

**Wednesday
17 June 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 17 June 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Wednesday 17 June 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cost of Living

1. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce the cost of living in Wales. [900381]

4. **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce the cost of living in Wales. [900384]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): Let me begin by congratulating all the Welsh recipients of King's birthday honours, which were announced over the weekend—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden).

We are doing everything we can to tackle the cost of living. We are increasing wages faster than inflation, creating thousands of jobs, helping people into work, and increasing pensions and universal credit, and we are going even further to ease the pressure on families this summer, because tackling the cost of living is the core purpose of this UK Labour Government.

Elaine Stewart: The Great British summer savings scheme announced by the Chancellor will have a positive impact on families across my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. More people will be able to save money while taking up opportunities to visit businesses and contribute to the local economy. Can the Secretary of State update the House on the impact that these measures will have in Wales?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is right. What matters for families is not just getting by, but being able to enjoy time together without worrying about the next bill. The Great British summer savings scheme is cutting VAT on, for instance, children's meals, tickets for cinemas and theatres and other attractions, and we are cutting the cost of the weekly shop by lowering tariffs on more than 100 staple products. All of that will ease pressure on household budgets, support parents during school holidays, and back Welsh businesses.

Jas Athwal: This Government removed the two-child cap, which took 5,000 children in my constituency out of poverty. Will the Secretary of State please explain how that is helping children in Wales?

Jo Stevens: As my hon. Friend knows from his constituency experience, poverty scars children's lives and life chances. That is why we announced the child poverty strategy, including the removal of the two-child limit, which will benefit nearly 70,000 children right across Wales. We have also increased universal credit for 320,000 families in Wales and raised the minimum and living wages, and, as I mentioned earlier, we are slashing VAT on days out to help families not just get by but enjoy the summer, as everyone should. Meanwhile, what can Welsh families expect from the new minority Plaid Government in Wales? Well, the First Minister has announced a steering group, and has promised to come up with a plan at some point soon. That is the difference between Labour and Plaid: we act and they talk.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Funnily enough, in the first 100 days of this Labour UK Government the Prime Minister cut winter fuel payments for vulnerable pensioners, whereas in the first 100 days of the Plaid Cymru Welsh Government, an extra £55 million is being invested in free childcare for parents. Does the Secretary of State concede that, unlike Labour, Plaid Cymru is focusing on making a difference to people's lives and lowering the cost of living for households in Wales? Actions speak louder than words.

Jo Stevens: I have to say that it has been rather amusing to hear the new minority Plaid Cymru Welsh Government bragging about what they have done since the election. They have started a review, they have set up a steering group, they are working on a plan for another plan, they have set a target, and they are thinking about things. Meanwhile, this Government have invested £134 million in the Cardiff capital region, approved seven new youth hubs across Wales, launched the summer savings scheme to cut the cost of living, announced a new ban on social media to keep our children safe, given a pay rise to over 3,000 armed forces personnel in Wales, and expanded the Valour programme for veterans. That is the difference between us and Plaid: we are getting on with the job.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): A few months ago I met farmers in Merthyr Cynog, in Brecon and Radnorshire, who warned me about the growing pressures that they were facing. Since then, Trump's reckless war with Iran has sent fertiliser prices soaring by up to 45% and red diesel prices by up to 30%. Does the Secretary of State accept that unless urgent action is taken, higher costs for Welsh farmers will ultimately mean higher food prices for families across Wales and the UK?

Jo Stevens: As the hon. Lady will know, red diesel has been slashed to its lowest rate for over 20 years. We have protected farming budgets, all the trade deals that we have signed have helped farmers, and we are looking at all the measures that we can introduce to tackle the cost of living and the impact of the Iran war—in which we did not want to get involved, and we decided not to get involved, despite the protestations of some parties in this House. We are making sure that the economic impact is mitigated.

Job Creation

2. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help create new jobs in Wales. [900382]

9. **Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help create new jobs in Wales. [900390]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Anna McMorrin): Creating high-quality jobs across Wales is a priority for this Labour Government, which is why we are backing major growth sectors across the country. We have delivered £2.5 billion for small modular reactors at Wylfa, supporting at least 3,000 jobs. Alongside that, new AI growth zones in north and south Wales are expected to create more than 8,000 jobs.

Gill Furniss: The UK Labour Government are investing across the UK in initiatives that are creating jobs and fuelling economic growth, such as Parkwood Springs and Special Melted Products in my constituency of Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough. Will the Minister update the House on the difference that UK Government growth funding is making in Wales?

Anna McMorrin: The UK Government growth funding has been transformational across Wales, delivering jobs in local communities across all parts of the country. Last week, we announced £134 million for the Cardiff capital region, which has already created 7,000 jobs and is fast on its way to delivering 25,000 jobs for the region. This latest investment will help cement Wales's place at the forefront of technology and innovation, helping even more businesses to thrive and grow the Welsh economy.

Alan Gemmell: Universities in Wales and Scotland are engines of job creation through the crucial role they play in fostering innovation. Will the Minister please update the House on what the UK Government are doing to fuel innovation in Welsh universities?

Anna McMorrin: Universities are a core part of our industrial strategy, as countries that lead in research and innovation also lead in growth and investment. Welsh universities play a unique role right across Wales by building and investing in our industries and businesses of the future. As a Minister in the Wales Office, I am bringing all the Welsh universities together in collaboration to help maximise R&D funding, deliver stronger results, and ensure that the impact reaches the communities that need it most.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I have repeatedly asked the Government to publish their assessment of Scotland's nuclear potential, without success. Perhaps the Minister can help me in the meantime. What does she regard as the greatest benefit of the Wylfa site in Wales: the long-term, skilled jobs, the local investment that it draws in, or the contribution to our energy security? Does she believe that Scotland would be able to share in the same benefits?

Anna McMorrin: There are absolutely huge benefits right across Wales. Wylfa is expected to support 3,000 jobs across north Wales. This is a generational commitment to the future of clean energy right across the country.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that a strong and effective UK internal market is critical to creating jobs in Wales, and will she work with Cabinet colleagues to secure frictionless east-west trade so that businesses in Wales and Northern Ireland can more easily supply each other in key sectors, such as manufacturing, food and construction?

Anna McMorrin: Absolutely. Through collaboration and working together, we are creating tens of thousands of jobs right across Wales. Our Welsh freeports and investment zones have the potential to deliver at least 25,000 new jobs in Wales. Our generational commitment to modernise Welsh rail will bring 12,000 jobs in Wales. This is about a collaborative effort right across the United Kingdom to help and support Welsh communities, but also communities right across the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Boarded-up windows, derelict buildings and deserted towns are increasingly common on high streets in Wales, as highlighted by North Wales Live and its readers. Our hospitality sector is being hollowed out thanks to Plaid Cymru and the last Welsh Labour Government's disastrous tourism tax. The Conservative and Unionist party believes that this tax should be urgently scrapped to support the approximately 150,000 people in Wales who are employed in this crucial sector. Does the Minister now regret her party's decision to impose the tax, and will she join me in calling on the new Welsh Government to scrap it?

Anna McMorrin: I will take no lectures from the Conservatives and the hon. Member when her party presided over completely unprecedented wage stagnation and businesses took blow after blow, with—to be specific—the worst wage growth performance of any decade since Napoleonic times. On our side of the House, the Chancellor announced just last week the great summer savings scheme, with a reduction of VAT from 20% to 5% over the summer to help families enjoy the summer and use hospitality venues. This will boost local spend and boost the local economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the Plaid Cymru Westminster group leader.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Secretary of State had some cheek earlier, but Wales had 27 years of Labour and has had less than six weeks of a Plaid Cymru Government, so we have work to do, and we are getting on with it.

The Port Talbot steelworks fire caused huge damage, but not a single penny of Labour's £2.5 billion steel fund has been guaranteed for steel in Wales. Instead, millions are being spent from this fund to support steel at Scunthorpe, leaving Welsh workers fearing they have been pushed aside. Will the Government stand up for Welsh interests and guarantee a fair share of the steel fund to all steel sites in Wales?

Anna McMorrin: Our steel strategy will revitalise the UK steel sector, restoring domestic production, 50% of which will come from Wales, and securing supply for key sectors and national infrastructure. I really hope that the minority Plaid Welsh Government will support this work to support our Welsh steelworkers.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am interested to hear the Minister's response, but she is muddying the waters, because what she said does not relate to the steel fund. I am specifically talking about the steel fund and the contribution it will make to Wales; we know that that money is going to Scunthorpe.

On another matter, next week it will be a decade since the EU referendum, and the promised Brexit dividend is still a fantasy unicorn. The Welsh economy is at least £4 billion smaller and exports are down £1.1 billion. Over the same period, Northern Ireland—still in the single market, remember—has seen gross value added per head grow 20% faster than in Wales. We see the damage, and we know the solution. Wales, of course, is very much an exporting economy. Surely the Minister knows that the right thing to do by Wales and the rest of the UK is to rejoin the single market and the customs union.

Anna McMorris: I am proud that this Government are resetting our relations with European partners to improve our economic and security co-operation following Brexit. The historic first UK-EU summit last year marked that turning point, and striking a deal is good for bills, good for borders and good for jobs. Our focus is on driving that forward and delivering a very strong EU-UK relationship.

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

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her responses. I want to raise the issue of young people not in education, employment or training. We know that the Conservatives failed our Welsh young people for 14 years, so I am really pleased that this Labour Government are investing £2.5 billion in the youth guarantee. How many Welsh young people will benefit from this scheme?

Anna McMorris: Far too many young people are not in education, employment or training, which is why we have committed to a youth guarantee to grant young people right across the UK, including Wales, the choice to learn or to earn, backed by £820 million of funding. This week, we announced seven more youth hubs for Wales, helping young people build critical skills and find jobs. Those measures will be life-changing opportunities for young people, significantly reversing the increase we inherited from the Conservative party in the number of those not in education, employment or training.

Defence Spending

3. **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of increases in defence spending on Wales. [900383]

5. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of increases in defence spending on Wales. [900385]

12. **Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of increases in defence spending on Wales. [900393]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): Wales has a crucial role to play in our national security. Wales is home to a dynamic defence SME base, as well as major companies such as QinetiQ, BAE Systems, Airbus, General Dynamics and Thales. The increased defence budget will support thousands of jobs in communities across Wales, help to grow our economy and keep the UK safe.

Gurinder Singh Josan: In the King's Speech, the Labour Government made it clear that our key priorities are national security, economic security and energy security. Those three priorities have one thing in common: the promise of jobs for communities across the whole UK. The defence growth deal stands to unlock some 50,000 new jobs across the UK, including 500 well-paid skilled jobs in Wales. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how defence spending is having a positive impact in Wales?

Jo Stevens: The Welsh defence sector is central to the security of the United Kingdom. I am proud that our defence growth deal, backed by £50 million of UK Government investment, will transform our nation into a centre for defence innovation, creating highly-skilled jobs and driving economic growth across the country. It has been a real pleasure to see at first hand the opportunities the defence sector is bringing to people and communities in Wales, such as the talented young local apprentices I met recently who are starting out on their careers at General Dynamics in Oakdale.

Chris Bloore: National security is the No. 1 priority of this UK Government, and businesses in Redditch are proud to support our armed forces. Does the Secretary of State agree with my assessment that, at this time of global uncertainty, it is more important than ever that parties across the House champion the value of our Union and our nations standing together against global threats?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government are undertaking the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war. We know that the increase creates not only a defence dividend but a Union dividend, too. It will boost prosperity, create high-skilled jobs and strengthen security for working people in every corner of the UK, while at the same time bolstering the resilience of our defence industrial base. My hon. Friend is right to say that every nation and Government of the United Kingdom should stand together and play their part in our national security.

Sean Woodcock: This Government have a NATO-first approach, meaning that our strength is reinforced by global allies, so that, in an increasingly dangerous world, the UK will not stand alone. It is vital that colleagues from across the House and Governments across the UK remain united in that approach. Will the Secretary of State provide an update on any discussions she has had with the new Welsh Government regarding their contribution to the UK's national security?

Jo Stevens: The strategic defence review reinforces the importance of close collaboration between all Governments on defence, particularly where key levers such as skills and planning are devolved. I can confirm to my hon. Friend that I have written to the Cabinet

Minister for Finance in the new minority Plaid Welsh Government on Wales's role in the defence of the UK. I regret to inform the House that the Minister did not respond to my request for confirmation that the Welsh Government will support the UK's full membership of NATO, but I can assure the House that the UK Labour Government are wholeheartedly committed to our defence and security.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The increase in spending for Wales should encourage us all, as it does across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Does the right hon. Lady agree that the extra money for defence spending underlines the importance of being a member of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have the advantages of the Union. Does she also agree that our friends, the Plaid Cymru MPs in front of me—and they are my friends—should recognise that being part of the United Kingdom brings benefits?

Jo Stevens: I could not agree more. As I said earlier, the increase in defence spending creates not only a defence dividend but a Union dividend, too. That is why every nation and every Government in the United Kingdom should stand together and play their part in our national security.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): "Inadequate...failing...unable". Those were the damning words used to describe this Labour Government's approach to defence by the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), after his dramatic resignation. The defence industry in Wales is vital for the defence of us all, as well as for local jobs. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge why, after a recent defence visit, the Wales Office used the incorrect figure on X of a £270 billion increase in defence spending in this Parliament? Was that post deleted because it was disinformation and factually inaccurate?

Jo Stevens: I am reassured to hear the Conservative party finally acknowledging the importance of defence spending. This Government are undertaking the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war. We are doing that to keep Wales and UK safe, and to create thousands of new, well-paid jobs. The hon. Member's party left office having hollowed out our armed forces, leaving military homes in a disgusting state, so I am glad that she has finally learned the lessons of previous Tory failures.

Economic Growth

6. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Wales. [900387]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): The UK Government are strengthening the Welsh economy, helping businesses grow, and supporting thousands of good, well-paid jobs. Whether it is nuclear energy in Wylfa, offshore wind in Port Talbot, or connecting our

communities with a £14 billion pipeline of rail projects, this Government are building a stronger Welsh economy for generations to come.

Catherine Fookes: Monmouthshire's high streets welcome the £1.5 million Pride in Place funding, especially Monmouth, after November's devastating floods. I recently wrote to the landlord of 20 Monnow Street—more commonly known as the "pigeon-poop building"—as part of my campaign to fill empty shops. But we need deeds, not words. The commissions and the taskforce that Plaid says it is planning will not cut it, so will the Secretary of State make representations to the Welsh Government? They need to act on our high streets as soon as possible, not just establish quangos.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that regenerating our high streets and town centres is vital to creating jobs and supporting local businesses, restoring pride in our communities. That is why we are investing over £300 million in Pride in Place funding for Wales, alongside over £500 million through the new local growth fund. It is vital that this funding, which will be delivered by the Plaid minority Welsh Government, is operational as quickly as possible. I have written twice to the Welsh Government Minister responsible about how we can get that funding out to communities, and I look forward to his eventual response.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): The previous Welsh Labour Government spent more than £100 million developing plans for the M4 relief road, only to scrap the project before construction began. Congestion at the Brynglas tunnels continues to cause significant delays, hampering economic growth. The previous Conservative UK Government offered funding to back that crucial scheme. Will the Secretary of State urge her colleagues to make a similar offer to the new Welsh Government, and does she regret her party's decision to cancel this vital project in the first place?

Jo Stevens: This Government have delivered the biggest financial settlement for the Welsh Government in devolution history, with nearly £6.5 billion more spending power for public services in Wales, and that includes funding for transport. That contrasts with the activities of the hon. Member's Conservative Government, who, through austerity, starved public services in Wales of funding.

Rail Network

7. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve the rail network in Wales. [900388]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Anna McMorrin): The Prime Minister has announced a generational funding commitment to Welsh rail and a pipeline of projects worth up to £14 billion. That long-term plan will transform connectivity across Wales. We will deliver that at pace, building on the strong start of the £445 million of investment already secured at the spending review.

Harpreet Uppal: It is brilliant to see you wearing your Yorkshire rose, Mr Speaker.

The UK Labour Government are investing in our railways to boost economic growth right across the country. In my constituency, we are seeing continued investment through the trans-Pennine route upgrades in Huddersfield. Will the Minister set out what rail upgrades are coming to Wales, and how they will deliver economic growth and boost employment across the nation?

Anna McMorris: I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent question. We have agreed a £14 billion long-term plan for Welsh rail, with work starting immediately, spanning 43 projects in every corner of Wales and unlocking around 12,000 jobs. New stations and faster and more reliable trains will connect people with communities and jobs right across Wales, benefiting the whole UK.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900466] **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 17 June.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr David Lammy): I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Prime Minister, who is attending the G7 summit in Evian.

May I first pay tribute to two giants of the Labour party. Roy Hattersley was a formidable deputy leader who never stopped fighting for a more equal and fair society. We also remember our beloved colleague Jo Cox and honour her memory in working to bring our communities together, celebrating the decency and compassion that defines this country. I also want to remember the 72 lives lost at Grenfell tower. The legacy of that appalling tragedy must be a safe, secure home for everyone in this country.

Finally, let me congratulate Scotland on their first win at the men's world cup in 36 years—that, Mr Speaker, is what happens when your captain signs for Spurs. I wish England the best of luck for their first match this evening.

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

Dr Sullivan: I associate myself with the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks and pay tribute to Jo Cox. I also wish the England men's team all the best tonight—may they follow the winning example of the Lionesses and the Scotland men's team.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that our town and local centres, particularly our independent small businesses, are the lifeblood of our economy, and will he confirm that this Labour Government will do what it takes to unlock the potential of our local economies? One such example would be supporting the campaign by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) to restore the Gravesend-Tilbury ferry, which was cut by the Conservatives.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her campaign to restore the Gravesend-Tilbury ferry. I agree that town centres are the heart of our communities, and we are determined to help them to thrive. Our high streets strategy, backed by more than £300 million of investment, will build on our work to rejuvenate high streets across the country. We are also putting power into the hands of local communities through our flagship Pride in Place programme, which includes £1.5 million for Gravesham. Her local council can make use of the integrated transport funding for local priorities, including ferry services, and I know that Ministers will be happy to help.

Mr Speaker: I call Claire Coutinho, shadow Secretary of State, acting for the official Opposition.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): On behalf of the Conservatives, I extend our condolences to the families of Jo Cox and Roy Hattersley. I know how much pain we on the Conservatives Benches felt when we lost Sir David Amess, and so we share Labour's pain today. I also pay tribute to those who lost their lives in the Grenfell tower fire. I would also like to congratulate Scotland on their stunning win and wish England the very best of luck for tonight.

It is a great privilege to be standing at the Dispatch Box across from one of the few survivors of Labour's original Cabinet who has not resigned on principle or been sacked in disgrace—I feel honoured. Will the right hon. Gentleman start by telling me this: why are the Labour Government happy for Britain to get its oil and gas from Russia or Qatar but not from Aberdeen?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome the shadow Energy Secretary to the Dispatch Box. It is always good to hear from someone who was at the heart of the Treasury during the biggest fall in living standards on record, who was the Children's Minister in the Government who plunged hundreds of thousands of children into poverty, and who was the Energy Secretary who showed an unwavering commitment to the cause of net zero, even though she has now forgotten that.

The right hon. Lady should not believe everything she reads in the papers. The Prime Minister and the Energy Secretary have been discussing cutting bills by over £100. Our warm homes plan is lifting millions of families out of fuel poverty, and we are securing enough energy projects to power 23 million homes. The right hon. Lady was the Energy Secretary who left our country exposed to global fossil fuel markets. We are delivering clean energy security.

Claire Coutinho: Bills came down by £500 under me. They have gone up £300 under these guys.

This is nonsense. Labour is banning new oil and gas licences in the North sea, and the guys over there in the SNP are no better, because this is the same policy that the SNP championed for years. It is pointless virtue signalling, and it is destroying well-paid jobs. Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell the House how many jobs have been lost in Aberdeen since Labour came to power?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I remember when the right hon. Lady championed net zero as Energy Secretary. She said in 2023:

“We cannot prosper... Nor can our children flourish if we don't decarbonise energy”.

The Tories used to believe this three years ago. The right hon. Lady has forgotten that, because the Tories are desperately chasing Reform and we know it.

Over 700 jobs were lost in the last 10 years that the Tories were in power, and production fell 75% over the last 25 years. We have secured over £900 billion of investment to support more jobs by taking control with renewables, and over 100,000 jobs in Scotland are supported by clean power. We are building on that, led by Great British Energy, which is headquartered in Aberdeen.

Claire Coutinho: Let me help the Deputy Prime Minister out. One thousand people are losing their jobs every month in places like Aberdeen South because of Labour's policies. The Government say that those oil and gas workers can get new green jobs, but what they do not say is that those salaries pay half as much. Can he tell the House how he would feel if the Government forced him to take a 50% pay cut?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady used to be an investment banker, and she has got her facts wrong. Oil and gas are coming out of the North sea 24/7. In the first three months of this year, 52 million barrels of oil came out, and the equivalent of 44 million barrels of gas came out. We are not turning off the taps. This will be part of a mixed economy that will support existing oil and gas fields throughout their lifespan, making changes to exploit neighbouring fields. We do want to create more jobs, which is why we will continue to invest in renewables. She knew this three years ago. She has changed her mind because she is chasing Reform.

Claire Coutinho: I asked the Deputy Prime Minister about pay cuts, which the Government should care about, because if the Mayor of Manchester gets his way, I am pretty sure that half of the Front Bench will be getting a pay cut pretty soon.

This is serious. The world is getting more dangerous, yet last week the Prime Minister asked the Energy Secretary to help fund the defence of our country and he ghosted him. Let me repeat that: the Energy Secretary refused to meet the Prime Minister on a matter of national security. Why has he not been sacked?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Stop reading the papers, is what I would say to the right hon. Lady—or certainly the right papers. When the defence investment plan is published, it will set out—*[Interruption.]* This is important. It will set out how every Government Department is contributing to defence, including the Energy Department. We will always put national security first. The Conservatives still do not get it. Families are worried about their bills going up because of a war in the middle east that the Leader of the Opposition said she would jump into feet first.

Claire Coutinho: If everything is so hunky-dory, why did half the Defence team quit last week? The Government will not find the money to keep our country safe, so let us go through some of the things they can find money for. They can find millions of pounds to build solar farms in the Congo, and tens of millions of pounds for an experiment to dim the sun, but they are turning

down £25 billion in tax revenue from the North sea to please their out-of-control Energy Secretary. Does the Deputy Prime Minister really think that any of that is more important than defending our country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We have said that more spending on defence is our No. 1 priority in this spending review and the next spending review. The right hon. Lady wants to talk about resignations. Let us remind ourselves of the Tory Defence Secretary in the last Government—the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson)—who was sacked for breaching national security; the Tory Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, who resigned over sexual harassment; and the Tory Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, who admitted hollowing out the armed forces for 14 years. We have a Prime Minister securing jobs and investment at the G7, we have a Chancellor raising the minimum wage, we have an Education Secretary cutting costs for childcare, and we have an Energy Secretary cutting energy bills by over £100. We are proud of that record.

Claire Coutinho: If everything is fine, why do we have a new Defence Secretary? *[Interruption.]* He was not here last week, was he? Let us face it: this is a Government on life support. What is their grand plan now? Let me get this straight: they want to make the job-destroying Energy Secretary Chancellor; they want to bring back the former Transport Secretary, who resigned for nicking phones; and they want to replace the Deputy Prime Minister with the former Deputy Prime Minister, who resigned for dodging taxes. Those are all pointless distractions. Here is a better idea: why do they not cut welfare, fund defence, make energy cheap and back the North sea?

The Deputy Prime Minister: It is very thin gruel. I am here, like the right hon. Lady, because I am standing in for the leader of my party. I am proud to serve the Prime Minister and proud of what the Labour Government are delivering: more rights for working people—the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation—the biggest boost to defence spending since the cold war, and lifting more children out of poverty in a single term than any British Government in history. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives can make all the noise they want. They do not want to talk about the economy because it is growing, they do not want to talk about the NHS because waiting lists are falling, and they do not want to talk about immigration because they lost control of our borders and net migration is down under us by 82%. They had their chance and they blew it. We are building a stronger, fairer Britain.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): I, too, wish to pay tribute to Jo Cox and her family, and to the commitment in her name that we tackle division and extremism. We saw extremism play out on the streets of Belfast last week—a pogrom where families were burned out based on the colour of their skin; health workers were stopped and asked for ID by masked thugs; and small businesses were ordered to close. Many minorities are still living in fear after a list of their addresses was circulated widely online. They deserve more than sympathy and warm words; they deserve to know that Governments are serious about confronting hatred online and offline.

The UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive spend millions each year on programmes intended to tackle paramilitarism, but, decades after the troubles, individuals linked to loyalist paramilitaries had a role in directing and fuelling the disorder last week, including menacing a senior journalist on tape. Will the UK Government commit to reviewing how the Northern Ireland Executive are gripping—or failing to grip—paramilitarism? Will they ensure that public money never reaches individuals or groups who fuel, orchestrate or benefit from intimidation and hate?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I join the hon. Lady in utterly condemning the violence. People are right to feel sickened by the sight of people being burned out of their homes because of the colour of their skin. That is racism, and those responsible will face the full force of the law. We must never go back to 1950s Britain, where my father arrived to signs saying, “No blacks, no dogs, no Irish.” We are focused on bringing people together, and that includes by providing a further £24 million to help to tackle paramilitarism and by acting to tackle those who incite hatred online; our social cohesion plan is about bringing our communities together. I am happy to work with all parties in that endeavour.

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

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): May I associate myself and my party with the Deputy Prime Minister's tribute to Jo Cox? We extend our condolences to her friends and family, and to those of Roy Hattersley as well. I also join the Deputy Prime Minister in remembering the horrific tragedy of Grenfell, and that the families still await justice. I congratulate all those named in the King's birthday honours list, congratulate Scotland and wish good luck to England this evening.

The right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) is respected across the House. When he says that he was forced to make decisions that could make the country less safe, we should all take heed. It is now becoming clear that the Treasury's refusal to consider new ways of funding defence is undermining our national security, so will the Deputy Prime Minister join with us to make the case in Government for new defence bonds, which could raise £20 billion over two years to defend our country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We believe we should work with our allies to join up defence, procurement and funding. That is why we are exploring the most effective mechanisms for multilateral co-operation, which is of course a topic of discussion for the Prime Minister at the G7.

Daisy Cooper: We are pleased to hear that the Government are looking at that, but they need to act far quicker.

