she was. She had hosted a very rowdy event, and she was determined that she would go to her surgery and do the job that she was elected to do. That is a testament to the amazing woman, advocate and politician she was.

Bernard Kenny was also stabbed as he tried to save Jo. He was a hero. In a strange coincidence, they shared the same birthday. I feel that that was a sign from the gods that they wanted Jo to be with us for a little bit longer—like her work was not finished. Bernard was given an award by the Queen; I think his wife picked it up for him. It is great to mention him, too.

Kim Leadbeater: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Bernard. She is right: he was an absolute hero on that day. The other bizarre coincidence was that his son, Phil Kenny, was Jo’s and my geography teacher. I have got to know Phil and his family over recent years; I put on record my thanks to them for their support.

Dawn Butler: That is incredible. These are sometimes signs and messages as opposed to coincidences, but what is not a coincidence is your kindness and the person you have been in this House. It obviously runs in the family.

We need those traits more than ever in society, because there are politicians in this House and activists in our country who are intent on sowing division. As much as we try to stop them, it sometimes feels as though we are not winning the battle. That is tough, when we know there are more better people in the world than there are bad. It is tough because the people who are fuelled by money, ego and power are getting more publicity than anybody else.

Yesterday I was on Iain Dale’s show, having an argument with a Member from the other place. He kept saying, “Social media is a voluntary contract; it shouldn’t be banned or legislated.” Well, he was completely talking out of his rear end. [*Interruption.*] I’m getting better.

He failed to understand the real damage that social media can do. Social media is like somebody producing a hate leaflet and delivering it through someone else’s letterbox, whether they want it or not. The fact that people get rewarded and paid to do that means that they do it more often. We have to recognise that in government, and we have to legislate. It is tough, but we have to do it. We are in a different world right now.

Iqbal Mohamed: Does the hon. Member agree that unless and until the Government take action that hits these companies where it hurts—in their profits—they will continue to do what they are doing? We set age limits on alcohol and cigarettes, and we ban heroin, crack cocaine and all that kind of stuff. This is one of those products that causes such harm.

Dawn Butler: I agree 100%; we have to hit them where it hurts. There have to be consequences. We have laws on inciting hatred in our country, and yet these companies seem to openly and flagrantly bypass them. The leader of Reform gets something like half a million or a million views whenever he posts a hate post—he is not that popular by any stretch of the imagination. It just feeds egos, and we need to legislate.

Sarah Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree that we would be wise to heed the warning of what happened in the run-up to the first world war in Germany? Fundamentally, radio was a new media then, and there was no regulation of it. Where we landed was the first world war. If we do not recognise that history is in many ways repeating itself as we stand here now, we could pay the significant and ultimate consequence for that.

Dawn Butler: In fact, we are already paying the consequences. If we do not take this issue as seriously as we should now, we cannot foresee the additional harms that will happen. The growth of the involuntary celibate movement—the underground movement that we did not really know about, but that we felt through the rise in misogyny and hate against women—was being fuelled by social media. Just because we are not a part of it, it does not mean we do not have to legislate. That is also why I feel that we have to legislate for the individual. As soon as we introduce legislation, it is out of date. We have to legislate to protect the individual—to protect our voice and our image.

I agree with the key calls from the most recent report of the Jo Cox Foundation. One is that political parties should enforce higher standards of conduct. That needs to happen, but some political parties will not care. In fact, some political parties actually recruit people who they know have violent intent and are racist, misogynistic, antisemitic, Islamophobic or homophobic. They actively go out to find them. We have to find a way to combat that.

Another of the report’s calls is that elected representatives and candidates should actively lead by example, maintaining civility during robust democratic debate. We can all take a leaf out of that book. The report also says that tech companies should do more to prevent and reduce online harms; media, digital and political literacy education should be expanded for all ages, to build greater understanding; and lastly, the Government should ensure sustained funding, police resourcing and cross-border co-ordination to protect elected representatives.

[Dawn Butler]

It is a sad fact that we need more protection than ever before. It is a sad fact that social media means that our speeches can sometimes be manipulated and misrepresented. The rules of the House are complex, and that can be easily manipulated for a certain agenda. It is a sad fact that that then puts us at risk in this place and outside it. A lot more needs to be done.

Jo was a great advocate for everyone—for people in Africa, for the children, for Syria. She would have hated what was happening right now in our country—she would have hated the rhetoric, and she would have been on the frontline, fighting. I want to end with a poem by a Syrian poet.

“It does not matter that I love her endlessly...

She lives in a world that the devil dreams to flee...

And yet she stands strong with a smile shining through her lips...

With a laugh musical, poetry to my ears...

She is a brave woman...gentle and free”.

May Members of this House be a little bit more like Jo.

2.14 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the moving and impassioned speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler).

I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Spenn Valley (Kim Leadbeater) for her deeply moving tribute and the contribution she made today, speaking about her dear sister. I also pay tribute to the work of the rest of Jo's family, who, in the decade since her senseless and terrible murder, have been champions for celebrating her life, her legacy and her values. Jo's principled internationalism and her humanitarian legacy are and should be a source of great pride to her loved ones. It was the singular sense of humanity and compassion that she brought to her causes which drove them forward. From refugee rights to the protection of civilians in war, her contributions were remarkable.

Jo's work in Syria rightfully won many admirers in many countries, and we should also remember her outspoken and impassioned advocacy for the rights of the Palestinian people. After working in Gaza and the west bank with Oxfam, Jo spoke passionately in Parliament about the need for the Government to do more for humanitarian aid in Gaza, as well as for civilian protection during the 2014 Gaza war. I know that her voice has been sorely missed in this place over recent years.

I must also place on record my admiration for the work of the Jo Cox Foundation. As Members have said, the efforts of the foundation are carrying forward Jo's mission on tackling loneliness and social isolation. The scale of loneliness in this country is a tragedy in and of itself, but the impact of this isolation on an individual's health and wellbeing and on the fabric of our social wellbeing demands real action. The foundation's efforts deserve recognition, and I support the campaign for a new cross-Government action plan to tackle loneliness, while noting my admiration for organisations in my constituency, including Neighbours in Poplar, for their work in bringing our communities together.

Two years ago, I participated in research undertaken by the Jo Cox Foundation for its 2024 Civility Commission report, “No place in politics: tackling abuse and intimidation”. As I stated to those at the foundation then, I have long faced a heightened risk to my own safety: serious death threats, threats to kidnap me, threats of sexual violence and threats about ripping off my hijab in public. This abuse has not relented in the years since I was first elected to this House, and I am sad to say that, despite progress being made on the representation of women in this House, I do not feel there has been sufficient progress in our country to protect elected representatives or those who are standing for election.

Despite all the initiatives on security and justice in the years since Jo's death, politics in this country remains a dangerous and difficult environment for women. We know that elected representatives and candidates from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are particularly targeted for abuse. I say this knowing that Jo was absolutely passionate about achieving a 50:50 Parliament, and she was a passionate advocate for women standing for public office not only in the UK but in many different countries around the world. The constant abuse and threats of violence against women representatives and candidates represent a major obstacle that is holding us back in the UK, and we must do more.

Young people, women and survivors of domestic abuse often reach out to me and other Members of this House to say that they would like to stand for office, to take forward their lived experiences into politics, and they ask us for advice. I have to be completely frank that I now often struggle to give them that encouragement, because after many years of trying to rebuild and move on with my life, I am really aware of the physical and mental health toll on me as the post-separation harassment goes on and on.

Iqbal Mohamed: May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work? Before I came to this place, I did not follow many politicians, I am sorry to say, but I did follow the hon. Lady and a few like her who have always been an absolute rock and the strongest champion for the rights not just of women but of any person who has been the target of abuse or suffered at the hands of others. I wanted to put that on the record.

There are sections in this House and in the community who say that hate speech online or in person is not as important to investigate as real crimes—burglaries, violence and other crimes we have seen this week. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is not an either/or? We have to tackle all crimes across our society, and tackling hate speech will hopefully reduce the level of violent crime that we see on our streets.

Apsana Begum: I agree that we must take steps both online and offline with the same level of energy and commitment, and I thank the hon. Member for his kind words.

When Members first come to Parliament or enter politics, they know that they are ultimately taking a risk with their life, and that is not something we should have to do when we put ourselves forward for office. It is not easy for me to say that I have also contended with that scenario—perhaps I have to understand that it just

comes with the job. There have been times when I have legitimately feared for my life, and that was particularly true during the last general election campaign. As I have previously informed the House, during that election the abuse and intimidation that I had long endured reached new heights. It was an election in which my abusive ex-husband stood as a candidate against me, after I had already faced several years of post-separation harassment. Even before that I had already endured a vexatious trial, and a reselection process in the Labour party, during which I experienced harassment from his associates. Alarm bells were rung by organisations in the domestic abuse sector, and representations were made on my behalf, but the situation is ongoing and unresolved. All of that has been a deeply harrowing experience that I truly do not believe any survivor of domestic abuse should be expected to endure.

I also feel a strong sense of duty and responsibility to other survivors of domestic abuse in this country, and over the years they have reached out to me, saying that they feel a strength when they see people in this House speak about their own experiences. I do not want to be a case study or a statistic sometime in the future, or for us to say that nothing could really happen in this situation, yet sometime down the line, one or two decades later, we will all look back and say, “Oh yeah—she was really failed. The system did not protect her as a survivor of domestic abuse. We are better now, but there were failings along the way.”

For that reason, along with Members across the House, I am working to try to secure better protection for candidates facing domestic violence, post-separation harassment, and hostility in the context of election campaigns. That is why I have provided testimony and participated in the work of the all-party group on women in Parliament, and given evidence to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which is developing a method for institutional action—MINA—to protect candidates standing in elections or those in elected office who suffer violence in politics.

Domestic abuse can affect people from all walks of life and in all forms of employment, including those of us serving in public office. All survivors should be able to have dreams and hopes, a life beyond domestic abuse, and play a role in national policy making and our democracy, just like anybody else who has not gone through those awful and horrific experiences. This is not just about me. As I have said, no survivor of domestic abuse should be prevented from standing or staying in office due to post-separation harassment.

Jess Phillips: It has been an honour and a pleasure to work with my hon. Friend over the years, and I absolutely agree with her. Does she agree that perpetrating domestic abuse or sexual violence should eliminate someone from being able to hold such office?

Apsana Begum: That is exactly the area that many of us are looking at in the Representation of the People Bill before the House, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support. She has publicly said that my experiences were completely unacceptable and unjustified, and that we must all do better to ensure that no one who seeks to stand for public office or to represent their communities has to face what I have had to face. She and I both work with many organisations and activists

across the tackling violence against women and girls sector. That entire movement was built on the backs of survivors who decided to do something for themselves and for others, and who became activists. Why should those people not be able to stand for office? Why should they not be policymakers? Surely that is almost a natural progression. Why should they look at situations such as mine and think to themselves, “No, I can’t do that; I can’t take it too far” because the perpetrator will target them?

It must be the duty of everyone in society, and of all political parties, to ensure that elected representatives who are survivors of domestic abuse are not exposed to further harassment in their roles. I wish to thank members of the Jo Cox Foundation, including Dr Hannah Phillips, who I have worked with, as well as Elect Her and other organisations, for their encouragement. I also thank many of my constituents who have stood and continue to stand with me throughout what I continue to endure. I am also grateful for the support of my independent domestic violence advocate, without whom I do not think I would have been able to go through many of the procedures and processes that I continue to endure, just to be heard and to ensure that the right protections are in place.

I was elected to this place three years after Jo’s tragic murder, but the impact that she had on those who had the privilege to know her is clear. I know how proud many of my constituents are to have called Jo a neighbour in Poplar and Limehouse, and once again I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley and say how I touched I have been by her words. I hope we can try to change politics for the better, build a society with dignity at its heart, and improve safety for women and survivors of domestic abuse.

Kim Leadbeater: May I put on record how hugely impressive my hon. Friend’s bravery has been in her political journey? I hope she will agree with me and other colleagues that we need voices such as hers in public life, and we should encourage women, whatever tragedies they have been through in their own lives as victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence, because we need their voices in this place.

Apsana Begum: Absolutely—we can only be a rich and effective democracy with all voices in the debate. In this House, through the increased representation of women, we have been able to enact and make progress on policies that meet the needs of a wide range of people in our country.

It is important for us to be able to change politics for the better, to improve safety for women and survivors of domestic abuse, and increase their ability to participate in politics. I hope I may be able to play some part in that work, and I will continue to do so to honour Jo’s legacy and values.

2.28 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) not only for securing this debate, but for her tribute to her sister. I feel extremely humbled and incredibly honoured, yet also deeply sad to be speaking in this debate, and I wish to take the opportunity to reflect on the life and legacy of a woman who I never

[Amanda Martin]

had the privilege of meeting, but whose impact continues to shape so many of us. Jo Cox's legacy is not simply something we remember; it is something that demands action from all of us today. Jo was in every sense a Labour woman, and a fiercely compassionate internationalist, utterly determined to open the doors of public life to those who had often been shut out, and to ensure that nobody was lonely. She did not just talk about women's leadership—she built it. Through her work with the Labour Women's Network and beyond, she backed women to step forward, to find their voice and to lead. Many of us stand here in this House because women like Jo believed that we belong here.

I am proud to be a graduate of the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme, which some may say is her girls' club. Like so many others, I gained not just skills but confidence, solidarity and a network of women who supported one another, and still do. That is Jo's transformative legacy in action. Like Jo, before coming to this place I was not a politician. I was a teacher. Although this place can be very lonely for those who have little connection to it, I felt the love of her legacy—the cups of tea, the hugs and the smiles—so to her, I want to say thank you.

At the heart of everything that Jo did was a simple but powerful belief that we have more in common than that which divides us. That is a phrase we repeat often, but it is much more—and it must be much more—than words. It must guide how we conduct politics and how we treat one another, and it should remain a challenge to us all.

It is unfortunately not shocking but now an accepted fact of political office that opponents will spread falsehoods and misleading information online and beyond in an attempt to create outrage, whip up hostility and score political points. As has been said, although robust debate is absolutely part of our democracy, targeted abuse and intimidation should never become normalised in public life. We can and should have passionate political discussion, because that is our democracy, but without resorting to personal attacks, threats or attempts to intimidate others.

Jo's words feel especially important in a political climate where some seek to turn disagreement into division, and where fear and anger can be used as tools to win support. The day Jo was murdered, our country was in the middle of a deeply divisive political campaign. A poster carrying the words "Take Back Control" was part of the wider political landscape, and that phrase has become associated with period of intense national debate and intense hatred. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) so eloquently said, 10 years later we are sadly in a world that is even more divided and has even more hate.

Political disagreement is essential to democracy, but Jo's legacy asks us to reflect on the tone that we set, the language we use and the responsibility we carry when we seek to persuade and disagree with others. We must challenge any politics that relies on blame, hostility or creating an us-and-them situation. A democracy cannot thrive when people are encouraged to see their neighbours as opponents rather than fellow neighbours and citizens. As a teacher, I often sorted out playground squabbles,

which are often really difficult for children whose worlds are so tiny. I was always looking to find solutions that were respectful, because our young people are often much better at forgiveness and finding what they have in common than we are as adults.

The tragedy of Jo's murder remains a devastating reminder that the words we use, the campaigns we run and the atmosphere we create in public life and on our streets matters. The Electoral Commission report on the 2024 general election found that 70% of candidates experienced at least one form of abuse, but women and ethnic minority candidates faced the most serious forms of abuse.

It is not just MPs who face threats and abuse. The leader of my local Labour group on Portsmouth city council, Councillor Charlotte Gerada, who is also a graduate of the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme, was recently verbally abused during the election campaign while visibly pregnant. This is far from okay. Women in public life are being made to feel unsafe for serving their local community, and their families are often made to feel unsafe too.

It is not surprising that the Girlguiding survey found that a third of girls and young women are deterred from pursuing careers in politics because of the hostility that high-profile women face online. That should concern every single one of us, because these are not abstract statistics: they are our sisters, mothers, daughters, nieces, aunties, nans and friends. When women are targeted, abused or driven out of public life, that affects us all. Perhaps the greatest danger of a politics built on hostility is that people begin to think they are disagreeing not with human beings, who have families, hopes and fears, but with people they see as targets. We should all ask ourselves: would we speak this way if it was someone we loved on the receiving end? When women are driven out, democracy is weaker.

Jo was determined to restore civility in public life. I commend the work of the Jo Cox Foundation in carrying on her legacy and working with the Government to bring in important changes to defend our democracy. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), I ask the Government to uphold those recommendations. The changes cannot be left to the Jo Cox Foundation alone: it is on all of us—every MP, party and platform that carries political debate—because we set the tone for our country. Jo believed in lifting as we climb, and as a teacher, daughter, sister, auntie, friend and an MP, that is a responsibility that I take seriously. We cannot abandon future female leaders and let those seeking to divide and discourage win.

I have been taking encouragement from Jo. That is why in Portsmouth's 100th year as a city, I am launching the 100 Pompey Belles award to celebrate community and actively show that we have more in common than that which divides in my city. People can nominate their Pompey Belle: the woman in their family, workplace or community who is the glue and the foundation—the queen. They are ones who quietly, sometimes loudly but always passionately, just get things done.

We must recognise the incredible work that so many inspiring women are doing across my city and this country. It is work that often goes unnoticed, yet without it much of what makes our communities thrive simply would not happen. The 100 Pompey Belles award is about celebrating the breadth of women's contribution,

from carers and campaigners to entrepreneurs and volunteers, and it is about showing the next generation that leadership takes many forms. It is about seeing and believing that there is a place for them too. It is everything that Jo Cox embodied. In the awards, I hope we can not only celebrate those giants who walk among us, but inspire the next wave of Pompey Belles to devote their lives to bettering our communities, and to be more Jo.

The question for us all today is simple: do we honour Jo Cox with words alone, or do we honour her with action? If we are serious about honouring her legacy with more than words, 10 years on we must ask ourselves: will we all call out abuse when we see it? Will we all support women to step forward and stay in public life? Will we all build a politics that is kinder, more inclusive and rooted in our shared humanity? Will we all build bridges of community, connection and common causes? For me, that is how we carry with us her life and her love, not just in what we say but in how we lead and in what we all do. We all need to proudly be more Jo Cox.

2.37 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin).

This debate is exactly the legacy of Jo Cox. It is about Jo's legacy, and every single Member who has spoken has mentioned a memory—a sparkle of Jo. I thank Jo's sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), for her incredibly thoughtful contribution, which took strength and courage to deliver. I also pay tribute to the Minister on the way she opened the debate. The way in which she set the tone gave us the ability to say what we want to say about Jo.

I put on the record my thanks to Jo for her dedicated work on strengthening communities and advocating for everyone to be treated with respect, as we have heard so much about today. In her honour, I particularly want to talk about loneliness in our communities and why she was such an avid champion of targeting it. I hope to provide the same hope that Jo brought to Westminster with her sparkle.

Before I do that, a lot has been said about the Members of Parliament who arrived in this place at the same time as Jo, but not so much has been said about the impact of her death on our wider Labour family. I was a member of South Leicestershire Labour party at the time, and had been the 2015 general election candidate for South Leicestershire. We, like so many, were not just truly saddened but shocked by Jo's death. It was so difficult—we just could not fathom that it could have happened. It was beyond belief.

In true South Leicestershire constituency Labour party tradition, a decision was made to honour Jo with a permanent tribute. We have a plaque and an acer tree planted in Mossdale meadows—a lovely part of South Leicestershire—to allow us to remember Jo. Of course, it bears her most famous quote from her maiden speech.

I want to give particular thanks to some members of my CLP, because out of that confusion about what had happened, action sprung into place, as often does with the people we know and trust every day. I thank Sandra Parkinson, Lord Willy Bach in the other place, Caroline Bach, Councillor Nick Brown, who is leader of Braunstone town council, and the late Councillor David Gair for

their work to get the tribute to Jo firmly in place in Leicestershire. The plaque was our way of remembering Jo, but its unveiling coincided with our get-together event, at the place where we bring our community together and make sure people are okay. I have to admit that when I need a little bit of solitude and silence, I make my way to the plaque. It is a really lovely space.