It is now more than five years since the Prime Minister originally set out his famous red lines on Europe when he was in opposition: no customs union and no single market. But since then, the world has changed. Putin has launched a war on our continent, an unreliable Donald Trump has returned to the White House and, here at home, the cost of living has got worse and worse,

so does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the Government should rip up those red lines now—or is that just another job to be left to the next Prime Minister?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I was proud to be the Labour Foreign Secretary who returned to the meeting of European Foreign Secretaries, and to work alongside my colleagues in the Cabinet Office to ensure that we were at last year's summit and that it was successful. I can confirm that the next summit will take place on 22 July. Our red lines remain, but we are focused on a sanitary and phytosanitary deal to cut prices on the shelves, a youth experience scheme and cutting red tape for exporters.

Q2. [900467] **Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will want to congratulate Sir Kevin Sinfield on his knighthood, which is fitting recognition for his work on motor neurone disease.

Another champion fighting for a cure for MND is my constituent Mark Sommerville, whom I have mentioned at Prime Minister's questions in the past. Diagnosed in 2023, Mark fights with remarkable resolve and courage. I am supporting Mark and his foundation in pushing for a new national MND strategy, with an emphasis on finding effective treatments, enhancing access to trials and accelerating novel drug discovery. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss the matter further, so that we can work to find a cure for this horrific condition?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Sir Kevin Sinfield. He is an inspirational fundraiser and a champion for his sport and, of course, for the MND community. I know that Mark Sommerville runs an excellent foundation that campaigns on MND in my hon. Friend's constituency. We are committed to improving care for people with motor neurone disease. We are looking at the current system to ensure that care is truly focused on the needs of individuals, and we are investing in cutting-edge research, including a world-first clinical trial to test remotely monitored portable ventilators. I know that the Minister for Care would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

Q4. [900469] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): Since this Government came to office, more than half a million businesses have closed, nearly a million young people are without education, employment or training and graduate recruitment is at an all-time low. These are not just statistics; these are people's lives, people's jobs and people's futures. Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell the House if that is because the Government hiked business rates and slashed reliefs, slammed employers with the jobs tax and buried businesses with the Employment Rights Act, or all of the above?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We have the fastest growing economy in the G7, borrowing is down and we have just signed our fifth major trade deal. I must say this to the Tory deputy chairman: yesterday he was on television laughing and joking about the arson attack on the Prime Minister's home, laughing about a firebomb targeting the Prime Minister and his family. Not only that, he joined with promoting conspiracies about the attack

and laughed along to demeaning homophobic remarks. He should be ashamed of himself—absolutely ashamed. My advice to him is to grow up, apologise and do considerably better.

Q3. [900468] Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The Makerfield candidate for Reform has disgracefully said that the majority of abortions are for “vanity purposes”. He described mums

“with their fat bellies...pushing a pram in their PJs”,

and failed to apologise to national treasure Carol Vorderman for endorsing sexually explicit comments about her. This exposes the rank hypocrisy of Reform politicians: talking tough on violence against women and girls but in reality having zero respect for women. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that Reform has a problem with women, which is further highlighted by seemingly welcoming a woman-beater into its fold?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The Prime Minister has rightly put tackling violence against women and girls at the heart of this Labour Government. By contrast, I have been utterly appalled by what we have heard from the Reform candidate in Makerfield—from the vile, sexist comments to saying that Putin was within his rights to invade Ukraine. When the Reform leader was asked about them, his answer was, “So what?” This speaks volumes about Reform. The only way to stop its politics of grievance is to vote Labour.

Q8. [900474] Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I echo the tributes to Jo Cox, Roy Hattersley and the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire.

There are approximately 400,000 private hire and black cab drivers in the United Kingdom, and we rely on each and every one of them to keep our economy moving. It is concerning to hear that this Government are letting Uber deploy robotic minicabs across London, with the potential of them being rolled out across the country. Our drivers already face unsafe working conditions, discrimination and low pay, and now they are becoming casualties of this AI drive. At the last general election, British people were promised jobs and better workers’ rights, so I ask the Deputy Prime Minister: why are the Government pushing an agenda that will drive tens of thousands out of work, and will he arrange for a meeting so that we can have a discussion about this matter?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I attended the AI summit in India, and right across the world all countries and many companies—certainly tech companies—are at the forefront of this opportunity. We have to get the governance right, and of course we have to test and re-test to ensure safety. Anything on our roads would of course be tested and licensed by the Department for Transport. I do not think we can stand in the face of innovation.

Q5. [900470] Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister, and congratulate my constituent Sir Kevin Sinfield on all the work he does.

Yesterday marked the 10th anniversary of the murder of our dear friend Jo Cox. As well as being a sister to our wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley

(Kim Leadbeater), she was a wife, daughter and mother, and we must not forget that. Jo’s mantra was always that we have

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

Will my right hon. Friend indicate what he thinks he should do, and in fact what we should all do, so that Jo’s beliefs and her legacy are always remembered?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am so grateful to my hon. Friend. We all miss Jo—a dear friend and a valued colleague. Three years ago, I had the great privilege of opening the Jo Cox More in Common centre in Huddersfield alongside Jo’s sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), and her parents Jean and Gordon. It was one of the great honours of my life. We all have a duty to live up to the values that Jo stood for. She was a trailblazing campaigner against loneliness and inspired the Great Get Together taking place this weekend. In the words of the Jo Cox Foundation, holding or attending a Great Get Together “in your local area is a simple but powerful way to honour Jo’s legacy”—

neighbours coming together, differences set aside and communities choosing unity over division, because that is what Jo stood for.

Q9. [900475] Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I am sure that we all share the thoughts about Jo Cox and her family who are here today.

I know that the Deputy Prime Minister has always struggled with police visibility—even when they are stood behind him—but does he agree with Sir Mark Rowley that London will be even less safe because of this Government’s police cuts and the decision made last week by Sadiq Khan to block a key contract, which will lead to 500 fewer frontline police officers and make us all less safe?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am hugely grateful for the work of the Home Secretary and the previous Home Secretary in putting neighbourhood policing back at the heart of our communities and putting in extra policing across the country. We on the Labour side remember the decisions by Boris Johnson to cut policing across the country—I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman.

Q6. [900471] John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): A film called the “People’s Emergency Briefing” is being shown in communities up and down the country. I recently attended a screening in Wirksworth, and there is another one next week in Bakewell. The film educates us and reminds us of the climate emergency that we all face. Yet, inexplicably, the Conservatives have basically given up on the climate, and Reform continues to act like modern-day flat-earthers, refusing to accept science and to accept the bleeding obvious. Will the Deputy Prime Minister please assure me that this Labour Government will continue to do everything they can to combat man-made climate change?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for campaigning on this issue. I am very proud of the fact that this Government have restored the UK’s position as a global leader on climate action. That

includes ambitious targets to reduce climate emissions and restore nature, and seizing the opportunities of clean, renewable power.

“The net zero economy now supports 1.1m UK jobs and generates £105bn in economic value—proof that tackling climate change & growing the economy can go hand in hand.”

Those are not my words; they are from Baroness Theresa May in the past fortnight. The Tories used to believe in this agenda, but they have forgotten because they are chasing Reform UK.

Q10. [900476] **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): May I associate myself with the tributes paid to Jo Cox?

In two weeks' time, new steel quotas and 50% tariffs will come into force, which industry has said will cost jobs. UKF steel in my constituency has been clear that without a change of course, it will almost certainly cease trading before the end of the year, and that will cost 50 jobs in my constituency. Last week, I attended a cross-party roundtable, and it was clear that my concerns were also shared by many Labour MPs who are concerned about job losses and further deindustrialisation. What action is being taken at the very top of Government to mitigate the effects of what will be an imminent but avoidable economic disaster?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious issue. He might have forgotten that this House legislated for emergency measures to save steel across our country. We will continue to do more—and, of course, this is on the agenda for the Prime Minister at the G7.

Q7. [900472] **Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): It is great to see the NHS moving forward, with a reduction in waiting lists and improving relations with our junior doctors, my colleagues. However, in order to keep our NHS working well in the long term, we must get serious about prevention. Every year, more than 30,000 deaths in our country are attributed to poor air quality. Ella Kissi-Debrah's mum knows this all too well; her little girl was just nine years old when she died as a direct result of air pollution. Seventy years on from the Clean Air Act 1956, will the Deputy Prime Minister support a much-needed update to this essential law, to protect the future of our NHS and to keep our children healthy?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. She makes a powerful point, as someone who has worked in public health for many years. I have met Ella's family, including her mother Rosamund. Her death was a tragedy, and this is an issue close to my heart. Through our environmental improvement plan, we are taking action to cut pollutants, including through new targets to cut exposure to harmful particles by a third, and by reforming industrial permitting to reduce emissions. A Minister will be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Q12. [900478] **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): As an Eastbourne boy born and bred, I can tell the Deputy Prime Minister that Eastbourne pier is an iconic part of our heritage, an iconic part of our local economy, and an iconic part of me; I literally have it tattooed on me, and I can show the Deputy Prime

Minister afterwards. On a serious note, the residents of Eastbourne have become concerned for the pier's future, after a company connected to the pier fell into liquidation, and maintenance costs for piers across the country are sky high. Will the Deputy Prime Minister back my “Protect our Pier” campaign, and meet me to discuss emergency measures to safeguard our pier for the future?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I never thought I would get a request from the hon. Gentleman to look at his tattoos. I know that Eastbourne pier is a much-loved iconic local landmark. I believe he is meeting the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan), to discuss his campaign. I am pleased that we have allocated £20 million of Pride in Place funding to regenerating Eastbourne. It was one of the first seaside towns I visited as a young child. This summer, his constituents will be able to enjoy their day at the pier for less with our Great British summer savings, with free bus travel for kids, cheaper meals and cheaper tickets to amusement parks.

Q11. [900477] **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Thames Water's headquarters are local to my town of Reading, but it is their distant creditors who are really in charge. Investors should be rewarded for success, but they should pay for their failures. That is why I strongly welcome the Government's objections to the current creditors deal. Under any deal or special administration regime, the company will be restructured, but the question is whether that restructuring will be done only in the interests of senior creditors, or with customers and the environment in mind. Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell us whose side he is on?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her dedicated work on this. I am on the side of the people who elected us to clean up our rivers, our lakes and our seas. I and this Government are on the side of consumers, who are paying the price for years and years of failure by the Conservatives. We do not want Thames Water customers to have to pick up the bill for the company's failures. We stand ready for all eventualities. The Labour Government have already blocked bonuses and introduced criminal sanctions for polluting water bosses, and we will go further by creating a new powerful regulator to hold all companies to account and clean up our waterways.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): May I say to the Deputy Prime Minister that he is looking very prime ministerial today? He certainly has my vote if he decides to run for Labour leader on Friday. *[Interruption.]* Trust me, it is a deliberate ploy. On a serious note, Stoke Heath is a small rural settlement in Shropshire, in my Wrekin constituency. Over the past few hours, I have been informed—at a very late point, I think, by the way—that 121 asylum seekers will be going into that settlement. That is a 35% increase in the population in a matter of weeks. It is equivalent to 44,000 asylum seekers coming into the Deputy Prime Minister's constituency. While this is a tolerant, compassionate and understanding nation, does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with me that that level of dispersal into a small, isolated, rural community is just not fair?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman and I have made common cause on a range of issues, cross-party, over the years. On the central issue, I am proud that we have seen a reduction in net migration of 82% over the 23 months that we have been in power. We cannot both grip this problem and say, when it comes to ensuring that people are detained—most often so that they can be removed—“Not in my patch.” I do not know the detail of his circumstances, and of course the immigration Minister will look at this matter, but we have to be honest about what the British public expect us to do on their behalf.

Q13. [900479] **Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s willingness to take tough action to protect young people online. It reflects growing concerns about the harms that can arise from online platforms, including self-harm, suicide and poor mental health. The consequences can be truly devastating for those affected, including families in South East Cornwall whose experiences I will never forget. Individuals and companies are promoting and profiting from harmful material and behaviour online that would attract far greater scrutiny, rightly, in the offline world. Freedom of speech must be defended, but what we have online is often not free speech, but manipulated speech. Companies with influence over what millions of people see should be held accountable and made responsible. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree? What further action will the Government take to strengthen accountability and protect young people online before more lives are lost?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend. I know that she has worked closely with families affected by harmful content in her constituency. Our decision to ban social media for under-16s is a landmark moment that will ensure that we better protect children and young people across our country. We will absolutely hold platforms to account for the harms that they can cause. That is why we have asked Ofcom to review their capability to enforce the social media ban and publish a clear enforcement strategy.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Earlier this week, in Westminster Hall, we had a debate on brain tumours, brain cancer, and the inequity of the service across the United Kingdom. The issue has been highlighted by my constituent Archie Goodburn, a Commonwealth swimmer who will compete in Glasgow next month. He

got the treatment he needed only after I approached the Government and they supported him. Will the Government look at how we ensure that people in all parts of the United Kingdom, regardless of devolution, get the best possible treatment for cancers?

The Deputy Prime Minister: There is a new target that 75% of patients diagnosed from 2035 will be cancer-free or living well after five years. That means that 320,000 lives will be saved. The cancer plan will end the postcode lottery on cancer, introduce a new three-year neighbourhood early diagnosis fund, and cover the cost of travelling for cancer treatment. I know that Ministers are happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that further.

Q14. [900480] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister and others for their comments about Jo Cox; our thoughts are with her family today, as they are every day. May I also thank the Harlow Town Park volunteers, who I joined this morning in repairing the iconic zig-zag bridge in Harlow? Harlow will be the site of one of the Government’s new youth hubs—another example of this Labour Government investing in our town. I believe passionately that Harlow’s young people have so much potential. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree? Does he also agree that this funding will unlock that potential?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a former schoolteacher, and I know how much he cares about this matter. I am delighted that we have announced the locations of 180 new youth hubs, which include Harlow; it means that more young people across the country will benefit from skills and training opportunities. This week, we have shown that this Labour Government are working to transform the lives of our young people. I thank my hon. Friend for all his campaigning on behalf of his constituency—and I know that a lot of the young people support Spurs.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order come after urgent questions. Today is a very important day. This is about Jo Cox, bringing us together, and unity. I hope that we will have more temperate, tolerant language and respect for each other. The Jo Cox great get-together is taking place at lunchtime in Speaker’s House.

Steel Tariffs

12.40 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if he will make a statement on steel tariffs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): May I start by giving the apologies of the Minister for Trade, who is in Turkey, negotiating further trade deals for British industry?

On 19 March, the Government set out the UK's plan to introduce a robust new trade measure from 1 July. It will limit tariff-free steel imports, as compared with the steel safeguard measure. Any imports above the levels in the measure will face a 50% tariff.

Protecting primary steel production is crucial to the UK's critical national infrastructure and defence. That is why we have published a long-term plan for steel and are introducing a new trade measure countering the unprecedented and damaging effect of global overcapacity. It is simply wrong that only 30% of the steel that we need in the UK is made in the UK.

Steel is essential for advanced manufacturing and engineering, and the interests of the domestic steel sector and downstream industry are best served together. A thriving steel industry strengthens supply chain resilience for downstream businesses and limits their exposure to global supply shocks. We need to balance the need to protect domestic steelmaking with maintaining secure, reliable supply chains for downstream businesses.

Imports will remain important. The Government have engaged extensively with businesses across a range of sectors, including manufacturing, when developing this measure. Indeed, last week, I held a roundtable with downstream industry, together with my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade. We, and the Secretary of State, also heard from several colleagues about the concerns of businesses in their constituencies. We are listening carefully to companies throughout the supply chain as we finalise the measure.

We have introduced a transitional arrangement; the new measure will not apply to goods under contract before 14 March 2026 and imported between 1 July and 30 September 2026. We have introduced a carry-over mechanism to give importers more flexibility. We will review the measure after 12 months to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

We are also engaging intensively with the European Commission on our respective steel measures, and are working to find a bilateral solution that protects vital UK-EU steel trade. This engagement reflects the unique structure of our trading and security relationships and the interconnectedness of our supply chains, but we need to be clear: if we do not act, we will not have steel-making in the UK. The US, Canada, the EU are all acting; we must too.

Andrew Griffith: I thank the Minister for that statement.

Aerospace, the automotive sector, Formula 1, the construction sector, and manufacturing businesses that use steel, which employ 300,000 people, are all being impacted by Labour's botched tariffs. Many specialist steels—the Minister may have heard this from

manufacturing businesses—are not, as it stands, even produced in the UK. That is a real issue when it comes to, for example, categories 14 and 27, which are used in aircraft wings, or in defence applications that we need to make ourselves safe. Where defence companies have cost-plus contracts, the tariff on steel that is not made here will just get added to the bill for the Ministry of Defence.

Will the Minister listen to Stephen Morley, president of the Confederation of British Metalforming, who says:

“The UK risks accelerating the decline of its manufacturing base rather than preserving it”,

or Simon Boyd from REIDsteel, a British steelmaker, when he says that these measures will kill off

“downstream customers of steelmakers in the UK”?

I am sure that is not the Minister's intention, but with just two weeks to go, with respect, it is time to stop listening and start acting.

Will the Minister answer three questions? First, will he confirm today that the measures will not be applied retroactively throughout the whole life of existing, agreed contracts? Secondly, will he exempt steel—especially in categories 14 and 27—that is simply not made here in the necessary volumes? Thirdly, after listening to industry, will the Government please delay these tariffs for at least six months so that they can get this right?

Chris McDonald: In line with your guidance about constructive debate, Mr Speaker, I am sure we will have some constructive debate now. The shadow Minister has raised some legitimate questions, and I am very happy to provide the answers.

I think we all recognise the importance of the steel industry and the downstream sector—there is definitely a point of agreement there. The point about timing is a critical one, and on the face of it, the request for a delay is not unreasonable. The important thing to recognise is that our steel safeguard measure expires on 30 July. It is not possible for us to extend that measure; it has lasted for eight years, and under World Trade Organisation rules we cannot extend it, so new measures are required. Of course, the EU is introducing a new measure on 1 July, and the US and Canada have also introduced new measures. If we were not to introduce a measure, the UK would become the global dumping ground for subsidised steel. That would be the end of our primary steel industry, so something needs to be done.

In designing the measures, we have been very careful to ensure that they are targeted at those steels that are made, or could be made, in the UK. However, the categories are quite broad, and we acknowledge that some steels that are not, and could not be, made in the UK could be swept up in them. That is the point of the quotas. Since our draft measures were published, we have consulted extensively with industry—I have known Steve Morley for a very long time, and I listen very carefully to what he says, but more than that, we have carried out extensive consultation. The Minister for Trade and I have met the downstream group on three occasions, and I have met the Aerospace Growth Partnership, the Construction Leadership Council and many other businesses. We will be publishing our final measures in line with our EU negotiations when they are completed, in time for 1 July.

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

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I am grateful for this urgent question. Today, I am publishing the Committee's correspondence with Ministers after the roundtable we held with steel producers, expressing a very high degree of alarm that these measures were not in the right place and thousands of jobs are now at risk.

There is a loophole for the import of fabricated steel. Canada and the United States have both moved to close that loophole; there is a question about why we have not taken the same steps. Twelve months is too late. There are no exemptions for steel products that we do not make, as we have heard, and there is no clarity on the use of procurement to drive domestic production. It also appears that a number of the quotas have been set in the wrong place, so will the Minister look again at the advice the Select Committee provided and come back to the House urgently—within the next week—with some adjustments to help safeguard a brilliant industry with a brilliant future ahead of it?

Chris McDonald: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for both his work and that of his Committee on this issue. I recognise the concerns that were raised in his Committee earlier this week. On the point about timing, though, while I recognise the uncertainty this causes for business, it is impossible for the Government to announce the final arrangements until our discussions with the EU have concluded. I am reliably informed by those people with knowledge of negotiations with the EU that these things tend to run to the wire, so while I appreciate that it creates uncertainty, we need to wait until that point. However, the feedback from industry about quota levels has been heard by Government, and we are looking at those quota levels. That was the point of publishing the draft measures in the first place.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The steel sector is a vital UK industry. We must support it in the face of numerous challenges, including China's unfair practices and Trump's trade war, but I am extremely concerned about the impact on parts of the steel industry supply chain if these proposed tariff changes are implemented. We all want businesses to buy British, but that is just not an option if there is no domestic supplier that can meet the grades and certifications that its customers require. Businesses simply cannot buy British, and will be punished by new tariffs as a direct result. The specialist steels needed by aerospace, defence and precision engineering are not made in this country in the grades or volumes that those sectors require, and qualifying a new source takes not a fortnight, but several years. The Government are already having sufficient difficulty funding their defence investment plan without loading additional costs on to the defence manufacturers. Tariffs on steels not available in the UK will materially damage downstream manufacturers, with serious implications for their competitiveness, as well as for investment and jobs.

What response did the Minister give experts in the manufacturing industry when they warned him about these matters? What conversations has he had with Tata Steel in determining the Government's tariff position? Will he remove categories from the regime where no domestic production capability exists, such as product

codes 14 and 27, which are critical for the viability of many aerospace and defence manufacturers? Will the Secretary of State commit to delaying or tapering implementation until proper mitigations have been put in place?

Chris McDonald: I thank the hon. Member for her constructive engagement on this issue with me over the past few weeks. The nub of her question is, I think, about domestic suppliers and the availability of domestic supply. As I said, the measures have been designed to cover those steel categories that are made or could be made in the UK. She raises the particular issue of speciality steels. We all understand the position with Speciality Steel UK in Stocksbridge and Rotherham. That business is going through administration, and it was impossible for it to compete in the UK while there was an influx of subsidised steel.

The hon. Member asks about the conversations I have had with industry. I will tell her what I said to the Aerospace Growth Partnership. When I met it this morning, I said that clearly we would not want to start from this point, but that it is about choices. This Government have decided that we want to have a full aerospace supply chain, including our own speciality steels production. That is a different choice from the one that the previous Government made when they were approached by industry, offering to co-invest in that site and keep it open. They rebuffed all those responses, because their view was, "Leave it to the market, let the steel plants close." We are making a different choice.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As the Minister knows, I represent Llanwern, which produces galvanised steel. I repeat my ask to the Minister to be mindful of the impact of the scale of the allocations for non-EU countries on Llanwern. Will he continue to liaise directly with Tata and the unions on this issue?

Chris McDonald: I am particularly concerned about the allocations for galvanised steel, as my hon. Friend says, particularly given the country's reliance on the ZODIAC galvanising line in Llanwern. That is a critical part of our steel and our national infrastructure. It is the only process route that we have to make car auto body and various construction and coating steels. A lot depends on that plant, and I am considering the issue seriously.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Engineering firms in Kingswinford and South Staffordshire are integral to automotive and aerospace supply chains, so how can it be right or in the national interest that they pay a tariff of 50% on the steel they import and use, while European producers making those parts with the same steel pay low or no tariffs?

Chris McDonald: I have just been alerted to the fact that I said the current measures will expire on 30 July. It is actually on 30 June. It was hopefully correct in the context, but I am happy to correct the record. On the specific point raised by the hon. Gentleman, these measures are clearly designed to support primary steel production. That is their purpose and what they have been designed for. It is about getting the balance right so that we support that level of primary production in the UK while dealing with the issues with the downstream steel

producers so that they can get the steels they need within the UK or perhaps more broadly within the EU, as we discuss our market arrangement measures with it.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): We all support greater production here in the UK, but the details of these tariffs need more work. Black Country MPs, such as me and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes), have heard huge worries from our downstream industries, including stockholders such as Amari, fabricators such as Angle Ring, and trade associations such as the British Constructional Steelwork Association and the Cast Metals Federation. Will the Minister go away and review the details? We need protections for fabricated steel, like those Canada and the US have in place. Once again, we are seeing projects in receipt of massive public funding importing fabricated steel. We need a detailed look again at the categories and the quotas. We need proper consultation with UK Metals Council members, and we need to look at the detail again to ensure that it is right and that it supports a great future for manufacturing in the Black Country and elsewhere.

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for the strong work that she has done advocating for businesses in her area. Across the whole west midlands, there has been strong support from west midlands Members of Parliament for their businesses, and quite right too. She may recall from the roundtable discussion we had with the Secretary of State and the Minister for Trade earlier this week that her concerns are being heard and taken into account, and I want to reassure her about that. I neglected to mention earlier the engagement we have had with the British Constructional Steelwork Association, which she mentioned. I reassure her that I and my officials are talking to the BCSA, too.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister says that the concerns about fabricated steel are being taken into account. Can he be a bit more specific about why other countries have protections for fabricated steel in their economies, but we do not yet have any in ours?

Chris McDonald: I can give a specific example, if that would be helpful. A number of Members have mentioned the specific situation in Canada, for instance, and I have looked carefully at the situation there. Fundamentally, it has a completely different tariff regime, which would not necessarily be straightforward or legal to apply in the UK. However, I continue to look at that. I reiterate the point that this measure is designed to support the steel industry. If other concerns fall outwith that, they need to be raised and dealt with appropriately.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): May I add my voice to that of other Black Country Members? On behalf of Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and Netherton, I am grateful to the Minister and the Department for Business and Trade for their ongoing engagement with me and local businesses. It is much appreciated, but can I also add my voice to those calling for a review of quotas? In some places, those have been reduced by more than 80% on products not currently produced here. Equally, we have fabricated products being imported that are not subject to any tariffs, which could impact on local downstream supply chain industries.

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend not just for her question, but for the invitation to visit Stourbridge and have this discussion with businesses in her constituency. I am looking forward to that, and I thank her. To reiterate the point that I made about the quotas, the Government have published draft quotas and we are engaging in consultation. We listen carefully to her representations and those of others, but the final quotas, when they are published, will ultimately be dependent on that consultation and the negotiations we are having with the European Union.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I am greatly concerned by this issue. I spoke in the consideration of the steel Bill, and I raised the concerns of some of my businesses. The Minister rightly said that the measures expire on 30 June, but there is less than two weeks to go and huge amounts of uncertainty. Businesses are having to stock up on that steel, so costs are already going up. How did the Government let this happen? Did the impact assessment not show that there would be a huge impact on steel? What will happen next?

Chris McDonald: As I mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), the Chair of the Select Committee, I am sympathetic about the uncertainty. It is a difficult position for businesses to be in. To be clear, the reason for the uncertainty is that the publication of the final measures is dependent on market access negotiations with the European Union. It is to be expected that the negotiations with the European Union will go very close to the deadline.

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): UK steel sector voices and Cabinet officials met to back procurement of British-made steel at Tata Steel park in Wednesfield, rather than in offices in Whitehall, which I welcome. I also met Walsall Wheelbarrow, a family-owned business started by Fred Thacker in 1939. It is the only UK manufacturer of wheelbarrows left in the UK. Will the Minister look at ensuring that imported steel that cannot be made in the UK remains tariff-free?

Chris McDonald: The design of the steel measures, because of the different steel grades, means that the combined nomenclature codes fall into large buckets, so although the Government have targeted the measures at steels that are or could be made in the UK, some that are not or could not be made in the UK end up being caught up in the measures. That is the point of the quotas. It is important that we ensure that those quotas are in the right place, including for businesses such as Walsall Wheelbarrows. I have slightly lost count of the number of wheelbarrows that I have, but I will be sure that the next one I buy is from Walsall.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): From Yeovil's cutting-edge defence manufacturers to Thorn Wood Forge, which makes hand-crafted tools in Hinton Saint George, businesses in my constituency need steel that is currently not produced here. A 50% tariff would be disastrous. Will the Minister commit himself to exemptions for specialised steel grades that are not made in this country at the scale and spec needed by businesses in Yeovil?

Chris McDonald: The hon. Gentleman and I have engaged significantly on the industrial base in Yeovil, and I know how important it is to his local community. This takes us back to the point about steels that are or could be made in the UK. The issue raised by the hon. Gentleman and by many other people primarily involves the Speciality Steels plant. When we designed the trade measures, we were expecting a very quick move into new ownership, but it has taken about seven months longer than expected, and I am aware of the concern that that is causing businesses. I am, however, unapologetic about our determination to create the right market conditions, so that the production of speciality steels in the UK is a viable business proposition.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is absolutely right in principle for the Government to try to defend the steelmaking sector, particularly Liberty at Stocksbridge and Rotherham. However, there are downside implications for smaller firms, particularly manufacturing firms such as Ansell Handtools, Special Steel Group and Crown Hand Tools in my constituency, all of which have said that they cannot buy precisely the steel that they need, or the quantities of steel that they need, from British manufacturers. That is the challenge. I know that the Minister has been doing a great deal of work on this; can he tell me how he will leave a channel open for concerns to be raised by those companies if the further measures that he has taken do not address their particular grievances?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. May I ask the Minister to keep his responses short? Back Benchers should keep their questions on point as well?

Chris McDonald: I will endeavour to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let me say to my hon. Friend that I will do exactly what I have done since the day these draft measures were announced: engage with Members on both sides of the House and with all businesses. I hope Members will feel that I have endeavoured to do that. We have had cross-party discussions and I have had many meetings with businesses, trade associations and individual colleagues, and I am determined to continue to do so.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): The real reason for the rise in the steel problem is the energy price—the input price. Has the Minister had any challenging conversations with his colleague the Secretary of State, and will he consider exemptions for the defence industry as well? As he knows, the new Defence Secretary is now trying to balance a very difficult budget, and I am sure he would be happy to do what he can to help.

Chris McDonald: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making that link with defence. I know that he cares about it deeply, as I think we all do, but that has not really come out until now. He also mentioned energy. As he will know, we increased the supercharger rebate from 60% to 90%, and the British industrial competitiveness scheme will come into force next year—but there will be a refund for this year as well. That will affect many of the downstream businesses. However, I believe—as, I am

sure, does the right hon. Gentleman—that the crucial point about defence is that we need the capability to make aerospace deals in the UK, and our measures are designed to ensure that that happens.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The imposition of tariffs on black-painted and zinc-painted steel banding—products that are not manufactured in the UK, and are therefore imported from the EU—and the scramble for quota at the beginning of the year will increase costs for our steel producers, and will have a serious impact on importers' cash flow. Will the Minister look at the tariffs again and do all that he can to ensure that those particular tariffs and quotas do not go ahead?

Chris McDonald: This issue, which my hon. Friend has raised with me before, relates primarily to category 4 products. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) earlier about the importance of that in Llanwern. I am very concerned about category 4, and it is one of the issues that I am looking at.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Northern Ireland manufacturers—and, indeed, metal traders—who rely on those specialist grades, including stainless steel box section, are already impacted by EU tariffs, and the additional tariffs being imposed by the Government will have an adverse effect on those manufacturing sectors in Northern Ireland. What consideration will the Government give to them?

Chris McDonald: The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on exactly the issue with which the Government are dealing at the moment, which is the interaction between our own measures and our own market and the EU measures and the EU market, and the market access that we can negotiate between the two. Unfortunately, that is the issue that is causing uncertainty for businesses such as those that he mentioned.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has mentioned the negotiations with the European Union. The elephant in the room is the fact that we would not be in this position if we had not left the European Union on the terms negotiated by the last Government, which has left us isolated and vulnerable to trade wars of this kind. The British Chambers of Commerce says that this is “self-inflicted damage to the economy”, given that “sectors rely heavily on imported steel”.

What lessons is the Minister taking from that, and from his conversations with his colleagues as they negotiate our future relationship with the European Union? We need to sort out not just matters such as the carbon border adjournment mechanism, but a sector-by-sector deal to help our British businesses in the future.

Chris McDonald: I am afraid that I am the ultimate pragmatist. I would not have wanted to start here, but starting here, I am determined that we will do the best we can.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The Minister is right to point to the uncertainty that businesses are facing, and my constituents and local businesses repeat that message to me regularly.

The Minister has indicated that there may be a chance that some of the tariffs or the categorisations will be changed. Will he undertake to come to the House and make a statement as soon as that is announced?

Chris McDonald: As soon as the measures are finalised, the Minister for Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), will want to report them to the House in the usual way.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): This week I hosted a meeting between officials from the Department for Business and Trade and representatives of Hanson Springs, a brilliant family manufacturing business in my constituency that exports across the world and whose specialised products are made from steel. I thank the Minister for his personal interest in the case. May I urge him to ensure that nothing the Government do, particularly in those negotiations with the EU, will harm brilliant British businesses such as Hanson Springs?

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend and Hanson Springs for their interaction with my officials. I know that the specific issue of 13 or 14-metre lengths of rod is a problem for him, but I can assure him that in all our negotiations, whether with the EU, India, Turkey or the United States, this Government are putting British industry first.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister says that the Government are listening to the concerns of businesses. May I be so brazen as to suggest that we need action and need it urgently, given the timescale of these changes—changes that will cripple steel-using businesses across the manufacturing, construction and infrastructure sector in my constituency, which have no domestic steelmaking industry in Northern Ireland on which to rely? Will the Minister meet businesses from Northern Ireland as a matter of urgency to discuss the devastating impact that this will have?

Chris McDonald: I shall be happy to meet businesses in Northern Ireland, as I have met businesses throughout the United Kingdom.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): This issue has raised a great many concerns in my constituency and across the Black Country. I have been working closely with my colleagues in Sandwell in particular, and we have had many meetings with local companies and communication with my hon. Friends the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) and for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes).

Hadley Industries, a large employer, is already considering downscaling its number of employees. Pargat Housewares in my constituency, another large employer, is a significant manufacturer of pots, pans and bakeware—in fact, it is one of the largest manufacturers in the UK, supplying most of our superstores and exporting. However, steel suitable for kitchenware is not manufactured in the UK in significant quantities and at competitive prices. What advice would the Minister give you give companies that are facing a 60%—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call the Minister.

Chris McDonald: I am familiar with the issue of kitchenware, which is very similar to some of the other issues that have been raised. If a particular kind of steel falls within a tariff area, not because it is made or could be made in the UK but because it is grouped in that way as part of the trade measures, the quota is designed to resolve that. If the business in question feels that there is a problem with setting the quota, I ask my hon. Friend to write to me. Alternatively, representatives of those businesses could come and meet my officials.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. If Members have prepared a long question, I suggest they cross most of it out.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): On Monday my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) asked the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), about the impact of these new steel tariffs on the defence investment plan. His answer was not particularly clear, which surprised me, given the strong representations that both he and I will have had from the Plymouth Manufacturers' Group. What conversations have the Minister and his colleagues had with the Ministry of Defence about the impact of tariffs on the DIP, and will he agree to meet me and the Plymouth Manufacturers' Group?

Chris McDonald: I should be happy to meet the hon. Lady and representatives of businesses in her area. As the Minister for Industry, I am responsible for ensuring that we have adequate productive capacity to defend the nation, and in that respect these steel measures will provide the steel that we need for defence.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his personal engagement on this matter. As he knows, time is of the essence. Businesses are already telling me that they are cancelling orders, and that these quotas and tariffs create uncertainty. I cannot understand why we would put tariffs on our own British businesses when they cannot obtain the size and grade of steel that they need, and that includes non-speciality steel in categories 1 and 7. Will the Minister apply tariff exemptions when there is no ability to buy British?

Chris McDonald: There are issues with category 1, and I am looking at that. As I mentioned before, the uncertainty is unfortunate, but my hon. Friend will understand why it is there. I am aware that some businesses have been told by their stock holders that all their steels will be subject to a tariff, but that is not always the case. I can be generous and say that stock holders are perhaps also suffering some uncertainty and want to protect their own businesses, but I ask them to look very carefully at the codes. If they need some help with that, my officials stand ready to support them.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Firms such as Hewland Engineering in Maidenhead face a 50% tariff on their specialist steel, but there is no approved British supplier to make the grades they need. That is not a steel strategy, but a tax on British manufacturing. I know the Minister understands their concerns, so will he go further and exempt categories for which there is no realistic British manufacturing or supply?

Chris McDonald: I can go further than understanding and offer some practical advice, if that is helpful. The first thing to check is whether the steels that the hon. Member mentions are made, or could be made, in the UK—the “could be made” is important. He is shaking his head, so I assume that they are not made in the UK but are caught in a category group simply because the groups are so broad, and they might represent a small part of that group. That is the purpose of the quota. If the hon. Member’s businesses feel that the quota is too small for their needs and for other businesses in the sector, they should urgently get in touch with me.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): Local manufacturers in Huddersfield have raised real concerns with me, particularly about the unintended consequences of this policy, the lack of a level playing field for raw materials and finished imports, and uncertainty around supply. Some are already seeing cost inflation in key steel outputs. Can the Minister please look at these matters again? Categories 14 and 27 have also been raised with me, and we must communicate better with our local companies.

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend mentions categories 14 and 27, and perhaps her businesses could share their views with me. She says that we must communicate better. I am absolutely determined to communicate as much as possible, so if she gets her businesses to get in touch with me and my officials, we will take their representations into account.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): That is exactly what I did on behalf of my constituent Paul Kenchington: I wrote to the Secretary of State about the specialist steel that he uses, and I have not had a reply. Why can the Minister not say today that, until we are producing this steel ourselves, he will exempt from these tariffs all the steel that is not currently made in this country? It must be simple to do that.

Chris McDonald: If it was simple, we would do it. Of course, it is not that simple, because, as I have described, the category groupings for steels are much broader than individual grids. There are 20-odd categories, covering a whole range of grids, and that is why the quota size is particularly important. If there are issues with the quotas, we must deal with them. The hon. Gentleman says that he has not had a reply to his letter, for which I apologise on behalf of the Secretary of State. I can assure him that I will get my officials to look into that immediately.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): In my constituency, Xtreme Stainless builds exhaust systems and would always want to buy British steel. The company believes it is better made, and wants to back British jobs and manufacturing, but the owner is watching firms get around the tariffs by sending finished products to the UK, which undermines British manufacturers. Could the Minister please tell me what the Government are doing to close the gap so that the tariffs protect the whole supply chain, not just the first step of it?

Chris McDonald: The issue there is category 14, because we want to protect the stainless production that we have in the UK. I am not particularly familiar with exhaust systems manufacturing, but it largely uses flat

stainless steel, which we do not make in the UK. As I mentioned, it is about making sure that we have a sufficient quota for that business, so that it does not need to pay the tariff. If my hon. Friend could share the information with me, I would be very grateful.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I am going to let colleagues in on a secret: I cannot read their minds. If you are not continually bobbing, I do not know whether you are uninterested or want to be called.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): May I ask about jobs? I appreciate that the Minister has answered a lot of questions about tariffs, but a lot of my constituents work in Trostre, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith). We have talked a lot about the £2.5 billion steel fund. Nearly two years later, sites such as Trostre are still waiting, with no commitments, no timelines and no certainty on investment. No answers were found in the steel strategy, which was published in March. Can the Minister give me a straight answer on when Welsh steel sites will see investment from the steel fund?

Chris McDonald: I can indeed give a straight answer. Welsh steel sites will see money from the steel fund when the businesses that own them make a successful application for the money. Some £1 billion of the fund currently sits in the National Wealth Fund, awaiting such proposals. Tata Steel is particularly relevant to Trostre. I cannot say whether there is a project under consideration for Trostre, but I do know that Tata is bringing forward ideas. If the hon. Lady would like to talk to colleagues at Trostre and Tata Steel, they may well be able to share any ideas with her.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for recently meeting me to discuss my two brilliant downstream steelmaking companies in Monmouthshire, CMF and STAPPERT. Can I ask him to look at their cases again? If he is meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden)—my constituency neighbour—at Llanwern, perhaps he could consult these two companies and hear exactly what their issues are.

Chris McDonald: I do not think I have a visit to Llanwern in the diary, but perhaps I will do soon enough. I am certainly happy to take another look at those cases. If there is an opportunity for my officials to have a discussion with the businesses, I would be very happy to set that up.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I recently met Littlewood Fencing, a company in my constituency that makes specialist fencing for secure and sensitive locations, and it is facing crippling increases in costs. It might be noble to try to save jobs in the steel industry, but if jobs are lost in other parts of our economy, we are not really achieving anything. It is all about the rate of change that the Government are seeking to introduce. It is clear to many Members of this House that the rate of change currently proposed is not right. Will the Minister rethink and, if necessary, pause to ensure that we do not lose jobs in constituencies like mine in order to save jobs in other parts of the country?

Chris McDonald: The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on the issue that we are all grappling with: how we manage the transition. I recognise the importance of the business in his constituency producing secure fencing. There is a supply chain in the UK that could support that, leading from British Steel through the wire drawers, but he is right: it is about managing the transition. Unfortunately, we have a hard stop at the end of this month, and we need to put something in place beyond that and manage it over the course of the next few years.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): FMC and Dynamic Metals, both of which are in my constituency, have no alternative but to import specialist steel, because if it is not made in Britain, they cannot buy in Britain. What message does the Minister have for those businesses, and will he look at changing harmonised system codes so that customs can better distinguish between generic and specialist steels?

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend puts her finger on a particular problem: the grouping together of various steels in the measures, which I recognise is an issue. As I have mentioned before, the quota is designed to solve the problem. I would appreciate it if she could share the issue with my officials; tonnage grade product specification is particularly helpful. It would be very helpful if she could share those details.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Like other Members, I have met businesses in my constituency that will be severely impacted by what is being proposed in agriculture, and they do not want to put additional costs on farmers, who are already struggling. In one of his earlier answers, the Minister said that the overall strategy of trying to increase steel production is progressing more slowly than he would like—I think he said it has taken seven months. How long does he think these changes are going to be in place?

Chris McDonald: There are two things there. Our steel strategy said that we had an ambition to increase domestic steel production from 30% to 50% of market share. I have mentioned that the Speciality Steel sale has been delayed by a few months, but that component of the UK steel market is not the largest part. There are about 1 million tonnes of capacity there, whereas British Steel and Tata Steel each produce about 3 million tonnes. I realise that we are talking about different grades, but to answer the hon. Lady's specific question: the overall capacity issue is very much about those two larger companies.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I fully support the need to buy British, but companies such as Springmasters, KM Products and Accurate Laser Cutting Ltd—all of which are based in Redditch—cannot source the grade and size of steel required for their machines entirely from the UK; in fact, most comes from the EU. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of my local businesses to hear their suggestions about how we can protect local businesses but also meet the good intention of this Government to support British steel?

Chris McDonald: I am aware of the challenges for spring steel businesses. Spring steels are incredibly difficult to produce and use high-quality, high-value steel. They

are clearly within the capability of Speciality Steel, but the business is not operating. Given the number of requests for meetings, we might do a roundtable or something similar, but there will certainly be an opportunity for my hon. Friend to speak to officials. Perhaps we can get together with the Minister for Trade.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Prototype Productions in Long Crendon, Gibbs Gears in Stoke Mandeville and Aircraft Materials in Stokenchurch are all businesses in my constituency that categorically rely on grades of steel not made here in the United Kingdom. We have heard countless examples from around the Chamber of such businesses in other parts of the country. I have heard the Minister say “if” there is a problem with quotas; I would put it to him that there quite clearly is a problem with quotas. As we approach this cliff edge, I urge him, as so many others have, to stop, pause and ensure we get this right, or jobs will be lost.

Chris McDonald: The hon. Member talks of tool steels. As I have said, this is about steels that are made or could be made in the UK. Clearly, for the steel businesses to be profitable, we need to—*[Interruption.]* Well, the phrase “could be made” is actually quite important, because the Speciality Steel business was unable to compete with subsidised steel coming in from China. If the Opposition say they want our steel strategy set by the Chinese Government, that would be why our steel industry is in the position it is. I am sympathetic to the calls from UK businesses to manage the transition, and I am trying to do that. Understandably, however, I do not believe that our steel strategy should be set by the Chinese Government.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Although I do not sound quite like the distinguished Minister, I did in fact grow up in Teesside in sight of the mighty Redcar works, which closed in 2015 with the loss of 2,000 jobs. The Conservative party did not stop that. Does the Minister agree that we finally have a Government acting to protect our steel industry?

Chris McDonald: As my hon. Friend knows, I very much have an emotional attachment to that plant, having worked there myself, and what he says is right. We can contrast the situation in 2015 with the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill that we are passing—opposed every step of the way by the Opposition—and the action we are taking on Speciality Steels. When the plant he refers to closed, I was in the business of looking for a buyer, and I was told by the Conservative Government that I had just 10 days; we have given months of support to Speciality Steels, and we are determined to see that process through.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): North Norfolk businesses, including PSS in North Walsham, have written to me to share their concerns about these tariffs. One thing that has been raised is that there are tariffs on raw materials, but not on the import of finished and machined products. This creates a bit of a perverse incentive to move manufacturing abroad, only to then re-import it and undercut British manufacturers. Has the Minister considered this unintended consequence, which could harm businesses in North Norfolk and elsewhere?

Chris McDonald: Yes, I am concerned about that. As I have said, these measures are primarily about supporting the production of steel in the UK. I do not know if this is specific to the business mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, but many of the businesses we have heard about rely on supply from the EU, and that is where our discussions with the EU—linking discussions, essentially—are so critical.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): While I am grateful for the Minister's engagement, I think both he and the House are learning the dangerous domino effect that begins when we start mucking about with tariffs. I find it unbelievable that I am placed in the position, as somebody who believes in free trade, of urging him to consider consequential tariffs on the fabricated products with which businesses in my constituency are competing in a desperate attempt to hold on to at least domestic markets, given that international markets will evaporate. My question is this: he has said that he is going to review whatever emerges at the end of this process after 12 months, but the impact will be immediate, so could he please review it after one month?

Chris McDonald: The right hon. Member is quite right that there is a 12-month review. I thank him for his engagement, particularly with Stannah Stairlifts, but also for his further suggestions to me privately about how we might manage the transition. I want to reassure him that I am looking very carefully at the ideas he has raised.

To be clear about this, I think everyone in this House believes in free and fair trade, and we all wish we lived in a world where there were no tariffs. UK Steel has welcomed these measures, but has also said it would prefer it if there were not any tariffs. Unfortunately, this is the product of the world we are in. I do not think this is “mucking about with tariffs.” Essentially, we are responding to the global trading situation, and trying to ensure we have a strategy for a viable UK industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Sir John Whittingdale, who, after hearing the answer, may wish to get into the private Members' Bills queue.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Indeed. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can Minister state what assessment he has made of the grades of steel that are simply not produced in this country? What is his message to companies such as C&M Precision Ltd in my constituency, and all those mentioned this afternoon, that face an immediate increase in their costs, because they have absolutely no alternative except to import their steel?

Chris McDonald: The Government have done a very detailed assessment of the steels that are not made and could not be made in the UK. Unfortunately, because of how the categorisations are set, some steel grades are swept up in a tariff measure along with other steels that are made in the UK. The quotas are designed to deal with that, so this is really about getting the quota level right, and that is very much part of the discussion we are having today—but I do understand the problem.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): For Northern Ireland, there is both a key sovereignty question and a key economic question. Because of the iniquity of our

being subject to EU law, we are already under EU tariffs when it comes to steel imports and quotas, paying 25% once we cross the quota. I have a simple question: can the Minister assure my steel importers that the writ of the United Kingdom will govern their imports, not the writ of the foreign EU?

Chris McDonald: The trade arrangements for Northern Ireland will be the same for steel as they are for anything else. I have already committed to meeting businesses in Northern Ireland, and if the hon. and learned Member has businesses in his constituency that would like to join that meeting, from my perspective they would be most welcome to join it.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): We have talked about large and small businesses being affected, but my constituent Joe, who is a sales director in an SME likely to be affected, is deeply concerned about his livelihood. I have a very simple question for the Minister: if he is taking on board industry feedback, will he publish detailed information on safeguard quota allocations and anticipated utilisation rates before those measures come into place on 1 July?

Chris McDonald: The hon. Member is right to bring this conversation back to the people involved in the industry. We have had a lot of discussion about steel and quotas and so on, but this is very much about people, and about the steel communities and communities, such as those in the Black Country, where there are lots of downstream users. The Government will of course publish the details as soon as they are available, but as I have said, that is very much dependent on our concurrent negotiations with the European Union.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): A specialist manufacturer in my constituency employs 26 people designing and fabricating foundation tooling systems used in piling and construction across the country. None of the steel it needs can be sourced in the UK. Can the Minister explain how a policy that taxes raw materials but exempts imports of fabricated products does anything other than make British fabricators less competitive than international rivals?

Chris McDonald: I referred to exactly that point earlier, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman could share that with the company concerned. If it needs a steel that is not made or could not be made in the UK but has been swept up because it is part of a larger product categorisation, we need feedback about the level of quota in relation to the tonnage it would normally purchase. If it is involved in piling, I imagine the tonnage could be quite high. It would be very helpful if that information could be shared with me.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister has repeatedly referred to steel that “could be made” in the UK, but these tariffs come in in two weeks' time. That is of no use to the manufacturers I have spoken to in North West Norfolk, where grade specification and volumes are simply not available. Why are the Government failing to recognise this, and why will they not guarantee that tariffs will not apply where people cannot get the steel in the UK?

Chris McDonald: Perhaps I could address the point about the phrase “could be made”, which I think is at the nub of what the hon. Member is saying. The issue here is latent capacity in the UK. Some of that steel could be made at an existing steel plant that stretches its product range, but that is not the primary concern for me. This is about latent capacity, which is where we have steel capabilities in the UK that are not operating due to unfair competition from overseas. Fundamentally, we have to make a decision to correct a market failure to ensure that those businesses are investable for the private sector and are profitable, can operate, and can deliver those products to the market.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that Northern Ireland operates a dual market economy, relying on the same supply base in GB and the Republic Ireland for structural steel sections. GB buyers are aggressively competing for the same limited pool of steel, making steel sourced from GB or imported directly from Northern Ireland substantially more expensive. How can the Minister ensure that Northern Ireland has access to safe and affordable steel when the odds are clearly stacked against us?

Chris McDonald: I want to reassure the hon. Member that I am concerned about the issue in Northern Ireland. In fact, just this morning I had a discussion about this with Short Brothers—I know he is a strong advocate of that business in this House—and I am giving careful consideration to the impact on Northern Ireland.

BILLS PRESENTED

INFANTS, PARENTS AND CARERS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Desmond Swayne presented a Bill to make provision about support for infants, parents and carers of infants, and prospective parents and carers, including provision relating to assessment of needs and to reporting requirements relating to such support; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 13).

TERMINALLY ILL ADULTS (END OF LIFE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Lauren Edwards, supported by Kit Malthouse, Mr Peter Bedford, Josh Babarinde, Andrew George, Kim Leadbeater, Peter Prinsley, Dr Simon Opher, Jess Phillips, Dr Marie Tidball, Siân Berry and Liz Saville Roberts, presented a Bill to allow adults who are terminally ill, subject to safeguards and protections, to request and be provided with assistance to end their own life; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 14).

HERITAGE PUBLIC HOUSES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mike Wood presented a Bill to require local authorities to maintain a register of heritage public houses in their area and to make provision in connection with the compilation and maintenance of such registers; to make

provision relating to planning applications in respect of public houses on such a register; to make provision about the listing of heritage public houses; to make further provision relating to heritage public houses; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 15).

HOMES AND PLANNING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Andrew George, supported by Mr Clive Betts, Gideon Amos, Hannah Spencer, Mr Lee Dillon, Caroline Voaden, Ben Maguire, Steve Darling, Grahame Morris and Steff Aquarone, presented a Bill to make provision about the availability of social, affordable, and intermediate market homes; to make provision about the powers of local authorities and local planning authorities in relation to homes and planning; to make further provision in relation to homes and planning; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 16).

FIRST COUSINS (PROHIBITED RELATIONSHIPS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Luke Evans, supported by Mr Richard Holden, Claire Coutinho and Mrs Kemi Badenoch, presented a Bill to prohibit the marriage of first cousins; to prohibit civil partnerships between first cousins; to prohibit sexual activity between first cousins; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 17).

STRATEGIC LITIGATION AGAINST PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir John Whittingdale, supported by Tom Tugendhat, Alex Sobel, Alicia Kearns, Damian Hinds, Gregory Stafford and Mims Davies, presented a Bill to make provision about the use of litigation to suppress freedom of speech.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 18).

DOMESTIC ABUSE PROTECTION ORDERS (AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Jessica Toale presented a Bill to make provision about domestic abuse protection orders; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 19).

EMERGENCY AND LIFE-SAVING SKILLS (SCHOOLS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst, supported by John Cooper, Bradley Thomas, Sarah Bool, Joe Robertson, Alison Griffiths, Lincoln Jopp and Rebecca Smith, presented a Bill to require the teaching in schools of skills relating to emergency situations, including life-saving skills; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 20).

CERAMICS (COUNTRY OF ORIGIN MARKING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Gareth Snell, supported by Adam Jogee, Dame Karen Bradley, Leigh Ingham, Dave Robertson, David Williams and Dan Aldridge, presented a Bill to require the indication of country of origin for ceramic products; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 21).