Jo Cox famously said:

“I will not live in a country where thousands of people are living lonely lives, forgotten by the rest of us”.

I share that sentiment. I have been door-knocking fairly regularly throughout most of my adult life, but the post-pandemic feeling on the doorsteps was something I had not experienced before. More people than ever wanted me to come into their homes to chat. It was a really unusual experience. They were super lonely. They had felt isolation much more than they had realised. If we look at the data and information, that should not feel surprising. Roughly 7% of adults in England reported feeling lonely often or always, and that proportion remains relatively high post pandemic. On top of that, adults living with a disability are twice as likely to experience persistent loneliness.

There are also groups we often forget. New mothers often feel incredibly lonely, and those whose gender identity differs from their sex registered at birth are three times more likely to feel lonely. Loneliness is also disproportionately high among the long-term unemployed and those who are financially struggling. That is why we have to give people hope and make sure that we tackle some of the core issues in our society.

In this age, Jo's statement that we have more in common than that which divides us is a more important reminder than ever. It is not a huge leap to say that loneliness is partly to blame for the division and anger we see today—isolation triggers people. As the Jo Cox Foundation reminds us, loneliness is linked to lower trust, reduced civic participation and increased feelings of exclusion, and that weakens community cohesion and increases vulnerability and polarisation. How can we as communities look out for one another? How can we promote community cohesion? How can we tackle loneliness?

Just on Saturday, I went to an inspirational event: Woodstock in Whitwick's annual cheque-giving event. Social inclusion is the organisation's main focus, and it is run exclusively by volunteers focused on giving back to their community. Alongside hosting its main annual fundraiser Woodstock—a community music festival—it holds events, including “bingo buddies” on the last Friday of every month, a free bingo session for older people, with a raffle, teas and cakes. For so many, sadly, it is the only time they get out of the house. It is such an important space in which to socialise. Our communities are the ability to unlock the answers to some of these questions. Our communities are championing each other all the time.

Woodstock in Whitwick actively looks at ways to help others, raising money throughout the year to give to those most in need in my community. For those the organisation has helped but who have lost their battle to cancer or to other trauma, it sends a hamper to the family—a little reminder that they are not alone and that they have their whole community behind them. Since 2002, Woodstock in Whitwick has have donated

[Amanda Hack]

more than £150,000 to individual families and community groups. Most recently, it has donated to Loros, Bright Hope, Leicester Royal infirmary's intensive care unit garden and so much more. The impact on our local community has been profound, and something we need so much more of.

I hope that through my short speech, we will understand that Jo's legacy is not just about the sadness that we feel and the grief we have we have shared today, but about hope and the opportunity to carry Jo's legacy forward. We can continue collectively to create a better society and be a bit more like Jo.

2.44 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) in this fantastic debate. It was great to hear the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Spenn Valley (Kim Leadbeater). The words were fantastic, but the emotion and the pride in particular she has for her sister is amazing. Ten years on from what happened, which was so awful, it is remarkable to hear so much emotion in what many have been saying. I did not know Jo, but it is great to learn so much more about her—I have to say, the debate has been much better than reading the Wikipedia page last night.

All of us can remember the feeling of shock when it happened. I remember that Kezia Dugdale hastily organised a vigil in Edinburgh, in what has turned out to be my constituency, to which I took along my son and my daughter. Just a few weeks before, my daughter had voted in the Holyrood election, and I think she took the “more in common” message too far: at the vigil she told me that she had voted for the Conservative party in the election.

Sir Andrew Mitchell: Hear, hear!

Dr Arthur: She has learned since then, and of course she has a fantastic Labour candidate to vote for.

Ten years on, it feels like this is the ideal time to have this debate, because of where the country finds itself. I mean that both in a positive and hopeful way and in quite a depressing way. I find myself getting quite depressed by the situation the country finds itself in.

This debate is about Jo's legacy, and in my office I am incredibly lucky to have a small part of Jo's legacy in Evie, an intern who works for us one day per week. She is still a student, but she is also part of the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme, which is fantastic. She is always telling us about the amazing women she meets on that programme, without realising that she is actually one of them. When she found out about the debate, she was keen to write my speech. This is her speech, though hon. Members will be glad to hear that I will not do a Yorkshire accent.

Today—almost 10 years on from the tragedy in which Jo's life was senselessly taken—acts as a reminder of the continued fight we face against violence towards women and girls. The testimony of some women Members of the House reminds us of the responsibility we all have to tackle that vile hatred. I have been quite reflective about that as the debate has continued. Further, no man

or woman in any public office should ever fear for their safety—and neither should their family—for speaking up for what they believe in.

We are gathered here today, however, to remember much more than that tragic day; we are here to remember the incredible legacy that Jo left behind. As an ardently committed MP, Jo brought an enthusiasm and commitment to public service that we should all aspire to. She was loved by her family, her constituents and all those who had the pleasure of meeting her during her time in Parliament. We have heard that amply: hon. Members' moving words have been testament to that.

Beyond Jo's exceptional campaigning inside and outside this place, her unwavering commitment to confronting those who seek to divide us defined so much of her leadership—she was a leader in this place. Whether through her advocacy on the Syrian conflict or her efforts to combat racial hatred, Jo was steadfast in amplifying the voices of those most in need of being heard and, above all, in leading with compassion. I do not really know what she would make of the rhetoric we hear sometimes in this place.

I am really grateful to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for the points he made about overseas aid. When I was reading about Jo last night on Wikipedia, I drew the conclusion that she would be a little bit concerned about the cut. Because I did not know her, I did not want to put words in her mouth, but the right hon. Gentleman did know her, so I am really glad that he made that point.

I was visiting Balerno high school last week, and the young people there raised that cut with me. I am guilty of saying to them that I was not happy with it, but there has not been too much of a pushback against it in this place. However, in reflecting on that today, I think that is perhaps because I have not been pushing back enough on it. There is a lesson there.

Both internationally, through her work with Oxfam and Amnesty International, and in Parliament, where she helped to establish the friends of Syria APPG, Jo made a profound impact that continues to resonate today. It is deeply moving that her values of co-operation, justice and humanitarianism live on through the Jo Cox Foundation, which we have heard about. Its vital work carries forward Jo's vision of a fairer and more united world—one in which there is no place for hatred.

The Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme empowers the next generation of women leaders across the Labour movement, ensuring that Jo's astounding commitment to public service continues to shape the future of the party. I started off by talking about Evie, who is a real leader in her office. She is a very modest person, but she has shown leadership outside the office, such as in the students' union at Edinburgh University. She has also just been elected as the vice-chair of Scottish Labour Students, which is fantastic.

Eleven years ago, Jo said in this Chamber that we have

“far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

Those words are more important than ever, and we must hold Jo's message close to our hearts. It is fitting that we hold this debate in her honour, but the greatest tribute we can pay is to continue to stand against the

hatred and division that tragically took her life. In doing so, we keep faith with Jo's belief in a kinder and more united society.

One of the most powerful elements of this debate is the fact that we are all so concerned about the tensions, if I can put it that way, in communities right across the UK. We are all united in trying to tackle them. On that positive and hopeful note, I will finish.

2.51 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): It has been an absolute privilege to be in the House today and to listen to everybody's personal reflections on Jo's time here and on how they have been impacted.

I want to talk about Jo as a friend of mine for years and years. We met in the Labour movement, and we kept finding ourselves in the same meetings—ones that focused on international development, but, most of all, meetings that focused on women. In fact, we became closest and bonded the most when we both became pregnant at the same time.

Let me talk about the time when we were all processing having lost the 2010 election. Jo and I have always been people of action, and we have not been shy in coming forward; we both have that very much in common. I had started my own business, and she came barrelling into the office one day and said, "How are we going to organise? We cannot live like this. It is awful." The solution, as is most often the case, was women.

We hatched a plan on how we would revitalise Labour Women's Network and ensure that Jo took over as chair. I then stood up out of my chair and, at three months' pregnant, I already had an enormous bump. She said, "You're pregnant! That is so exciting—so am I. How pregnant are you?" I said, "Three months. How pregnant are you?" She said, "Three months too." You would not know it. She was this tiny little thing with a perfectly flat belly, and I thought, "That is three months' pregnant, and I already look like this!"

Our plan for Jo to take over as chair of LWN was very successful, and that success continues. What she was committed to bringing back to the Labour movement—what we organised and committed to—was hope. She brought a way of rebuilding our movement after that loss and a way of ensuring that women were at the heart of that.

Not long after that, we both gave birth. I looked enormous, like a beached whale, and I gave birth to an 8 lb baby. Jo was tiny throughout, and she gave birth to a 10 lb baby—I do not know where she put that baby in her small little body, but oh my goodness! Still then, we were at meetings and we were determined to breastfeed at party conference, because, frankly, the thing that both our children had in common was that they were voracious eaters—

Kim Leadbeater: They still are!

Emily Darlington: As are mine, and they were only a few days apart.

The other thing we did was bring together our two NCT groups and try to radicalise them to the Labour cause—some more successfully than others. We dragged them to LWN fundraisers. We ended up organising many women with their babies and their buggies coming

on to the Terrace of the House of Commons. We were determined that these women who we had bonded with so much in our pregnancies—the time, and then the feeding, the burping and the sleepless nights—were going to become part of our revolution.

We were both behind-the-scenes women; we liked to work and build up other people. But in the run-up to the 2015 election, we called each other back and forth, asking, "Are we going to do this? Are we going to stand in this election?" We had asked everybody else to stand, because that is what we do, and finally we asked each other and said, "Look, I'll do it if you do it," because we were not confident. We were confident in other women; we could see all those qualities in other women, but we were not confident that we were the ones to take that forward. That is such a woman thing to do—we look at others and see all their amazing characteristics and abilities, but we struggle sometimes to see them in ourselves.

We made a pledge to each other that we would stand in the 2015 election—she in Batley and Spen, and me in what was Milton Keynes North at the time. We would check in with each other regularly. We were each other's secret lifeline, in this world in which we had encouraged other women to go where we had never been before.

After that election, Jo won and became the MP for Batley and Spen, and I went off to Kenya, because I thought, as you do, "If I can't make a difference here, I can go and make a difference elsewhere." We had completely swapped paths: she had spent time in Kenya while I was a special adviser in the Labour Government, and now she was representing our views and ideals here and I had gone off to Kenya to see what I could do. Everywhere I went, people would say, "Oh, you're from the UK—do you know Jo?" I would proudly say, "Of course I know Jo. She's my friend. She's doing an amazing job in the House of Commons."

I fell pregnant again when I was out there—Jo had already had her second child—and one day I got a phone call from a mutual friend of ours who was also in Kenya, and he asked me, "Have you heard the news?" I literally had to sit down because I thought, "I'm going to collapse, and this baby is going to get squished. I need to sit down and take this in." I just could not believe it. Because so many people in Kenya knew that I had known Jo, I was inundated with messages saying, "What are we going to do?" None of them said, "Isn't it so sad?" They said, "What are we going to do?" That is so Jo.

The high commissioner in Kenya gave us his property for an evening, so the first thing we did was hold a reception event in remembrance and celebration of Jo, simultaneously with the one being held in London. There remains a book of remembrance at the high commission in Kenya of all the people whose lives she touched in Kenya across those many institutions, charities and other places, and some people who just knew about her but had been inspired to come.

Not long after that, Brendan reached out to me and to other friends of his and Jo's in Kenya, saying, "Look, it's become too much for myself and the kids in the UK, and we can't get a break because of all the media focus. Can we come out and spend some time with you guys?" I very much understood that our job in that situation was to surround those two amazing children with joy, so we spent a lot of time driving around, singing musicals

[Emily Darlington]

at the top of our lungs—it is a shared passion between our two families, and her children and my children knew all the words. We brought them to see the tree that the children had planted in Karura forest in memory of Jo. For those who do not know Karura forest, it is the forest that is right in the middle of Nairobi, and that tree stands there today.

Now I am in Parliament. I sit on the Government Benches every day and, because of the strangeness of this place, we now look at Jo's crest every day. She is a constant reminder. I do not know if anybody else is like this, but I have a series of amazing women in my life who have passed and with whom I have conversations, whether it is my grandmother, my mother-in-law or Jo. I think, "What would that conversation be? What would they say?" The conversation I have with Jo is, "How do you raise children and protect them when you are a Member of Parliament?" You try to laugh off your home security and your personal security; you make jokes about them. Sometimes you go to events with them, so you have this guy with these big guns—big muscles—walking along with you. The children ask, "Who's this?" So you say, "Oh, it's just a friend of mine." "Do you know his name?" "No, but he's a friend of mine, and he's going to follow us around as we go to an event in the constituency together."

I think, "What would Jo think of where we are today?" We talked a lot about how women of all backgrounds needed to be in this place, because it was the only way we were going to make our politics better. That is something that so many of us have fought to achieve, yet we have brought women to this place and told them, "You need to put up with the crap we are putting up with"—apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker; that was not the best language. It is everything from social media to what we do to protect our children and the fact that we cannot be as open and available as we all want to be. I get criticised all the time for not having my surgeries in the middle of an Asda, and I keep saying, "I can't. Yes, you need an appointment; you cannot just come in and see me. You cannot just walk into my office, because of my team"—who, again, are a bunch of amazing women. What does that say about our politics? We would all love to be more open and inclusive. We would all love to feel safe to pop up anywhere in our constituency, but we cannot. It goes against everything that Jo and I believed a good MP—a good public servant—should be, and I struggle with it all the time.

I think Jo would love Milton Keynes, not just because we are quirky and weird, and she was a bit quirky and weird—we have new technology delivering groceries—but because we are a city that is not afraid to stand up and say that diversity is our strength. Diversity is what makes us the capital of innovation in this country. Diversity is something we celebrate throughout the summer, with festivals for diaspora communities, and everybody is included. We will be doing the MK Great Get Together. It is a picnic where everyone is invited. Bring a blanket; if you can bring food, bring food. If you have enough to bring food for others, bring food to share with others. Share the best cooking from your mum, share the best cooking that you know from your communities, and let us come together and celebrate our amazing city of Milton Keynes.

I want to finish with the fact that I knew Jo best as a mum, and I want her to know that while her legacy lives on in so many places, it also lives on in our joint NCT groups that have come together. We continue to have girls' nights out and girls' weekends away. The dads have a beer club, but they are not as good at organising themselves. We still have joint birthday parties. We still go away at Whitsun recess to a Eurocamp somewhere. Her voice and her memory are never forgotten in those spaces. Inevitably, as we are sitting there as a bunch of mums drinking wine, her name comes up. Inevitably something triggers it—it could be about anything. She was a brilliant mum, and she did what all brilliant mums do, which is to try to be an example to their children and to be supportive of all the other mums.

Faye, Tracey, Karin, Sarah, Hannah and Claire and others from our NCT group asked me to say this on their behalf: her passion brought people together, not just in the country, but as mums. Her sense of community and of cohesion that she expounded is why her death felt even more traumatic. I want to thank her sister and my friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), for always letting us remember Jo with positivity, not anger, and with a gumption to go. That does not mean we are all going to do a run with my hon. Friend. [Laughter.] God knows what your parents fed you for breakfast, but whatever it was, it should be in those free breakfast clubs that we have across the country, because boy are you two amazing. You are supporting us to be the amazing MPs that we can be, and we are all supporting that next generation to say, "This is not what politics is about. This is not what our country is about." We are better than this, because we are more united and we have more in common than that which divides us.

3.7 pm

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): It is an incredible honour to speak today in this debate on the life and legacy of Jo Cox, and particularly challenging to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) and her incredibly moving words. It just makes those of us who were not Jo's best friends incredibly jealous. We all can recognise that close sisterhood that we have with our closest friends. Like everyone else, I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) not just for securing today's debate, but for the amazing, wonderful sister that she is. I thank her for how she has welcomed in later intakes of MPs and, as somebody who came to the House in 2024, the latest intake of MPs in particular.

Legacy is often a concept that it is hard to distinguish, but with Jo, her legacy is tangible because of how she chose to conduct herself and lead her life. It has had a lasting impact not just on this place, as we have heard today, but in our communities up and down the country and around the globe. I will never forget the first constituency Labour party event I attended. Fortunately, it was not a CLP meeting on a Friday night, because perhaps I would not have gone back. [Laughter.] It was an event for women that Jo hosted on her boat before she was elected. True to who she was, it provided an inclusive, empowering and welcoming space for women like me who were just seeking to understand how we could bring change to our communities. Today, more than ever, we need to be the change by creating those

spaces, when so much in the political discourse is desperately seeking to intimidate and put off women and minority groups.

Jo lived by the words she expressed in her maiden speech that we have heard so often today, that

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

It can be hard to hold on to that truth, given the division and vitriol we have seen expressed on our streets, in our media and online, but hold on to it we must as forces seek to polarise us further away from each other in a most un-British way.

Like Jo’s constituency of Batley and Spen, Hyndburn is a diverse community with a significant number of people who come from, or who still have connections with, Kashmir. It is made up of a number of towns, but it is a place where people often feel ignored and forgotten, and where the simple blaming of others can be a tempting answer to the far more complex questions that we know our society faces. In many ways we are more connected than we have ever been but, just as profoundly, we are more disconnected than ever before. An Office for National Statistics survey in 2025 found that about 40% of 16 to 29-year-olds have felt lonely at times—and that is while they supposedly have the world in their back pockets or in their hands.

I believe that the sense of feeling alone has increased. For connection to bring people together, heal mistrust, clean up untruths, and identify the commonalities and common purpose between people and groups, it must be grounded in relationships, which the online world does not enable well. People hide behind a keyboard or anonymity and say things that cause a huge amount of hurt and harm, while bots and algorithms push misinformation and disinformation, with no regard for facts. Owing to the growth of social media, everyone can now be publishers; we can share our opinions from behind a keyboard, even opinions that we do not truly believe. With the development of AI, we can also all be producers. However, unity and authentic cohesion are built on listening, engaging, breaking bread together and enjoying being with each other. Much of how we communicate and trust our fellow human beings is by being there in person and showing up, to understand our differences and find our common ground.

As MPs, we all know that community can and will be messy, but it is wonderfully messy, as people from all walks of life come together and find out that, against all the evidence to the contrary—perpetuated online and through the media—our hopes, values and convictions are often similar, if not just the same. Community is where disagreements can be resolved through respectful dialogue. A healthy society and democracy depend on our ability to bridge differences, find common ground and move forward together rather than apart, but too often we see disagreements framed as moral conflicts that demand that people choose sides—all or nothing. This kind of polarisation pushes us into opposing camps, and makes it harder to recognise our shared values and aspirations.

A recent report by Hope not Hate found that the far right is seeking to engage young people, particularly boys and young men, by using platform algorithms to guide them towards increasingly insular spaces where extremist views are reinforced and intensified. The same approach exists on the far left, often targeting young

women and girls. This is perpetuating a sense of polarisation on moral grounds, and targeting people who are actually just desperate for a sense of belonging and an understanding of this world. Online harm is a real threat, with nearly three quarters of my constituents recognising that boys and girls are being subjected to different forms of online harm. Tech companies must do more to protect our young people and our older people, and I urge the Government to be bold and brave in making sure that they do what is required of them, both morally and legally.

Since I became an MP, I have been supporting my constituent Debbie Duncan following the tragic death of her son Jay while he was on holiday in Tenerife. Since those heartbreaking events, Debbie has been hounded by what we have termed “tragedy trolls”—content creators seeking to capitalise on her grief by promoting disinformation, conspiracy theories and actual threats of violence. This has caused harm while Debbie has been navigating the worst nightmare that any parent can face. We must tackle the assumption that anyone is fair game online, especially those serving in public life, but Debbie did not ask for any public attention, let alone the limelight. She is now bravely campaigning for action to be taken against the trolls and the platforms to ensure that no family have to face this sort of abuse at the worst moment of their lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley and Jo’s wider family also faced that type of abuse following Jo’s death. It is unforgivable and morally indefensible. I hope that the Government will take action on this and the wider issue of misinformation, because the risk that the rise in misinformation poses to our communities and to our democracy cannot be ignored. We must all choose to confront the climate of hostility, division and malevolence that allows this online practice to fester, which also falsely claims to offer our young people a sense of belonging or empowerment.

If there is a key lesson we can take from Jo’s life, and there are of course many, it is that hope is not passive. It is something we build through action, service and our commitment to one another. At a time when forces seek to divide us, we must honour her legacy not simply by remembering her words, but by living them—choosing dialogue over hostility, community over isolation and common purpose over division. She believed that a fairer, kinder, more tolerant world was possible, and the most fitting tribute is to ensure that both our words and our actions take us closer to that reality.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench winding-up speeches.

3.15 pm

Sir Andrew Mitchell: With the leave of the House, let me say that this has been an interesting, important and at times very moving debate commemorating the life, causes and work of our great friend—and hon. Friend—Jo Cox, as we think about how we take forward her work and her inspiration. There have been many great speeches, with some very consistent warnings, themes and concerns, as well as important agendas that all of us should be pursuing.

I will start, if I may, with the speech by the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). She reminded us that, as well as a politician and a figure in public life,

[Sir Andrew Mitchell]

her sister was a mother of a brilliant family—she was a daughter, sister and a mother. We remember today how much that family has suffered, and how much they have contributed to our country as her legacy. It was so good to hear the hon. Lady's news about Jo's children, Cuillin and Lejla. The hon. Lady made a superb speech, which really placed this debate in the position in which it needed to be.

The hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) underlined the importance of the work tackling loneliness. My constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) brought Brummie good sense to the debate. We always enjoy her contributions in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield. She set out the importance of friendship and family, and above all the importance of political courage. The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) spoke eloquently about Jo's leadership on the huge value of building united communities.

The right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) made an uplifting speech. I have no doubt it will be carefully parsed with particular interest by his Whips Office. He spoke up for “more in common”, emphasising that it does not mean we all have to agree, but that it is important we know how to disagree in the appropriate manner. He made the point, far better than me, that although the media focus on our divisions in this place, there is an awful lot of harmony, agreement and close working together, which does indeed get things done.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) emphasised the importance of confronting reckless and inflammatory language, and those who enable it to be spread. That most important point recurred a number of times during the debate. The hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) called for more people like Jo, and she made a lovely speech. The hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) emphasised the importance of simple courtesy and much more, both in the House and in politics outside it.

The hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) made an important speech about the need to focus on online safety and on tackling loneliness. I thank her and others for their very nice comments about our friend and colleague Sir David Amess.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), who has made such a contribution to cross-party work on international development, made a most important point that the sheer personal cost of coming into politics and Parliament today, particularly for women, has risen hugely. As parliamentarians, to protect future generations and ensure their interest, commitment and ambition, we, too, need to focus on that in our time.

The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) entertained the House with her drinking stories. [Laughter.] We are all relieved to see that she managed to get home in the taxi kindly arranged by the right hon. Member for Ilford North.

Wes Streeting: I finally understand why my rating is slightly below five stars!

Sir Andrew Mitchell: The House will have heard the right hon. Gentleman's comments.

The hon. Member for Brent East spoke about her work doing battle on the radio show of the excellent Iain Dale, the highly respected broadcaster, against the evil side of social media. We should all thank her for that.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), in a most important contribution, spoke about the excellent work on projects she had done with the Jo Cox Foundation. She told us of the appalling abuse she has faced which, on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, I condemn in the strongest possible terms today from the Dispatch Box. Across the House, we salute her bravery.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) talked about the Jo Cox Foundation, the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme, the agenda for change and the need for all of us to stand against targeted abuse, threats and hatred. She reminded the House of the horrific level of threats faced by candidates in the 2024 general election, giving the House the independent figures that have been collated. Collectively, we must ensure that that is never allowed to happen again.

The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) talked compellingly about the work of the Jo Cox Foundation, its impact in her constituency, and the importance of continuing to build on that locally. The hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) revealed the diversity of political views, at least at one time, in the Arthur family—something the Mitchell family would recognise. He said that there had not been much push-back in this place on the international development cuts. I invite him to join me and others across the House in campaigning to change that, in the certain knowledge that Jo Cox would have thoroughly approved of our taking up that cause with very great vigour. She would have been delighted that we had done so.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) entertained the House with stories of her and Jo's pregnancies, their work together as mums, and her efforts to make the House more friendly to mums and children. I must tell the House that back in 1988 it was me and the then Member for Chelmsford, Simon Burns, who finally persuaded the House authorities to allow two high chairs to be placed in the cafeteria downstairs—what was then called the Strangers cafeteria—so that we could bring our children in for tea once a week on a Tuesday.

Finally, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) talked about the force of Jo's legacy because of the example she set and the way in which she conducted herself. The hon. Lady made the interesting point that we are both more connected and more disconnected than ever before. She talked of the hurt so often caused by keyboard warriors who behave in a way that they never would if they were held to account.

It is my pleasure to add my voice, on behalf of the Opposition, to the important points and to the spirit of unity and community that have characterised this excellent debate.

3.23 pm

Alison McGovern: With the leave of the House, I will close the debate on behalf of the Government.

Before I respond to the points that have been made, I just want to make one very brief point, which is to thank all those who participated in the Speaker's Conference on security. If I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would also like to put on the record, perhaps on behalf of all of us, our thanks to all those who participate in Operation Bridger to keep Members of Parliament safe, and to all those who look after us on the estate. On the way into this debate, I spoke to a few of the Doorkeepers who looked after us in the days after Jo was killed. I know that they will be thinking about this day with as much poignancy as all of us in the Chamber, so I put on the record my thanks on behalf of the Government. I also agree with colleagues who said that today we are thinking of Sir David Amess's family, the difference Sir David made across this House, and the great parliamentarian that he was.

I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate, not least my friend, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell)—the royal town of Sutton Coldfield, as I have learnt to call it. *[Interruption.]* I missed a west midlands joke there. The right hon. Member and I worked together after Jo was murdered and have done so since. With his participation in the debate today, he has truly earned his stripes as an honorary sister. I was particularly taken by his addition of highchairs to the cafeteria, which we all welcome.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I want to put on record my appreciation for the incredible work that Jo did for the people of Syria, and for the incredible work that the Minister and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) did after she was murdered. They took forward that cause at a moment when they were both experiencing the great grief of Jo's murder. The Syrian people are grateful for the work that Jo did, and that they continued to do, during that very difficult period.

Alison McGovern: I truly thank my hon. Friend and agree with what he said about the importance of that issue.

Of course, we must all thank my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). Words do not feel enough to describe the manner in which she has carried her sister's legacy forward. She has made this House a far better place than it ever could have been without her, and I hope that she has felt the love today.

The hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) talked about community, as so many others did. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) nearly got away with making a speech without dropping herself in it, and talked most powerfully about friendship and the loneliness that we feel, to which Jo was a singular antidote. I thank my hon. Friend for that and for her friendship.

I was glad that the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) spoke about her predecessor, and I know that she is carrying forward the work of Caroline Lucas in that same spirit. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) talked about our country, and I am glad that he did, but he also mentioned for the first time his personal experience of losing Jo. It is important that we are able in our grief to recognise that part of that grief comes from love, and the love that we have for each other. It is okay to talk about that.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) talked about being a good parliamentarian, which is important for us all. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) talked about the 2015 intake—as a 2010-er, I now feel like I missed out. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) is another 2015-er; I have never felt more disappointed to have been elected five years earlier. My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) talked about the Great Llanelli Get Together, which sounds wonderful.

My fellow 2010-er, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), knows about the subject of this debate more than most, and I am proud of her today, as I am every single day. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler): respect—that's all I can say. We all support my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and the way she speaks up. I agree with so much of what she said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) told the House about the Pompey Belles, which I am excited about. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) sounds like she has done amazing things on loneliness in Leicestershire. I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) to please give Evie my best; it was a cracking speech—well done.

It was wonderful to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) tell her story of friendship with Jo. I know that Jo's legacy is not just here in this country but in around every corner around the world, and it is wonderful to hear that. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) also showed just what an impact Jo had in every way on bringing women forward in our politics. Through all the contributions today, we have heard about the length, breadth and depth of Jo's legacy, and why we need it now.

I want to make just make one slightly party political point and say that I am sorry Jo was not here with us to see this Labour Government elected, because although much of today's debate has been cross-party in spirit—and rightly so—Jo was Labour to her core. Her love and determination is in all her friends on the Labour Benches. A feisty feminist, she was the first elected chair of the Labour Women's Network. She would have been so proud of all the graduates of the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme, of whom there are 18 in the House—I will not name them all for reasons of time, but they are an incredibly impressive girl gang, and I would not mess with any of them.

I like to think that Jo would have approved of our work to stop violence against women and girls. As a campaigner for children, and having spoken in the House about her educational attainment in her Yorkshire home, I suspect she would also have liked free school meals, new playgrounds, our investment in schools and the child poverty strategy, which will lift half a million children out of poverty.

I want to relay some words from the Foreign Secretary. Thinking of Jo as a West Yorkshire neighbour and friend, she recalls that Jo was a true force of nature who radiated purpose and determination and took sheer delight in the joy of life, which is why it is so devastating

[Alison McGovern]

that she lost her life so young. Our first female Chancellor of the Exchequer added that it falls on all our shoulders to take forward Jo's work, as she said in the Chamber after Jo died, and we have—most of all my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley.

What Jo might have made of the fact that my party is yet to elect a woman as its leader, I cannot say. She was a proud trade union member and would have relished voting for new rights at work along with the rest of us.

On 16 June 2026, next week, it will be 10 years since Jo Cox was murdered in her constituency. We all remember her words, which are forever etched on the wall of the Chamber, just below her coat of arms, which is to the left of the Speaker's Chair; designed by her children, it features intertwined Yorkshire and Lancashire roses, a mountain and the colours of the women's suffrage movement. The words underneath, "More in Common", have become a political movement among all of us who believe that the idea of community comes from our values, and not where we happen to be born or what we happen to believe.

At this moment, when some politicians are stirring division and hate, Jo's legacy has never been more important. In the aftermath of her killing, people were inspired by not just what Jo did, but how she did it. She recognised that the curse of loneliness unites us all, because it could happen to us all, and saw the value in physical activity that would provide a language and connection however different people thought they were. Her activism for Syrian civilians united and corralled people of all political persuasions and none, because there is nothing more obvious and uniting than the fact that children made homeless by falling bombs should have a roof over their heads. Ten years after she was murdered, this type of politics has never been needed more.

If democracy is to succeed at all, it must be on the basis that it is for everyone. Stirring up fear tells people that politics is just for the powerful—just for those who can tolerate abuse or worse. That is not democracy; it is politics by intimidation, and it is the law of the bully.

Ten years after Jo was murdered, "More in Common" cannot just be words on the Chamber wall. It must be the operating principle for all of us who want to sit in the House of Commons. It is the standard to which we hold ourselves, not just a nice idea.

Ten years have passed, but in that time the case for Jo's arguments has only strengthened. We desperately need people in every part of the UK to feel a part of their community. The hateful rhetoric that is now rife can be stopped only with a proud campaign inspired by Jo and all she stood for—to support our diversity and the idea that we are all equally part of our country, deserving to be heard.

That campaign is this. First, do not hate. No one needs to hate anybody. As my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley told us earlier, as they say in Yorkshire, "If you can't say anything good, keep your gob shut." Secondly, be a neighbour. Go to the coffee morning, volunteer, join the sports team.

Thirdly, be brave. I am different from Jo. She was the life and soul of the party, but I am the one in the kitchen talking about econometrics. I never felt, when

faced with a challenge, her instinctive ability to just say yes and go for it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley reminded me this morning, it is about jumping in at the deep end and finding the shallows afterwards. I learned from Jo to be brave—that's how you get things done in politics.

The fourth part of the campaign has to be for all of us to fight for our country. The United Kingdom is full of wonderful and good people. They need homes and jobs, and they need some joy in life. They do not need bitterness and hate. They need Jo's love. If there is a fight to be had in this country, it is a fight for that. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the legacy of Jo Cox.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Today an honourable man has resigned, on a matter of principle, from a Government in disarray. The former Defence Secretary, as he now is, has resigned over the Government's continuous failure to publish the defence investment plan or even to fund it. In his letter to the Prime Minister he said,

"your DIP financial settlement—which I was first given in full on Monday afternoon this week—falls well short of what is required for defence and the country at this dangerous time...it rises to just 2.68% of GDP in 2030".

That is four years from now.

We have a war in Ukraine, continued instability in the middle east and a Department in total limbo. The man with day-to-day responsibility for overseeing the nation's defence has just quit. Madam Deputy Speaker, have you been given any indication that the Government will come to the House before we rise at the conclusion of business today and make a statement on this chaotic situation and who is now in charge of the Ministry of Defence? Similarly, have you been given any indication as to when the Government will now finally, at last, publish the defence investment plan, which is essential for the security of this country? As the first duty of the Government, above all others, is the defence of the realm, they must surely come to the House in the next few hours and explain how this dreadful situation will somehow be rectified.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. I have not been informed that the Government wish to make a statement on this matter or on the timetable for the publication of the defence investment plan, but those on the Government Front Bench will have noted what the right hon. Gentleman said.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can I first put on the record my appreciation of the heartfelt contributions about Jo Cox today?

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to highlight the case of Rasika, who is a care worker serving our community, and his wife Chamila, who is a teaching assistant in Northchurch who helps children with special educational needs and volunteers at the local church. They have built a life in my constituency for four years. They have

done everything right, yet the Home Office told them and their three young children that they must return to Sri Lanka within 14 days.

The community has rallied around them and has been in absolute disbelief, with one person saying that the family are such kind, good, intelligent and hard-working people. They are frontline workers and pillars of our community, and I am horrified that this is the Britain they know and that they do not feel welcome. I have written to the Immigration Minister, but I would like advice on how I can secure urgent action from the Minister and the Home Office to reassure this family and find a resolution for their case and for the many others who may face the same situation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. Those on the Government Front Bench will have heard her point. This is not a matter for the Chair, but I suggest she consults the Table Office to explore the other mechanisms through which she can pursue the matter further.

Grenfell Tower Fire: Ninth Anniversary

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Gregor Poynton.*)

3.39 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): This Sunday will be the ninth anniversary of the Grenfell tower fire. With thousands of others, I will join the silent walk on father's day to remember the 72 people who lost their lives in an entirely preventable and foreseen tragedy, and to support families who lost parents, siblings and children in unimaginable circumstances.¹

I know that for the bereaved and for survivors, and for our community in Kensington and Bayswater, this is always a difficult time, because nine years on, there has been no criminal accountability for those responsible; nine years on, the pace of change at local government and at national level is too often too slow; and nine years on, the cladding crisis still affects hundreds of thousands of people across the country. I pay tribute to all those who continue to advocate for truth, justice and change for Grenfell, and to everyone across the country affected by this national scandal.

But it would be a mistake to give up hope. The Metropolitan police said last month that it will hand over files to the Crown Prosecution Service in September this year and that the CPS will make charging decisions by the 10th anniversary in 2027—20 organisations and 57 individuals could face criminal charges, and potential offences under consideration include corporate manslaughter, gross negligence manslaughter, fraud, health and safety breaches, and misconduct in public office.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): Justice delayed is justice denied. It is great that the Met has now come to this position. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should try to ensure that the cases are fast-tracked in our criminal system so that justice can now be speeded up?

Joe Powell: My hon. Friend is right. We have seen, in recent history, that with events of national significance—from Southport to the recent disturbances on our streets—the criminal justice system has moved really quickly because of the importance of showing that justice is seen to be done. I hope that once the CPS has made its decisions, we will do everything we can to ensure that the court capacity is in place to deliver the trials as soon as possible. I hope the Minister can reassure us that the investigation will continue to be fully funded and that that planning is already taking place with the judiciary and the Ministry of Justice so that the cases are prioritised. If those trials take place, which I obviously hope they will, they will be some of the most complex ever held in the UK. I therefore hope that consideration is also given to a special court or a Nightingale-style court. I know that is being looked at.

Corporate manslaughter convictions are incredibly rare, so it is essential that those responsible face the full force of the law. I also believe that it is completely wrong for any company cited in the public inquiry still to be receiving public contracts. In December I uncovered dozens of contracts with implicated companies, including two current NHS contracts with Rydon, the main contractor for the refurbishment, which was cited in the public

1.[*Official Report*, 15 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

[Joe Powell]

inquiry. I urge all public bodies to do a full audit of their contracts, including subcontractors and supply chains, and publish exactly what they find. It is good news that this Government have introduced new powers to exclude companies on grounds such as professional misconduct. Now is the time for procurement offices to start using them.

We have already had a public inquiry that has laid out in stark terms why the fire happened and where responsibility lies, and I am glad that this Government have accepted the recommendations in full and that important progress is being made. It is important not to forget that. The last report shows that 20 of 61 recommendations are complete and 40 are in progress.¹ I am glad that those include progress towards a single construction regulator, the expansion of product regulation, the introduction of residential personal emergency evacuation plans, the idea of a college of fire and rescue, and proposed changes to the statutory fire safety guidance in approved document B.

I am also pleased that, under Lord Roe in the other place, the performance of the Building Safety Regulator is improving, including signing off remediation works more quickly. I welcome the remediation Bill in the King's Speech, on which I look forward to engaging in this parliamentary Session, so that we can address the outstanding unremediated buildings and the knock-on effects, such as crippling insurance bills for leaseholders.

I acknowledge all that progress, but there is one missing piece of the jigsaw: oversight and accountability. The online tracker for Grenfell recommendations is no doubt helpful, but Grenfell would not have happened at all if we had properly learned the lessons from the Lakanal House fire in 2009 and listened to the coroner's recommendations. Instead, they sat on a shelf, and an opportunity to save lives was missed. We need a proper system of tracking and following up, not just on major inquiries that get a lot of attention here, but on all the inquests and investigations that lead to recommendations for change. That is why I continue to support the idea of a national oversight mechanism as a legacy for Grenfell.

On 25 February, the Secretary of State said in this House, in answer to my question:

"Work is continuing across Government, including in my Department, on setting up a national oversight mechanism".—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 363.]

I hope that the Minister can provide us with an update on that work and tell us when we can expect a decision to be made. Such a mechanism would sit alongside the Public Office (Accountability) Bill—the Hillsborough law—which I hope to see back here soon, as landmark reforms that put power in the hands of citizens: a real duty of candour for the state, a level playing field for legal aid, and clear deterrence for misconduct in public office. If we design those well, they will lead to fewer and shorter inquiries, more rapid lesson learning by the state and a culture shift towards openness, which can contribute to the rebuilding of trust in politics and in government in this country.

The culture shift that we need extends to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. I am deeply disappointed that the first decision of the Conservative leadership in the new council term last month was to remove an opposition chair of the housing scrutiny

committee. Since Grenfell, that position has been promised to an opposition councillor. It is still unclear to me why or how that decision was taken, because avoiding scrutiny, especially for this council, which is so culpable for the fire, is an extremely bad look. I call on the leadership to think again and to reverse that decision.

Residents in RBKC know that the council needs scrutiny. The independent Regulator of Social Housing reported last year that the housing department was seriously failing, giving it a C3 rating. The council has the third worst complaints record in the country. It likes to say that it gets the basics right. Well, meeting the decent homes standard, so that everyone can have the minimum of a safe and healthy home, is surely a basic human right that any council should be delivering.

The Lancaster West estate surrounding Grenfell is a good example. After the fire, the promise was a model 21st-century housing estate, and that promise is still unfulfilled. I am glad that the Government have stepped in with an additional £8 million to ensure that there are no further delays to the current work, and that that will come alongside additional scrutiny on how that money is spent. I hope that the Minister can provide more details on how residents can be involved, including leaseholders and others, so that new oversight can be shaped by them and that they have confidence in the arrangement. I am also pleased that support was extended to NHS services through the period of the deconstruction of the tower, given the acute risk of mental health issues, and to five local primary schools to provide trauma-informed education around the community.

My final point is a simple one: with the passage of time, we cannot allow a return to business as usual before the fire. Already, we hear rumbles from parts of the construction industry and even, shamefully, some political parties, saying that Grenfell is somehow responsible for the slowdown in house building or that fire safety is a trade-off worth considering. There will always be policy choices for local and national Government to make, but putting life at risk should not be a trade-off we accept. I hope we can work together with empathy and respect—something I suspect Jo Cox would have wanted—and ensure that the legacy of Grenfell is that everyone in this country, regardless of class, race, geography or age, lives in a safe and healthy home.