NORTHERN IRELAND TROUBLES
(CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS ETC) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Lewis Cocking, on behalf of Lincoln Jopp, supported by David Davis, Alex Burghart, James Cartlidge, Nick Timothy, Mr Mark Francois, Jim Shannon, Ian Roome, John Cooper, Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst and Katie Lam, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals relating to the circumstances in which new criminal investigations, prosecutions, inquests or inquiries in respect of Troubles-related conduct carried out in Northern Ireland may be commenced; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 22).

FIREWORKS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Patricia Ferguson, supported by Sarah Owen, Kirsteen Sullivan, Alberto Costa, Douglas McAllister, Martin Rhodes, Dave Doogan, John Grady, Dr Zubir Ahmed, Susan Murray, Maureen Burke and Tracy Gilbert, presented a Bill to make provision about fireworks; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 23).

GROUP-BASED CHILD SEXUAL OFFENCES
(MANDATORY LIFE SENTENCES) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Robert Jenrick, supported by Nigel Farage, Richard Tice, Lee Anderson, Sara Pochin, Danny Kruger, Andrew Rosindell and Suella Braverman, presented a Bill to make provision about the sentencing of offenders convicted of serious sexual crimes against children committed as part of a group; to require that whole life orders are the starting point for adult offenders; to require minimum terms for young adult and child offenders; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 24).

AUTOMATED ONLINE SOFTWARE
(ACCESS AND TRANSPARENCY) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Damian Hinds, supported by Alex Davies-Jones, Sir John Whittingdale, Pete Wishart, Liz Jarvis, Mr Bayo Alaba, Dame Caroline Dinenage, Simon Hoare, Jeff Smith and Vicky Foxcroft, presented a Bill to make provision about the registration of operators of specified automated online software; to make provision about duties on those operators with regard to the functions of that

software, including in relation to accessing online material published by persons other than the operator; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 25).

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION
(FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Alistair Strathern presented a Bill to make provision about relationships and sex education in the further education sector.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 26).

CANCER (REPORTING AND STRATEGY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Clive Jones, supported by Dr Scott Arthur, Helen Morgan, Mary Kelly Foy, Helen Maguire, Lee Pitcher, Charlie Maynard, Cameron Thomas, Mr Will Forster, Adam Jogee, Christine Jardine and Vikki Slade, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report annually to Parliament on performance in relation to specified targets and measures relating to cancer and to the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer; to require the Government to publish a strategy for improving cancer outcomes; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 27).

PLANNING (SOLAR POWER GENERATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Victoria Atkins presented a Bill to make provision about the granting of planning permission and development consent in respect of the building or installation of provision for solar power generation on agricultural land; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 28).

CHILD-LIKE SEXUAL ABUSE DOLLS (OFFENCES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Munira Wilson, supported by Alex Davies-Jones, Dame Karen Bradley, Max Wilkinson, Jess Phillips, Damian Hinds, Jess Brown-Fuller and Marie Goldman, presented a Bill to make certain acts involving child-like sexual abuse dolls an offence; to make provision for the seizure and forfeiture of such items; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 29).

COASTAL COMMUNITIES (HEALTH) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Steff Aquarone, supported by Edward Morello, Andrew George, Rachel Gilmour, Caroline Voaden and Richard Foord, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State, in exercising functions in relation to the health service, to have regard to the need to reduce inequalities between people in coastal and inland areas; to require the Secretary of State to prepare and publish a strategy for improving the health and wellbeing of coastal communities and for reducing health inequalities between people in coastal

and inland areas; to require the Secretary of State to report annually to Parliament on the implementation of that strategy; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 30).

HOSPICE FUNDING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Paul Foster presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals relating to the funding by integrated care boards of medicines and pharmacy services for patients in hospices; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 31).

WORK EXPERIENCE (SCHOOLS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

David Pinto-Duschinsky presented a Bill to make provision about work experience for pupils in secondary education.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 32).

National Security (State Threats) Bill (Allocation of Time)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the National Security (State Threats) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the Question on any Motion described in

paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(16) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(17) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a debate.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Shabana Mahmood.*)

1.35 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Let me be clear from the outset that the Opposition support the Bill and want it on the statute book, but we cannot support the manner in which the Government are seeking to pass it. This motion, for something that seeks to make a permanent change to the criminal law of our country, was laid only late on Tuesday, and with it the Government are seeking to drive through every single stage in one afternoon. The months of debate that the Bill should have had are gone, and the line-by-line scrutiny and votes on amendments in Committee have all been taken away, so the first test of this law will be in a court room, where it may well collapse. The case for these powers was made well over a year ago. The House does not exist to waive through legislation; it exists to test it and to find weaknesses before our enemies do. A motion that forbids us that duty does not strengthen the Bill but imperils it. Therefore, with regret, we will seek to divide the House.

1.36 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): I will be brief in my remarks. I regret the approach taken by the official Opposition. They know full well that this is a very tightly constructed Bill that takes forward a specific set of recommendations made by the independent reviewer of terrorism and state threats legislation. It will be fully scrutinised by this House and the other place. The reason for moving quickly, as the hon. Lady well knows, is because we need the wider power to designate bodies, which we will debate in due course, so that we can move quickly, given the threats the country faces. The need for speed, I believe, is made by recent events, and I think the Government are doing the right thing. I ask her to think again. Of course, if we must divide then so be it, but I would have expected better from someone with her experience.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Shabana Mahmood: I will not give way, given the time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Do any other Members wish to contribute? I call Sir Jeremy Wright.

1.37 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I am bound to say that the Home Secretary, for whom I have huge respect, is wrong to suggest that she cannot take interventions because of a lack of time—she has decided that there is a lack of time. I want to make one simple point to her, which my hon. Friend on the

Opposition Front Bench has adverted to. Jonathan Hall KC produced an excellent report, most of which we will all agree with, but he did that in May last year. The Home Secretary cannot have it both ways. Either this is a desperately urgent matter, in which case the Government should have brought forward legislation long before now, or it is not, in which case we should have longer than a day to consider it, should we not?

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 233, Noes 94.

Division No. 28]

[1.38 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Charalambous, Bambos
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Daby, Janet
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
De Cordova, Marsha
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Furniss, Gill
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gemmell, Alan
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hinchliff, Chris
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris

Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lavery, Ian
Lewin, Andrew
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Abtisam
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Murphy, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Niblett, Samantha
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Powell, Joe
Poynton, Gregor

Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Race, Steve
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Rutland, Tom
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Trickett, Jon
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Taiwo Owatemi and
Claire Hughes

NOES

Allister, Jim
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Berry, Siân
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra

Burghart, Alex
 Cartlidge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Davies, Gareth
 Davis, rh David (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Kearns, Alicia
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit

McVey, rh Esther
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Morrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Hannah
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
 James Wild and
 Rebecca Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

National Security (State Threats) Bill

Second Reading

1.51 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The first responsibility of a state is to protect its citizens. The security of our nation is the basis upon which our democracy, our prosperity and our way of life depend. If a state cannot guarantee the safety of its people, every other promise it makes rings hollow. Today we debate a relatively short Bill, but its brevity should not be mistaken for unimportance; it is essential to meeting the sacred responsibility of protecting this country and our fellow citizens.

This Bill comes at a time when the need is great. We live in an increasingly dangerous world—one in which many of our old assumptions no longer hold. The boundaries between war and peace have blurred; the tactics employed by hostile actors have become more sophisticated, more deniable and more insidious; and the threat has grown in scale. The director general of MI5 recently revealed that the number of individuals under investigation for state threat activity had grown by more than a third in the space of a year. After many years in which the Security Service was focused overwhelmingly on counter-terror work, it must now also respond to threats from foreign powers that are greater in number than at any time in a generation.

The nature of the threats posed by foreign powers will be known by many in this House. We have seen physical threats against individuals and property; we have witnessed attempts to interfere in and influence our democracy; and we have experienced cyber-attacks targeting both the state and the private sector that disrupt critical infrastructure and compromise sensitive data. The source of these state threats has come predominantly, although not exclusively, from three countries: Russia, China and Iran. I should emphasise that the threats from each present differently, both in scope and nature, and I will take each in turn.

The Russian state, as we know all too well, is responsible for deaths on British soil. What began with the murder of Alexander Litvinenko was repeated in Salisbury with the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal. The Russian state's wanton disregard for human life was evident in the risks it was happy to pose to British citizens, which led, tragically, to the death of Dawn Sturgess—an innocent British woman killed by the Russian state.

Putin's Russia has also sought to influence our politics, as demonstrated by the guilty plea by Nathan Gill, Reform UK's former leader in Wales, who accepted bribes for peddling pro-Kremlin narratives. Russia is also a prolific and malevolent force in cyber-space. A recent targeting of politicians, journalists, universities and civil society organisations was disrupted by our security services in December 2025, resulting in the sanctioning of eight Russian cyber-intelligence officers.

As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, our approach to China is nuanced: we will co-operate where we can and challenge where we must. There are areas on which we will engage with China, including the economy, the environment and, indeed, on certain shared security

challenges. Choosing not to engage with China is no choice at all. However, national security is the first duty of Government, and China does pose real national security threats to the United Kingdom. We have seen cyber-attacks, foreign interference, and espionage targeted at our institutions. Just days ago, MI5 and fellow Five Eyes members issued an alert warning of the threat posed by China's military intelligence services. The Hong Kong police force has also encouraged transnational repression on our soil against a community to whom we are proud to have given sanctuary.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Minister for bringing forward this legislation. I am concerned on behalf of my constituents of Chinese descent who still have families living in Hong Kong and China and who are still subject to persecution and human rights issues. The pursuit of my constituents by Chinese officials in Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland has to be stopped. What can the Minister do through this legislation to stop the pursuit by Chinese officials—clandestinely, or in whatever way it may be—of my constituents, who are law-abiding citizens, just because they happen to be Chinese and just because happen to have relatives in Hong Kong?

Shabana Mahmood: Both the National Security Act 2023 and the measures we are debating today will ensure that we have the strongest suite of measures available to us to take action against those who come after people on our soil, including dissidents from other regimes and people to whom we have given sanctuary. Transnational repression will be caught by the measures in this Bill.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): As the Home Secretary will know, this is the fifth or sixth national security-related Bill in the past few years—the most Bills on national security issues that we have seen in any Parliament. She will also know that the UK intelligence community has more powers as a result of these Bills, as well as bigger budgets and more responsibilities than ever before. I commend all those serving in our agencies for their distinguished service. However, I am concerned that there are parts of Government that are currently not covered by aspects of the oversight of our intelligence community by the Intelligence and Security Committee. I commend the excellent members of that Committee; I am a former member, so I can commend them in the House today.

It is absolutely vital that the intelligence services have independent oversight. Unfortunately, the legislation that oversees the ISC is 30 years old and 10 years old. We are having all these national security Bills, but we do not have commensurate Bills to improve oversight and accountability of our intelligence agencies. It needs to change, because we cannot have an echo chamber in the UK intelligence community. There needs to be parliamentary oversight with the power of sanction—summons and sanction. At the moment there is no power.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me first associate myself with the right hon. Gentleman's tribute to the excellent work and service of all those in our United Kingdom intelligence community, wherever they serve, and indeed all those who serve and put their lives at risk in order to keep the rest of us safe. I also pay tribute to the tremendous work done by the Intelligence and Security

Committee—one of Parliament's most august Committees—to provide vital scrutiny of our legal frameworks in this important area.

I must say to the right hon. Gentleman that, personally, as someone who signs warrants every day that are subject to both Secretary of State decision and judicial decision, I think that we have a legal framework that is sufficiently robust to provide oversight, without getting into the operational choices that must be made. Of course, these matters are always kept under review, and I take that review process seriously. If there are proposals that he wishes to make, I would be happy to discuss them with him.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): On oversight, will the Secretary of State confirm that proposed new section 33G of the National Security Act 2023, which would be added by clause 3, is not intended to limit access to justice, or prevent challenges through the courts to future decisions made under human rights principles? That seems to me to be a measure that her Government would not want to bequeath to future Governments, who might misuse the legislation.

Shabana Mahmood: I do not agree with the hon. Lady's construction of

proposed new section 33G, but I am sure that we can pick up that point in Committee, when we do line-by-line scrutiny. The Bill is intended to be read alongside all our other pieces of international and human rights legislation, and the Bill is compliant with our domestic and international human rights obligations.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): The Bill gives considerably more powers to the Home Secretary and the Government, so it results in greater Executive power. Further to earlier interventions, is she not concerned that the Executive, and this branch of the Executive, are to have much greater power, but there is no commensurate increase in bodies' accountability to Parliament for deciding what organisations and which individuals are to be sanctioned, and what the system will be for making those decisions? We have been through this process many times, going right back to the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in the 1970s. Does she not feel that there is a danger of our moving too far away from parliamentary and public accountability for the very important decision to deny liberty to various individuals, who will have difficulty challenging that legally?

Shabana Mahmood: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman almost entirely. The Executive have a responsibility to protect and maintain this country's national security, and we have to move when we see that hostile actors are employing new methods to put our people and interests at risk. We have seen an increase in hostile activity from those who are not directly related to foreign powers, but have a relationship with them. That is why we are bringing forward the designated body condition in the Bill. It rather sounds as if he questions the basis for us having counter-terror legislation, or this legislation, at all. I disagree with him on that. I think we have a suitable legal framework, under both the Terrorism Act 2000 and this new Bill, to deal with all the threats that this country faces, including those that are emerging as new ways for people to put our citizens at risk.

[Shabana Mahmood]

Let me turn to the threat posed by Iran. We are debating this Bill in the shadow of a recent surge in hostile activity by the Iranian state. In just a single year, MI5 has tracked and disrupted over 20 potentially lethal Iranian plots. These have targeted dissidents, media organisations and critics of the Iranian regime, and they pose a real and enduring threat to our Jewish community here at home.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): The right hon. Lady has already spoken powerfully about attacks on politicians, and the Prime Minister's home was recently attacked. One point she has not raised, but hopefully will come to, is the nature of the media engagement that follows attacks. Lies and distortions have been used to suggest all number of different abuses by the Prime Minister—all of them false—when this was simply a Russian-paid attack on his home. Does she agree that it is not just Russia that is doing this? PressTV and anybody who has taken money from it have been active participants in the hate-filled propaganda that we see spreading, online and offline, in our country, encouraging murder and attacks on Jewish people, and attacks on our entire democracy.

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Gentleman is right. It is incumbent on all parliamentarians to reflect on the platforms we appear on, and what those platforms are seeking to do. There will always be a balance to be struck with freedom of speech and other matters, but where activities lead people to fall foul of the law, they will be pursued with the full force of the law—whether that is this Bill, the National Security Act 2023, or any other part of our criminal legislation framework.

On the attacks on the Prime Minister's home, let me just say, factually, what happened in the criminal justice system. It was not part of the prosecution's case that there was any additional direction of that activity. That was not part of the evidence. I would not want to let that stand without making that clear about the prosecution.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Home Secretary will know that I am an admirer of hers, and we tend to agree about much. We certainly agree about the threat posed by Iran. She will be familiar with the report produced by the Intelligence and Security Committee, of which I am pleased to be a member—indeed, I am basking in the glory of the compliments that the ISC has already received—which said:

“Iran poses a wide-ranging, persistent and unpredictable threat to the UK, UK nationals, and UK interests. Iran has a high appetite for risk when conducting offensive activity and”—

this is the critical point—

“its intelligence services are ferociously well-resourced with significant areas of asymmetric strength.”

Iran is a particular threat, and the Home Secretary will well understand that the way it uses its intelligence services is entirely different from the way that we see our intelligence services in this country. I have no doubt that she is mindful of that fact in relation to the Bill. I see this Bill as quite closely associated with how we deal with Iran. Will the Home Secretary comment on that?

On a point raised by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and my right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), one way of dealing with oversight would be for the ISC to be pre-briefed by a Minister when proscription was considered, rather than it having to play catch up afterwards.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. The Bill seeks to create the legal framework by which designations will be made in future. The Bill will hopefully be approved quickly by Parliament, and I will seek to move forward with designations as quickly as possible, to deal with the threats that I am discussing in the House today.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman would agree that the fact that I have spent some time considering the different nature of the threat posed by these three states in particular shows that we are very alive to the ways in which they use their unique positions to pose a threat to us in the United Kingdom. He is right about the way in which Iran operates; it is different from how Russia and China operate. The Government have to be alive to the different type of risks posed by these three countries in particular. At the moment, those countries account for a large proportion of the hostile activities that are monitored by our security services, but those activities are not exclusive to those three countries.

On matters of oversight, I will repeat my starting position. I do think that our current framework is robust and has stood the test of time. Of course, things change, and we would review the framework all the time anyway. I repeat my general offer—I suspect that I am making it to the whole of the ISC, given how well represented it is in this debate—of a conversation to pick up any concerns that its members have. The Minister for Security and I will make sure that we consider any additional proposals fully, but I am mindful that we do not want a position in which the Government cannot act quickly, or to over-regulate what is necessarily an Executive function, as speed is often of the essence. With that understood, a sensible conversation is always welcome.

In relation to Iran, Members will be aware that two men await trial under the National Security Act for the surveillance of Jewish sites. While investigations remain ongoing, the police are exploring potential links between Iran and the spate of arson attacks directed at our Jewish community in London. Faced with this intolerable hostility, our nation has bolstered its defences. The National Security Act, brought forward by the previous Government and supported by Labour, rightly commanded support from both sides of the House. It has given our authorities new tools and provided the legal underpinning for a series of complex and sensitive investigations, and it has secured important convictions, including of two men for gathering information and conducting surveillance to assist the Chinese state.

In addition, the foreign influence registration scheme has been in force for close to a year. Russia and Iran are placed on its enhanced tier. Anyone now conducting activity on behalf of those states faces a clear choice: identify themselves and register their activity, or face the prospect of prison.

Sanctions remain a vital tool in our action against hostile states. The UK now has more than 550 sanctions against Iranian-linked individuals and organisations,

including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety. Through measures like these, we have made this country a harder target. However, as we improve our defences, our adversaries respond and change their behaviour to pose new threats to our country. That has been particularly evident in the rising use of proxy groups—criminal gangs, professional enablers and front companies that do the bidding of a foreign power, against the interests of this country, in exchange for money.

There has long been a desire to ban state-linked organisations from operating in this country, and to target those who facilitate them. That is why the Government made a manifesto commitment to deal with state-backed domestic security threats in the same way that we tackle terrorism. The question was how to create the right legal power to do so. My predecessor, now the Foreign Secretary, tasked Jonathan Hall KC, the Government's independent reviewer of terrorism and state threats legislation, with answering that question.

Mark Pritchard: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way again; she has been generous. Does she believe that the Bill sufficiently covers the areas of non-state actors and non-kinetic activity, which are being used more and more?

Shabana Mahmood: The combination of what we already have on the statute book in the National Security Act and this Bill means that all aspects of that activity will be covered. It obviously depends on how the activity presents. The Bill closes the loophole where a designated body is responsible. Where proxy groups are responsible, they will be caught by the measures in the Bill, and that activity will be liable to both prosecution and conviction.

Jonathan Hall KC examined whether tools available in our current terrorism legislation might be emulated or adapted to address state threats. He determined that we could not use the existing terror legislation to proscribe a state entity. He memorably described that as

“shopping in the wrong department.”

He said:

“For the Secretary of State to have or purport to have power to prohibit the existence of foreign State entities would be well beyond what Parliament could have intended”

when it passed the Terrorism Act. He went on to conclude that applying the power to a state entity would “appear to overstep the boundaries of the principle of non-intervention at international law.”

Instead, he proposed a new regime: a power equivalent to proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000, but specifically designed to tackle state and state-linked organisations. Through this legislation, we seek to bring that new power into law.

I will now take the House through the Bill in some detail. Clause 1 introduces a power for the Home Secretary to designate a body. It will insert new section 33A into the National Security Act 2023. Such a designation will be possible if the Home Secretary believes that a body is, or has been, involved in foreign power threat activity and that designation is necessary to protect the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.

The definition of a body is purposefully wide; it cannot be targeted at individuals, but it can be targeted at a wide range of organisations, including foreign

intelligence services, mercenary groups, front companies and criminal networks. The power to designate is of critical importance.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Bill's offences are broad enough to inadvertently criminalise routine humanitarian operations, which could pose a significant problem for non-governmental organisations operating in countries where state institutions or public bodies could become designated bodies. Although safeguards for humanitarian operations are in the explanatory notes, they are not in the Bill. Will the Secretary of State think about putting those into the Bill?

Shabana Mahmood: I do not think that the activities that the hon. Lady mentioned are caught by the Bill. We have been clear in the explanatory notes to the Bill—I refer her to paragraphs 37 and 43—that diplomatic activity, and indeed humanitarian activity, will not be caught by any of the Bill's measures. We do not want to create a regime with lots of exemptions as that would enable hostile states to try to play games with our legal framework by dressing up front organisations. I reassure her that the measures in the Bill will not apply to any humanitarian organisation going about its business as a humanitarian organisation.

If there is any doubt, I refer hon. Members to subsection (6)(d) of proposed new section 17B, which makes it clear that anything that has essentially been approved by the UK, or is part of an agreement to which the UK is a party, will not be caught. If humanitarian organisations are concerned, I urge them to talk to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—as the hon. Lady well knows, that happens regularly in the humanitarian sector. The combination of all those provisions will ensure that the activity that she wants to see continue, as I do, will not be caught by the Bill's measures.

I understand that there is some consternation from the Opposition about what I might be intending to say in the rest of my speech. If that is so, let me say first that we might not have needed an unnecessary vote on the programme motion, but I will make quick progress as I explain the thinking behind the measures.

Clause 1 also introduces a new designated body condition. Under the National Security Act, it can be difficult to secure a prosecution, as a link must be proved that runs all the way from the individual to a foreign power, but through the designated body condition more organisations will be brought to justice.

On the so-called support offence, clause 2 sets out new offences related to those new designated bodies. Again, it amends the National Security Act, adding new sections 17A to 17C. The first offence is supporting a designated body, which covers inviting or expressing support and arranging, managing or addressing a meeting in support of a designated body. The offence will be triggered when the reason for the supportive act is to prejudice the safety and interests of the United Kingdom in what is known as a prohibited purpose test, echoing the National Security Act.

Let me say again that it should be noted that there will be occasions when individuals and organisations have to engage with some designated state actors. The new designation regime will ensure that diplomats can work on behalf of this country and that humanitarian organisations can continue their lifesaving work.

[Shabana Mahmood]

The second offence is to assist a designated body. It will become an offence to materially assist a designated organisation. That includes both directly assisting such an organisation and assisting a proxy organisation acting on its behalf.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): To build on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), if a humanitarian organisation were forced to make payment to a designated organisation to do its humanitarian work, would that lead it to fall foul of the Bill, or is the Home Secretary confirming that it would not be liable to prosecution?

Shabana Mahmood: That conduct would not be caught. Again, I point the hon. Member to proposed new section 17B, where the combination of subsection (6)(b) and subsection (4) ensures that the work of NGOs is not caught by the tests set out. We have had specific advice on that point from the Office of Parliamentary Counsel, I have discussed it at length with the Attorney General's Office, and Law Officers have had a look at it. We believe that the way in which the Bill is constructed does not catch humanitarian activities. It is not intended to do so, and we have made it clear in the explanatory notes that it will not do so. Our reading of how the Bill is constructed means that it will not do so.

Let me move on to the third offence in clause 2, which is of obtaining a material benefit from a designated body. An individual is outlawed from receiving a payment or a gift from a designated body either on their own behalf or on behalf of someone else. The very act of making the agreement would also constitute a crime even if no money were exchanged and no service were provided. That would cover a hacker hired to carry out a cyber-attack, a criminal gang commissioned to conduct arson attacks on British soil and a gang recruiting thugs to do their state-directed dirty work. Those two offences—assisting and benefiting from a designated body—would carry prison terms of up to 14 years alongside the sentences they may receive for any other illegal activity conducted, with sabotage and espionage offences carrying life sentences.

To trigger the offences of assisting a designated body and of obtaining benefit from a designated body, an individual must know that they are aiding a body that has been designated or, crucially, ought reasonably to know that they are doing so. Ignorance is therefore not a defence. If a reasonable person should have been able to surmise who would benefit from such an attack, the individual will be prosecuted despite their professed ignorance. The new powers are significant—

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I was going to ask the Home Secretary later but, as she has raised the matter, perhaps I can ask her this now. On proposed new section 17C of the National Security Act and, indeed, in respect of other parts of the Bill, the knowledge of the person who may be committing an offence becomes important. Can the Home Secretary clarify—because the language in the Bill is potentially ambiguous—that the knowledge required of the person in question is that the body they are supporting or being remunerated by is a designated body? The language could be read simply to mean that the individual needs

to know that the body they are supporting is a particular body, not necessarily that they know that that body has been designated. Can the Home Secretary be clear that the language refers to knowledge of designation, not simply knowledge of the particular institution or body that the individual is supporting or being remunerated by?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before the Home Secretary responds, I remind the House that many people wish to contribute and it is just a four-hour debate.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me be very clear: it is the former of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's points. On the construction of knowing or "ought reasonably to know", obviously the "ought reasonably to know" is both a subjective test of what was known and then an objective test as to what it is reasonable to surmise based on that knowledge. We think that captures exactly the kind of activity that I hope all of us in the House can agree should meet the test for criminal sanction.

Let me make progress quicker than perhaps others might have wanted. As I have noted already, the genesis for the Bill comes from the excellent work of Jonathan Hall KC, whom I thank for the work he has completed. In May 2025, he made further recommendations regarding gaps in our state-threats legislation. The Government have accepted all his recommendations in full, and we will legislate for them all in due course, but, in the interests of the pace at which we are required to bring this vital legislation forward, that will not happen in this Bill. As was set out in the King's Speech, there will be further national security legislation in this Session.

Every day, our intelligence agencies and their law enforcement colleagues make this country safer for their presence. They do so, however, facing a rising challenge. The threat from terrorism is growing and, at the same time, we face foreign powers acting with greater hostility than we have seen at any time since the cold war. In the face of the growing threat, it is essential that we equip those we expect to protect us with the tools they need to do the job at the moment that they need them the most. The need for the Bill is therefore great. It gives us a new and powerful tool to tackle hostile states and those who act on their behalf.

I end with a request to the House. We do not just require this Bill; we require it as quickly as possible. For that reason, the Government have promised to fast-track the legislation through both Houses. While we must debate it fully and rigorously, and I know that we will, I hope we can work together in the pursuit of a shared ideal, and one that is greater than our political differences: our solemn duty to protect our country. I hope that, today, the whole House can unite around the first and most sacred responsibility of us all. With that, I commend the Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

2.23 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): We support the ambitions in the Bill, we want the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to be designated, and we want the Bill on the statute book, so the Government

will find no enemies on our Benches today—only an Opposition determined to ensure that this law protects our people and our country. That is not a cause that belongs to those on one side of the House alone.