3.50 pm

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

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for raising this truly important issue. The ninth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy will be, above all else, a day of remembrance, shaped by loss, love and the enduring strength of this community. I want to begin by acknowledging the survivors and relatives of those who died at Grenfell Tower; I know they have the deepest sympathies of the whole House and our most profound respect.

The fire at Grenfell Tower, which claimed 72 innocent lives, was a national tragedy and a scandalous chapter in British history. We will never forget what happened that night, and we must make sure nothing like it can ever happen again. I recognise how each anniversary is intensely personal and deeply painful for bereaved families, survivors and the wider community. I am also struck

1.[*Official Report*, 15 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 4WC.](Correction)

every day by the grit and resilience of this courageous community, not least in the way it leads the commemorations. The Government will continue to be guided by the community and honour its voice. As I am sure my hon. Friend appreciates, it is right that the community shapes how the day is marked and that we stand alongside it in support. I have had the privilege of meeting many members of the Grenfell community, and I carry with me a lasting impression of their strength and determination.

I want to acknowledge the concerns that have been raised about justice and respond to them briefly. This Government recognise the importance of justice and acknowledge that it remains a central concern for the community. In the light of recent announcements, I want to respond to those concerns. The Metropolitan police has been investigating the Grenfell Tower tragedy since June 2017. It is one of the largest and most legally complex investigations the Met has ever conducted, with around 220 officers and staff dedicated to the investigation. Those responsible must be held to account, and we fully support the Met in its important work, which must remain independent. We also remain supportive of wider Government involvement, including from the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, and I know that on a cross-Government basis we are focused on ensuring that justice is served.

We are mindful of this community's enduring spirit at a time of continued change at the Grenfell Tower site. This Government will continue to support bereaved families and survivors and the local community, and to work with the independent Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission to create a memorial worthy of those we remember. The Grenfell Tower Memorial (Expenditure) Act 2026 is now in force, providing the statutory authority needed to take forward the construction of the memorial and ensure its long-term care.

The design team, Freehaus, is working with bereaved families, survivors and the local community to help shape the memorial. It is right that the voices of those most affected by the tragedy remain central to these decisions, guiding what comes next. The memorial will honour those who lost their lives and all those whose lives were changed forever. It will be a place for people to remember, to reflect and to pay their respects. This anniversary reminds us of our shared responsibility to honour the dead and to make sure that Grenfell's legacy is shaped by those most directly affected. It is in that spirit that I now turn to what this Government are doing to make sure that such a tragedy can never happen again.

As I set out in my recent written statement to the House, alongside the May 2026 Grenfell Tower inquiry progress report, the tragedy exposed deep and long-standing failures in the systems that were meant to keep people safe. The loss of 72 lives was a profound and preventable failure of oversight and accountability by industry, successive Governments and regulators. Bereaved families, survivors and the community continue to remind us of the human cost of those failures and the need for lasting change. The Government have accepted the inquiry's findings and are taking forward reforms to build a stronger and more accountable building safety system. Since February 2025, we have completed 21 of the inquiry's recommendations, and we remain on track to deliver all recommendations by the end of 2029.

We recognise that too often, inquiry recommendations have been made and accepted but not implemented, and we are determined that that will not be the case here. We are continuing to explore ways to improve transparency and accountability so that the public can see that the Government are following through on their commitments. We accepted the Grenfell Tower inquiry's recommendation to maintain a public record of recommendations made by inquiries. That tracker was published on gov.uk last summer and shows the progress made on implementing recommendations from 2024 onwards. It will be updated regularly and expanded to capture new inquiries as they conclude. I note my hon. Friend's comments on the national oversight mechanism, and I know how important that is to the bereaved and to survivors, notably Grenfell United.

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is also conducting an inquiry into this issue. We welcome that work, and have submitted evidence to support the Committee's inquiry. The Government have been clear that supplier exclusion must be carried out in line with the Procurement Act 2023, and must not jeopardise the ongoing criminal investigation. The pause does not prevent the Cabinet Office from resuming or undertaking future debarment investigations. In the interim, we have taken steps to stop senior officials and Ministers associating with the seven most highly criticised companies in the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 2 report. Across Government, Ministers and officials will no longer share platforms with those firms.

As the Secretary of State set out to Parliament earlier this year, remediation remains a central priority. In the King's Speech, we set out our commitment to bring forward the remediation of unsafe cladding Bill—a decisive step towards fixing the cladding crisis and making sure that those responsible are held to account. We will introduce a new legal duty to remediate, requiring those responsible to identify and fix unsafe cladding promptly, or risk criminal prosecution. Where they do not act, a new remediation backstop will allow a third party to step in and carry out the work. Each building made safe means fewer families left waiting, and real progress in helping people move on with their lives.

We will never forget those we lost, and we remain focused on making sure that such a tragedy never happens again. Grenfell was the result of deep and widespread failings, and it is our responsibility to address them. As we continue with these efforts, we remain firmly committed to supporting the Grenfell community. We recognise the profound impact of the tragedy on the whole community, and in particular on children and young people. Working with the Department for Education, we have provided more than £800,000 in additional funding to support the physical health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people in schools serving the Grenfell community, as the tower is carefully taken down. That is alongside a further £8 million provided by the Department of Health and Social Care to support the physical health and wellbeing of the community during this period.

Our thoughts are also with the residents living in the community around Grenfell Tower. They deserve safe, high-quality homes. Refurbishment work on the Lancaster West estate, led by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and supported by further Government funding, will make a real difference. That work must be shaped by the views of residents themselves, as they know their community best.

[Samantha Dixon]

We expect swift progress from RBKC in response to the C3 regulatory judgment by the Regulator of Social Housing, and the regulator continues to engage intensively with RBKC on its improvement activities. I am concerned to hear my hon. Friend's comments about the change in RBKC's scrutiny arrangements and will seek further advice about that. In addition, we will continue to explore stronger and more independent oversight to ensure that RBKC sets the standard of an exemplar council, and so homes are delivered to the standard and at the pace people rightly expect.

As I come to a close, I acknowledge that I am the latest in a long line of Ministers who has had responsibility for the Government's response to the tragedy and the recommendations from the inquiry, and I acknowledge

that that is hard and difficult. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater for the tenacity and constancy that he has shown to the community he represents with such determination.

As we look ahead to the future of the homes and the community around Grenfell, we are reminded once again of the strength that is shown in how people come together to remember, to support one another and to make sure that those who were lost are never forgotten. That strength must also guide us, and I pledge to the House that we will continue with determination, guided by those most affected, so that the legacy of Grenfell is one of lasting change.

Question put and agreed to.

4.1 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 11 June 2026

[PAULA BARKER *in the Chair*]

Clean Power by 2030

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Paula Barker (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. Mr Angus MacDonald will speak on the publication of the first report of the Scottish Affairs Committee, “Clean Power by 2023: A fair deal for Scotland?” for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement—questions should be brief, and Members may ask only one each—and call Mr MacDonald to respond to them in turn.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for affording me the opportunity to make a statement on the publication of the Scottish Affairs Committee’s first report of the Session, on the Government’s clean power 2030 mission. It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of the Committee.

This is the Committee’s second report on our inquiry into Great British Energy and the net zero transition. We launched the inquiry in November 2024, and it has been our longest-running piece of work to date. We have received more than 50 pieces of written evidence, held 11 oral evidence sessions and carried out numerous visits, both in Scotland and internationally. I thank all the stakeholders who have engaged with the inquiry. Last autumn, we published an interim report for the inquiry on the future of North sea oil and gas, and I commend that report to all hon. Members.

The report before us today—our second and final report for this inquiry—explores a wide range of issues. We cover the achievability of the clean power by 2030 mission, the role of GB Energy in delivering it, the urgent need for grid upgrades, and the community ownership of clean power. However, I will focus in my brief remarks on the issue of community benefits.

Community benefits are key to ensuring the fairness of the Government’s clean power mission, particularly for the communities of the highlands and islands, many of which I represent in my Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire constituency. It was declared that Scotland had the potential to become the Saudi Arabia of renewables, and there has been massive investment in onshore wind. However, those wind farm developments are seldom owned locally and offer few local jobs. In 2024, only £7 million of community benefit was generated in the highlands, and less than £30 million across Scotland, from that billion-pound industry. That was a disappointing outcome from a potentially transformative opportunity.

Throughout our inquiry, we had a clear consensus that the communities in Scotland that shoulder the greatest impact of the energy transition by hosting renewable energy infrastructure must also share in its benefits. As one of our expert witnesses put it, highland communities see that

“the turbines are generating lots of revenue for somebody but not for them.”

That presents an acute problem of fairness. The communities across Scotland that host industrial-scale renewable infrastructure in their backyards are the very same communities that pay among the highest prices for energy. Although fuel poverty rates across the UK cannot be directly compared, it is also clear that those same communities are enduring among the highest levels of fuel poverty. Indeed, many will be among the 34% of Scottish households that are classified as fuel poor while looking on at the massive wind turbines generating renewable electricity nearby—that cannot be just.

As our report highlights, that disconnect is a key driver of the sense of unfairness felt by communities across rural Scotland. It is for that reason that our report welcomes the UK Government’s commitment to introduce a mandatory community benefit scheme for new-generation infrastructure. The scheme, which is expected to be introduced by the end of 2027 at the earliest, could be key to ensuring that Scotland’s rural communities are adequately compensated for the disadvantages that come with enabling the whole of the UK to meet the Government’s clean power mission. However, that raises the thorny issue of what fair compensation looks like.

As the report highlights, the Scottish Government were widely regarded as leaders in this area. In 2015, they introduced voluntary community benefits guidance for onshore renewable developers, which recommended community benefits of £5,000 per megawatt, with inflationary increases. They have recently proposed increasing that to £6,000. However, the UK Government have, in their policy paper on how their mandatory scheme will work, proposed a benchmark contribution of only £5,000 per megawatt. Our report finds that that sum is insufficient and does not reflect fair compensation for rural Scotland. A £5,000 contribution may have been an appropriate amount in 2015, when the Scottish Government adopted it, but it is now worth around 40% less in real terms.

Our report makes it clear that the UK Government must be bolder. The Committee recommends that a figure in the region of £10,000 to £12,000 per megawatt would be more appropriate. The report also calls on the Government to consider carefully the Highland council’s view that £12,500, the upper end of that scale, is a fair figure. That proposal reflects the Highland council’s first-hand experience of supporting communities that bear the brunt of clean energy development.

The Committee’s report also highlights that, no matter what figure the Government adopt, it is equally important that a mechanism is included to maintain that value over time—otherwise, Scotland’s communities will eventually find themselves short-changed as the real-terms value of the figure is eroded. Financial payments will be an essential part of a fair deal for Scotland, but they are not the whole story.

Our report makes it clear that meaningful community benefit extends beyond financial payments, and that housing availability, access to skills training and the

[Mr Angus MacDonald]

creation of long-term local jobs are just as important. If delivered successfully, the influx of vast amounts of renewable energy could provide an opportunity to leave a transformative legacy of housing, skills and quality employment. That would be especially valuable for communities in remote rural Scotland, which have seen little private or public sector investment.

The Committee calls on the Government to seize this opportunity and ensure that their mandatory community benefit scheme is significant enough to reflect the needs and priorities of Scotland's rural communities. Our report recommends one specific way in which the Government could achieve that: their scheme should include a requirement on energy companies building projects in rural areas to construct legacy worker accommodation to a standard suitable for permanent community housing, rather than temporary modular buildings. That would go some way towards addressing the acute housing shortage in the highlands, which requires an extra 24,000 homes to meet the demand of the next decade, according to Highland council.

With that, I will conclude my statement. The Scottish Affairs Committee looks forward to the Government's response, which I hope will reflect serious consideration of our recommendations on delivering a fair deal for rural communities across Scotland.

Paula Barker (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called to ask a question.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): I call Patricia Ferguson.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my Committee colleague for the way in which he presented the Committee's findings and recommendations. It was a very interesting piece of work. One issue that came up time and again was curtailment costs—the payments made to electricity producers when turbines are not operational. Does he agree that the changes being made to the grid must happen as quickly as possible? One benefit would be a reduction in the curtailment costs, which would help bill payers across the country.

Mr MacDonald: I thank the hon. Lady for chairing the Committee—she was the driving force behind the report. The curtailment costs demonstrate quite how meagre the community benefits are. I do not have the curtailment cost figures to hand, but hundreds of millions of pounds are often being paid to utilities and infrastructure funds that own the wind farms but are not local—they are neither highlands-based nor Scotland-based. Basically, we are rewarding people for something they have not done to help the area. I could not agree more that the transmission lines, and the speed of getting them in, are crucial.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Scottish Affairs Committee for the report and the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for outlining the factual case. I also thank hon. Members

who commit their time and energy to coming forward with ideas—there are many ideas in the report. Am I allowed to ask two questions, Mrs Barker?

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Just one, I am afraid.

Jim Shannon: I will try to combine two issues in one question, then—my apologies for being overambitious. On green energy issues, does the Committee intend to share its ideas with the Northern Ireland Assembly? In Northern Ireland, green energy is not as advanced as in Scotland, and we are looking towards the energy connection between Scotland and Northern Ireland. Did the Committee consider that connection, and if not, will it do so at some point in the future?

Mr MacDonald: That is a bit of a curveball. That is not something I know anything about. If the Minister is better informed, maybe he can answer.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I was interested to hear the hon. Member say that the Scottish Government have proposed increasing the recommended voluntary community benefit for onshore wind projects to £6,000 per megawatt. That seems a derisory uplift given that, as he pointed out, it was £5,000 per megawatt in 2015—an uplift of only £1,000 after 11 years. Campaigners and local authorities across Scotland suggest that the figure of £12,500 per megawatt would be more appropriate. How should the UK Government respond to that? Is the Committee suggesting that the UK Government intervene, perhaps with a legal mandate to introduce a fairer and more realistic community benefit figure?

Mr MacDonald: It would have been helpful if the Conservative Government had made it mandatory 12 years ago, but they did not. Although I applaud the Scottish Government for doing so, they should have increased the benefit every year, rather than leaving it at £5,000. The £6,000 figure that they have now come up is completely ridiculous, because, with inflationary increases, the 2015 contract figure should be £8,500, so they have effectively reduced the community benefit. Two years ago, I wrote to the Scottish Energy Minister and the First Minister to make my case. Indeed, I met the Energy Minister about it. I am afraid that, by making it £6,000, they have taken the easy option.

Jim Shannon: On a point of order, Mrs Barker. For clarification, I asked the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) about the interconnector between Scotland and Northern Ireland, but as the Minister is in the Chamber, perhaps he might answer.

Paula Barker (in the Chair): May I ask the Minister to write to Mr Shannon?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey) *indicated assent*.

1.44 pm

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Freedom of Religion or Belief: Sudan

1.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief in Sudan.

It is a real pleasure to introduce this debate, which is one that I have sought for some time. It is also a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker—we have been friends for so many years in this House, and I appreciate that. It is a pleasure to see the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), in his place, although he is not who I was told would be here. It is in no way a disappointment; it is just that the hon. Member for Bridgend (Chris Elmore) happened to tell me, “I’ll see you on Thursday”, but there we are.

It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), who I spoke to beforehand; we have had a good friendship in this House. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), always turns up at my debates—I am not sure whether that is because he is made to or because he has a deep interest in them, but knowing him, I am going for the latter reason.

Why is this debate important? Sudan has been in my heart—and in all our hearts, I think—for a long time. There are many other things that people could be doing. We are well aware of the date of the Makerfield by-election, and I know people are committing themselves to that, which I understand. The shadow Minister told me that some Members who are speaking in the debate in the main Chamber on the legacy of Jo Cox also wanted to be here. There are others who also wished to participate but are in the Chamber.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating the time to discuss the severe violations of freedom of religion or belief in Sudan. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson will bring to this debate his personal experience—I did not know until a short time ago that he was in Sudan in 2022—and his knowledge of that time there and some of the things that have happened since.

It burdens my soul when terrible persecution and unspeakable violence take place against my brothers and sisters in the Lord—Christians—and those of other faiths. Muslims have not been outside the abuse, attacks and violence. Terrorist groups are committed to destroying Sudan, and they do not seem to worry a bit about what happens.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I have watched with great concern as Sudan has descended into the largest current humanitarian crisis on earth. The number of people displaced and murdered, and the level of abuse that takes place against women and young girls, are horrendous. Those things really quite annoy me, and they annoy us all. I cannot quite understand why anybody wants to be so evil, wicked and depraved against women and children. It is inconceivable; my mind cannot take it in.

Since April 2023, more than 150,000 people are estimated to have been killed—some figures are even above that—and up to 15 million people have been displaced from their

homes. Famine has taken hold in the Zamzam displacement camp, and millions more face hunger, fear and uncertainty every day of their lives. Sudan is fourth in the world watch list—that is like the premier league, but fourth place in this premier league does not look good, as it is about atrocities, persecution, human rights abuses and other things taking place. The top four or five are the worst places in the world, including North Korea, China and parts of Russia.

In February, the United Nations fact-finding mission reported on the actions of the Rapid Support Forces around El Fasher. At that particular time, there were incredible reports filtering through of the murderous intent of the Rapid Support Forces and the hallmarks of genocide, particularly in the targeting of non-Arab communities, including the Fur and Zaghawa peoples. Those words should make every one of us stop and think: hallmarks of genocide—men, women and children killed because they happened to be Christians, Muslims or, as far as the Rapid Support Forces are concerned, the enemy.

The situation in Sudan is one of hatred, identity-based violence and impunity at its worst. In my lifetime, though to a much lesser degree, I have seen in Northern Ireland—you will be aware of this, Mrs Barker—how hatred is allowed to overcome basic humanity. I have always tried in my life to be circumspect about those things, to take in what happens while also looking at how we move on and bring society together. We have done that in Northern Ireland, but Sudan is nowhere near that point.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has been a powerful advocate for religious freedom right across the world, and his speech underlines that even further. Like him, I looked at the Open Doors world watch list, which said that Sudan is now the fourth worst place in the world to be a Christian. That is not just because of the war; it is because churches are being burned down and Christians are being forcibly converted, in addition to mosques being attacked and the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe taking place right across that country.

I absolutely welcome the £146 million that the UK Government have released in humanitarian aid, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the only way we are going to get a lasting solution to this crisis is if the UK uses every lever at its disposal—including its role as the official penholder on Sudan at the UN Security Council—to broker a ceasefire?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words. We spoke beforehand in the Chamber to go over what he has just referred to. There is a key role to play. We are very fortunate to have the Minister in his place, and that the Government have given that £146 million of humanitarian aid. I suspect that it probably does not get to where it should—that is not the fault of the Government or the Minister—but there is a commitment from this Government and from our Minister on that.

In reference to the points made by the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards), let me say that no cause, grievance or political objective can ever justify the targeting of civilians, the destruction of places of worship or the abuse of women and children. As I said earlier, the depravity of those carrying out those vile things against innocent people is inconceivable.

[Jim Shannon]

In Sudan, places that should be treated as sanctuaries are being treated with contempt and disregard. In June 2025, the Rapid Support Forces bombed the Sudanese Episcopal church, the African Inland church and the Roman Catholic church in El Fasher. Father Luka Jomo, a devoted parish priest, later died from his injuries. He was not from El Fasher, but his duty as a pastor and priest who reaches out to help people was to stay with them and remain there during the siege, serving a community that was predominantly Muslim. That is Christianity at work.

I would love to see a world in which we can all have different religions, if that is the way it is, but still stand up for each other. That is what we should do, and I believe Father Luka Jomo did exactly that in the most compassionate way, ultimately giving his life for the belief that he held. That speaks powerfully of his faith, courage and love for the people whom he served and ultimately died for.

Of course, this disregard for human life extends to people of all faiths. In September 2025, the Rapid Support Forces attacked a mosque near Abdul Shouk camp during dawn prayers, killing over 70 people. Those people were praying, at peace and in touch with their God, yet they were murdered. In Khartoum, the Pentecostal Church premises in El Haj Yousif, El Shegla, were destroyed by extremists and members of the Sudanese armed forces. I have probably destroyed some of those words with my Ulster Scots accent, never mind my interpretation, but I am trying to put on record my concern for all those places that I will probably never see, and all those people whom I will probably never meet in this world, but hopefully will meet in the next.

For those who flee, the nightmare often continues. There are reports of Christians—my brothers and sisters—who had fled from areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces being arrested and detained in areas controlled by the Sudanese armed forces. It seems to be not only the terrorist groups who show disregard for human life, but sometimes the Government troops as well.

In October 2024, military intelligence officials in Shendi reportedly arrested 26 Christian men from the Sudanese Church of Christ, accusing them of being affiliated with the Rapid Support Forces. These accusations do not appear to have been based on any evidence—because there is no evidence to prove them—but on suspicion, on ethnicity and on the locations those people had fled from. They just happened to come from an area that the Rapid Support Forces had chased them from, and then the officials said that they were from that group. It really is quite hard to believe.

There are also wider concerns about what has been called the “strange faces” policy, which is rather hard to understand. Under that policy, people who are perceived—I emphasise the word “perceived”; it is not fact—to belong to communities linked with one side or the other have been harassed, detained or accused of criminal offences, even though there is little or no evidence to prove that they are guilty of any of them. Christian communities have been affected, too; many of them come from the Nuba mountains and the people are of African ethnicity.

We must also confront the horrific reality of conflict-related sexual violence. Such violence is inconceivable; it is wicked, depraved and evil for anyone to take

advantage of a woman or a young girl just because they are female. Women and girls have been raped, abducted and taken into sexual slavery; one young married woman had her young daughters taken away from her and—against their will, obviously—taken into sexual slavery. They were brought up in a good home, but what happened to them is depraved.

There are reports of men experiencing sexual violence in detention, as well. There are people of depravity in control of jails and in other positions of power who carry out their most depraved acts upon those whom they have a responsibility to look after. Survivors need medical care, social support and access to justice.

I have three or four asks of the Minister, and I must say that it really is a joy to see him here. His choice of words and his tone are calming; no matter how dark the statements that he makes in the main Chamber—and sometimes such statements are pretty dark—he develops a tone that perhaps calm us; it calms me, anyway. It is important that we can relate to a Minister who I believe has the heart for the stories that we are telling. We thank him for that.

On the resources that have been made available for work not only in South Sudan but for refugees in neighbouring countries, the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley referred in an intervention to £146 million in humanitarian aid, which covers some of the things that we are doing. But what about those who need medical help, those facing the trauma of depravities committed against them, the young children who are not being educated, because there are no teachers and no schools to teach in, or the neighbouring countries to which refugees have fled?

The treatment of women and girls by depraved men is reprehensible. We must intervene to support those who work in this area, not simply to help those who have been directly affected, but to train a generation to understand that rape and sexual violence are despicable, and that the actions of the past cannot be the actions of the future.

The United Kingdom has a particular responsibility because, to go back to the hon. Gentleman's intervention once again, we are the penholder on Sudan at the United Nations Security Council, and we have played a leading role on Sudan at the United Nations Human Rights Council. That gives us a duty to lead. I do not believe for one second that the Minister is not doing that, and I do not believe for one second that the Government are not doing that, but is there a better way of doing it? Can we encourage others to be, on paper, a penholder, as we are in the United Kingdom? Maybe there is a bigger role for the United States, the rest of Europe, those in the western world and those who have a heart for the people and compassion for those who are under pressure.

I think the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley must have read my three points; I did not show him my speech, but he ascertained what the issues were very quickly, and I congratulate him on that. I urge the Minister to press for an immediate ceasefire, safe humanitarian access, and the protection of civilians, churches, mosques and other places of worship. I ask the Minister and the Government to support the mandate of the United Nations fact-finding mission for the Sudan and to ensure that it is fully resourced and not watered down.

I am not here to criticise the Government for the moneys set aside for other countries across the world. We understand the financial pressures that are reducing those. In the debate in the main Chamber on the legacy of Jo Cox, the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell), referred to the Department for International Development and the reduction in development spending. DFID is the soft approach; the other approach is a military one, of course, but there are other ways to do it. We have been clear that we are happy to hear the Minister's ideas about how we can protect civilians, churches, mosques and places of worship and how we can support the United Nations fact-finding mission for the Sudan. Once we have all the details from the fact-finding mission, what plan of action will we take forward to ensure that things get better?

I also ask the Government to press for the Darfur arms embargo to be extended across the whole of Sudan and for the mandate of the International Criminal Court investigation, currently focused on Darfur, to be extended to the whole country. I am a great believer—this is a personal thing, but I believe that there are many in this House who feel the same—that while people in this world may think they get away with certain things, there is a day coming in the next world when they will be held accountable. What I want in this world is for them to be accountable for their crimes, their depravities, their abuse of women and children, their murders and their killing. I want them to be brought before an International Criminal Court investigation. I would be deeply indebted to the Minister if he could give us some indication of what is happening in relation to the International Criminal Court investigation.

There must also be accountability for those outside Sudan who are fuelling the war. If other states are supplying arms, funds or political cover to either side, that must be called out; I will mention one shortly. The United Kingdom should not be afraid to use sanctions against those who enable atrocities, inside or outside Sudan—it does not matter where they are in the world—and hold them accountable. I am quite sure that our Government and our Minister will make that happen.

There is a country that many of us feel is involved in this conflict right up to its neck. Concerns have been raised about the alleged role of the United Arab Emirates in supporting the Rapid Support Forces. The United Arab Emirates has denied any wrongdoing. It is so holier than thou, or at least it tries to be—but no; its hands are dirty and bloody, and it is time for it to be held accountable. The allegations made are serious and simply cannot be ignored. If any external state is supplying arms, funds or logistical support to those committing atrocities, it must be held to account. There must be a time when the United Arab Emirates and whoever is involved in these activities are held accountable.

I referred to the campaign for the Premier League to raise concerns with Manchester City owner Sheikh Mansour, who is also a senior political figure in the United Arab Emirates. Abdallah Idriss Abugarda, a survivor of the first Darfur genocide and leader of the Darfur Diaspora Association, has made the point that football is powerful. The first match of the world cup is tonight, and we are going to see the power of football over the next fortnight or three weeks. Well, here is an opportunity for the power of football to do something

for the people, stopping the supply of arms, funds and logistical support. The owner of Manchester City should do his bit as well.

Football is powerful, and with power comes moral responsibility. It is not just about playing the magnificent game for 90 minutes plus extra time. Whether in sport, diplomacy or trade, no institution should turn away from credible concerns about atrocities. That is why accountability must not stop at Sudan's borders. If we are serious about ending this war, we must look at not only those pulling the trigger, but those supplying funding and enabling the violence.

If the Minister does not mind, I would like some direction about any discussions with the UAE. Have there been any discussions, with the influence of Man City, perhaps? I am not a Man City supporter—this is not about what team I support. I support Leicester City, and we are now in the first division. If we are not careful, we might be in the second; I digress slightly but, when Coventry City went down, it took them 20 years to come back up. I hope it will not take 20 years for Leicester to come back. I hope it will be sooner than that.

A lasting peace can be built only on justice, accountability and the protection of all Sudanese people: Muslim, Christian, whoever. The destruction of places of worship must end; the targeting of civilians must end; the abuse of women and girls must, must, must end; the obstruction of aid must end. The people of Sudan deserve peace, justice, protection and the freedom to believe, worship and live without fear.

We must do all within our power—the physical and emotional power that we have in this country—to help the people of Sudan to change their nation and deliver hope and a future to their young people, the people of tomorrow. As a grandfather, I often think not just of my three boys, but of my six grandchildren and the place I want to leave them in. We want to leave the same thing for their young people. Women and children are valuable to God and to us, and he cares for them as we do.

I often finish with a scripture text. Today, it is Ephesians 6, where it tells us: “Having done all...stand.” The people of Sudan cannot stand alone, so my final request is that our Government stand with them and support their nation. Today, in Westminster Hall, we stand; we can do no other.

2.13 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I believe that this might be the first occasion on which I have done so. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, not untypically, asked the right question with the deep care and compassion that always moves us. He was kind enough to reference the fact that I was in Sudan in 2022, so I speak from some limited personal experience in these matters; I will reflect on that shortly.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset, though, that the conflict in Sudan today is the world's largest humanitarian crisis. It is a catastrophe unfolding before our eyes—and what is so disappointing at times is that we do not seem to see it, to hear it or to read about it. As we focus on other events around the world, those terrible atrocities in Sudan fall away from the public gaze. That is deeply regrettable, because of the appalling tragedies that are unfolding there, which the hon. Member

[*Dr Al Pinkerton*]

for Strangford has just spoken about: millions of people enduring unimaginable suffering, families are being forced from their homes, communities being shattered and many now facing starvation.

I was in Sudan in 2022 working on an academic project. We were tracing the border between Sudan and Egypt—a British creation. There are two different borders constantly under negotiation, drawn at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century, leaving a curious geographical anomaly called Bir Tawil between them. We started our journey in Khartoum, working alongside Sudanese guides, who were extraordinary in their care, service and hospitality.

As we travelled north through the Nubian desert, we came across one of the key actors that has driven the conflict to where it is today. Just outside one of the stations on the old British railway that used to run from Wadi Halfa down to Khartoum, we came across the Wagner Group, the Russian paramilitary organisation. They were stationed in the Nubian desert, extracting tons of gold from the sands—transporting it back to Russia to fuel the war in eastern Europe—and training Sudanese paramilitaries at the same time.

We were warned by local members of the Ababda tribe, who inscribed the symbol of the skull and crossbones—the symbol of the Wagner Group—into the sand, that we should not proceed any further along that particular wadi. As the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned, there are forces internal and external to Sudan who are driving this conflict. He has mentioned the United Arab Emirates, which I will talk about, but we should not forget the malign forces of the likes of Russia and its proxies, including the Wagner Group.

The scale of the violence we are seeing today is truly horrifying. Across the country, civilians are living in fear, insecurity and hardship every single day. Amidst this devastating conflict, fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, are increasingly under threat. At a time when the very concept of human rights is under sustained threat globally, some might find it controversial to suggest that freedom of religion or belief is indeed a universal human right. The truth is that it should not be a controversial concept or principle, and we should continue to hold on to it. Every individual should be free to practise the faith of their choice, change their beliefs or hold no religious belief at all, without fear of discrimination, persecution or violence.

However, reports from Sudan paint a deeply troubling picture. Religious minorities have faced discrimination and intimidation, places of worship have come under attack, and restrictions on religious practice have affected people from a wide range of faith communities and backgrounds. Those abuses are unacceptable and must not be ignored. The international community has so far failed to do enough. More must be done to safeguard religious freedoms, protect vulnerable minorities and uphold the basic rights and dignity of all Sudanese people.

To make one party political reference, in our 2024 general election manifesto, the Liberal Democrats reaffirmed our commitment to protecting, defending and promoting human rights, including the rights of those persecuted because of religious or other faith-based beliefs. An unwavering commitment to human rights

and the rule of law is frankly why I am a Liberal Democrat, but I also recognise that those commitments have long defined who we are as a nation and a people, and there is no better place to express them than in this Chamber.

That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the appointment of an ambassador-level champion for freedom of religion or belief, ensuring that those issues remain a priority in British foreign policy. We continue to support a robust, rights-based approach to tackling the persecution of religious minorities around the world, and that means applying diplomatic pressure where necessary, strengthening protections for those seeking asylum, supporting international accountability mechanisms and backing civil society organisations that work tirelessly to defend religious freedom.

In Sudan, that begins with the UK Government working more closely with international partners to protect religious rights and challenge those—both indigenous and exogenous to Sudan—who are responsible for persecution and violence. It must include a clear commitment to upholding article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which guarantees

“the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, the United Kingdom has a particular responsibility in this area as the United Nations Security Council penholder on Sudan. Therefore, it is uniquely placed to lead international efforts on this crisis. I encourage the Government to use that position to work with allies and partners to push for a ceasefire and prevent further loss of life.

The Liberal Democrats have also called for stronger international action to establish a Sudan-wide arms embargo to stem the flow of weapons that continue to fuel this conflict. Alongside that, the Government might usefully redouble their efforts to establish a multilateral contact group capable of co-ordinating the international response and building consensus among key partners. The international community must resist attempts to legitimise those driving the conflict within and outwith Sudan. It must ensure that individuals responsible for war crimes and serious human rights abuses are held accountable.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the United Arab Emirates, and it is important that we do, because the role it plays in Sudan has often gone unmentioned in this place. I hope the Minister will offer some comments and reflections on what can be done to ensure that its deeply toxic relationship with Sudan is affected by British diplomacy.

Sudan’s future should be determined by civilian leadership, not by armed forces. At home, the Government should do more to raise public awareness of the crisis and work closely with the Disasters Emergency Committee to support a nationwide humanitarian appeal. Humanitarian workers continue to risk their lives delivering aid to those in the most desperate need, yet they are too often targeted by attacks and reprisals from the RSF and the Sudanese armed forces. The UK should work with international and regional partners to secure guarantees for their protection, and should press all parties to allow safe and unrestricted humanitarian access across Sudan.

We must also take stronger action against the smuggling networks that sustain the conflict and prolong the suffering of ordinary Sudanese people. At the same time, we

cannot lose sight of the humanitarian catastrophe. The United Nations appeal and the regional refugee response must be properly funded. The Government should reverse their plans to cut official development assistance and should set out a clear pathway towards restoring aid spending. Particular attention must be given to Sudanese children, who have borne a disproportionate share of the conflict's consequences. Millions have been denied access to education, healthcare and basic security; an entire generation has been placed at risk.

Individuals and entities responsible for perpetrating, providing arms for or enabling serious human rights abuses in Sudan already face sanctions from the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union and others. Those measures should remain under constant review and should be strengthened where necessary. I would go as far as to say that they should be expanded to include the role of the United Arab Emirates.

The people of Sudan deserve peace, dignity and the freedom to live according to their beliefs, without fear. The international community, and the United Kingdom in particular, must not look away. We must act with urgency, defend human rights, uphold freedom of religion and belief, and stand alongside the people of Sudan in their time of greatest need.

2.23 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate, and Members from across the House for their thoughtful and heartfelt contributions. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) has actually been to Sudan, which is a rarity in this place. I have not been to Sudan, but I have known the horrors of war.

I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for securing the debate because, jostling for attention with other terrible conflicts across the world, Sudan is often forgotten, despite the catastrophic situation there; indeed, it is experiencing the world's worst humanitarian crisis. More than 150,000 people have been killed, nearly 15 million have been displaced, 33 million need humanitarian support, and 40% of Sudan's population faces severe food insecurity. Yet, the warring parties continue. The Rapid Support Forces and the Sudan armed forces constrain aid deliveries to those most in need. They continue to commit massacres on scales that beggar belief. Appalling acts of sexual violence are being perpetrated daily against women and girls.

Of course, among those barbarous acts, worshippers are being abused, minorities targeted and places of prayer levelled. The religious freedoms of the 2019 draft constitution have collided with the reality of war. The warring parties have attacked religious sites. In particular, the RSF appears to prize places of worship because of their strong walls: fighters take churches and mosques, often threatening and killing clerics and pastors to do so, and then violently clear the area of civilians. In turn, the SAF bombards those places of worship, targeting the RSF and other rebel groups.

The destruction of religious sites is a terrible thing, but worshippers pay the highest price when good and evil collide. We have seen that far too many times: the drone attack on the El Fasher mosque that killed more than 70 people; the airstrike, days before Christmas, on a church in Al Ezba in 2024, which killed 11, including

eight children; and the visit without notice of SAF fighters, accompanied by police officers and religious extremists, to demolish the Pentecostal church in El Haj Yousif.

It is not only places of worship that are being targeted. Practices that have been prohibited post al-Bashir are being carried out with impunity. Religious discrimination is reportedly rife. Vulnerable minorities are being forced to convert. Many are denied work, food or education until they abandon their faith. Hudud laws are being used to target minorities, yet the Sudanese authorities are in no state to prevent or prosecute public floggings, which had been outlawed.

Jim Shannon: Those who renounce their Christianity and want to convert, or Muslims who want to convert to Christianity, are denied fundamental economic rights. They face the complete forfeiture of any family inheritance, domestic violence and abandonment without financial recourse. Those who were once Muslims and are now Christians lose even their most basic rights. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that, and it is absolutely despicable to see what is taking place.

Lincoln Jopp: When these things take place, it is abhorrent to the whole House.

Laws mean nothing when the state lacks even the most basic capacities to enforce them. Among this chaos, bad actors are thriving. We have long known that Russia deploys mercenaries in Sudan in return for a free hand to smuggle gold and a Red sea port for Putin. There are reports that the Houthis are using the chaos in Sudan to smuggle weapons to their terrorist forces in Yemen.

In keeping with the topic of this debate, Iran is using its links to Islamist paramilitaries to perpetrate Sudanese civilians' suffering. For example, the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade is a Sudanese Islamist militia that has contributed tens of thousands of fighters to the civil war. The US has placed sanctions on the BBMB, but the United Kingdom has not. BBMB fighters have reportedly been involved in arbitrary arrests, torture and summary executions. The BBMB has benefited from training and weapons provided by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—the same organisation that the Minister's party, when in opposition, promised to proscribe. The Government are almost two years into their time in office, and only this week did they publish the text of the legislation that will make that happen.

With that in mind, will the Minister tell us whether he has considered following the US's lead and sanctioning the BBMB or even proscribing it? How do the Government plan to use the global human rights sanction regime created by the previous Conservative Government to crack down on religiously inspired Iranian agitation in Sudan? Indeed, does the Minister see a wider role for the human rights sanctions regime in cracking down on abuses of freedom of religion or belief in Sudan?

Will the Minister tell us how the Government are pursuing accountability for the religious abuses we have heard about today? How are they gathering evidence of those abuses? Since Sudan was last raised in this House, what have they done to support the collection of evidence of war crimes, so that those responsible can be held to account? How is the UK using international courts to pursue those responsible for such atrocities?

[*Lincoln Jopp*]

On the big picture, I know that the House is united in wanting to see the immediate end to hostilities in Sudan. We are all aware that pressing the warring parties into a ceasefire, and hopefully an eventual sustainable peace, will require combining our efforts with those of our international allies. How is the Minister using the UK's role as the penholder for Sudan at the UN Security Council to ensure that humanitarian aid is reaching those in desperate need? How is he using that role to tighten the screws on the warring parties, pressing them into a ceasefire and ending this barbaric conflict?

Finally, when did the Minister last engage with his US counterparts on their peace efforts in Sudan, and what specifically is the UK contributing to those efforts? Has he, or any of his colleagues, had discussions with other members of the Sudan Quad about their push for peace? How is the UK supporting the Quad in achieving the goals we hold in common: securing a humanitarian truce followed by a permanent ceasefire, securing a commitment to protect civilians and supporting an inclusive Sudanese transition to establish a civilian-led Government in Sudan?

The war in Sudan is a stain on the world's conscience. The freedom of religion or belief abuses being carried out are utterly barbaric. Britain must exert every ounce of influence and leverage to get the warring parties to lay down their weapons immediately, to secure lasting peace and to hold to account those responsible for the crimes being committed in the name of, and against, religion.

2.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I am standing in for the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Chris Elmore), who sends his apologies that he cannot be here. I am sure he would be delighted to respond to this important debate raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has already received many tributes from contributors. I know that, as long as he is in this House, the hon. Member will continue to raise this important issue and which affects many across the world, and will use his full strength of voice on their behalf. I am sure we are all grateful for that.

I thank hon. Members on all sides of the House for their thoughtful contributions. As ever, my beautifully named opposite number, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), rightly spoke of unity across all parties on this question. I will endeavour to go through all of the questions that have been raised.