The Government are right to bring forward this legislation, but they must now have the courage to get it right. The head of MI5 warned us that state-based threats have risen by more than a third in a single year, and that since 2022 our security services have disrupted more than 20 Iran-backed plots to kidnap or kill on British soil. That is 20 plots in our country, and against people who came to this country precisely because they believed it lay beyond the reach of the regimes they had fled.

There is a national emergency of antisemitism in our country. Jewish families, many of whose parents and grandparents came to these shores fleeing persecution, now find themselves looking over their shoulders once more. They have endured threats, intimidation and violence on a scale that this House swore we would never see again, and Jewish lives have become smaller. The Bill is a step towards ending that, because much of the activity is fomented, funded and directed from beyond our borders.

In the face of that national emergency, and attacks on our Jewish communities, a Bill that confronts hostile state activity on British soil is not just welcome but overdue, because a hostile state is not a gang or a terrorist cell. It poses a different challenge, operating through proxies, the hired gun and the useful idiot, recruited to sow chaos on our streets—but all backed by a foreign state with a flag, an embassy, a seat at the United Nations, and resources beyond the reach of most terrorist groups. That is what makes this Bill so difficult, and why it demands such care.

If the Bill is found wanting, it will handicap our police and the security services in their work—work that is largely unseen and for which they are too rarely thanked. Those officers deserve a Parliament ready and willing to give them the tools required for the task. That is what the Bill is for and why, in principle, it is right.

But—I am sure the whole House heard the “But” coming—the Bill has gaping deficiencies. It was laid in the House at the end of last Tuesday, and the Government want to carry out all its stages in one sitting by the end of today. A law on how we confront the gravest threat, short of outright and declared war, is being published, debated and railroaded through in a matter of days. That is a serious point, not a procedural complaint, because if we get the scrutiny wrong, our country will pay the price. We exist to find the weaknesses before our enemies do, and the Bill is meant to protect more people.

More than a year ago, Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, set out in detail why this sort of legislation was needed, and the Government accepted all his recommendations. But then we saw nothing for a year. When the House is told there is no time to get this right, let me be clear that there was time—14 months, to be exact. There was not the will to use it, until a single day was chosen for reasons that have nothing to do with the tempo of the threat.

I have called for this legislation for years, so no one will accuse us of wishing to delay it, but I say to the Secretary of State with complete candour that the threat

did not arrive in a hurry and it will not be beaten by rushing today. There is no prize for being first to the statute book with a law that fails in the first courtroom that tests it. A Bill passed fast but built wrong is not a blow to hostile states; it is a gift to them. That is why we have tabled 13 amendments, not one of them to stall the Bill or to blunt it, but all to better protect us.

I will take the House through the amendments in Committee, but let me now name the gravest gaps, so that we go into this first debate with our eyes open. First, extraordinarily, the Bill is gentler on hostile states than the law currently is on terrorists. Under the Bill as drafted, to convict a person who, for example, supports the IRGC, the Crown must clear a hurdle that it does not face when prosecuting someone for support for the very terrorist groups that the IRGC arms and funds. The IRGC, the world’s biggest sponsor of terrorism, is being handed protection in law that the terror proxy is denied. I can find no version of that argument that survives being said out loud.

It should not be harder to prosecute the body that trains, funds and directs the terrorists than to prosecute the terrorist themselves. The provision on “prohibited purpose” sets a higher threshold, which lawyers for hostile actors will delight in. There is no reason beneficial to the UK for anyone to be engaging with the IRGC, so our amendments would simply bring the offence in line with the Terrorism Act 2000, from which it was copied and then weakened by the Government. The Secretary of State has just said that she wants hostile states to be treated the same way as terrorists, but that is not the case in this legislation.

Secondly, the Bill risks making Britain a launchpad for hostile acts against our friends—a state terror hub. A cell that conspires here, be it in Manchester or London, while directing its activity at Baghdad, Beirut, Berlin, Brussels or even Hong Kong will slip the net because the harm was meant for another state’s streets and not ours—it is not prejudicial to the safety of the UK. That is not just a hole in our law but an affront to our allies. Britain will not become a safe harbour for plots against our friends due to inaction from our side, and that is why we have tabled an amendment to close that gap.

Thirdly, as drafted, the Bill does not give the police the power to stop state-backed threats before they are enacted and therefore to secure a prosecution. Our terrorism law lets us intervene while an attack is still being planned, and that is among the most important powers our counter-terrorism police have. This Bill has no equivalent, so we could be powerless to charge a person who plans to assist the IRGC or another terrorist state organ unless they act. Our security services do not wish to clear up after plots; they wish to stop them and prosecute beforehand.

Fourthly, the Bill has not learned the hardest lesson of the last 20 years, which is that the most common danger that our security services have to deal with is no longer the directed plot but the lone individual who absorbs a hostile body’s propaganda and acts on it without specific direction. A hostile state brings sophistication and reach to its propaganda, yet the Bill catches only those commissioned and instructed, rather than those who are inspired by the climate created by the hostile state. It guards us against the plot that is ordered, but leaves us open to one for which no order has been given.

[Alicia Kearns]

I will press the detail of these points in Committee, but I raise them now because they go to the heart of whether the Bill will work. I am afraid that Foreign Office lawyers, Home Office lawyers and Home Office officials have been unable to reassure me on any of these points. In fact, their answer—[*Interruption.*] If the Home Secretary wishes to intervene and clarify where I am wrong, she is very welcome to, but her own officials have said that it is “likely” the Bill may cope with these issues. I am not interested in “likely”. If someone is a traitor and they betray our country by supporting a hostile state, I want to make sure that they will be able to be prosecuted. Not one Government official has been able to reassure me or say that our concerns are wrong. I am glad that the Home Secretary of State finds that amusing. She is still very welcome to intervene.

Mark Pritchard: The shadow Minister is making an excellent contribution, as always, and I completely agree with her. I support the Bill, but I think it is thin. I also support the former Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), and the comments about legal ambiguity. That runs through the whole Bill.

The Home Secretary talked about diplomatic cover, saying that diplomats will not be affected by this, yet it is public knowledge that intelligence officers from certain countries operate under diplomatic cover. For example, if an intelligence officer from an embassy in the United Kingdom gave a great big bag of cash to a small criminal—I will not mention where they might be from—and said, “Go and commit some sabotage,” or “Go and commit some arson,” how would that be prosecuted in the courts? How is the Crown Prosecution Service going to disaggregate that? It would have to say, “This bit we can prosecute, but the other bit, the important bit, we cannot.”

Alicia Kearns: The reality is that an individual such as that would not be captured, because they would have diplomatic protections under the Vienna conventions. I admit that I have not been able to find an amendment that would correct that. That is why we have scrutiny of the House, because the shadow Front Bench is not the sole arbiter of where the gaps are. We would have been able to do this if we had had more time.

However, I will use this as a chance to touch on the fact that there is a protection in the Bill that if a person acts

“for or on behalf of, or holds office under, the Crown, or is in Crown employment”,

they are protected against any interactions they may have with the IRGC. However, there is a slight concern, because that is followed by:

“(whether or not they engage in the conduct in that capacity).”

We would all like to say, hand on heart, that no one who works for our country as a civil servant—a Crown servant—would ever betray us, but technically, under this legislation, we could not prosecute anyone who did so, even if they did so outside their official capacity and were therefore genuinely working to abet another organisation. Again, if the Home Secretary would like to clarify how we would prosecute rogue civil servants, I would be happy to take an intervention from her—but there isn’t one.

The Government decided that it was wise to attempt to pass such vital legislation in just one day, but we think that scrutiny is important because the Bill needs to work as well as it can. It is littered with omissions. I have already set out some of them. Additionally, Jonathan Hall said that we should give powers to the police to strip passports at the border, but the Government have not included that. It was proposed that there should be serious police protection orders, but they have removed them. We are gifting defences to would-be perpetrators, and the Bill should not be left as it is. These examples are only the gaping holes I could find in the two and a half days and late nights that I was given to find issues and table amendments.

There is one more thing that the Government and the House must hold in mind as we fix our gaze on Tehran. This power is rightly organisation agnostic. We must not write a law for the IRGC alone. We are writing a law for every hostile state organ that comes after it, and the next may look nothing like the last. I think of the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist party, of whose reach I have spoken often, and I hope the day comes when the Government turn this power on it. I doubt that that will happen, but I set out that ambition. That day will come only if we build this Bill for the second designation, the third and the fourth.

As drafted, this legislation has been written with a single, already sanctioned organisation in mind, and that shows. There is no reference to sanctions read-across in the Bill because the IRGC is already sanctioned. The Government said, “We don’t need to do a read-across for sanctions because the IRGC is already sanctioned.” I am not just looking at the IRGC. There are more organisations that will need to be designated in future. The law must fit not just one adversary but all. Otherwise, it is a single-use power dressed up as a meaningful law.

We support the principle of this Bill without reservation, and we will support it on Second Reading, but we will support it in the right way, with scrutiny, attention and determination to ensure that a rushed process does not result in us not meeting the scale of the threats we now face. It is vital that the Government engage today in good faith and listen to Members on all sides. Their failure so far to accept any amendments does not give me cause for optimism, but there is still time for them to accept some. The delay of the last 14 months should not be undone by haste today, because a half-built Bill will not redeem that time; it will simply compound the danger.

2.36 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The world has clearly entered a new era of geopolitical volatility, with technology and strategic competition for resources driving an increasingly contested and competing world. This has not just happened since July 2024. It has been on the horizon for a good many years, and that intensifying and escalating rivalry between states is now the new normal. The United Kingdom must adapt to this new world, not cling to a dying world order, and this Bill is the latest recognition from the Government that they must and will adapt and respond, and that they will always put the national security of the UK first.

Today, I will centre my remarks on the state threats we face, on the Bill and on the wider response that is needed to tackle those state threats. The three greatest

state threats facing the United Kingdom are from Russia, China and Iran, and they each pose a distinct and unique threat. Only this week it has been confirmed that Russian proxies set the Prime Minister's house and car on fire. We need to urgently grasp the seriousness of that. It was abhorrent political violence targeted against the elected leader of the United Kingdom—our country—but that was not all. The individuals spread disinformation, whipped up community tensions and paid for far right posters to be put up and for “Stop Islam” graffiti to be sprayed. We must not tolerate this. That was not an isolated event. We have heard about the assassination of Litvinenko, the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal, the attack on the warehouse in east London in March 2024 by the Wagner Group and many other suspicious attacks on these shores. These include the cyber-attacks on Jaguar Land Rover, on Marks & Spencer and on the British Library, which still has not recovered from the attack several years ago.

In October 2025, the director general of MI5, Ken McCallum, said that state threats had risen by a third over a year and were now equal to or even greater than the threat of terrorism. In the last year alone, there has been a 35% increase in state threat activity. For example, between 2022 and 2025, the UK prevented 20 Iran-backed plots, all of which were potentially lethal threats. Meanwhile, Chinese espionage and cyber-attacks are a continual threat. With China's thousand grains of sand theory, every piece of information, no matter how small or seemingly unimportant, is of value. In May 2024, the director of GCHQ said that the service “devotes more resource to China than any other single mission” and that China poses a “genuine and increasing cyber risk” to the UK.

Those three countries present three different ideologies and three different strategies, but they all represent an intensifying and rapidly evolving threat to the United Kingdom. The Bill is another important step following the critically important National Security Act 2023 to protect the United Kingdom from these state threats. It will introduce a new power to designate bodies involved in foreign power threat activity, as we have heard, and create a new offence of supporting, assisting or benefiting from designated bodies. Of course, that follows the review by Jonathan Hall KC into whether existing terrorism powers could be used to address state threats. He found that the terrorism proscription charges would not be appropriate, so instead this legislation will now designate bodies, including proxies, such as the IRGC or the Wagner Group.

It was clear from the inquiry by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy into the China spy case that while the 2023 Act was a big step forward, the ever-evolving threat landscape means that it would need to evolve, be improved upon and be amended, just as we are doing today. I am pleased that the Government have taken up the recommendation and acted in the national interest. The designation of certain bodies should and must send a clear message to our adversaries that the person will be held responsible for it, with a maximum of 14 years in prison for such an offence.

It is slightly unusual for a Bill to be expedited in this way, but I recognise the urgency and thank the Department for its continued engagement with the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. However, I do have

one area of concern. The impact assessment outlines a potential long-term consequence that I would like to focus on. The assessment says that a long-term impact may be “Detrimental impact of foreign policy objectives/bilateral relationships”.

On the risks to bilateral relationships, my immediate thought is, of course, China. The Chinese state does not take kindly to accusations of espionage, as we saw with the collapsed China spy case whereby, under the last Conservative Government, the deputy National Security Adviser was unable to describe China as the enemy due to Government policy, despite the security threat—this tricky tightrope that we continue to have to walk. We have to engage with China. Its economic might and, quite frankly, our dependence on it, which we have to reduce in the long term, means that ignoring China is not an option, but how does the Minister plan to mitigate the risk to our national security while avoiding damaging that relationship? It seems that the contradiction here is yet to be fully resolved. Could the Minister assure me that there are clear contingency plans for an incident like that and that all civil servants, police forces and intelligence services are clear on the Government's position regarding China?

I am pleased that this Labour Government have already taken a raft of measures to keep us secure and safe, with today being the latest piece of legislation to meet the moment. Of course, there will be other piece of legislation because the threats will become greater and even more diverse. The Representation of the People Bill, the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill and the Bill before us are all interlinked and should be seen as a co-ordinated effort, but there is more to be done.

We need to explain this very real threat to the public and build resilience in our institutions and businesses, and throughout the country for each and every individual. We need a national conversation with the public because the Government cannot do this alone. In this new era of state threats, legislation is crucial, and the Government have an integral role in keeping us all safe, but so does the public. We need to explain that and not shy away from the realities before us.

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

2.42 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I want to begin by making clear that the Liberal Democrats support the Bill. Our country faces co-ordinated hostile campaigns by state-sponsored and state-linked actors who actively undermine our democracy, terrorise our citizens and erode our core values. The Home Secretary has referenced Iran, China and Russia; we know that in future there will be others.

The convictions that we have seen in recent days for Russian-linked attacks on our Prime Minister underline the imperative that we act with urgency. The two men convicted of these attacks were recruited online by a Russian-speaking handler, and a BBC investigation found evidence that the handler has links to the Russian regime. GCHQ director Anne Keast-Butler recently warned us of the rising threat from Russia. She referenced Russia targeting critical infrastructure, our democratic processes, supply chains and public trust, as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western)

[Max Wilkinson]

referenced. Sir Richard Moore, the former head of MI6, has warned that Putin is using sabotage, cyber-attacks and arson to be

“disruptive, distracting and intimidating to those of us who are supporting Ukraine”.

The Bill is an important step towards ensuring that our security and law enforcement agencies have the powers they need to identify, disrupt and deter those who seek to threaten the safety, sovereignty and democratic integrity of the United Kingdom. The cases and incidents referenced by the Home Secretary form part of a broader and deeply worrying pattern of events that seek to undermine our freedoms and our liberal democracy. It is right that we take measures today to better defend ourselves.

The reality is that threats to the United Kingdom from foreign states are evolving rapidly. They are no longer confined to traditional espionage; today, they include foreign interference in our political system, cyber-operations, disinformation campaigns, sabotage and, at the most extreme, assassination attempts. In the past year alone, individuals have been convicted of spying on Hong Kong dissidents on behalf of China, and a journalist was stabbed on behalf of Iran, in addition to the convictions for the attacks on the property of our Prime Minister.

We have seen convictions of individuals for carrying out an arson attack on a Ukrainian-linked warehouse on behalf of the Russian Wagner Group. As the Home Secretary reminded us, we should not forget that Russian threats predate the invasion of Ukraine. It is now eight years since the chemical weapons attack in Salisbury, which killed Dawn Sturgess, hospitalised others, including the Skripals, and had the potential to harm thousands more due to the potency of the chemical agent used. Foreign powers are increasingly outsourcing operations to proxies and state-linked organisations. The evolving threat landscape exposes a critical gap in our legal framework.

The Liberal Democrats have long called for decisive action to tackle the threat posed by hostile state actors, including the IRGC. Time and again, we have been disappointed by the failure of successive Governments to act with the required speed. The previous Conservative Government referenced the threat and suggested that they would act, but ultimately they did not. Even after Jonathan Hall KC recommended these powers over a year ago, progress has been regrettably slow, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), said.

Meanwhile, the threat has not stood still. While the Government may be preoccupied with questions about leadership, the responsibility in this House is clear, and it is a positive that despite that, the Government are bringing forward the legislation today. We must now act to protect the safety and freedoms of the people we serve and the integrity of our democracy, because when it comes to matters of national security, the unity in the House today is something that we should welcome.

Existing counter-terrorism legislation was never designed to deal with hostile state actors, as Jonathan Hall KC said. He concluded that there are strong grounds for

introducing a new classification power that is equivalent to proscription but specifically designed to address state threats. Crucially, he noted that such a power should sit alongside existing tools, such as sanctions, rather than attempt to replace or distort counter-terrorism law.

The Bill provides a framework to address those challenges. It gives the Government the tools they need to keep pace with an increasingly complex and hostile international environment, and it equips the Government to address future threats from state actors if and when they arise. That is reassuring, particularly given the behaviour that the Home Secretary referenced earlier from the three states mentioned, but of course there will be others in future.

Of course, as the Bill progresses quickly today, it will be right for this House to scrutinise its provisions carefully, particularly to ensure that safeguards and oversight are put in place and that matters of proportionality are addressed. But the Liberal Democrats will support the Bill today. We hope that it will pass and make swift progress.

2.47 pm

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I want to begin by acknowledging what many colleagues across this House will believe: when a Government ask Parliament to extend their powers in the name of national security, scrutiny is not obstruction; it is our duty, as has been said already on the Opposition and Government sides. Civil liberties, the right to dissent, and the freedom to campaign, to report and to advocate—these are the very values that distinguish us from the states whose hostile activities this Bill is designed to confront. I know the Government understand that and, equally, I know that colleagues across the House will hold these expectations firmly.

The threat facing the United Kingdom from hostile foreign states and their proxies is very real—we have heard some examples already in today’s debate—and it is growing, and our existing legal framework has not kept pace with it. I want to take the opportunity to endorse strongly what my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said about the need for us to have a public conversation about the very real dangers that our democracy faces.

In 2025, the director general of MI5, Sir Ken McCallum, reported a 35% increase in state threat activity from the previous year. Over that same period, MI5 tracked more than 20 potentially lethal Iran-backed plots on British soil. We have seen espionage threatening and targeting our Parliament, our universities and our critical national infrastructure. We have seen arson, surveillance and physical violence commissioned by foreign states, and we have seen those states hide behind proxies precisely because our current laws make it easier for them to do so.

Following the start of the conflict between Iran and the US and Israel in February, there have been a number of attacks on Iranian and Jewish targets in the UK thought to be linked to Iranian proxy groups. Those include an attempted arson attack at the London premises of Iran International—a Persian language news channel opposed to the regime in Tehran—an arson attack on a synagogue in Finchley, and the stabbing of two Jewish men in Golders Green.

In a statement on tackling antisemitism on 5 May this year, the Prime Minister acknowledged that one line of inquiry was whether a foreign state had been behind some of these attacks. He said that such “malign threats” from Iran or other states “will not be tolerated” and that the Government would fast-track legislation to deal with them. The Bill before us today is a result of that commitment and it is something that I fully support.

As has been said, the National Security Act 2023 was a significant step forward, but as Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of state threats legislation, concluded in his May 2025 report, there remain gaps, particularly in our ability to disrupt proxy organisations acting on behalf of foreign powers, and the Bill seeks to fill those gaps. At its heart, as has been discussed, is a new designation power for the Home Secretary, equivalent to the proscription power that exists for terrorist organisations under the Terrorism Act 2000, but applied to bodies engaged in state threat activity. Crucially, the Bill also covers the aliases and proxy names through which hostile states so often seek to obscure their operations.

These are serious powers and they must come with serious safeguards. The Bill has been drafted to be compatible with the European convention on human rights, and particularly article 10 on freedom of expression, and I welcome that, but compatibility is a floor and not a ceiling. I urge my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to ensure that the definitions of “support” and “assistance” are applied with precision and proportionality, because the offences created in the Bill can, by their nature, reach into areas of ordinary civic life, including journalism, academic research and political advocacy.

I also want to raise a particular Welsh dimension. As well as the security services who work day and night to keep us safe, so too do our armed forces and our police officers. As the Bill progresses, I wish to place on the record my continued support for capital city policing status for Cardiff, with the resources to match the unique security and civic responsibilities that come with being a capital city. I urge my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to engage seriously with that as the legislation progresses and comes into force.

Our constituents ask us to take tough decisions and to ensure that we exercise our judgment responsibly to ensure that our nation is protected. I believe that the measures in the Bill, taken together, will help to keep my constituents safe as it will make the operating environment for foreign intelligence services and their proxies much tougher. I support the Bill because the threats it addresses are real and demand a response. I do so with clear expectations that designation powers are used, as has been said, on solid evidence and building on established legal frameworks, that enforcement is proportionate and that civil liberties are treated as central to the legitimacy of the law, not as an afterthought.

My constituents will be reassured to understand that the Bill provides that designation decisions will be agreed by Parliament, that it will be annually reviewed for efficacy by the independent reviewer of state threats legislation, and that individuals will have clear rights of appeal and access to independent review. These are important and welcome safeguards.

We can be strong against those who threaten us, but we can also be strong in defence of the democratic

values they are trying to undermine. The Bill, properly applied, will do all those things, and it is for those reasons that I am supporting it today.

2.52 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to make some brief comments about this legislation. I agree fully with what the Government are trying to achieve; I just do not agree with the way they are doing it. I will not repeat the arguments for why we need the legislation, as we have heard them from both sides of the House and I agree fully with what has been said. I benefited from the national security measures when I was in government, as I am sure will the new Minister for Security—I welcome her to her place.

When we need to pass this kind of legislation, there is a consensus across the House, but we need time to properly scrutinise it. I say gently to the Minister for Security that the business managers could have set aside more time for Second Reading and perhaps a general debate to follow, with then some time in Committee to scrutinise the Bill properly, looking at amendments and deciding what might improve the Bill. It would be better for everybody if they knew that the Bill had been properly stress-tested.

I say to the Security Minister and to the Home Secretary, who is no longer in her place, that I genuinely want them to succeed. I am not somebody who wants to see Ministers fail because we are from different parties. I benefited from that when I sat on the Treasury Bench and had similar support from the Opposition, but I never expected the Opposition just to accept that what I was saying was correct and accurate; I always expected there to be scrutiny, and I welcomed it. The report by Jonathan Hall was published over 12 months ago, so there is no need to pass the Bill in one day. It could have been introduced and considered at many times over the past 14 months.

When I was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I frequently had to take legislation through in one day, because devolved matters could not be considered in Stormont while there was no Executive. When we took legislation through in one day, we spent a lot of time working with the Opposition and interested stakeholders to ensure that they understood why we were taking it through and what it meant, and to listen to them about where improvements could be made.

I regret enormously that the Home Affairs Committee, which I chair, has been offered only a briefing on the legislation after today, so our Committee members will not be briefed by officials until after the Bill has passed all stages in this House. That is very disappointing. It is a shame that the Home Secretary is so far refusing to appear before the Committee before the summer recess for her regular session. I deeply regret that and I warn the Security Minister that the Committee will look at this in detail, because we need to make sure that scrutiny has happened.

The Security Minister will recall that during the covid pandemic we did not always have time to scrutinise the legislation that the Government were taking through. As a member of the governing party, I was concerned about that, but as an Opposition Member, she was incredibly concerned about the lack of scrutiny, and it has to be said that the Government did not always get things right.

[Dame Karen Bradley]

Having made those points, I have a couple of questions for the Minister about the substance of the Bill. First, I am not clear about how the various regimes—sanctions designation, the FIRS regime and proscription, which does not apply in many cases—are going to work together, so it would be helpful to understand how she envisages these issues fitting together. I appreciate that she is new to her role and she may be asking her officials the same questions, but it is important that we test the new provisions against the reality of what has been going on in the world. We must check that they will actually work and that the Crown Prosecution Service will be prepared to take cases, because it is only worth having this legislation if law enforcement and others are prepared to use it and legal action comes from it.

My final point is about future-proofing. We have talked about evolving threats. The fact that the Government are introducing the Bill three years after the National Security Act 2023, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) took through when he was Security Minister, shows how threats evolve. I know that he will have done as much as was possible at that time, but things have evolved. How confident is the Minister that the Bill is future-proof? How confident is she that the powers that I am sure this House will end up giving to the Secretary of State today will not be misused if, in the future, there is someone else sitting in the Home Office as Home Secretary? That person may have a different agenda and may not agree with the consensus that there is in this place today, and they may want to use these powers for ill. Is the Minister confident that these powers cannot be misused in the future?

2.58 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I pay tribute to the previous Security Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), for his tireless work to get us to this position, debating a much-needed Bill to tackle the state threats we face. As our new Defence Secretary, he will continue to hear from me—perhaps even more than before—on the need to match the urgency with which we are dealing with hostile states in today's legislation, with the largest possible uplift in defence spending.

I welcome the new Security Minister to her place. She is a long-standing friend and ally of mine from our time together on the Labour party's national executive committee, as indeed is the Home Secretary, who is no longer in her place but who gave an excellent speech to introduce the Bill. I welcome the Security Minister to her position and look forward to her bringing her wealth of experience to the debate.

I have been campaigning for the Government to take more action against the Iranian regime and its proxies and their activities in the UK for many years. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; before being elected to this House, I campaigned on this issue in my then employment as director of the organisation We Believe in Israel.

I wrote to the Home Office last year, calling on it to follow Australia's lead in designating organisations such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as state sponsors of terrorism. The Bill clearly is not intended to specify particular states, although three states and particular

organisations have been mentioned, but it gives the Government the powers to facilitate such a move. The Bill itself and any proscription measures—[*Interruption.*] Sorry—we are not supposed to call them proscription measures. The Bill itself and any measures that it takes to deal with such organisations have my wholehearted support.

I was elected on a Labour manifesto that recognised the key duty of Government to keep their people and the country safe. That foundational pillar ought to motivate every Member of the House to support the proposed legislation we are debating. This Bill is a necessary response to the growing and evolving threat posed by hostile states to our freedom, our democracy and our way of life. According to the director general of MI5, MI5 tracked more than 20 potentially lethal Iranian-backed plots in 2024. The IRGC is Tehran's prime weapon in exerting influence here in the UK and in many other countries. That influence has targeted the British Jewish community to devastating effect. We have seen proxy groups carrying out a horrific spate of arson attacks designed to terrorise our Jewish communities and normalise antisemitic hate. These are not just attacks on British Jews; they are attacks on the values that we all hold dear as a nation.

Jewish community leaders, including the Chief Rabbi, have demanded robust action to take on the threat that Iran's proxy campaign of terror poses to British Jews. Today, our Labour Government are heeding those demands and continuing to stand with Britain's Jewish community. This Bill empowers Ministers to disrupt and deter the activities of state and state-linked entities, as well as those working with them, that target and terrorise British civilians. Such a power was recommended by the independent reviewer of state threats legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, as the best way for the Government to achieve their manifesto commitment of dealing with terrorism and adopting legislation to deal with state-based security threats.

As Jonathan Hall KC has made clear, traditional proscription is not the appropriate way to deal with state-linked entities due to the constraints of international law, which prevents the British state from banning the existence of a foreign state entity. As someone who has previously called for IRGC proscription to be considered, I am confident that this measure goes just as far as proscription to prevent hostile foreign actors from advancing their malign interests here in the UK. It gives Ministers flexible powers to target these organisations without legal constraints that hold us back from taking the right action under existing frameworks.

The Bill does not designate any organisations as state threats to national security. Instead, it will give the power to Ministers to make any decisions based on the intelligence to which they have access. I am aware that the Government do not comment on individual proscription decisions, but I would like to take this opportunity to call on the Government—hopefully for the final time—to use a designation against the IRGC to keep British Jews and Iranian refugees and dissidents resident in the UK safe, and to clamp down on the brutal and oppressive machinery of the Iranian regime.

The legislation before us is not just bad news for Iran; other hostile countries will be set back by the Government's robust action. The Secretary of State mentioned actions by Russia and China. It was less than a decade ago that

Russian operatives carried out a Novichok attack here on British soil. More recently, just two years ago, the Wagner Group, which was already proscribed as a terrorist organisation, co-ordinated an arson attack on a warehouse providing critical aid to our gallant allies in Ukraine.

Just this week, it was revealed that appalling arson attacks on the Prime Minister's home were linked to Russian actors. Whatever other disagreements we may have, I know the House will stand united on this matter, with the Prime Minister and against what a former MI6 chief has described as attempts by Vladimir Putin to intimidate British people on British soil.

Across the world, regimes with values diametrically opposed to our tolerant, democratic society clearly want to make the United Kingdom and its citizens suffer for our values and the role that we play in supporting countries such as Ukraine. Wherever that threat arises, the Government have a duty to defend against it, and today they are stepping up to the plate and doing just that.

This legislation is a welcome step forward in equipping the Government to handle the dangerous threats faced in Britain in 2026. By supporting this Bill, we are supporting the safety of British citizens, particularly British Jews, and opposing a tyrannical regime that is hellbent on disrupting our way of life. It gives us the tools to confront those who seek to terrorise, divide and harm our society, and I urge colleagues across the House to support it.

3.4 pm

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I pretty much wholeheartedly endorse everything said by the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst). Let me begin by declaring my interests, as set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, including those relating to my role as the chair of the United Arab Emirates all-party parliamentary group.

I will not restate the arguments for this legislation in the first place, as they have been made eloquently by many other Members. Suffice it to say that we have seen in our lifetimes the nature of the threats facing the United Kingdom evolve from being primarily state-based, to terrorist-based after 9/11 and 7/7, and to the hybrid of grey zone warfare that we are all familiar with. Many of us struggled with and sought to address that issue when we were in government, not least when I was the Deputy Prime Minister. I sought to co-ordinate across national resilience and security and international relations. I worked closely with Members of this House, including the former Security Minister, my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat).

Given that this is a debate on Second Reading, I wish instead to use the limited time available to me to make three points in relation to the application of the powers under the Bill—and, indeed, the inability to use powers under the Bill. The first point relates to Iran and the IRGC. As Members will know, for many years this House has debated whether and how to deal with the IRGC. The essence of the problem has always been that it is not just a conventional non-state terrorist organisation; it is part of the Iranian state, but it also operates through military structures, intelligence functions, cyber-capabilities, proxy militia and criminal intermediaries. As I read this Bill, and as the Government have strongly indicated, I think that is precisely the sort of body or

network of bodies that this legislation appears designed to address. This really does matter, for the reasons set out by the hon. Member for North Durham.

In Hertsmere, I have the privilege of representing one of the largest Jewish communities in the country. For that community, this is not just an abstract debate about legal architecture; it is real. It is about whether people feel safe at synagogue. It is about whether parents feel confident in sending their children to Jewish schools. It is about whether community centres, charities and places of worship can operate without fear.

The Jewish community has long seen the malign role of Iran and its proxies. After the terrible spate of recent attacks, they live in a different world—one in which fear and intimidation have deepened and intensified near to breaking point. I therefore hope that the Government genuinely understand that fear and that they will use the powers granted by the legislation to act and to act fast.

The second area I will touch on relates to the question of ideological movements that may intersect with state-threat activity. I urge the Government not to treat ideological extremism, particularly Islamist extremism and state-threat activity, as entirely separate worlds. We know that the hatred unleashed on the streets of this country often finds its source in Islamist extremists, who have nothing but contempt for the values of this country but who are adept at using our openness and our institutions to undermine us. In that way, a mutual interest is created between this hateful ideology and hostile states. We have foreign funding, ideological influence, proxy activity and hostile state interests overlapping. This Bill rightly targets foreign states and agents, but we must look at the broader ecosystem too.

Dame Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Select Committee recently looked at new forms of radicalisation and extremism, and we were very struck by how things can be looked at through an ideological lens or not, and that sometimes things fall through the cracks in the middle because they are not looked at as a whole. Does he agree that the Bill could present an opportunity to address that issue?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I totally agree, and it is dangerous for this country that there is a mutuality of interests among extremists who do not share our values and hostile states who are opposed to us. This Bill should seek to deal with that overlap. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood is in certain places backed by foreign states and has an equally subversive agenda here in the UK. Although its relationship with violence on our streets is often more subtle and obscured, the threat to our social cohesion and democratic fabric is no less severe. We have seen in recent months the United States Government designate various regional branches of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist organisations, and an excellent article by Lord Godson highlighted today how many European states are taking steps to address this issue. The west is waking up to this reality and we in this country cannot afford to lag behind.

Sir John Hayes: This situation is worsened, of course, by the values we seek to defend being used against us. Fair-minded British people want to believe that every side deserves a hearing, so we afford to some groups that do not deserve it a kind of equivalence—on one

[Sir John Hayes]

hand we have the west and Britain and America, and on the other hand we have these other groups. That equivalence is entirely bogus of course, because we are defending an open society and they are seeking to close it.

Sir Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend is of course entirely correct. Members on the Labour Back Benches are, given their presence in the Chamber for this debate, at the more hawkish and national security end of the left-wing spectrum, but there are elements of the liberal left who succumb to that equivalence argument and it is profoundly dangerous.

The 2015 review of the Muslim Brotherhood concluded that membership of, association with, or influence by the Muslim Brotherhood should be considered a possible indicator of extremism. A decade later, in the current far more dangerous geopolitical environment, we need to look again at that assessment. That is why I continue to believe that the Government should take up the opportunity to do so. Some of our closest allies have done so and indeed have taken a much more robust approach. For example, the United Arab Emirates has designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. We should ask ourselves why a country such as the UAE has such concerns about the radicalisation of its own students in our mosques that they are restricting their study here. The test under this Bill is rightly a foreign powers threat test, and there may well be other avenues for addressing this issue, but none the less I make the point that where an ideological body or a body linked to an ideological movement is acting to the benefit of a hostile state, this regime, alongside others, should apply.

Finally, I would like to address the future-proofing of this legislation, which has been touched on by some Members. Just as threat actors have evolved, so too have their methods, and foreign powers and their proxies no longer exclusively rely on the old-school methods of human surveillance, forged documents and so on. They can deploy bots that distort the democratic debate, as we have seen; ransomware to cripple business; cyber-attacks to disrupt public services; and deepfakes to impersonate trusted public figures. That list goes on, and AI will accelerate all of that—a point I made at the UN General Assembly ahead of the Bletchley Park AI safety summit. Cross-Government co-ordination to address this issue is more urgent than ever.

In this country we cannot just look at state threats purely in a physical silo, detached from the digital domain. Hostile states will use AI to automate reconnaissance, scale spear phishing, identify vulnerabilities, and so on. A criminal who once needed specialist skills may increasingly be able to purchase or access those capabilities through AI-enabled tools, and hostile states that once needed sophisticated cyber-units may be able to outsource, automate or accelerate parts of that work. Many Members will be familiar with the concerns and indeed opportunities surrounding Claude Mythos and its advanced cyber-capable AI models. That is a warning to us, but it is a warning of much more to come in this space.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an important point. As AI develops, the threshold for non-state actors to conduct

cyber, physical and other attacks against our democracy is lowered further, and that is happening almost weekly. Does he agree that we need to move quickly on this legislation, and on the effective regulation of artificial intelligence?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I totally agree with the hon. Member, and that is why we Opposition Members support the legislation. On AI, we can all see these challenges coming. We need to work cross-party and support the Government in finding ways to address them, because this is essentially the challenge of our age. Of course, AI will be able to strengthen our defences, but we should not be naive; the same tool that helps a defender to patch faster will of course also enable an attacker to breach faster. We have seen this with hostile states. Russia has already integrated cyber-sabotage, propaganda and deniable proxy activity into its campaign against the west. The same can be said for North Korea, which has not been touched on much in this debate, and Iran.

Tom Tugendhat: The internet outage in Iran knocked out a large percentage—5% or 10%, depending on who we believe—of Scottish separatist sites on social media. Do we genuinely believe that Iran is the only country seeking to weaponise social media? On one account, for example, someone claimed to be a nurse from Glasgow, but was fluent in Persian. Is it not likely that China and North Korea are doing exactly the same thing?

Sir Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Separatism makes a country weaker, and there is no doubt that our enemies will encourage it. The example that he cited, which I also saw, is very telling of exactly that.

Max Wilkinson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being very generous with his time. On the use of AI on social media to disrupt, is he also concerned about what happens on X, where unidentified and unidentifiable accounts—sometimes bots, sometimes accounts using a dinosaur or other avatar—seek to stoke hatred on our streets against Jewish people, Muslims and others, and against British values? I am very concerned about that. I have been criticised by members of the Conservative party on the internet for raising this point, but I wonder if he shares my concern.

Sir Oliver Dowden: I have great respect for Elon Musk's ingenuity when it comes to trying to send a man to Mars and set up a colony there. I am slightly more dubious about the activities in relation to X, but that platform should be subject to the same legislation as all others.

As for this Bill, the question is whether the designation regime will be agile enough to deal with not only traditional organisations, but cyber-units, hackers for hire, front companies, AI-enabled threat and state-threat networks, and commercial entities that materially assist hostile state activity. This Bill will not solve the problem of state threats on its own, but it is an important and necessary addition, because the reality is that today's threat is hybrid; state power, ideology, cyber-capability, organised crime and artificial intelligence are increasingly overlapping. That is the challenge before us all. The law must keep pace with this, and the Bill is an important step along the line.

3.19 pm

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I strongly support the change to the law being proposed today, to better protect our nation and our fellow citizens from those working for foreign states that want to disrupt and attack our way of life. While there has been debate today about the timeline, I personally welcome the swift and decisive approach being taken to protecting our national security. As we have heard from colleagues across the House, state-backed threats are evolving incredibly rapidly, so it is critical that legislation passed by this House adapts at the same speed and keeps pace with the complex threat environment. If that puts me at the hawkish end of the political spectrum, to use the words of the right hon. Member for Hertsmer (Sir Oliver Dowden), that is a badge I will wear with pride. Hopefully, through our discussions today, the House can send the clearest possible message: anyone who supports those backed by hostile states, glorifies or promotes their messages of hate, or is in the pay of foreign states that wish us ill can and should expect to face the full force of the British law. The Government and this House must always take firm action to defend our way of life and protect our citizens.

Why is this Bill so important? As we heard eloquently from my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), there is clear evidence that hostile states are actively trying to undermine our society by paying proxies to bring violence to the streets of Britain. We have seen this in the attacks on Iranian dissidents by criminal groups linked to Iran's security services; in the attacks on Jewish volunteer ambulance services in London, for which an Islamist terror group with links to the Iranian regime has publicly claimed responsibility; and in the attacks on Ukrainian-linked property and the Prime Minister's private residence by proxies linked to the Russian state. These acts are appalling, shocking and unacceptable. That is why I am pleased that, in addition to introducing the measures that we are discussing today, the UK Government and 23 other countries issued a joint statement on 10 June that condemned the egregious actions we have seen across Europe, North America and Australia by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other organisations. As the statement said powerfully,

"Attempts to kill, kidnap, harass, intimidate, or otherwise attack people on our soil, undermines national sovereignty and international norms. These actions must stop immediately."

What action must we take to tackle these serious and growing threats? As Members across the House have set out, the Bill before us seeks to give our law enforcement agencies and security services greater powers and flexibility to address these serious matters. The Bill includes three new offences related to supporting, assisting, or receiving benefits from activists or organisations that are threatening the UK. As colleagues have said, it builds on existing legislation dealing with non-state terror groups, following the recommendations of the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation.

In a small way, I have seen for myself the growing challenges that we face in the wider threat environment. I am a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which involved the Royal Air Force last year and the Royal Navy this year. Together with colleagues from across the House, I have had the privilege of meeting senior military and security personnel at home and abroad. Having visited operational bases here at

home, and been briefed by British and NATO force leaders in Europe, it is clear to me just how complex and rapidly evolving the range of threats we face in our country is. It is clear that conflicts on foreign shores are playing out on British soil. It is clear that the range and sophistication of the attacks we face—physical attacks, cyber-attacks and interference in democracy—have grown. It is clear that the military, the security services, the police and other law enforcement bodies need to work in an increasingly sophisticated way to deal with those hybrid threats. It is clear that hostile activities from state and non-state actors are increasingly linked, and that our laws must evolve quickly to give those tasked with defending us the tools that they need in the modern age.

Before I conclude, I will raise some issues with the Minister; I would be very grateful if she would address them in her closing remarks. The first picks up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington, and by other Members, about public knowledge. The tactics that we have been discussing are intentionally hybrid and hidden; they are designed to complicate and obfuscate, and in some cases, it takes our security services many months to work out exactly what is going on, and to give confident public statements. As right hon. and hon. Members across this House have said, it is critical that we can better explain the nature of the threat to our citizens, residents and constituents, so that the significant investment that we are making in our military and security services is understood, but also so that citizens can help defend themselves and this country, including from individual cyber-attacks and other measures.

My second question, which draws on a point made by the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), is about integration. Given the complexity of what we face and the need for the police, the military, the security services and others—not just in our country, but across allied nations—to work together in a much more sophisticated way, are we confident that those organisations have the necessary resources, and is the Minister confident that they have the freedom to break down bureaucratic silos and work across organisational boundaries to get this done?

I hope that across the House today, we can be clear that state-backed aggression, attacks and disruption are not just attacks on people, property and organisations, as appalling as those things are; they are attacks on our way of life, on our values, and on democracy itself. I hope we can unite to show that we will take action—decisive action—and will take it today.

3.25 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I think we agree about the threat we face and about its scale. We do not need to spend the four hours allocated for this debate sharing that agreement, as the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) rightly said. Our job is to scrutinise the Government's proposed response to the threat, and that is what I want to do with my time. It is especially important to do that when the timescale for consideration of the legislation is compressed, as it is today.

I have huge sympathy with those who have spoken about the IRGC, but I would counsel against using this legislation to make the final decision about its proscription or designation. I do not want to steal the Minister's

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

lines, but I suspect that she will say to us, rightly, that it is important that we do not set a precedent, under this new system, of making designations in primary legislation, rather than by ministerial decision. There is an important procedural point there, which it will be necessary to maintain if we want to defend the flexibility that I think the Government are seeking in this legislation.

However, it is right to reflect on the problem that the Government are seeking to solve. The problem is clearly the gaps that they, and many of us, perceive in the proscription regime under the Terrorism Act, which does not enable them to deal with damaging behaviour by entities, including state entities, that are not captured by the proscription regime. That is the problem that Jonathan Hall identified in his report, and the problem that the Government are seeking to remedy through this legislation. They have made it clear that their objective is to present a regime that is broadly equivalent—the Government have used the word “equivalent” in their publications relating to this Bill—to the proscription regime. I want to explore that a little, to understand exactly how the Bill is going to deliver on its objectives.

I will start, as the Bill does, with the grounds for designation. The Bill is clear that in order to designate a body under this legislation, the Secretary of State must reasonably believe that it is, or has been, involved in what is described as “foreign power threat activity”, and then must consider that

“designating the body is necessary to protect the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.”

It is important to understand what foreign power threat activity is. It is defined in section 33 of the National Security Act 2023 as

“the commission, preparation or instigation of acts or threats”,

which are set out in subsection (3), and include obtaining or disclosing protected information or trade secrets, assisting a foreign intelligence service, entering a prohibited place, sabotage, general foreign interference and obtaining material benefits from a foreign intelligence service. Section 33 goes on to specify other acts:

“serious violence against another person...endanger the life of another person, or...create a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public.”

I set that out in detail because it is important to understand that for designation to be attached to a relevant body, it must have been involved in that sort of serious harmful activity. That is what would justify designation in the mind of the relevant Secretary of State: the body's activities must be considered to be different from those of a normal state or other body engaged in its normal business.

In the explanatory notes, the Government give examples of things that might result in designation, such as, in paragraph 21,

“a foreign intelligence service obtaining protected information and inspecting sensitive defence or intelligence sites in the UK...a mercenary group carrying out acts of serious violence on behalf of a foreign power”,

or,

“a network preparing to carry out sabotage or threatening to commit acts that create a serious risk to the health and safety of the public”.

I set all that out because the Bill creates an offence of supporting a designated body, but in the construction of that offence, it is clear that the Government do not believe that all acts or expressions of support for a designated body are sufficient for that criminal liability. I want to understand why not.

Sir John Hayes: I hesitate to interrupt the flow of my right hon. and learned Friend, but the key point is legitimacy, as he and I have discussed. A state can be conducting legitimate activity by definition, whereas the bodies that have been proscribed previously are never legitimate implicitly. It is a difficult tightrope for Governments to walk, and that is why historically they have tended not to defer to a place where they chose to proscribed state bodies, because the implication is for the state as a whole. Where states take a “whole-state approach”—China being a good example—it is hard to walk that tightrope.

Sir Jeremy Wright: My right hon. Friend and Committee colleague is right in what he says, and I will come back to how and why we distinguish what the Bill proposes from the proscription regime.

On what is required to prove at least one of the criminal offences set out in this Bill, clause 2 introduces a new offence under a proposed new section 17A of the National Security Act 2023. The offence involves support for a designated body, but only if such support is given for “a prohibited purpose”, which proposed new section 17A(4) sets out is

“a purpose that the person knows, or having regard to other matters known to them ought reasonably to know, is prejudicial to the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.”

That is an additional element that the prosecution must prove. That will undoubtedly make this offence more difficult to obtain convictions under, and there may be good reason for that, but if there is, I want to understand what it is.

I make two observations on the Government's chosen approach in relation to that specific proposed new offence. The first is that this is not equivalent to proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000. I use that expression because that is the wording the Government have used in setting out their aspirations with the Bill. Although the Government intend designation to be similar to proscription in many respects—I accept it cannot be in all respects—proscription does not require an additional motive for someone who supports a proscribed organisation, but merely that they support the proscribed organisation and know that that is what they are doing. No additional motive, demonstrating some kind of animus against the welfare of the United Kingdom, is needed, and that is an important distinction.

The Government may say that the reason for that difference is to protect those who are engaging with a legitimate entity in a way that, just as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) says, can never be possible with a proscribed terrorist organisation. In that case, however, I am struggling a little with the purpose and effect of designation itself. Surely the point of designation in the Bill is to move an organisation from the acceptable column into the unacceptable column. Surely the list of reasons why someone might be designated, which I read out earlier, is there to show us that those organisations,

when they are doing those things, should not be worthy of support of any kind; but that is not, I think, where this legislation leaves us.

Alicia Kearns: That is precisely the point that I made in my opening speech. The Government are saying that it is not legitimate to engage with these bodies. Of course they want a carve-out to protect Crown servants, but that is explicitly included in the Bill. What they are doing, essentially, is creating a carve-out whereby people could say that it was legitimate for them to engage with the IRGC, and that somehow it would not be inherently dangerous or unbeneficial to engage with it. We are creating a threshold that I do not believe the courts will be able to meet, so we will not get the prosecutions that the Bill is designed to create.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I will come to exactly that point about the carve-outs. It is, I think, evident from a close reading of the Bill that the Government's approach to the first of the new offences it creates differs from their approach to the next two. I want to understand from the Minister for Security—and this is my second observation—why that difference exists. I should say at this point that it is a great pleasure to see the Minister, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), in her place. As a distinguished former member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, she knows about these matters. However, I am also conscious that she has only just arrived. I hope I am setting out these specific concerns in a way that will give her two chances to answer them, on Second Reading and in Committee. If she is concerned about the lack of time between the two, she has no one to blame but her own colleagues—but we will come back to that.

As I was saying, my second observation relates to precisely the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns). There is a difference between the way in which the Bill sets out the first of the new offences and the way in which it approaches the other. For example, new section 17B, which amends the National Security Act, creates the offence of “Assisting a designated body”, while new section 17C creates the offence of

“Obtaining...material benefits from a designated body”.

Neither of those requires the additional motive of acting with a prohibited purpose. Instead, both allow for defences to be raised by those accused to establish that they were acting for a proper purpose. That would, of course, include not giving *carte blanche* to anyone who works for the British Government to behave as they wish, but if that person is acting within the purposes of their public appointment, it would offer them the chance to raise that defence, and would also offer opportunities to present a defence of acting in compliance with a UK legal obligation. I simply want to understand from the Minister why that approach was not taken in relation to the offence of supporting a designated body, because that would have been an attractive way forward.

Perhaps the Government will say that the prohibited purpose requirement matches some of the offences in the National Security Act, where they are carried out for or on behalf of a foreign power, but the National Security Act definition includes any foreign power, benign or malign. This, of course, is different, because a designated body has already been designated by the Secretary of

State as a body that is— if I can use unparliamentary language—up to no good, and should therefore, in my view, be in a different category. Perhaps we have already established that demonstrating that they were acting innocently in support of it would be a high bar for any potential defendant to meet. It would be helpful to understand the Minister's view on that.

Let me finish where I started. I agree with the purpose of the Bill; I think we all do, and it is clearly important for the Government to plug an evident gap in our legislative armoury. However, we must be certain that the way in which the Government are approaching the plugging of that gap is the right way, and that all these parts of the Bill fit together—not least, as we heard from the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), with other parts of the sanctions and other regimes. It is that process that I hope the Minister will be able to deal with, either when she winds up this part of the debate or subsequently in Committee.

3.39 pm

Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I start by commending the Government for the speed with which they have brought forward this legislation. I understand the charges made by the Opposition about the amount of time available to debate the Bill, but the House will recall that when the Prime Minister spoke to Jewish communities following certain attacks this year, he promised not only that the IRGC would be proscribed, but that this legislation would be brought forward and accelerated. That was just prior to the April recess, the local elections and the King's Speech, so there has not been too much parliamentary time between then and now, and he has fulfilled at least one of his promises by bringing forward the legislation.

Alicia Kearns: I have been very clear that we must stand by our Jewish communities. Yesterday, I sat down with the Jewish Leadership Council, the Community Security Trust and representatives of other organisations. They do not recognise the need to rush this Bill through the House, and they want us to scrutinise it in order to close the gaps that we discussed in that meeting. Although I wish we could have acted sooner, and I fully support the Bill and want to get it done, they want to get it done right, so that we do not have the gaps that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) has just set out.

Mark Sowards: I appreciate what the hon. Lady says, and I am glad to hear that she has been meeting those organisations. The Prime Minister made two promises, and this Bill fulfils one of them. Proscribing the IRGC is the other, and I will come to that in a moment.

This Bill captures the sophistication of the entities that it seeks to target: those groups operating under alternative names and front organisations. It targets them to ensure that they are unable to exploit any potential loopholes. Creating the new power of designation—which is almost equivalent to proscription but not quite the same, as we have heard in this debate—is absolutely welcome. The Bill also makes supporting designated bodies for a prohibited purpose—including arranging meetings, professing support for them or materially assisting their activities in the UK—a serious

[Mark Swards]

criminal offence. I am grateful to the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and the previous Security Minister for enduring my endless questions about this issue, both in this House and in private. I am very appreciative that the Bill does what I have been asking for it to do, and what many other Members of this House have been asking for it to do. I am also very pleased that offences will carry substantial penalties, including sentences of up to 14 years, which is absolutely the right move.

I appreciate what the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) said about this being primary legislation, and he is right to say that today's discussion has to be about the content of the Bill, not the bodies that we seek to proscribe through it. I absolutely take his point, and he set out a very eloquent argument about what he sees as the problems with the legislation. However, given the impact of the IRGC on this country and on the communities I speak to, I want to take this opportunity to set out not only why this legislation should pass through its Commons stages today, but why it should be used to proscribe the IRGC as soon as possible, as I will not have many further opportunities to do so.

There is no clearer threat to the UK and the British Jewish community than that posed by the IRGC. We know that the IRGC directs terror abroad, and we know it funds Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas. We know that it brutally crushes dissent at home in Iran and murdered more than 30,000 people in the January protests, and it continues to repress its people as well as cut off internet access, which makes us unable to update the figures and to know what is truly going on in some parts of the country. We know that the IRGC is a clear and present danger to Britain's national security. It plans terror attacks here, it tries to radicalise people here, and it promotes extremism here.

I pay tribute to our security services for all the work they have done to protect us against the IRGC and others. As we know, MI5 confirmed last October that it had identified more than 20 potentially lethal plots, backed by Iran, in the previous year alone. On that point, I want to focus my remarks on the threat that the IRGC poses to the Jewish community in this country. As the Chief Rabbi said in April, our fellow citizens are facing a sustained campaign of violence and intimidation. We know that Jews have been stabbed on the streets of Golders Green. We know that Finchley Reform synagogue, Kenton United synagogue, and Jewish organisations and charities have all been targeted. We know that ambulances belonging to Hatzola, an organisation that serves the entire community, were burned.