I will briefly characterise the situation, although that has been done effectively by previous speakers, some of whom commented on their own connections to the area. As some of my colleagues may know, I lived in South Sudan for two years during a difficult period when many had been displaced from Sudan. A notable feature to me was that the nature of the violence in that part of the world has long been particularly extreme. Many hon. Members have already described it in graphic detail. I will not do the same, but it is foremost on the

conscience of Foreign Office Ministers, as I know it is for right hon. and hon. Members on all sides of the House. The statistics are horrifying: 9 million people internally displaced and 4 million stranded on the borders of neighbouring countries. In the midst of all that, basic human rights, including the freedom to practise one's faith or to hold no faith at all, have been not just stripped away, but used to target violence on specific communities.

The right to freedom of religious belief sits right at the heart of our UK human rights approach. As hon. Members are aware, last July the UK special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), set out the Government strategy on the issue. The strategy focuses on 10 countries, but that does not mean we look away from crises elsewhere—far from it. I know that he has focused on issues in Sudan as well.

Let me also briefly abuse my previous life to respond to the Liberal Democrat demand for an ambassador-level position. Having been a diplomat and a Member of this House, I assure the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) that having a special envoy rooted in this House is a powerful additional thing. We hear a voice with the authority not only of the Foreign Office but of this House when the envoy speaks, as my hon. Friend has on many occasions, including the appearance I just mentioned.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am sorry for being late, Mrs Barker, but I had a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan); otherwise I would have been here at the beginning of the debate. It is good to see you in the Chair. My grandmother was born and raised in Birkenhead, so I know not to mess with a strong woman from Merseyside.

May I ask the Minister about the Africa strategy published at the end of last year? What more will we do to ensure that the strategy is rooted in our commitment to human rights and, of course, to freedom of expression and belief?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend has been one of the most focused voices in questions around the Africa strategy and the UK's approach to the continent. I hope he will forgive me if I focus in particular on the specific area in east Africa where, in both Sudan and South Sudan, there have been significant abuses. Later in my speech, I will turn to some of the questions of wider strategy, because as identified by both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat spokespersons, the hon. Members for Spelthorne and for Surrey Heath, respectively, the conflicts in Sudan and the wider situation in the east of Africa have regional elements.

Our role in multilateral settings has been raised throughout the debate. At the UN General Assembly's Third Committee, in the Human Rights Council, and as penholder at the Security Council, as others have referenced, and leader of the relevant core group in the Human Rights Council, we have been clear just how important the issues in Sudan are. We regularly take part in interactive dialogues with the UN's special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and other relevant mandate holders to highlight the situation in Sudan.

We made a statement at the UN Third Committee in October and at the 58th session of the Human Rights Council last year. Our special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, condemned the repression of non-Muslims in detention settings in Sudan, following terrible reports of detainees being denied food and coerced to change their beliefs, exactly as we have heard described today. As hon. Members have pointed out, we must use every lever to uphold international law. We have repeatedly condemned the countless violations committed by the warring parties in Sudan, and called on all those parties to honour their commitments to protect civilians and to uphold international law.

None the less, civilians and civilian infrastructure, including places of worship, continue to be routinely, deliberately and cruelly targeted. Like the crisis of sexual violence in Sudan, the repression of basic human rights is used by the competing militias as a weapon of war and as a means of asserting dominance over the territories they control and spreading fear into the territories they do not. In that dangerous and frightening context, we pay tribute to all those courageous souls inside Sudan who are trying to hold their communities together. Religious and community leaders try against all odds to lead their own efforts in conflict prevention, reconciliation, peace building and humanitarian relief. To support the efforts of those local aid groups, the Foreign Secretary announced in April that the Government will double our funding to local humanitarian responders operating in the hardest-to-reach places. In many places, it is those community groups who deliver, in the most dangerous conditions and with the fewest resources. Supporting them is one of the most effective ways we can act to get help to those who need it most.

This year, as the hon. Member for Strangford identified, the UK is providing a further £146 million in funding for humanitarian relief in Sudan, which should ensure that lifesaving aid reaches almost 2 million people. I can reassure the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, that Sudan has been ring-fenced from the wider reductions in aid. Alongside our international partners, we are using every diplomatic lever available to press the warring parties to remove obstacles to aid, to guarantee the safety of civilians and aid workers, and to end the siege tactics that have trapped and starved communities.

The involvement of others in the conflict has been raised a number of times. Regrettably, we believe there are at least 12 states funnelling arms into Sudan, which is obviously an inextricable part of the conflict. Members have referred to particular countries and concerns. We do engage, as the hon. Member for Spelthorne asked, with all members of the quad. I spoke to Mr Massad Boulos, the United States lead, just days ago; I know the Foreign Secretary and Baroness Chapman are in regular contact with him as well. The Foreign Secretary and I regularly meet our counterparts in the United Arab Emirates, and the Foreign Secretary has put Sudan right at the top of her agenda, including in her discussions with that country.

We have taken steps in wider formats as well. We are a founding member of the coalition for atrocity prevention and justice. We are committed to advancing justice for the Sudanese people, including religious communities. Launched in February, the coalition is working to press for accountability and justice while bolstering local

peacebuilding and protection efforts. We are also supporting Sudanese human rights defenders to verify and preserve information relating to attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure. The hon. Member for Spelthorne was right to highlight the importance of ensuring we have an accurate account of abuses. As many hon. Members know, in this era, making sure that reports are verified to a high standard is a priority to ensure that the information we receive is accurate and up to date.

I was asked by hon. Members to comment on sanctions. I hope I will not try their patience too much by saying that we will not comment in the House on upcoming sanctions, but we have now sanctioned 24 individuals and entities aligned with or backing warring parties in Sudan. The measures are intended to send a clear message to those who fuel this war and profit from it, or are linked to the gravest violations of international humanitarian law, that they will face consequences.

We must be frank. Important though all those steps are, they will not by themselves bring peace. There will be no end to the crisis and no end to the repression and violence affecting communities, including those of faith, unless the fighting finally stops. That is why the Foreign Secretary continues to work urgently with international partners to press for a ceasefire and to lay the groundwork for an inclusive, civilian-led transition, which will turn that ceasefire into a just and lasting peace. That includes working alongside various nations and organisations, including the African Union-led quintet, to support the Sudanese civil society actors who are working to reshape Sudan's future for recovery, long-term peace and justice. We must be absolutely clear in everything we do. Any political settlement that emerges from this brutal conflict must be inclusive and protect the rights of all Sudanese people. It must respect Sudan's diversity, including its many different faith communities, and it must create space for people of all religions and none to live freely, safely and equally under the law. The UK will continue to stand up for freedom of religious belief in Sudan, not just because it is under attack now, but because it is a test of whether peace can be sustained in future.

2.44 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) for pre-reading my speech. He knew my four headlines, and mentioned the four of them in an intervention, delivering my speech in four words or thereabouts—that would have been a small speech for me. I know he has a deep interest in Sudan, and I thank him for coming along.

I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton). He and I share many deep interests, and Sudan is one of them. We understand the issue of persecution of those of Christian faith, other faiths and no faith. We understand the issue of human rights abuse, and Sudan is unfortunately the epitome of all the things that are going wrong. He also referred to article 18 of the United Nations charter, which is core to this issue, and to the UAE. The Minister has just confirmed that 10 or 12 states are involved in the supply of arms, which gives us some concern.

It was nice of the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) to come along. He married a girl from Northern Ireland, so he is almost a Northern

[*Jim Shannon*]

Ireland citizen. He focused on the Africa strategy. The Minister kindly replied to him and said that is something he brings up regularly. We thank him for that.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp)—gallant Member that he is—is a great friend of Northern Ireland. He is a great friend of mine because of his service in the forces, and a great friend of all in this House for all he did to bring about peace. He focused on the 33 million people in need in Sudan. That is a massive figure. It is half the population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—that is how big it is. Such is its vastness that it could go from Liverpool down to the very south coast or from Liverpool up to Edinburgh. He referred to the killing of pastors and priests and the destruction of churches and mosques. If the law is to mean anything, the state must act; it cannot ignore these incidents. I thought that was important. He also underlined what the US is doing. I am sure it is doing something. It is sometimes easy to disregard that, but it is important to recognise, although it could be doing more to work collectively.

I thank the Minister for his answers and for his tone. He gave us great encouragement, and his words were well chosen and well spoken. He referred to the UK's role as the penholder and to the graphic violence. We do not need to go into that, but just thinking about it makes me feel bad, to tell the truth. The extra £146 million he mentioned will reach another 2 million people. He referred to the 12 states that are funnelling the arms to area, but it is encouraging to hear that Sudanese human rights defenders are collecting evidence of abuses. Some of the guys who are involved in the atrocities and bestial activities will be held to account someday. The Minister is right: the fighting must stop. We all wish that the fighting would stop. We should all be encouraged that our Minister and our Government are committed to trying to find peace.

I suggest there is one more thing we all need to do. If we are not doing it, I think we should. We should pray every day for Sudan and its people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief in Sudan.

2.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Secondary Breast Cancer

[*MR CLIVE BETTS in the Chair*]

3.10 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered secondary breast cancer.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I declare an interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital; a family member also holds shares in a medical company.

It is a privilege to speak in today's debate on incurable secondary breast cancer, a debate that the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and I have brought to Westminster Hall. I thank the many healthcare professionals, charities and life science organisations that have provided valuable information ahead of the debate. I also thank the patients and the charities Breast Cancer Now, Make 2nds Count and METUP UK, who are represented today in the Public Gallery, for their work and support. I would like to recognise everyone involved in the Moments That Count campaign exhibition last November, particularly the brave testimonies from Claire, Laura, Jo, Lisa and Juliet.

As I have mentioned many times in Parliament, I am a breast cancer survivor. That experience showed me the importance of early diagnosis and effective treatment, not only for survival but for the quality of life. My own diagnosis was delayed: I was initially sent away by the first GP I saw, and I waited several months before being diagnosed. During that time, the cancer spread to my lymph glands, which had to be removed. Eighteen years later, I still experience the consequences, most recently just a few weeks ago.

Fortunately, my treatment was successful. For those living with secondary breast cancer, however, a cure is not an option. Secondary breast cancer occurs when the disease spreads to other parts of the body. Treatments can slow its progression and give people more time, but it cannot be cured. About 11,500 women and 90 men die from breast cancer every year, and most of those deaths are caused by secondary breast cancer. For those living with the disease, every extra month matters, yet too often their voices are not heard, their needs are not recognised and time runs out.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member and to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for securing this vital debate. I am pleased that it was rescheduled from earlier in the year and that we have the opportunity to be here today.

In advance of this debate, I heard from many women in Newcastle-under-Lyme who have been impacted by breast cancer. I am here to add my voice to their calls for action, to place on the record my support for the More Time to Live campaign and to pay tribute to Breast Cancer Now for all it does. I am grateful to my two colleagues for giving me the opportunity to do so.

Clive Jones: I thank the hon. Member for putting his support on the record. This debate is very important: it gives us the opportunity to highlight the experiences of people living with secondary breast cancer and the action needed to support them.

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of reliable data. It is estimated that about 61,000 people in the UK are living with secondary breast cancer, but we do not know that for certain. The disease remains under-recognised, poorly tracked and inadequately recorded. People living with secondary breast cancer are still not consistently counted. Too often, they are invisible within the health system, making it harder to provide the tailored treatment, services and support that they need.

Some 20 years ago, data collection on metastatic breast cancer was identified as a priority by Breast Cancer Now's secondary breast cancer taskforce. Progress was made in 2013 when mandatory data collection was introduced, and subsequent strategies have promised further improvements, but we are still flying blind. The first two national audits of metastatic breast cancer were unable to provide a complete picture, because recurrence data remains insufficient, both in quality and in completeness. The audit has demonstrated just how important it is that the issue be addressed: without accurate data, the NHS cannot properly plan services, allocate resources or understand the scale of need. Better data could also help to address continuing gaps in access to clinical nurse specialists for people with metastatic breast cancer.

Most importantly, people living with the disease are left feeling that they do not count, because the system cannot guarantee the support that they need. The reality is simple: if we do not know how many people have the disease, we cannot hope to support them effectively. This challenge is not unique to the UK; it is a global issue, and international collaboration can help us to learn from best practice elsewhere, but we should be leading the way. That is why the Government's national cancer plan is so important. The plan commits to defining and counting recurrent cancers, starting with metastatic breast cancer in 2026. That commitment must now be delivered in full, and Parliament must hold the Government to account on achieving it. The ongoing work of the national disease registration service with NHS trusts to improve data collection is encouraging, but progress will require national leadership and accountability.

I am delighted that the hon. Member for West Lancashire is here today. Ashley Dalton was the Minister who drove the national cancer plan through Parliament.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Members must not refer to each other by name in the Chamber.

Clive Jones: I did mention the hon. Member's constituency first, but I take your guidance, Mr Betts—my apologies for that.

I recently joined a meeting with the hon. Member and with charities including Breast Cancer Now, Breast Cancer Network Australia and Rethink Breast Cancer. Together those charities are working across the UK, Australia and Canada to improve metastatic breast cancer data and ensure that patients' voices are heard. The message is clear: if we do not count people, we cannot support them. Collecting and publishing this data is essential, because people with metastatic breast cancer count.

Alongside better data, timely access to new treatments is critical. Secondary breast cancer may be incurable, but advances in medicine have transformed outcomes

or many patients, giving them more time with the people they love. However, too many patients still struggle to access life-extending treatments on the NHS. One example is Enhertu, a treatment for people with HER2-low metastatic breast cancer. It has the potential to extend and improve lives, yet it was rejected for routine NHS use in England in 2024 on cost grounds. As a result, many patients have been unable to access the treatment that they need. Meanwhile, Enhertu is already available in 26 European countries, including Scotland. England is falling behind. Recent changes to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's cost-effectiveness threshold provide an important opportunity to revisit that decision. I urge Daiichi Sankyo, AstraZeneca, NICE and NHS England to work together to reach an agreement so that patients can access and benefit from Enhertu.

More broadly, concerns remain about how NICE assesses medicines and about the impact on innovation and access to treatments, particularly following the introduction of the severity modifier in 2022. Even after recent changes, the threshold for approving some medicines for metastatic cancer remains lower than before 2022. NICE has estimated that the revisions may result in only three to five additional medicines being approved each year. It is the patients who pay the price. Life-extending treatments exist, but they are not always available to those who need them most. That cannot be right.

The commitments in the national cancer plan to streamline medicine approvals and accelerate clinical trials are welcome. The recent UK-US pharmaceutical agreements, including commitments to strengthen support for the life sciences sector, are likewise welcome, but without meaningful investment in innovative medicines for severe conditions, access will remain limited and patients will continue to miss opportunities for longer and better lives. Support services also remain inadequate.

Clinical nurse specialists play a vital role in guiding patients through complex treatment pathways and providing emotional support, yet many people with secondary breast cancer still do not have access to a clinical nurse specialist. Even among those who do, a quarter have not seen their specialist since diagnosis, and only 65% feel that their specialist has enough time for them. The reason is simple: caseloads are too high. We must recognise the profound emotional impact of secondary breast cancer. More than a quarter of patients say that they did not receive enough mental health support. Many need greater support for their family as well. The NHS long-term plan promised every cancer patient access to a clinical nurse specialist or support worker. That commitment must now be delivered for people with secondary breast cancer who need specialist expertise to navigate this complex disease.

People living with metastatic breast cancer do not have time to wait. They need to be counted. They need access to the support they deserve. They need rapid access to treatments that can give them more precious time with the people they love. I ask the Minister for two clear commitments. First, will she set out a timeline for delivering the national cancer plan's commitment to define and count recurrent cancers, starting with metastatic breast cancer in 2026, and will she outline any plans to make the data that is currently held by the national disease registration service publicly available? Secondly, what are the Government doing to support metastatic breast cancer patients who may miss out on life-extending medicines because of pricing and access barriers?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. I will call Mary Kelly Foy next, as the co-sponsor of the debate. After her speech, I will give hon. Members an indication of how long they may have to speak, to try to get us to the end of the debate in a reasonable fashion.

3.22 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) to secure this important debate. I thank the campaigners who work to ensure that people living with secondary breast cancer are seen, heard and supported. I am thrilled that my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), who has spoken so openly about her diagnosis, is here today: I am sure that her remarks will be invaluable.

I speak not only as a Member of Parliament, but as someone who has been through breast cancer. I was fortunate: my cancer was picked up through screening and caught early. I received timely treatment and am now cancer-free, but I am forever grateful to the teams at the QE hospital in Gateshead, the Maggie's centre and Future Dreams for their support. Whenever I can, I encourage people to attend screening appointments and to check themselves. In fact, on 14 July I will be hosting an event alongside leading breast cancer advocates and sporting ambassadors, focusing on raising awareness of the importance of women prioritising their breast health. I would love the Minister to join us.

I know that my personal experience was not that of someone living with secondary breast cancer. For people whose cancer has spread and can be treated but not cured, time is everything. In 2026, it is unacceptable that we do not know with confidence how many people are living with secondary breast cancer. We know that around 60,000 people in the UK are living with it, but that remains just an estimate. More than a decade after data collection was made mandatory, it is still not being consistently or accurately recorded across the country, and if people are not properly counted, their needs are too easily overlooked. The NHS cannot plan the right number of specialist nurses, oncology appointments, palliative care services, mental health support services or clinical trials if the true scale of need is not known.

I welcome the work of the national disease registration service, with NHS trusts, to improve data returns on metastatic breast cancer, but I am concerned that no data has yet been published. I also welcome the Government's commitment to the national cancer plan, to define and count recurrent cancers, starting with metastatic breast cancer, and to ensure that patients have named primary contacts, but patients need delivery now, not just commitment. The NHS must routinely capture data on not only diagnosis but treatment and support needs. That is how we can move from counting people in theory to improving the services available to them in practice.

In Durham, trust was shattered when failures were identified in breast services at County Durham and Darlington NHS foundation trust. The concerns went way beyond isolated mistakes, and patients wondered whether the care that they received was truly in line with

the standards that they should expect. Patients place their lives in the hands of the system, so they deserve to know that decisions about their care are evidence-based, properly scrutinised and made through strong, multidisciplinary teams. When that trust is broken, it is difficult to rebuild. I pay tribute to those who spoke out, such as my constituent Jackie, who did so on behalf of her sorely missed daughter, Michaela, and Amelia, Cat and Nadeen, who formed the Pink Justice Network. I do also recognise the efforts of the new senior leadership team at the trust, who are working to reform services and repair patient confidence.

On access to treatments, everyone living with secondary breast cancer deserves to have access to new, effective life-extending treatments, but there are serious concerns that the way in which NICE currently assesses some drugs limits access for people living with incurable metastatic breast cancer. Campaigners have warned that since the introduction of the severity modifier, some advance cancer treatments have been disadvantaged compared with the previous system. Breast Cancer Now reports that only a minority of end-of-life treatments assessed under the new approach received the same level of priority as they would have before.

The clearest example is Enhertu, which could give people with HER2-low metastatic breast cancer more time, yet was not recommended for routine NHS use in England in 2024, as a cost-effective pricing agreement could not be reached. Since then, eligible patients have missed out, and people have asked why a life-extending treatment should be available in Scotland but not in England. The Government's decision to increase the NICE cost-effectiveness threshold for new medicines is welcome, and I hope it will create an opportunity to reach an agreement on Enhertu. I also welcome the fact that discussions between AstraZeneca, Daiichi Sankyo, NHS England and NICE are understood to have begun. More than 50,000 people have signed a petition calling for urgent agreement on Enhertu. They are asking for something very simple: that all parties come together to find a way to give eligible patients more time.

I must also mention the work of our hospices, such as St Cuthbert's hospice in Durham, which are supported by charities such as Marie Curie, in providing people who are living with secondary breast cancer with the services that they need. Marie Curie reports that one in three people do not receive the care and support they need at the end of life, so I welcome the fact that the Government are developing a palliative care and end-of-life care modern service framework. I hope that the framework will address the lack of support available outside of normal working hours, embed palliative care in neighbourhood health and ensure that the palliative care workforce is fit for the future.

Will the Minister set out how the Government will ensure three things: first, that secondary breast cancer data is collected and published consistently across every trust, with clear accountability for delivery; secondly, that every patient has meaningful access to a specialist named contact with the time and capacity to support them properly; and thirdly, that people living with secondary breast cancer are not left behind when life-extending treatments become available?

Secondary breast cancer is not just a diagnosis. Mothers miss milestones, daughters face uncertain futures, partners become carers and families must live with a clock that

they never asked to hear ticking. We do not ask for kind words today, but for action on research, access to treatment, support and giving people more time not just to survive, but to live—because behind every diagnosis is a person who still has dreams, plans and a life worth fighting for.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. We have four Members who want to come in, so I will issue a guideline of nine minutes each for speeches, if Members could stick to that, please.

3.30 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I want to focus on something that sits at the heart of improving outcomes for people living with secondary breast cancer: data, research and recognition. That especially applies to people suffering from lobular breast cancer.

Last year, my office asked the Government whether the new national audit of metastatic breast cancer would provide a breakdown by breast cancer subtype and hormone receptor status. The response from the Department of Health and Social Care was striking. The Government have effectively admitted that the data is simply not there in any complete or meaningful form. There is still no clear national picture of how many people are living with different forms of secondary breast cancer, what treatments they receive or the outcomes they face. That matters because, if we cannot accurately count metastatic breast cancer patients, we cannot properly plan services, understand needs, target research funding or develop treatments. We cannot fix what we do not measure.

That is especially true for lobular breast cancer. Invasive lobular carcinoma is the second most common form of breast cancer. Twenty-two people are diagnosed with it every day in the UK, yet it remains chronically under-researched and poorly understood. Unlike ductal breast cancer, lobular cancer often does not form a distinct lump. It grows in thin, single-file patterns, making it much harder to detect on standard mammograms and often leading to delayed diagnosis.

Secondary lobular breast cancer also presents further challenges because it tends to be found in untypical places, such as the liver, lungs, brain, bladder and even the eyes, whereas other types of breast cancer spread mostly to the bones. Despite those key biological differences, there is still no specific treatment pathway designed for lobular breast cancer patients. That is extraordinary, considering how many women are affected.

For too long, secondary and metastatic lobular breast cancer has existed in a blind spot. Historically, cancer registries have focused on primary diagnoses and have often failed to track recurrence or progression properly. Mandatory reporting has improved matters somewhat over the last decade, but huge gaps remain. That is why the work of campaigners and researchers has been so important.

I especially want to recognise and pay tribute to Dr Susan Michaelis, founder of the Lobular Moon Shot Project. She was one of my Horsham constituents, and she sadly died of lobular breast cancer almost a year ago. Susan was relentless in pushing this issue into public view. She understood that, without data, dedicated research and recognition that lobular breast cancer is different, progress would remain unacceptably slow.

Her work has already helped encourage NHS England to release the first dedicated statistics on lobular breast cancer, but much more needs to happen.

This is about more than statistics. It is about people living for years with secondary breast cancer while feeling invisible within the system. Better subtype data would help us understand metastatic disease properly. Better research would improve diagnosis and, ultimately, dedicated treatment pathways for lobular breast cancer could help us move closer to what patients want to hear most of all: that their cancer is not just treatable, but curable.

The Lobular Moon Shot Project is looking for just £20 million over five years to fund research into the basic biology of lobular breast cancer. Researchers at the Manchester Breast Centre are ready and willing to take on the mission—they could start tomorrow. The Lobular Moon Shot Project is supported by more than 460 sitting MPs, more than can be found on any other single issue. All it needs now is for the Government to press the button. While we wait for that, women face poorer outcomes and require medications that were actually designed for other types of cancer, which cost upwards of £3,000 per month. Now is the time for the Government to commit to front-loaded funding to save lives, save money for the NHS and, most of all, demonstrate to those women that they matter. I ask the Minister for her support in finding the modest investment required to find answers for this very common but, sadly, much-neglected disease.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I am supposed to be neutral in the Chair, but I think I am allowed to give a particularly warm welcome to Ashley Dalton.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

3.36 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): As ever, it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I first acknowledge the campaigners from Make 2nds Count, METUP UK and Breast Cancer Now and the fellow MBC patients who are joining us in the Public Gallery. If you will indulge me, Mr Betts, I would like to take this opportunity to say a special thank you to my team at the Clatterbridge in Liverpool for the support they have given me through my treatment and diagnosis.

I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate on secondary breast cancer. Secondary, metastatic, advanced, stage 4, disseminated, which a new one for me, distant metastatic spread—lots of words that all mean the same thing: incurable breast cancer. For completeness, there is a relatively new term: oligometastatic, which means very small or very few metastases. There is a school of thought that suggests that that may be curable, but the jury is still out on that, so we will stick with the terms that we have. But there are some other words that describe secondary breast cancer: devastating, terrifying, overwhelming, horrifying, desperate, anger, resentment and fear—all of which I have certainly felt.

This debate calls it secondary breast cancer. It is really important that we get it right, because I have met many people who think that secondary breast cancer means having breast cancer for the second time. It does not. Let me be really clear about that. As we have heard,

[Ashley Dalton]

secondary breast cancer is breast cancer that has spread outside the breast tissue and is now incurable. It can be diagnosed after a primary diagnosis—primary breast cancer is potentially curable—or the first time that a person is diagnosed with breast cancer. That is called a *de novo* diagnosis. That is what secondary breast cancer is and, as we have heard, I have it, along with many, many other people.

I want to take the opportunity to talk about some of the myths around breast cancer. Colleagues have spoken really well about some of the issues and concerns, and the politics and policies involved, but I want to talk about the reality and some of the myths about secondary breast cancer. The big myth for many people is that it is curable. A number of people have, very well-meaningly, said to me, “How long will you be on treatment?” I will be on treatment until I die. “I hope you make a full recovery.” I am not going to be making a recovery. My favourite—I know people mean well—is: “If anyone can beat this, you can.” I know people mean well when they say that, but the truth is that I cannot beat it. I will always be in treatment, and I will not recover. It is absolutely terrifying, but we have to be honest about this. If we are not honest and do not grasp the nettle about this disease, we cannot truly tackle it.

There are some other myths about breast cancer. One is that when it spreads, it is a new cancer. If you have breast cancer and then you have cancer in your bones, that is not bone cancer; it is breast cancer in your bones. It looks like breast cancer and the cells are breast cancer; they behave like breast cancer and they will need to be treated like breast cancer. There is also a myth that the treatment for your primary cancer was somehow wrong or had failed if you get metastatic breast cancer. Again, that is absolute nonsense. Breast cancer can still spread, even after successful treatment for a primary cancer, and even with the best treatments in the world. Breast cancer in particular can lie dormant for years and years.

That leads me to the five-year myth. We often count survival after primary diagnosis and treatment at the five-year point. Sometimes, that creates the idea that if you get to five years and it has not come back, you are okay. Sadly, that is not true; it does not mean that it will never come back. Breast cancer in particular can come back up to 20 years, if not longer, after primary diagnosis. My breast cancer came back 10 years after my primary diagnosis. I do not say that to terrify people, but to say that it is absolutely imperative that they are aware of the signs and symptoms of secondary breast cancer in case they ever have them, no matter how long it has been since their primary diagnosis—or indeed, if they have ever had one. I put on record my commendation and thanks to Jo from METUPUK, who developed the infographic on secondary breast cancer symptoms, which has been extremely useful.

We have heard about lobular breast cancer, and there is an idea that secondary breast cancer is one disease. Obviously, it is not: there is ductal, lobular, metaplastic, inflammatory and other sub-groups such as hormone receptive, HER2-positive, HER2-negative and triple negative. The weird thing about cancer is that it is not a disease that infects us. It is not something from outside that we pick up, or that we get. It is us—it is our own

cells that change and do this to us, so our cancer, invariably, is as unique as we are. There is also a myth that all treatments will work for everybody, and that if you have one kind of cancer, a certain treatment will work. Unfortunately—sadly—that is not the case, because we are all unique. A treatment that can be extremely effective for one person can have absolutely no impact on somebody else.

There is also the idea that the treatment for metastatic breast cancer is more aggressive than that for primary cancer; actually, it is often the opposite. I cannot be cured, so what is the point of making me so sick that I cannot get out of bed for six months? The point of treatment is to keep the cancer at bay—to hold it back to allow me to continue to do this work and live my life—not necessarily to cure me.

Then there is the myth that metastatic breast cancer means that you are going to die soon. I received some absolutely terrible comments when I went public with my disease. One particularly lovely person on Facebook said, “Oh, there’ll be a by-election soon then,” assuming that I was going to be dead—that was two years ago. It is not necessarily true. Metastatic breast cancer is treatable, but it is not curable. Our treatments are there to hold it at bay and treat pain and other side effects. Sometimes we might even get the holy grail of “no evidence of disease”, which is what everybody hopes for. That does not mean that you are necessarily cancer free, because we know that it lies dormant and we cannot necessarily see it.

We know what secondary breast cancer is, so what are we going to do about it? Some of these points have been raised already, but the national cancer plan, which I, as the Minister at the time, was delighted to lead on and launch earlier this year, is perhaps the first national cancer plan that does not have metastatic disease as a brief mention but has it at its heart. I am really pleased about that, because it has not been forgotten about—it is in the plan.

The No. 1 thing that I wanted to make sure was in the plan was that we count; this has already been touched on. We estimate that 61,000 people have metastatic breast cancer, but really we have not got a clue. We have some good data for *de novo*—where it is diagnosed initially—but for people like me who are diagnosed 10, 12 or 20 years later, we do not really know. Without that data, we cannot build the services or estimate demand. The fundamental truth is, if I am not counted, I do not count. We must start this. The cancer plan commits to counting metastatic disease properly, starting with breast cancer, so I ask the Minister what progress has been made, and will she set a deadline for trusts to report? It is literally just counting.

On research and lines of treatment, some treatments work and some of them do not. Basically, you try them, and if they work, you stay on them until they stop working or they make you so ill that you cannot carry on, and then you try another one. It is literally a process of trial and error, and you keep going until you run out of options, which means that without access to new drugs and without trials, we will run out of options sooner rather than later, and when we run out of options, we die.

The cancer plan committed to develop world-class cancer care through world-class research, so I ask the Minister what progress has been made, particularly to

establish the cancer trials accelerator by 2027. When we do develop those drugs, we need to know that we are getting them. Changes to NICE criteria, namely the severity modifier, have been touched on, so I ask the Minister what developments have been made on them. Will she explore those? Access to drugs and research makes it possible for me and others like me to see our children grow, to meet our grandchildren and to bury our parents, not the other way round. Lives with metastatic breast cancer matter too.

3.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Members for Wokingham (Clive Jones) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for calling attention to this disease, and I thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) for her spirit and courage; it always touches me and makes me quite proud of her. I wanted to put that on the record.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Pat Cullen), some local ladies, Tristan Loraine and I had a meeting with Health Minister Mike Nesbitt in Northern Ireland some four or five weeks ago to discuss the issue of lobular cancer. It was an important meeting because those ladies around the table were ladies like the hon. Lady for West Lancashire; they were ladies who had cancer, were living with it and were trying to deal with it. Their personal stories really touched me because almost every one of those ladies had children. One lady had four young children, and I was moved by her contribution and very touched by the life that she was leading with four young children.

Each month in the UK, around 1,000 people die from secondary breast cancer, which equates to one life every 45 minutes. That stat paints a harrowing picture of the devastating impact that secondary breast cancer has on many individuals and their families. Although the cancer is not curable, as it has metastasised, it is treatable and can often be managed. On average, patients can survive two or three years or more after diagnosis. Symptoms can be relieved, and patients' quality of life can be maintained, with many leading a "normal life".

In 2024, secondary breast cancer was deemed "moderately severe", meaning that funding would not be granted in Wales, England and Northern Ireland. My request is that we have access to the licensed Enhertu drug, which is used to slow the cancer's progression and maintain quality of life for patients. It is incredibly difficult to justify a system in which patients in Scotland and more than 20 other European countries can access this treatment, while eligible patients in England, Wales and Northern Ireland cannot. It just does not make sense. Mental health support should also be invested in across the United Kingdom to ensure that patients and their families receive emotional support to help them cope.

Despite secondary breast cancer being the leading cause of death for women under 60 in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, over 40% of British adults have not heard of the disease. There is a lack of awareness. It was quite amazing to know that some of the ladies I met that day with the Minister in Northern Ireland thought that they were cured but found out that they were not, because the full diagnosis had not been done. The hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) is very knowledgeable about the

Lobular Moon Shot Project; he spoke about how more needs to be done, and I want to speak about that as well. It is estimated that some 36% of people cannot name any signs or symptoms of the cancer.

Those figures show that there is much work to be done to ensure that individuals are informed, and that they rapidly access treatment as a result of early diagnosis. We can, however, inform the public only of what we know. Advancements must be made to invest in further research to deepen healthcare professionals' understanding of the disease and change its prognosis from being a death sentence. Charities such as Breast Cancer Now have already awarded some £300,000 to researchers at Queen's University Belfast to support an investigation into the inequalities among people living with this disease.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place. She encourages us with her interest and compassion for this subject, and I know that she will give us some idea of what has been done at Queen's University Belfast and the trials that are taking place. We are not that far from finding the cure, and from raising awareness to the level it should be at to save lives and give people hope for the future, long beyond the times that have been allocated. Has the Minister's Department had an opportunity to talk to Queen's University Belfast to see what it is doing? Has she had a chance to talk to Mike Nesbitt, the Minister of Health in the Northern Ireland Assembly, to support the investigation into the inequalities among people living with this disease?

The study will consider factors including education, income, disability and mental health—we always say this, because it is the truth: it is not just the ladies who suffer; the families, the children and their in-laws suffer too, because they are all very aware of what is happening—to determine how inequalities influence patients' access to care, their treatment outcomes and their overall quality of life. Would the Government consider supporting this research at Queen's University Belfast so that everyone living with the disease across the United Kingdom is given a fair chance to access effective care?

Speaking as my party's health spokesperson and as a representative from Northern Ireland, I draw attention to the long wait times for cancer referrals in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom. From July to September 2025, urgent breast cancer referrals in particular saw long delays, with just 6.8% seen within the 14-day target. Over the same time, the Health and Social Care Trust received more than 6,000 referrals for suspected breast cancer, 86% of which were marked as urgent—86%, and no response. With approximately 1,000 living with the disease in Northern Ireland, I must draw attention to the increased risk of women in Northern Ireland experiencing delays in diagnosis and access to treatment.

Cancer treatment should not be a postcode lottery. Advances in treatment mean that more people can now live longer and maintain a good quality of life with secondary breast cancer. While the disease remains incurable, everyone across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should have equal access to the treatment and support that they need. I join Members—those who have spoken and those who will speak shortly—in looking to the Minister and simply asking for more: more screening, more funding and more saving of lives.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Before I call Wendy Chamberlain, let me say that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has indicated to me that he has to leave at about quarter past 4. He has a plane to catch; I accept that as a reason, and he has given advance notice, which I thank him for. We will begin the wind-ups by 4.05 pm at the latest.

3.54 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. Some people, both in this place and outside of it, say that politicians are out of touch, that they do not care and that they do not bring their lived experience to the Chamber. I want to thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) for everything that she did in her role as Health Minister and for her powerful speech. It should be essential watching for those who say otherwise about politicians' intentions in this place.

I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) on securing this debate, and I thank them for telling their own cancer experiences. Like most Members, I have been impacted by breast cancer in that my mother is a survivor. She was diagnosed when I was away from home for the first time at university. It was difficult for the family to receive that diagnosis and difficult for me, knowing that my mum was going through treatment while I was far away from home. I am pleased to say that she is still with us.

My colleague and friend in the Liberal Democrats in North East Fife, Councillor Fiona Corps, is currently stable after undergoing treatment for lobular breast cancer. She messaged me today to say she started her new meds yesterday. It is only two years since her daughter's leukaemia fight. Fiona and her family have been through a lot. Her diagnosis brought me to speak to the lobular breast cancer campaign and I, like others, want to focus my remarks on that cancer in particular. Part of that is because, in relation to secondary breast cancer, the unmet clinical need of lobular breast cancer means the chances of it spreading are incredibly high. Indeed, for many who are diagnosed it has already spread by the time of their diagnosis.

It is important to note that this year marks 50 years since doctors first knew that lobular breast cancer was a distinct condition. I had not been born—just—we did not yet have Sony Walkmans, personal computers or mobile phones, “Don't Go Breaking My Heart” was No. 1 for six weeks, and “Rocky” won best picture. I know it has been a long time since Scotland were in the World Cup, but this really was a long time ago. Here we are 50 years later in a world with advances that were unimaginable back then, but we have made painfully little progress on the diagnosis and treatment of lobular breast cancer.

As others have referenced, it is not like we think breast cancer is. As a woman, I have been taught to check for lumps—my mother's experience made that more acute—but lobular cells grow in single lines that spread out over tissue. If a somebody did a lump check today, the chances are they would not spot it. Even more worryingly, if somebody goes for a mammogram, it will probably not show up there either. As others have referenced, 22 people are diagnosed with lobular breast

cancer every day, but the reality is that we do not know how many people might be living with the disease and getting progressively more ill without treatment.

As of today, we still understand very little about it and there are no dedicated treatments for it. I am conscious that health is a devolved issue. I am standing here as a Scottish MP, but given the Minister's responsibilities, I will note that the Government's recent cancer action plan for England did not mention lobular breast cancer. We can say that other treatments are available, and Fiona and others are taking other treatments, but they are hit and miss. I have engaged with the Lobular Moon Shot Project and with Tristan—a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne)—and the story of his wife, Susan. She had eight different generic breast cancer treatments, none of which worked. Frankly, that lack of treatment kills people.

That is why lobular breast cancer is so relevant to the debate on secondary breast cancer. Not enough people know what to look for because it does not show up on tests, it is diagnosed late, and when it is diagnosed, there is not a dedicated treatment pathway for it. It is a recipe for a cancer spreading and we heard very powerfully from the hon. Member for West Lancashire what a diagnosis of secondary breast cancer means.

Unsurprisingly, there is still a lot that we do not know about what happens when the cancer spreads. We know it can spread to areas where other cancers do not like to, such as the outside membrane of the spine. We also know that the cells can lie dormant for years before starting to spread again. What we do not know is why any of that happens, how it can be identified, or how it can be stopped.

There could be hope. As others have referenced, researchers across this country are ready to take on this challenge. Importantly, there is cross-party support for getting this done; it is probably one of the most bipartisan campaigns in the history of this place. The Liberal Democrats are behind it; our leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), asked the Prime Minister about funding last summer. Indeed, I recently asked the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), about the project. He suggested that the money was there to fund the project, but work was needed on the programme of research. I say to the Minister: that is not how those involved with the project see it. This is a campaign that almost every Opposition MP supports, as well as huge numbers of those in the governing Labour party. Outwith this place, 84% of Labour voters surveyed in 2024 wanted lobular breast cancer research to be funded.

As others have said, £20 million over a five-year settlement equates to £238 per person for every person diagnosed over the next 10 years. Although I do not believe that life-changing research should be about a cost-benefit analysis, £238 is nothing compared with the costs of patients being out of the labour market and being treated over several years with the wrong thing—successfully or not.

I know that the Lobular Moon Shot Project is calling on devolved Governments to step up as well and provide £1 million per year for research to be carried out in their countries; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to that, too. I call on the new Scottish Government and the new Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care to take this ask incredibly seriously.

I am sure that the Minister will refer to the current National Institute for Health and Care Research funding round. I do not want to pre-empt that—it is, of course, important—but it is not the same funding as is needed for the Lobular Moon Shot Project, which is research into the underlying biology of lobular breast cancer. Such research will remain weak until we know what it is we are trying to treat. We need funding for research into the underlying biology, so that lobular breast cancer can be identified, diagnosed and treated. That will improve outcomes drastically, including reducing the number of people with secondary breast cancer, which is the topic of this debate.

I will conclude by saying that my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham has demonstrated very visibly that breast cancer is not simply a female issue, so I will end today by reflecting on the fact that anyone can get cancer. Many of those who do get cancer will make a full recovery. For some, cancer is something they will live with for the remainder of their life, but it will not be the condition from which they die. However, we have heard today that secondary breast cancer is decisive in terms of people's life expectancy. We must let those women and men know that they are not alone.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We now move on to the Front Benchers.

4.2 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I thank both my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) and the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for securing this important debate, and for sharing their experience with cancer. I also thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) for her frankness and openness in describing her own experience.