Police investigations are ongoing, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on all the specific circumstances of each case, but we know that paid proxies are operating here. We also know that the US Department of Justice has identified paid proxies operating in our country that are directly linked to the IRGC, and the threat is not contained to Britain, with a number of attacks across Europe in recent months. The threat is not disputable. Senior intelligence figures such as the former head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, have stated clearly that the IRGC poses a threat to the British Jewish community, and that threat is of long standing.

Over the past decade, we have seen growing evidence of Iranian efforts to radicalise young people here. Senior IRGC commanders have addressed student audiences and urged them to

“raise the flag of the Islamic Revolution, Islam and martyrdom”, and calling on them to join an “apocalyptic war”.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Member is making an extremely powerful speech—I do not find a word I disagree with—and I am very grateful to him for making it. However, this again shows why it would have been rather helpful to have a bit longer on this, because a small amendment around the use of slogans or the wearing of varieties of designated military insignia—IRGC or Hezbollah insignia in this case, but different things in other cases—would have been useful. Sadly, the way this is being rushed through makes that almost impossible. Would he agree?

Mark Swards: I am certain that we will get on to the point the right hon. Member has raised in Committee, which is coming up soon. I do think those items are worth discussing, and that such scrutiny will be possible during the next stage. I would also take this opportunity to commend him, because he warned that Iran was recruiting criminal gangs to spy on the Jewish community. I think that was three years ago, and the threat has only got worse since. The reason why I am making this speech is that I want to underline the need to proscribe, or rather to designate, the IRGC as soon as this Bill receives Royal Assent.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I take the points, particularly from the Opposition, about the speed at which we are proceeding on the Bill today. However, does my hon. Friend—by the way, he is giving an excellent speech—agree that, as we have 17 more working days in this place before recess, time is of the essence? To go back to the points made earlier, we want to get this through both Houses and on to the statute book before the summer.

Mark Swards: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend's excellent point. I do not want to repeat myself too much, but the Prime Minister made this promise to the communities involved, and this is the perfect time to accelerate and get the Bill through Parliament before we get to the summer recess, so that we are not dealing with it in September, October or November.

To deter, counter and thwart Iran's malign activities, we must take this firm action now, in line with my hon. Friend's intervention, and this Bill will enable us to do so. As was said in the opening speeches, the Government have rightly ramped up sanctions against Tehran, targeting both the IRGC's architects of repression at home and the pro-regime oligarchs overseas who enjoy the very freedoms that they deny to the Iranian people at home. However, sanctions alone cannot and have not curtailed the IRGC's nefarious activities in the UK. Crucially, while sanctions primarily target an organisation's or an individual's financial activities, only designation as described in this Bill will allow us to criminalise those who are members, supporters or agents of a terrorist organisation.

Tom Tugendhat: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a real concern, particularly given what is going on in the Persian gulf at the moment, that when the Iranian Government were last given access to vast amounts of cash about 10 years ago, they used that money to

murder Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis and, in fact, anybody else they could get their hands on, and to boost their propaganda arms? That did enormous harm not just to the Jewish community—he is quite right to highlight the Jewish community—but to the UK and the whole of western civilisation, including the French, the Germans and many others. Does he not agree with me that the suggestion that billions of dollars may be handed over to the Iranian regime raises concerns that it will be equipped for a new round?

Mark Sowards: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his powerful intervention. To be crystal clear, although we are talking about designation today and that gets into issues that are not covered by the Bill, I have serious concerns about the position the IRGC will be in following any potential peace deal. Peace is always welcome, of course it is—when people stop killing each other that should always be welcome—but the IRGC is the world's No. 1 sponsor of terrorism. It being in a position of power? I can never be comfortable with that.

Sanctions alone cannot have the impact we want. The Bill allows us to designate those individuals who are operating in the UK. It also allows us to designate their supporters and anyone who chooses to support this terrorist organisation. And let us be in no doubt: the IRGC instigates and stokes terror, it funds terror, it directs terror. The IRGC is a terrorist organisation. It is the terror arm of the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Only this legislation will allow us to protect the British people from its nefarious activities on our shores. I commend the Government for bringing it forward. I commend the Prime Minister for keeping his promise. I ask him to keep the second one and proscribe and designate the IRGC.

3.51 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The “2026 Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community” states:

“The global security environment is becoming more complex.”

That complexity is being fed by the increasing sophistication of our adversaries. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) talked about AI and the impact it may have in adding to that complexity and deepening the threat.

It is not just the US agencies that have come to that conclusion. The director general of MI5, in the speech referred to by the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards), said:

“My teams are routinely uncovering attempts by state actors to commission surveillance, sabotage, arson or physical violence right here in the UK.”

These adversaries, far from being remote, are real and present on the streets of our constituencies. That is why the Government's attempts to improve the tools at the disposal of Ministers are welcome. It is why all the considerations made by Governments, of whatever hue, that are sufficient to deal with that rapidly changing threat deserve the hearing they are receiving. That is not an unqualified level of support—I shall explain my qualifications in due course—but in essence it is right that the Government look again at the legislative framework associated with keeping us safe.

There is a weakness in democracies that is not shared by most of our enemies. That weakness is that legislation passes through this House and is scrutinised, debated and considered. That takes time. Our adversaries can, at will and at a whim, change their approach. Keeping pace with that change is difficult in an open and free society. That very openness and freedom is, of course, what we are here to promote and, indeed, to defend.

The director general of MI5 went on to speak about the various enemies we face. For example, when he spoke of Russia, he said that the police have “disrupted a steady stream of surveillance plots with hostile intent”

from the Russian state. He went on to speak about Iran. He said:

“Iran's autocratic regime is likewise frantically trying to silence its opponents around the world, including in the UK.”

The hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley spoke about the number of plots that have been tracked in a single year. The director general went on to say:

“The UK was among the first to call out this wave of...transnational aggression”,

but in fact the problem is worldwide. On China, he said that

“clandestine technology transfer...efforts to overtly influence UK public life...harassment and intimidation of opponents”

are all features of Chinese activity here. Because China adopts a whole-state approach, it is not possible to separate the cause—China's determination to undermine us—and its effect, in terms of the mechanism it uses to do that.

None of that is a surprise to those who have sat on the Intelligence and Security Committee. As Members will know, it commissioned a report into Russia, before I was a member, and then, while I have had the privilege of serving on the Committee, reports into China and Iran. Our China report says that:

“The fact that China is a strategic threat is not news...China's state intelligence apparatus—almost certainly the largest in the world, with hundreds of thousands of civil intelligence officers (leaving aside their military capability)—targets the UK and its interests prolifically and aggressively.”

The Chinese are particularly enthusiastic about their activities in high-tech industries and academia. Their ability to gain a head start in the economy is partly as a result of their infiltration of the knowledge sector, their theft of innovation, and the ability to persuade, frankly, naïve—I am choosing my words carefully, as I was going to say witless—individuals to be party to the theft of intellectual property.

China is active in its attempts to do harm across the world, and particularly in Britain, as the Government recognises. This and previous Governments have also long recognised that we need to update legislation to deal with that changing and increasingly complex threat—indeed, I note that both my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat), present in the Chamber, and I were Security Ministers in previous Governments. The attempts by China to gain technological dominance, the attempts by Iran to infiltrate institutions, and the perpetual attempts by Russia, both in cyber-space and elsewhere, to undermine Britain's interests and industry are clear.

The Bill is part of a fitting response to those threats, but there are questions that I want to address, some of which amplify the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam

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(Sir Jeremy Wright), who sits with me on the ISC. There is an important matter for the Government to deal with about the relationship between the Bill and the Terrorism Act 2006, in particular, as my right hon. and learned Friend said, proposed new section 17A to the National Security Act 2023.

Essentially, the Government are creating a higher bar than that which applies in existing legislation. As was set out in the speech by my right hon. and learned Friend, we need to understand why that higher bar exists in the proposed legislation, and how it will be crossed. The purpose of the legislation is clear, but in practice it will only work if it can be supported in the courts. Designation will undoubtedly be challenged, so it has to stand up to the test of legal scrutiny. I have doubts as to whether the double bar that will be required to make designation practically possible can be straightforwardly met. Some more commentary from the Government on that would be helpful.

I would also be interested to know why a different approach has been taken for designation itself, and why there is no discretionary power in the Bill for the Home Secretary to take action promptly—such action will sometimes be necessary—as she can in respect of proscription. As I know from my time as Security Minister—the Minister, too, will know this—it is sometimes necessary to act quickly on proscription because circumstances demand it. The Bill does not allow that level of discretion and flexibility, and I think the House has every reason to wonder why.

In addition, the new statutory test for designation appears to introduce this cumulative two-pronged approach. We understand that proving that designation will protect and safeguard the interests of the UK is necessary, but that is not necessary in the case of proscription in the same way—at least, not in specific terms—and I wonder why the Government have chosen to adopt a different approach in that respect.

There are a series of quite technical challenges to the Government over whether this well-intended legislation—which I think enjoys broad support across the House, from those who understand the scale of the threats that I have briefly outlined—will work in practice. I hope that the Minister, during the course of our considerations this afternoon, will be able to address some of those matters, particularly in relation to proposed new section 17A.

The chief of the Secret Intelligence Service said recently:

“We are now operating in a space between peace and war. This is not a temporary state or a gradual, inevitable evolution. Our world is being actively remade, with profound implications for national and international security.”

She concluded:

“It also means everyone in society really understanding the world we are in—a world where terrorists plot against us, where our enemies fearmonger, bully and manipulate, and the front line is everywhere. Online, on our streets, in our supply chains, in the minds and on the screens of our citizens. We must all stand together against this.”

That means, of course, defending our values at every opportunity, in this House and beyond it; it means recognising that there is no ethical or moral equivalence between those who seek to do us harm and those who seek to defend us—whatever some of those who are either naive or malevolent might tell us—and it means

being responsive to that threat, in the way that this legislation is intended to be, by having adequate resources for our security and intelligence services, and the right powers too. This Bill is an attempt to get those powers in place in order to protect us all. I wish it well, but I also press the Government to ensure that it is as effective as it needs to be.

4.3 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): As everybody in this House knows full well, protecting our national security is always the first duty of any Government, and we have heard a consensus on that today. The reality today is that the threat from hostile foreign powers and the proxies on which they rely has grown significantly in both scale and complexity. We cannot make the mistake of thinking that the threat is theoretical; it is real, it is evolving, and it is happening right here in our very own country. We have heard many examples of that today.

A lot of the focus has rightly been on the IRGC. Time and again, where we have said, “That organisation should be proscribed,” we have heard, “Can’t touch the IRGC, I’m afraid.” We have struggled with that. I am very pleased that our Government are today holding on to the Prime Minister’s promise that we will make good our defence of our country from organisations such as the IRGC.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) eloquently set out, the IRGC is at the moment—it could change in future—the prime example of a state-backed organisation. It was initially set up to defend the Islamic Republic of Iran, but what kind of defence is that? Iran is hardly a friendly power to us—it has an extreme ideology, and it seeks not just to defend its own country but to export that ideology across the world, including to our own shores, as it has done time and again. This legislation seeks to end that. We have had debates in which it has been argued, “Well, is it the equivalent of proscription, and what does the test of knowledge mean?” Those questions are right, and I am sure that the Minister will respond, either in this debate on Second Reading or later in today’s proceedings.

What I want to get across is how real the threat is. Everybody here in the Chamber gets it—I hope we do—but my big worry is that our fellow citizens in the wider United Kingdom have not necessarily got it yet. It begins with someone thinking, “I read something online that doesn’t seem right”, and then they are taken down a pathway, and behind that pathway are hostile threats—the IRGC and others.

As legislators, we have to make use of the legislative tools to try to catch up with that, but I think we also have another job: we are not just legislators but representatives and communicators. I really hope that this Bill passes, but whatever happens, we have an obligation to say to our fellow citizens, “Be vigilant. Be resilient.”

Organisations, whether the IRGC or others, will not present themselves for what they really are. They will hide behind the proxies we have heard about today and do all they can to take the people of this country and use them, either knowingly or as dupes, for their nefarious ends—and we do not always know what those nefarious ends are. Whatever the country may be—Iran in this case—those ends are not consistent with our values. We

have heard about differences of views or opinion, but in this case they are not of moral equivalence. I totally agree with that point. We in this country rightly struggle to make sure that other voices are heard, but at the same time we ensure that everyone is protected. That is certainly not the case in countries like Iran, Russia or China.

Let us pass this Bill today, but let us not stop there.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is building to a crescendo, so I wanted to intervene before he sits down. The vigilance he calls for, which echoes what I said about us coming together to make a strong case for our values and to defend them against those who assail us, is going to become more difficult because of artificial intelligence—my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) made a telling contribution in that respect. It is really important that we are not so fascinated by the novelty of innovation that we wait too long to regulate AI. It took us 25 years in this House to work out that the internet might have malign effects. Finally, the last Government introduced the Online Safety Act 2023, and this Government have now taken that further—quite rightly. For heaven's sake, let us understand the risks that this poses in weakening the very resilience that the hon. Gentleman has called for.

Kevin Bonavia: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He makes a powerful point on AI. I was about to set out that we are already engaged in new legislative tools in this regard, including the Representation of the People Bill and the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill, which passed through this place yesterday. But we cannot just say “Right, job done; We’ve given the Government as much flexibility as we can, so let them now get on with it.” It will hit the wall, and we do not know as of today just how powerful AI in its widest forms can be.

I have thought a bit about AI and about how in many ways in this place we are always catching up. Occasionally, we make laws that push society forward—we have made some great social reforms through legislation—which is great. However, too often we are reacting to a problem that has grown out of control. Our procedures in this place will not necessarily work in the future with things like AI. That is not a debate for today. However, I take the right hon. Gentleman's point strongly in mind.

Although I support the Bill, I make the point that it is part of a much broader governmental, parliamentary and—I hope—whole-society approach. When we think about the tools that the Government need, from what I have seen the Bill will give the Government of the day broad-ranging powers, but I hope and pray that this Government, or any future Government, know full well that they will have to move far quicker than before to do what is needed. We as legislators in this place must be willing to support that Government in doing the job in hand. I support the Bill and hope that, as a result, it will make our country safer for all our communities.

4.11 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia), who made a thoughtful speech on the threats we all face. I listened carefully to the Home Secretary's speech and those made by colleagues across the Chamber. I noticed that the Home Secretary was careful not to

name any organisations that will be caught by the Bill—and quite right, too, because as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) made clear, the Home Secretary will need to make decisions after it has been enacted. But a number of issues of concern have clearly been raised during the debate, and I want to raise some others that do not appear to be caught by this legislation.

I am concerned that we have had no pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill, and indeed that we will have only a small amount of time in Committee, relatively speaking, to consider the large number of amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns). The Home Secretary made it clear that this is one piece of legislation and that further legislation may well follow, which assures me to a certain extent that some of the potential gaps in this legislation can be picked up at a later date—or they may be picked up when the other place considers the Bill.

I do not know any state-sponsored organisations in Russia or China that would be caught by the Bill, but I do know that the IRGC will definitely be caught by it. In doing a bit of research prior to the debate, I noted that I first raised the threat from Iran back in June 2010, a month after I had been elected to this place. Indeed, Iran has posed a threat to the middle east for many years, and it has not reduced; in fact, it has increased.

In March 2011, I first called for the UK to put pressure on the Iranians to stop arming Hezbollah—here we are, 15 years later, reaping the rewards in the war between Israel and Lebanon—and I am told that I have raised the subject of Iran 56 times in debates or questions since I have been a Member of Parliament. I declare my interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on UK-Israel and chairman of British Committee for Iran Freedom, which opposes the current theocratic regime in Iran.

The hon. Member for Stevenage raised the founding of the IRGC back in 1979. I was at university when the Islamic revolution came to Iran. The IRGC was set up to make sure the revolution continued—and how they have brutally made sure that that has been the case through many activities ever since.

We need to understand that the IRGC is not just a military force but a method of repression around the globe, including in the UK. In Iran, the IRGC holds political prisoners and imprisons activists. Any movement in opposition to the regime faces persecution, prosecution and death sentences. Today, there are members of the Iranian opposition on death row in Iran simply because they object to the regime. That is one of the reasons why we have to look at how this organisation acts.

More than 2,000 executions have taken place since President Pezeshkian took office—that is a short period of time. I know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that that is not necessarily the subject of the debate, but we have to emphasise the threat that the organisation poses to this country.

Of course, the IRGC's activity extends beyond Iran and across other national borders. People might wonder what it has done. There is concern that there is a gap in this legislation when it comes to diplomats. Back in 2018, I was going to an Iranian opposition conference in Paris. An Iranian diplomat in Belgium used a diplomatic bag to transfer a bomb to Brussels to be put in the

[*Bob Blackman*]

hands of terrorists, so that they could then take it to the conference that I was due to attend. That diplomat was tried in the Belgian courts, found guilty and imprisoned. If the same thing happened here, presumably that diplomat would get off scot-free, because such activity is not mentioned in this legislation. The diplomat was eventually freed in a prisoner exchange with Iran and returned to Iran as a hero. That is one of the gaps in the Bill.

We understand the direct threat to our country and, indeed, to the dissidents and those in the resistance movement in this country. They have suffered their headquarters being firebombed; very brave individuals who call things out through journalism have been forced to leave this country because we could no longer defend them; and opposition figures have been threatened by the IRGC. We cannot just recognise that; we have to do something about it.

I led the debate in this place on proscribing the IRGC more than 10 years ago. I heard the excuses then: “We can’t do anything because they are a state actor,” and, “The Americans want us to continue to co-operate with Tehran so that there is continuous dialogue between the two countries.” I heard all the excuses. I could not convince my party’s Government that we should do the right thing. This Government’s Members promised to do it when they were in opposition, and I applaud the Bill as a step in the right direction.

The IRGC is the head of the snake that controls terrorism around the world. We have rightly proscribed Hamas, Hezbollah and other terrorist organisations, but the IRGC continues to exist. I recall the fact that, on or around 2 October 2023, there was a meeting where the IRGC either gave permission for or ordered Hamas to attack Israel. We saw the devastation that then took place in Israel, and we have seen what has happened with the wars since.

Last Thursday, I had the opportunity to visit the Nova exhibition, which I recommend all colleagues visit. It is very personal for the individuals involved. I had the opportunity to listen to and speak to a survivor. Those terrorist operations were inspired and ordered by the IRGC and directly communicated from Iran. That is the threat posed not only to Israel, but to UK citizens. People from around the world went to that festival just to hear music, dance and have good company. That threat can come to this country unless we take action. We should be clear, and I hope the Minister will be clear, that in proscribing or taking action against any organisation, we are not taking action against the Iranian people. We are taking action against the regime and the IRGC, and the way in which they have consistently operated.

We know that protest movements in this country and across Europe have been threatened by the IRGC in all sorts of guises. We are behind the curve, because the United States, the European Union and many other countries including Canada have proscribed the IRGC in its entirety. Individual members of the theocratic regime that runs Iran own multimillion-pound properties in London. They do not occupy them, but they keep them as assets to be used. We know that Iranian diplomats have operated in this country to stir up trouble, threaten people of the Jewish religion and cause all sorts of concerns for other colleagues.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to Iranian activity in Britain. In the report that our Committee produced on that, we said:

“The Iranian Intelligence Services have shown that they are willing and able—often through third-party agents—to attempt assassination within the UK, and kidnap from the UK...There have been at least 15 attempts at murder or kidnap against British nationals or UK-based individuals since the beginning of 2022.”

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention.

Another issue, which the Committee also referred to, was that certain charities in this country are linked to or directed and funded by Tehran. At least 13 charities are under investigation by the Charity Commission. I have asked continually for action from the Government and the Charity Commission to close down those charities to prevent them from acting against the interests of this country. At the moment, there is a lack of action and co-ordination, and it is not clear to me that this legislation will catch those charities, or whether there is sufficient legislation to do so. I would appreciate the Minister addressing that issue.

Alicia Kearns: One of the powers that the Government could look to take—outside this Bill, because it is not within its scope—would be to give the Charity Commission the power to wind up a charity. It currently does not have that power, but we can be absolutely certain that states are creating brand new charities across our country specifically to infiltrate them. That might be my hon. Friend’s best course of action to get that done, and I am sure he would have the full support of most of the House for it.

Bob Blackman: It is clear that this is one of a series of actions that need to be taken. If we had had the opportunity to give the Bill pre-legislative scrutiny, suggestions could have been made to increase its scope to deal with these issues once and for all.

It is pretty clear to me that action needs to be taken to defend our people and the people who come here fleeing the Iranian republic. Following this legislation, we look forward to the proscription of the IRGC or whatever sanction we are going to take, as well as specific sanctions against the commanders. The assets of the IRGC and its various bodies should be frozen and subject to enhanced security, and we look forward to seeing protections for the Iranian dissidents and opposition figures living in Britain.

Let us make sure that we send a clear message. Members of all parties agree that this legislation is necessary, but further legislation is also necessary. This Bill could be improved, provided the Government were willing to listen to the proposals that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) has put forward. I hope that we will hear those arguments in Committee and ensure that the Government take note of that. I also hope that, if the Government do not act today, they will agree to act in the future on the sensible proposals that my hon. Friend has made.

This is a moral and national security necessity. We know that operatives from Iran, whether it is the IRGC or other state-based organisations, are taking action right now on our university campuses to stir up trouble and antisemitism. They are taking direct action, as has been said, against Jewish businesses, synagogues and, indeed, even now places where Jewish people live. That

is absolutely unacceptable, and the people responsible obviously have to be brought to justice, but the organisations that they are part of must also be brought to justice and prevented from operating. All we can do is pass this legislation and hope that the Home Secretary can take the necessary decisions.

I draw attention to one final issue: the operation of the communications. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting is a propaganda arm of the regime. It is tied directly to the IRGC. It is not clear to me that it will be caught by the provisions of the Bill. It has a hub in Acton in west London, and it actively airs threats against Iranian dissidents and against the Jewish community. That operation should be closed down straightaway, and I hope the Home Secretary will take the necessary action to do so.

I look forward to the responses from the Minister. I know she is new in the job, but I also know that she has the best interests of the security of this country at heart, and I wish her well in carrying out those duties.

4.26 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I am grateful to be called. I welcome the Minister to her place. It is a great job—I enjoyed it, and I have no doubt that she will, too. Though she may have shorter fingernails at the end of the day than she started with, it is worth it for the opportunity to serve with some of the finest people in our Government. The intelligence services and the police that she will be working with are truly exceptional, and it is worth putting on the record the gratitude of the whole House for what they do.

Yesterday was the 10th anniversary of the death of my friend Jo Cox, and many of us have been wearing white roses in memory of her. When we last met, Jo and I were in one of the Committee rooms working on a report together entitled, “The Cost of Doing Nothing”. What we were talking about in that report was the action in Syria, the way in which the extremism in that country had torn it apart and how we had not acted in ways that we felt we should have done. I welcome very much what the Government are doing today, because they are demonstrating another response: they are not willing to stand aside and watch as the country gets torn apart in different ways. I will make criticisms in a moment, but I would first just like to place on the record my gratitude for the way in which the Government have approached this legislation. I agree with the broad sweep of it; I just wish they had given it a little bit more time, and I understand that the Minister will almost certainly agree with me.

Unusually, I would like to praise the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards). He made an absolutely outstanding speech and spoke brilliantly, not just for this whole House but for the country, on the threat to a particular community, which is actually a threat to us all. It is absolutely true that in too many ways the Jewish community are the canary in the coalmine of any society. When we see Jews under threat, when we see Jewish homes frightened, when we see Jewish sites vandalised—as sadly we are seeing too much—we know what is coming, and what is coming is not pretty.

But let us get back to the Bill because, while it is welcome, it makes that tragic error that we often make in this place—I know we made this error in our time as well—which is to seek the rapid answer rather than the

complete one. In doing so, the Bill misses very slightly the challenge that is bound to come, because I am afraid that we do know what will come. By the way, I will no doubt support the Minister when she decides to use the powers, because she will be well advised by the teams we both know so well, but we know that when an organisation is designated, it will lawyer up, go to court and challenge her, and we will find ourselves going around the houses.

This is where I confess a failure of my own. One of the organisations that I sought to work on was the Islamic Centre of England. That organisation has the same connection to Islam that Christian organisations that claim the crusader cross, and that far-right baggage, have to the church of Christ. Let us be absolutely clear: it is a vile political organisation dressing itself up as a religious movement—there is nothing religious about it all—yet that organisation enjoys charitable status, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) identified, and sadly, despite irregularities in its business and the way that it operates, it is still able to operate.

Let me list a couple more such organisations. Darul Hikma has praised Qasem Soleimani, the late head of the IRGC, whose death is certainly not mourned here, and it praised 7 October and the IRGC. The Abrar Islamic Foundation has praised Hezbollah and Hamas, and has run antisemitic and homophobic events. There are also the Ahl al-Bait Society Scotland—sadly, this reaches across the whole of the United Kingdom—Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission and Al-Ikhlās. They have all run, in various different ways, sessions praising the IRGC and supportive of Qasem Soleimani, which is entirely against not just the interests of the United Kingdom, but very particularly the interests of the Muslim community in the United Kingdom. Let us be absolutely clear about what the natural consequence of this will be: it will stir up sectarian and religious hatred. As the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley mentioned, we are first seeing the effect in the Jewish community—of course we are—but we all know where this will lead.

There are those of us who value all communities in our society, as I know the Home Secretary does, and who want Islam treated exactly the same as any religion. I think we Catholics are the only ones who are still lawfully discriminated against, but given that that excludes us only from the monarchy, I think we can be pretty comfortable with our position. Those of us who want to see all religions treated equally know that we simply cannot have poison poured into a few ears and pretend that does not happen.

I mentioned PressTV today, as well as the vile rumours being spread about the Prime Minister and others by Russia Today, among others, to show that we need to be conscious of what we are dealing with. Let us be quite clear: this is not a freedom of speech issue. This is no more a freedom of speech issue than the invasion of a hostile army is a right-to-roam issue. This is fundamentally about the deliberate actions of a state organisation—either the Russian, Chinese or Iranian state—to undermine us and tear us apart.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Many people say that he was the second best Conservative Security Minister, and I tend to agree with that. Might he continue to build the bridges that

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have already been formed across the House during this debate by inviting the Minister, when she winds up, to re-examine the charitable status of a whole range of organisations that have intimate connections with the Chinese, Iranian or Russian state, as a parallel exercise to the consideration of this legislation? That would seem to me to be a sensible move that we could agree today.