Secondary breast cancer is now the leading cause of death in the UK for women between 40 and 49. Each month, around 1,000 people lose their lives to secondary breast cancer. That is one person every 45 minutes, so two lives will be lost to this disease in the short span of this debate.

Secondary breast cancer is incurable; treatment can slow down the disease, but it cannot cure it. Nevertheless, 13 years after data collection on secondary breast cancer became mandatory for all NHS trusts, the true number of people living with this disease remains unknown. It is estimated that the number is around 61,000. However, the lack of accurate data makes thousands of people who are in need of care invisible to the healthcare system. That is simply unacceptable. Those people count and we must count them. Collecting and publishing this data is essential. Without it, how can the NHS accurately assess the scale of need and appropriately plan services to ensure that support is available where required?

The Government's commitment within the national cancer plan to define and count all secondary cancers, beginning with breast cancer, and the target to meet all cancer wait-time standards by 2029, are steps in the right direction. But to achieve those ambitions in full, we must be bolder and do so much more.

The Liberal Democrats are clear: quality and speed of treatment are vital to increase the survival rates for secondary breast cancer. The results of the research

conducted by Breast Cancer Now in 2019 are damning. They make the lack of quality and the poor speed of treatment and care undeniable. They showed that 23% of respondents had to see their GP three or more times before they were diagnosed, and 53% of respondents said that they had not been given enough information about clinical trials by healthcare professionals. Just 30% of respondents said that they saw a cancer nurse specialist regularly and only 13% of respondents who had previously had breast cancer felt that they had been given enough information to recognise the signs and symptoms of secondary breast cancer.

Those figures show a healthcare system that is creaking under the strain after years of neglect by the previous Conservative Government. They highlight that professionals lack the time and capacity to effectively diagnose, offer follow-up care and share sufficient information, for which patients ultimately pay the price.

Every patient must get the care and support they need, when and where they need it. We must support the specialist cancer workforce, as well as GPs, to deliver the standard of care they would like and we expect. I therefore urge the Minister to take forward the Liberal Democrats' proposals to introduce a guarantee that 100% of patients will be able to start treatment within 62 days from urgent referral; to recruit more cancer nurses so that every patient has a dedicated specialist supporting them throughout their treatment; and to expand the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's capacity to halve the time for new treatments to reach the patients who desperately need them.

I think of the two people who will have lost their lives to secondary breast cancer in the 90 minutes of this debate. For them, and all the secondary breast cancer patients past, present and future, I implore the Minister to consider many of the calls raised by me and my colleagues here today.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We move on to the shadow Minister, Dr Caroline Johnson, who has 10 minutes to make her contribution.

4.6 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Wokingham (Clive Jones) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on securing this debate, which I know is extremely personal to both of them. I also congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) on her speech. It is quite common in this place for people to say that an hon. Lady or hon. Gentleman has given an extremely powerful speech, but that was an extremely powerful speech. I was moved by it, and I am in great admiration of her courage and the frankness with which she speaks in this House about her illness. I was fortunate enough to be at a roundtable earlier in the week with the *New Statesman* about the cancer plan, with the hon. Member for Wokingham and others. I found it very insightful and thought-provoking, like the contributions we have heard in the Chamber today.

As has been said, for many people, primary breast cancer never comes back after treatment, and treatment for primary breast cancer has significantly improved.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

But sometimes the cancer cells spread to other parts of the body—commonly the bones, lungs, liver, brain or skin—which is called secondary or metastatic breast cancer. As we have heard, the best estimate we have is that there are around 61,000 people living with secondary breast cancer in the United Kingdom, but that statistic is uncertain and the data is unclear. One point in the cancer plan was that the Government would collect the data on secondary breast cancer from 2026. We are almost halfway through 2026, so I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on how that is going and when we will see that data. Also, how frequently does she expect it to be published—will it be published monthly, quarterly, every half year or every year? What are her plans for that? There needs to be definition in order to do that, so I wonder if she has settled on that too.

Another point in the cancer plan is the desire to improve screening. Again, I commend the hon. Member for West Lancashire on her work on the cancer plan, but there are women in Lincolnshire waiting five weeks and more for referral to their appointment when they discover a breast lump, and we know that the longer it takes for diagnosis, the more likely metastasis is to occur. Could the Minister give more detail on the promise to expand screening? What does it look like? What workforce will be necessary and when will that be in place? What mammography machines or ultrasound machines might be needed? Are they to be bought and installed, and how quickly does she expect that to happen? For those who need genetic testing, what plans does she have to expand the availability of genetic testing, and what will the timescale be?

The cancer plan, which I am glad is very ambitious—it should be—will work only if it is delivered. It was published just over four months ago, but it is not clear what progress is being made or that the work is continuing at the necessary pace to deliver the ambitions we all want to see achieved. One thing slowing progress is the reorganisation of integrated care boards in response to the cutting of their budgets by 50%, and the Health Bill's abolition of NHS England. The people who would be organising and planning are organising and planning something else. Some of them are leaving, so we are losing expertise, while others are being made redundant—or leaving before they are made redundant. That is disrupting the planning of our health services. Will the Minister comment on that?

As has been said, there has not been the same progress for treatment of lobular breast cancer as for other forms of breast cancer. The previous Conservative Government committed £20 million to the Moon Shot project, to research ways of advancing treatment of that particular form of cancer, which needs more attention than it has had of late. Will the Minister tell us whether this Government are committed to providing that money for that research?

Hospices provide amazing services for people towards the end of their lives, but, as we have heard in other debates in this Chamber, they are struggling. They have a lot of staff because theirs is a very person-delivered service, and they accrue extra national insurance costs from employing all those members of staff. I appreciate that the Government have put a lot of money into hospices, but that is capital money to enable them to redecorate, build extra bits, provide extra equipment.

That is lovely, but it does not help if there are no staff to run the service and provide the care that the patients so desperately need. What discussions has the Minister had about the effects of national insurance contributions on hospices? Has she considered an exemption? What are her plans to help to support the hospice movement?

The hon. Member for West Lancashire referred to what happens when a patient has run out of options. As a doctor, I am always told that a doctor never runs out of treatments. Palliative treatment is treatment, so even when they run out of treatments, they are still providing a treatment. However, what happens when we run out of treatment that is active or likely to be successful in prolonging life or curing disease? It is important that research is supported and able to continue. I look forward to the Minister's words on what the Government are doing to support research so that new drugs can come online. During the pandemic, we saw how quickly vaccines were brought through the pathway. What is gumming things up now? How do we speed it up so that people can get the necessary drugs more quickly?

What happens in the grey zone, when a drug is going into trial and is sort of but not quite available yet? We have compassionate use schemes, about which I asked an urgent question in the main Chamber this morning. Such schemes are used when individuals have reached the end of the treatment options and perhaps do not qualify for any of the trials that are currently available—in paediatrics, that could mean that they are a few days out of the age bracket—or perhaps the trials are full. Those schemes are also used when a patient received the drug in a trial, but the trial is finished and negotiations about the drug are ongoing. In some cases, the drug companies will provide those drugs to patients for free to help them.

Unfortunately, towards the end of last year, the Government decided to charge VAT on the deemed value of such drugs. That means the companies have to pay sometimes quite significant charges to give those drugs to patients. One large pharmaceutical company has pulled out of the compassionate use scheme, which means that its drugs are not available for the people who need them—that issue was raised by my hon. Friend Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez). The enforcement of that tax by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has been paused for review, but the liabilities remain.

We therefore have a situation in which some drug companies are pulling out and others are considering their position. People with secondary breast cancer, and those with other cancers and serious illnesses, cannot wait for the autumn Budget. They need the Government to make a decision to sort this problem out now. Only last month, the Government decided that they would take VAT off rides at Alton Towers. That is great, but if they can do that, they can sort this issue out as well, and they need to get on with it. Will the Minister raise the matter with her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and in the Treasury to see what she can do to help people who have no option other than these new and special drugs to keep their hope alive?

In summary, the cancer plan is ambitious, which is great—it has some great targets that I hope can be achieved—but we need to see delivery. I am looking to the Minister for the detail on how the plan will be delivered.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): If the Minister allowed a couple of minutes before 4.30 pm for the mover to make some further comments, that would be really helpful.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for raising this important matter and securing the debate. They both spoke about their own breast cancer journeys very powerfully, and I thank them for sharing their personal experiences with us.

It is also personal to me, having gone through it not myself, but through my mother-in-law, who we lost to breast cancer almost 30 years ago. She was just 62, which is not much older than I am now. Thirty years ago, that age seemed a long way off, but now that I am 60, it does not seem very old at all. My father-in-law, who is in his nineties, is still with us, which made me realise how much life this terrible disease robbed her of. Her secondary breast cancer—like that of my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton)—was diagnosed 10 years after her primary breast cancer. That struck me and brought it back to mind. I was thinking how glad and happy I am that the treatment now is so much better than it was 30 years ago, and that my hon. Friend is very much still alive and kicking—and in great voice, as we have all heard today.

Losing my mother-in-law at such a young age spurred me on, as a new MP in 2005, to join the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer. I went on to be an officer and then chair for a number of years. Now that I am in government, I feel an immense responsibility resting on my shoulders. I want to do the right thing not just in memory of my mother-in-law, but for all hon. Members who have shared their stories and those of constituents and campaigners, and for all those I have met since I was first elected to Parliament.

This has been a very moving and informative debate, with so many excellent speeches from hon. Members. I particularly commend my predecessor as Public Health and Prevention Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire, for her fantastic work on the national cancer plan. It was all the better for being led by someone not just with lived experience, but who was actually in the middle of her cancer treatment at the same time. How she was able to do that—there is a huge workload in this brief—on top of her treatment, while at the same time driving progress on the 10-year health plan, the HIV action plan and the men's health plan, is testament to how focused, tough and brilliant she is. I am not afraid to admit that following in her footsteps is a challenge. I am thrilled that she is with us today, and we all witnessed her brilliance at first hand in her speech.

I want to come to the substance of the issues that hon. Members have raised. If I run out of time, or if there is anything that I miss, I and my officials will write to hon. Members, so they should not think that I have just ignored what they said. It will be responded to in due course.

I want to start with data. The more data we collect, the more we can empower patients to make informed choices about their care, but it is not just about giving

patients a clearer picture, important though that is. The Government made data one of the five big bets of our 10-year health plan—I think that is the right terminology—because the NHS is a data superpower. Just as coal was the fuel of the first industrial revolution, data will power the life sciences revolution, and we can use datasets to help scientists make further breakthroughs in cancer research.

Better data is also important for researchers to understand the number of cohorts they have to work with. It is important for NHS commissioners, who will have a clearer idea of patient demand. We cannot improve something that we cannot measure. In the words of Jo Taylor, the late founder of METUPUK,

“We are only counted when we are dead”,

and that is just unacceptable. As part of Jo's legacy, we now have a specific commitment in our national cancer plan to begin collecting data for recurrent cancers, starting with metastatic breast cancer. I pay tribute once again to my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire for personally making sure that that commitment was there. Now that I have picked up her baton, as I said, I am determined to make sure we can make good on that promise.

The national disease registration service is working with NHS trusts to improve their reporting of non-primary cancers in the cancer outcomes and services dataset. I can update the House today that since the publication of the national cancer plan, the NDRS has made the collection and reporting of secondary breast cancer a key priority. It is co-ordinating with all partners, charities, teams of experts and trusts to properly collect data on secondary breast cancers at source. It is helping trusts to improve the way they collect data for things like disease progression, recurrence and metastatic spread.

In the meantime, the NDRS is teaming up with researchers at the University of Oxford to develop a new algorithm. This infers the numbers of metastatic disease by combining multiple routine datasets. In plain English, what it means is this: trusts routinely report all sorts of data to NHS England—imaging, chemo, radiotherapy. All that data comes into NHSE from different places across the country. It can then be linked to give us a good idea on numbers until we can get an even clearer picture through trust reporting.

We are already off to a good start because data was already starting to improve under this Government, even before the national cancer plan was published. Consecutive audits of metastatic breast cancer by the National Cancer Audit Collaborating Centre, or NATCAN, cover a greater number of people living with metastatic breast cancer. Data coverage of metastatic breast cancer is already improving, and the NDRS will also publish a baseline assessment of incidence and prevalence and the total number of people living with metastatic breast cancer by the end of this year. It will be the best assessment we have ever had.

Cancer patients deserve to have the finest minds in the country harnessing the data to make a difference. That is why we are also setting up a new health data research service by the end of this year. It will provide a secure single access point for researchers, including data relevant to cancer diagnosis, care and outcomes. That means that wherever they live in our country, whether Washington, Wokingham or Durham, scientists will be

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

sitting on a treasure trove of data for their research. Our life sciences sector plan commits us to working with industry to accelerate growth in spending on innovative medicines. Just last year, a cutting edge oral targeted cancer therapy that helps to slow or stop cell growth was approved for treating advanced breast cancer on the NHS in England.

I turn to some specific points made by hon. Members. The hon. Members for Horsham (John Milne) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) spoke about lobular breast cancer and the Lobular Moon Shot Project. I assure the House that Government funders are committed to continuing to work with researchers to support the development of fundable research proposals to drive a stronger understanding of the biology behind lobular breast cancer, as well as to develop effective treatments. In April, Lord Vallance and I, alongside the National Institute for Health and Medical Research Council representatives, met representatives of the Lobular Moon Shot Project. It was a very interesting meeting, I must say. Lord Vallance will also host a scientific roundtable on lobular breast cancer this month—one of the commitments we made at that meeting.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire spoke about the cancer clinical trials accelerator. I assure her that the Department, NHS England and the NIHR are working hard to develop and set up the accelerator to the timeline set out in the national cancer plan.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked me once again about clinical trials at Queen's University Belfast and what discussions Ministers had had with Northern Ireland Ministers. I commit to writing to him with further information on that matter. His plea at the end for more screening, more funding and more saving of lives did not fall on deaf ears for anyone in this Chamber, I am sure.

It has been a privilege to respond on behalf of the Government today. I have spent the best part of 20 to 30 years—21 years of them in this place—fighting alongside campaigners on this issue, along with many others. Now I am in government, they are all at the forefront of my mind. When it comes to cancer, colleagues are pushing at an open door with me. I will never forget

my roots as chair of the all-party group and as a daughter-in-law of someone lost to secondary breast cancer at far too young an age. The hon. Member for Wokingham has a very personal connection to this campaign, and the all-party group could not be in better hands with him as its chair.

Let me end by thanking all hon. Members for keeping me on my toes. If I have not responded to any points made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), or by others, I commit to doing so in writing. I look forward to working with all Members in the months and years ahead as we take forward this important work.

4.27 pm

Clive Jones: I thank all the hon. Members who contributed to this debate. Many shared their own personal experiences, and those of their constituents. I know that that can be a very difficult thing to share, so I commend everyone for their participation. The debate has made it clear that there is a real need for urgent action, and I hope that the Minister has taken note of the issues that have been shared.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) talked about the need to improve data, as several of us did, because we cannot support people properly without data. I think, from the Minister's response, that she probably gets that, so that is really good. My hon. Friends the Members for Horsham (John Milne) and for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) highlighted issues relating to lobular cancer and the need for specific pathways to treatment. They also mentioned the effect of cancer on families. I must say, still today, 18 years after I had to have it, the hardest conversation that I have ever had was with my 13-year-old and 14-year-old daughters to tell them that I had breast cancer. The effect that breast cancer has on families is immense.

We saw this afternoon one of the most passionate speeches in this House on breast cancer from the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton). She has been a really, really good—

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 11 June 2026

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Sustainable Farming Incentive

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): I am today updating the House on the sustainable farming incentive, one of this Government's environmental land management schemes that pay farmers to manage their land in ways that improve nature, soil health and the environment, alongside supporting sustainable food production.

Farmers in England will soon be able to apply for the improved SFI. Building on previous announcements, the revised scheme is designed to be simpler to access and better suited to modern farm businesses.

The new SFI cuts unnecessary complexity while continuing to reward the practical actions that underpin productive, resilient farm businesses, from healthier soils and cleaner water to better habitats for bees, birds and other wildlife.

We have worked with farmers and industry to shape the new scheme, backed by £240 million for new SFI agreements and building on around £560 million already committed to farmers delivering over 39,000 live SFI agreements.

Applications are scheduled to open from 30 June 2026 for two groups: small farms and farms without an existing ELM revenue agreement. A second application window will open in September 2026, giving all farmers and land managers the opportunity to apply.

The first application window opens with up to £60 million available, followed by a second window opening in September to all farms with the remainder of the £240 million budget available.

The SFI offer in 2026 is an iterated version of the 2024 scheme. For continuity, the large majority of scheme features will remain as they were—the look and feel of SFI should be familiar to farmers who have applied previously. However, we have made some improvements to produce a simpler and more streamlined offer.

In the previous version of SFI, a quarter of funding went to just 4% of farms. For SFI in 2026, we have introduced a new £100,000 annual agreement cap to help ensure funding reaches more farm businesses. Each farm business will be able to hold one SFI26 agreement, helping spread available funding more fairly across the sector.

The new offer also contains several actions which encourage the reduced use of synthetic fertilisers in favour of more sustainable options, cutting input costs and boosting resilience to global market shocks such as the closure of the strait of Hormuz.

The Government have listened to farmers who said they need time to understand the offer before applications open. We published “Get ready to apply” guidance on gov.uk on 6 May and near-final versions of the scheme

guidance, terms and conditions, and actions last week on 2 June, allowing farmers to review the offer available and consider which actions may work best for their farm business. Final scheme guidance, developed with industry input, will be published next week.

Alongside the new SFI offer, the Government are making at least £50 million available for new countryside stewardship higher tier agreements this year, helping farmers and land managers deliver targeted environmental improvements where they can have the greatest impact.

The Government are also progressing the next group of landscape recovery projects expected to move into implementation this year, supporting large-scale action to restore rivers and habitats across England.

Together, these schemes form a comprehensive package of support for farmers, helping to boost food production, strengthen farm resilience and drive nature recovery, while underpinning the UK's long-term food security.

[HCWS107]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Anniversary of Air India Plane Crash

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Yvette Cooper): Tomorrow marks one year since Air India flight 171 crashed shortly after take-off from Ahmedabad en route to London. This tragic accident claimed the lives of 260 people, including 52 British nationals and 113 others who lived in the UK—one of the largest losses of British life in any air accident. The continued heartache of the families and loved ones of those who died is impossible to imagine, not least for those who still have questions about the tragedy and the aftermath.

The thoughts of the whole Government remain with all those affected by this tragic accident. When I visited New Delhi last week, I joined Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar in commemorating the tragedy. I also raised the importance of closure for all those who have been left bereaved, as we continue to wait for the full accident investigation report, and as some families still wait for answers regarding their loved ones' remains.

The UK Government response to the crash was both immediate and long lasting. Following the crash, officials initiated our crisis response to provide direct support to bereaved families and address the needs and welfare of all affected British nationals. Our high commissioner, Lindy Cameron, travelled to Ahmedabad on the day of the crash and has continued to support the UK deputy high commission team in the city. Trained consular staff were deployed to Ahmedabad to support families through the immediate period following the crash, along with experts from disaster victim identification, Red Cross and the UK air accidents investigation branch.

UK police family liaison officers also supported the families of deceased British and foreign nationals who were residents in the UK, and the FCDO continues to provide support to each family in need of help, including through dedicated consular caseworkers to hear feedback from the families and their representatives. As the Indian air accident investigation continues, AAIB family liaison teams have provided support to affected families.

We also continue to engage with Air India and Indian Ministries to resolve outstanding issues that families have raised.

At every level, from family liaison officers to Ministers, what we have heard constantly from those who lost loved ones a year ago is that they want information and answers, to help them understand how a tragedy like this could have happened, and to know for certain what happened to their loved ones remains in the aftermath. Not knowing what caused the crash can only add to

their sense of grief and frustration, and I hope that the accident investigation report, when completed and published by the Indian authorities, will answer some of their questions. The UK Government will continue to provide all the help and support we can as they seek answers to the rest.

In the meantime, my deepest sympathies remain with all those who lost their lives a year ago, and with all those who continue to mourn that loss today.

[HCWS108]

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