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend, demonstrating why he leads the list of Security Ministers past and present, pre-empted me; I was coming to China. Here I declare various interests. I am a patron of United Against Nuclear Iran, an organisation that campaigns, just as the Government do, and as everybody does, against Iran having nuclear weapons. I am not sure that it is a contentious organisation to be a member of; I hope it is universally supported. Also, I am sanctioned by the Chinese, Russian and Iranian states. I want to highlight some of the issues that we are dealing with that have not quite come through in the debate so far.

Let us be honest: this Bill is shaped around the IRGC. It is shaped around a state organisation—that is behaving like a terrorist group, because it is the sponsor of terrorism around the world. However, it is not alone; for example, we know that the so-called little green men who operated in Crimea were actually part of the Russian armed forces. There are Russian groups, such as the Wagner Group, that act as state-sponsored terrorist organisations in countries such as Mali. I am looking at the Home Secretary, here: I hope that those groups will be encapsulated in the Bill. It certainly reads as though it will cover them.

Let us look a little more directly at one question. There is an organisation that should be captured in this Bill but I suspect will not be: TikTok. The Home Secretary may wonder why I raise TikTok, so let me be quite clear. There are many social media platforms around the world, and I am not going to pretend that many of them are any better than a cesspit. They tend to encourage various forms of hatred. As an aside, when I meet people who have posted on those platforms in the flesh at constituency events, it turns out that they are absolutely charming people who would never be quite so rude to one's face, but they are utterly vile online. That is quite remarkable, but there we go. I mention TikTok for this reason: other social media platforms respond to the triggers involved in advertising. Effectively, they respond to the interests of their shareholders. They may or may not like the product, but we know what they are doing. Unlike other platforms, which are edited for profit, TikTok is edited for effect. That is the difference.

Let us look at the TikTok effect after 7 October, for example. It did not push a particular ideology. It did not try to tell us, as the Soviets did in the 1920s, that more tractors were being produced in Minsk than in Manchester, or wherever. It does not seek to tell us that something is better; it seeks to tell us that there is nothing there—that it is all about hatred and division. It seeks to promote a horrific outcome that some people want, which is effectively a destroyed, torn-apart state that is hostile to itself. I am afraid that is what TikTok is doing, and not by accident. Its algorithm is controlled by the Ministry of State Security, through the Chinese Communist party, in

Shenzhen. It is not based anywhere else. That algorithm effectively acts as an editor—just as a newspaper editor would. It quite deliberately promotes not one side, but both sides. If one side is promoted, we may get persuasion, but we still get unity. If both sides are promoted, we get division, anger, hostility and rage. I do not think that the Bill touches on that issue, but I urge the Minister to have a look at it in months to come.

There was a time, 20 or 30 years ago, when we would have said that a state-sponsored organisation was fundamentally human and needed people. It would have needed agents—someone to hire the car, rent the room or whatever it happened to be—but that is not true today. These organisations do not need to cross the border; they can write the code, programme the algorithm, watch the fire start, and shape it. Sadly, we have seen such division inspired in the Home Secretary's own community, between Indian-origin and Pakistani-origin communities. We have seen the same fire being lit, not because China particularly sides with one side or the other—it does not—but because it just wants hostility in the UK, and this issue is a dividing line. When we look at the designation of organisations, we must remember that those organisations include businesses.

I support this Bill, and I am very grateful to the Minister and the Home Secretary for bringing it to the House. I very much envy the Minister her place, and I am sure that she will enjoy her role.

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

4.38 pm

Alicia Kearns: I welcome the Minister to her place for the first time, and I wish her every success in a vital role in our country and in the Government.

Let me end where I began. We support this Bill and will not push its Second Reading to a vote, because its principle is sound. The power is overdue, and the Government are right to seek it, but let the House be in no doubt about what is being asked of us today. We are asked to take a Bill that was laid before Parliament only last week, and progress it through all stages in just one day. It is what the House would normally do over months. However, the threat is permanent. Haste is temporary, but the harm can be enduring. Our enemies will study and exploit that asymmetry, because bad laws made quickly are not easily redeemed, and the effect may be felt for years in courtrooms in cases that collapse, and in the quiet calculations of the very people we are trying to deter.

Let me be clear about what is and what is not in question. I do not doubt the Government's good faith. I do not doubt for one moment that the Ministers want to make our country safe, but good faith is not a working law, and good intentions do not disrupt plots. A Bill that reaches the statute book but fails in the courtroom is worse than no Bill at all, because it lets us tell ourselves that we have acted, while the threat goes untouched. The people hunted by proxies on our streets, and by hostile states, are owed more than sincerity; they are owed a law that holds in the police station, in the courtroom and at the border on the day it is tested.

I know what the answer will be—that gaps can be dealt with on another day, in some future Bill, but this House has heard that before, and we have learned what

“another day” means. I never took my Government’s word when they said that to me, as anyone will know who watched me damned well refuse to take it when I was Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I will not take it today, because “another day” is where good intentions are sent to be forgotten, and the country does not get to tell the assassin at the journalist’s door that the relevant clause is pencilled for the next Session. We have the Bill before us today, and we have amendments before us today; the only thing we are being asked to leave for later is the part that makes this Bill effective.

I want to touch on the speeches made, starting with that by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis), who rightly spoke about the importance of civil liberties. Our amendments would give clarity on some aspects of that issue, particularly the flying of flags and the wearing of uniforms. The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), was absolutely right to say that there has been insufficient scrutiny thus far. I am surprised that her Committee was offered a briefing only once this Bill had completed its passage through the House. I was offered a briefing only once, three days after the deadline for amendments had passed; however, we were able to rectify that. She is also right to raise questions about future misuse—an issue that I did not have time to go into, so I am grateful to her for touching on that.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), who I am sure will return to the Chamber in due course, touched on the Australian model. Under one of our amendments, assisting a designated body, or accepting money or any sort of benefit from it, would carry a sentence of up to 25 years. We believe that the sentence for supporting such a body, which is 14 years or a fine, should be increased for those actively assisting it, or receiving material benefit from it.

My good friend my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) rightly set out the experience of our Jewish communities. They are terrified and they are suffering, and this Bill will go some way towards helping them. He also rightly touched on the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is difficult to address, because it is not an organisation, although some like to talk about it as if it was. It must be tackled in the same way as an ideology such as Nazism, and we must find a way of dealing with it, because those who subscribe to its ideology are using funds to undermine this country. I also welcome his managing to include a discussion around AI in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) for raising the point about our need to stand by our Jewish communities.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) was absolutely right about concerns around the need for engagement with the IRGC or similar bodies to be for “a prohibited purpose”. There is no good reason for that threshold at this point. He pointed out that there is a very clear distinction in the legislation between supporting on the one hand, and assisting or receiving material benefit on the other. The Government must explain why they are treating those separately.

It was a pleasure to listen to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has been clear-eyed for a long time about the threat

from the IRGC and the Iranians. He is particularly right to raise concerns about charities and the way in which they are exploited. The openness of our society is a strength, but of course it also provides more points of entry for those seeking to harm us. He also rightly touched on the impact on our Jewish communities, as so many on both sides of the House did. It is because of that impact that our amendment requiring prosecution of those who fly flags or wear uniforms in support of these organisations must be considered. Even last weekend, we saw people marching through Jewish communities, flying the flags of proscribed organisations to intimidate and scare.

I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) for once again sharing the work he did with Jo Cox—I know that they were very good friends. I think we all remember where we were when we heard of her brutal murder, and this House has less heart as a result of her loss. My right hon. and gallant Friend was absolutely right to mention the Islamic Centre of England—we must give the Charity Commission the power to shut down such organisations. He was also right to touch on TikTok; few have as much expertise as he does in this area. It is a weaponised platform. China does not allow its own children to have access to it, and countries such as India have taken action to say that they will not have it in their country. We must protect our country.

I now turn to the difficulty that the Government can no longer escape. The gaps in this Bill have been named; we will discuss them in more detail shortly in Committee, but they are on the amendment paper. If they are waved away tonight, not in ignorance but in full knowledge, no one will be able to call this haste any longer; it will have become a decision. It will be a decision to put in place weaker powers against hostile states than those we already hold against the terrorists those states fund, to leave a plot that is merely planned beyond the reach of the law, and to let inspired attackers fall through a gap that our terrorism law rightly closed two decades ago. It will, I fear, be a decision made to suit a timetable that has everything to do with internal party politics, rather than the threat. It will not be the Prime Minister’s decision alone—it will belong to every Member who walks through the Lobby to oppose the amendments tonight.

I say directly to Government Members, to all those who have spoken so powerfully—I thank every Member for being so clear-eyed about the threats that the IRGC, the Chinese, the Russians and the North Koreans pose to our country—that they did not campaign for so long for a Bill containing these powers just for them to fall at the first legal hurdle. They did not demand action against hostile states just to hand them a gentler regime than we use for terrorists. The amendments before them are not Opposition traps; they are the protections we need, and I think many Government Members feel in their gut that they are needed. I came to this place because national security had been my career—tackling terrorist groups such as Daesh and tackling the Russian Government. I stand by the offer I made to the Government, in the spirit I always make it. I am not here to frustrate this Bill; I am here to complete it. Take the amendments and lay them as Government amendments, or lay them in the Lords. We do not want to make this party political; we just want to close the holes in the

[Alicia Kearns]

Bill. Accepting an amendment that ends the absurdity of having a higher bar for the sponsor than for the terrorist is the right thing to do.

In Committee, I will take the House through all 13 amendments we have tabled, clause by clause, to highlight what stands between the Bill in its current state and what it should be. It is not ideology, not a desire to delay, and not politics; it is time that was not given. Strip away the procedure: two years from now, there will be a prosecution, and we need to ensure that we do not allow a defendant to be freed by words written in haste. In the end, this is not about us, the timetable, or whose name sits at the top of the amendment paper—it is about protecting our people and giving our police what they need. I support the Bill, which is why I have spent hours and hours over the past week trying to get it right. I urge the Government to work cross-party, accept our amendments—be it here or in the other place—and ensure we give our police and prosecutors the power that we all know they will not fully have without those amendments.

4.47 pm

The Minister for Security (Dame Angela Eagle): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in today's Second Reading debate. We have had a very powerful and relevant debate, with a great deal of expertise in the Chamber from both sides of the House.

State threats are overt or covert actions by foreign Governments that fall below the level of armed conflict, but go beyond legitimate diplomacy to harm UK interests. They present a persistent and evolving risk to the UK and our allies, and that evolution and the hybrid nature of the threats we face today has come across in all the many excellent contributions we have heard from Members on both sides of the House. There is cross-party recognition that the threats we are dealing with are increasingly complex, and rapidly changing and evolving. They manifest across a wide spectrum of activity, including interference in democratic processes, acquisition of sensitive information, threats to public safety and disruption of economic security. We all know—it has been mentioned by many hon. and right hon. Members—that certain states have the intent and capability to conduct such activity to advance their objectives. We have talked about Iran, Russia and China. Such activity is often opportunistic. It is adaptive, and it is increasingly integrated across multiple domains, combining physical, cyber, economic and international tools. Increasingly, as has been pointed out, it involves new and emerging tools such as AI, as well as TikTok, cyber, AI and a range of other things.

In December 2024, the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley (Yvette Cooper), commissioned the independent reviewer of state threats legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, to conduct a review into the tools available in terrorism legislation to see how they might be applied to the problem of state threats. He proposed that there should be legislation to create a state threats power equivalent to that of proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000, and although the Bill does not deliver the recommendations of the entire Jonathan Hall report, it does deliver that proposal. To that extent, it is a narrow,

not a comprehensive Bill. It is important that Members from all parts of the House understand that that is what the Bill does.

Rather than trying to shoehorn everything else into this Bill, it is important that we understand the nature of the Bill and what it actually does. It strengthens the Government's ability to disrupt hostile intelligence services and their proxies by adapting counter-terrorism tools to tackle state-based security threats to the UK. It seeks to close that loophole. It creates a new power for the Secretary of State to designate organisations involved in foreign power threat activity, modelled on the Terrorism Act 2000. It introduces three new criminal offences of supporting, assisting or obtaining benefits from designated bodies. The Bill will enable proxy organisations to be treated in practice like foreign intelligence services, making it easier to prosecute those acting on their behalf. It strengthens the overall national security framework so that the UK becomes a more difficult operating environment for foreign intelligence services and their state-linked proxies.

Individuals acting for a designated body will feel the full force of our national security legislation and the potential accompanying prison sentences of up to 14 years. Designation will send a clear public signal to bodies and those prepared to assist them that their malign behaviour will not be tolerated in the UK. Our manifesto committed to adapt the approach used for dealing with terrorism to state-based security threats, and that is precisely what the Bill does.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) is a passionate responder at the Dispatch Box, and her interest in this area and her commitment to getting it right are clear. The Government have been working on this legislation since Jonathan Hall made his recommendation. The Prime Minister, in the light of the arson incidents that we saw in north London earlier this year, gave a firm commitment to legislate in a matter of weeks, and we are doing just that to close this loophole on state or proxy-based threats.

To be clear, this legislation is no less robust than the Terrorism Act 2000. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, Jonathan Hall said that using terror legislation is

“shopping in the wrong department”.

This Bill will ensure that we are shopping in the right department.

Sir John Hayes: I accept what Jonathan Hall said, but what he did not say was that a higher statutory bar was needed to achieve a prosecution. What worries some of us, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) and me, is that the addition of that will make it quite hard to achieve a prosecution under the proposed law, not least because the Bill suggests that there must be a criminal purpose—an illicit purpose—involved in the association with a designated body. Will the Minister address that specific point?

Dame Angela Eagle: I think that there are some necessary differences between a terrorist organisation and a state-influenced or state proxy organisation, which the differences between the Bill and the National Security Act—which deals with terrorism—seek to bring out.

Jonathan Hall said that the Bill “does the job” in closing that loophole. He also told the House that he thought it would be harder to achieve the prosecutions for designated organisations than those for terrorist organisations. The Bill builds on a tried and tested series of measures in the National Security Act, and we have developed it closely with operational partners. It does the job. We do not believe that it is tougher to get appropriate prosecutions up and running in this context.

Tom Tugendhat: No one, I think, respects Jonathan Hall more than we do. He has done an exceptional job for this country in many different ways. He is a man of the highest integrity and the greatest intellect, and we are very lucky to have him.

Given that it seems unlikely that the Home Secretary or the Minister will accept amendments today—I am sorry about that, but I heard their views—will the Minister engage in a conversation between now and the Bill’s passage through the House of Lords? There is a moment when we could introduce amendments that we feel would be of assistance to the Government and, in fact, would make us all stronger.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am more than happy to create a circumstance in which we can do that. I think there have been some misunderstandings about what protections are offered in the Bill, and some of the amendments seek to address gaps that are not actually there. However, I am more than happy to deal with that, and I will be in touch with the right hon. Gentleman to organise it before the Bill goes to the House of Lords.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) said that the Bill did not take into account activity outside the UK. She was wrong to say that that was not covered. The offences capture activity outside the UK where it is contrary to the safety or interests of the UK, and case law has made it clear that the definition of “safety and interests of the UK” is wide. As I have said, we have worked closely with operational partners to shape the Bill, and we are confident that it will provide the powers that are needed. There have been successful prosecutions under the National Security Act, which demonstrates that powers of this kind work.

Alicia Kearns: Yes, the law specifically covers UK citizens who then travel abroad to commit a crime in support of these proscribed groups. However, it explicitly

states that that does not apply if they are planning the crimes here in the UK and they happen abroad, unless it is prejudicial to the safety of the UK. It would be very straightforward for a lawyer to argue that something that takes place in Iraq is not prejudicial to the safety of the UK.

When I met Foreign Office and Home Office lawyers last night, they said it was “likely” that that would be captured. I said, “I recognise that ‘likely’ is hopeful, but it is not absolute.” [*Interruption.*] The Minister will be able to answer in a moment. I am formally repeating the conversation that I had, a conversation that was requested, in which I was told that this was “likely”. That is very different from saying, “We will be able to prosecute, and we must be able to do so.” We should be wanting to pass clarifying amendments to put additional protections into law so that it is watertight, to ensure that the actions of anyone in Manchester planning something abroad will definitely be captured.

Dame Angela Eagle: I suspect that lawyers often use words like “likely”, because they are very rarely ready to commit to “absolutely”. Perhaps we need to deal with some of this in more detail in Committee, but we are assured that overseas activity will be covered in the interactions of this Bill, and case law makes that more likely.

I am loath to go through in detail the Committee-style points that were made during the debate. What I will say is that designation is the closest we can get to state-inspired and connected proxies or organisations, so that we can prevent them from behaving in the way that they are behaving on our streets day in, day out. A designation will allow us to ensure that we capture and prosecute the malign activity in which hybrid and state actors involve themselves, so this Bill closes the gap that Jonathan Hall discovered in the National Security Act.

We wish to get the Bill on the statute book so that we can deal with the rising threats on our streets, which many Members on both sides of the House mentioned in their Second Reading speeches. I am extremely grateful that all Front Benchers support the Bill and will not vote against it, and I look forward to dealing with some of the amendments in much greater detail in Committee. I urge the House to give this Bill a Second Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

National Security (State Threats) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

DESIGNATION OF BODIES INVOLVED IN FOREIGN POWER THREAT ACTIVITY

5.2 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I beg to move amendment 16, page 2, line 12, at end insert—

“33AA Conduct relevant to designation

(1) For the purposes of section 33A, a body is to be regarded as involved in foreign power threat activity if the Secretary of State reasonably believes that the body is, or has been, involved in—

- (a) transnational repression;
- (b) abusive lawfare;
- (c) sanctions evasion connected to a foreign power, a designated body or foreign power threat activity;
- (d) the concealment, movement or control of assets for or on behalf of a foreign power or a body acting for or on behalf of a foreign power; or
- (e) conduct which enables, facilitates, assists or conceals any activity falling within paragraphs (a) to (d).

(2) For the purposes of this section, “transnational repression” means conduct carried out by, for, or on behalf of, or with the intention of benefiting, a foreign power, where the conduct has the purpose, or effect, of intimidating, coercing, punishing, silencing, controlling or retaliating against—

- (a) a person in the United Kingdom;
- (b) a United Kingdom national;
- (c) a person resident in the United Kingdom;
- (d) a person with a substantial connection to the United Kingdom; or
- (e) a family member, associate or representative of a person falling within paragraphs (a) to (d).

(3) Conduct falling within subsection (2) includes, but is not limited to—

- (a) surveillance, harassment, intimidation, threats or coercion;
- (b) threats or reprisals against family members or associates overseas;
- (c) forced return, attempted forced return, abduction or attempted abduction;
- (d) misuse of criminal, civil, immigration, extradition or administrative processes;
- (e) misuse of Interpol notices or other international police cooperation mechanisms;
- (f) targeting of journalists, activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, political opponents, dissidents, whistleblowers or members of diaspora communities; and
- (g) conduct intended to conceal, enable or facilitate any activity falling within paragraphs (a) to (f).

(4) For the purposes of this section, “abusive lawfare” means the use, or threatened use, of legal, regulatory, administrative, criminal, civil, immigration, extradition or other proceedings where the predominant purpose, or one of the predominant purposes, is to—

- (a) intimidate, silence, punish or deter a person from engaging in public interest speech, journalism, advocacy, democratic participation or human rights work;
- (b) deter investigation or scrutiny of corruption, human rights abuses, sanctions evasion, hostile state activity or foreign power threat activity;

- (c) impose disproportionate cost, delay, pressure or reputational harm on the target; or
- (d) protect, conceal or advance the interests of a foreign power or a body acting for or on behalf of a foreign power.

(5) Proceedings, or threatened proceedings, are not abusive merely because they are brought by, or on behalf of, a foreign power, or a person connected to a foreign power.

(6) For the purposes of this section, “sanctions evasion” means conduct which has the purpose, or effect, of enabling or facilitating the evasion, circumvention or frustration of—

- (a) sanctions imposed under the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018;
- (b) asset-freezing measures;
- (c) trade sanctions;
- (d) export controls;
- (e) immigration restrictions;
- (f) public procurement restrictions; or
- (g) any other restrictive measure imposed by or under an enactment for the purpose of protecting the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.

(7) Nothing in this section is to be read as preventing legal advice, representation or advocacy, provided that such activity is not undertaken for the purpose of facilitating foreign power threat activity, transnational repression, sanctions evasion, abusive lawfare or the concealment of assets connected to a designated body.”

This amendment would specify categories of conduct that may be regarded as involvement in foreign power threat activity for the purposes of designation.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Judith Cummins): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 15, page 2, line 42, at end insert—

“33C Mandatory review following designation

(1) Where regulations are made under section 33A designating a body, the Secretary of State must, within 30 days of the regulations being made, conduct a review of whether further action should be taken in relation to—

- (a) the designated body;
- (b) any person who owns or controls the designated body;
- (c) any person owned or controlled by the designated body;
- (d) any officer, employee, agent, member or representative of the designated body;
- (e) any person acting for or on behalf of the designated body;
- (f) any person who materially assists the designated body; and
- (g) any person who provides funds, economic resources, professional services, goods, technology or other material support to the designated body.

(2) The review under subsection (1) must consider whether it is appropriate to take, recommend or request action including—

- (a) designation under the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018;
- (b) asset-freezing measures;
- (c) travel bans or other immigration restrictions;
- (d) director disqualification;
- (e) public procurement exclusion;
- (f) civil recovery, restraint, freezing or forfeiture action;
- (g) referral to Companies House, the National Crime Agency, the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, the Financial Conduct Authority, the Solicitors Regulation Authority, the Bar Standards Board, HM Revenue and Customs, the Charity Commission, the Electoral Commission or any other relevant authority;

- (h) enhanced beneficial ownership checks;
- (i) enhanced reporting requirements; and
- (j) any other action necessary to protect the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.

(3) In conducting a review under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult—

- (a) the Treasury;
- (b) the Secretary of State responsible for foreign, Commonwealth and development affairs;
- (c) the National Crime Agency; and
- (d) any other Minister of the Crown or public authority as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(4) Within 30 days of a body being designated under section 33A, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a statement confirming—

- (a) that the review required by this section has been conducted;
- (b) what categories of action listed in subsection (2) have been considered;
- (c) whether any such action has been taken, recommended or requested; and
- (d) where no such action has been taken, recommended or requested, the reasons for that decision.

(5) A statement under subsection (4) may omit information where the Secretary of State considers that publication of that information would be contrary to the interests of national security, international relations, the prevention or detection of serious crime, or the protection of ongoing legal proceedings.

(6) The Secretary of State must keep under review whether further action under subsection (2) is required in relation to a designated body and persons connected to it.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State, within 30 days of designating a body, to review whether further action should be taken against the body and persons connected to it, and to lay a statement of the outcome before Parliament.

Clause stand part.

Amendment 3, in clause 2, page 3, line 8, leave out from “body” until end of line 9.

This amendment and Amendments 4 to 6 would remove the additional defence of supporting a designated body for a non-prohibited purpose.

Amendment 4, page 3, line 16, leave out from “body” until end of line 17.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 3.

Amendment 5, page 3, line 21, leave out from “body” until end of line 22.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 3.

Amendment 6, page 3, leave out lines 23 to 25.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 3.

Amendment 1, page 4, line 23, at end insert—

- “(3A) The conduct specified in subsection (3) includes establishing, administering or maintaining a company, trust, partnership or similar arrangement which conceals, or is intended to conceal, the beneficial ownership of assets connected with a designated body.”

Amendment 8, page 4, line 27, after “United Kingdom” insert

“or are conducted outside, but were planned from within, the United Kingdom”.

Amendment 7, page 5, line 15, leave out “14” and insert “25”.

This amendment would increase the maximum sentence for assisting a designated body from 14 years to 25 years imprisonment.

Amendment 11, page 6, leave out lines 21 to 23.

This amendment would remove the defence of reasonable excuse for retaining a material benefit provided by or on behalf of a designated body.

Amendment 12, page 6, line 38, leave out “(7) or”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 11.

Amendment 9, page 7, line 8, at end insert—

“17D Uniform and publication of images in relation to a designated body

(1) A person in a public place commits an offence if he—

- (a) wears an item of clothing, or
- (b) wears, carries or displays an article

in such a way or in such circumstances as to arouse reasonable suspicion that the person is a supporter of a designated body.

(2) A person commits an offence if the person publishes an image of—

- (a) an item of clothing, or
- (b) any other article,

in such a way or in such circumstances as to arouse reasonable suspicion that the person is a supporter of a designated body.

(3) In subsection (2) the reference to an image is a reference to a still or moving image (produced by any means).

(4) A person guilty of an offence under this section is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale (or both).

(5) A constable may seize an item of clothing or any other article if the constable—

- (a) reasonably suspects that it is evidence in relation to an offence under subsection (1), and
- (b) is satisfied that it is necessary to seize it in order to prevent the evidence being concealed, lost, altered or destroyed.

(6) In connection with exercising the power in subsection (5), a constable may require a person to remove the item of clothing or other article if the person is wearing it.

(7) But the powers conferred by subsections (5) and (6) may not be exercised so as to seize, or require a person to remove, an item of clothing being worn next to the skin or immediately over a garment being worn as underwear.”

This amendment would create an offence of wearing or displaying in public, or publishing an image of, an article in a way that arouses reasonable suspicion that a person is a supporter of a designated body.

Amendment 10, page 7, line 8, at end insert—

“17D Preparation of acts relating to a designated body

(1) A person commits an offence if, with the intention of—

- (a) committing an offence under section 17A, 17B or 17C, or
- (b) assisting another to commit such an offence,

the person engages in any conduct in preparation for giving effect to the intention.

(2) It is irrelevant for the purposes of subsection (1) whether the intention and preparations relate to one or more particular offences, offences of a particular description, or such offences generally.

(3) A person guilty of an offence under this section is liable, on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years or a fine (or both).”

This amendment would create an offence of engaging in conduct in preparation for committing, or assisting another to commit, an offence relating to a designated body.

Amendment 13, page 7, line 8, at end insert—

“17D Self-directing acts in support of a designated body

(1) A person commits an offence if the person engages in conduct of any kind which is—

- (a) inspired by the ideology, actions, and self-promotion of a designated body, and
 - (b) prejudicial to the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.
- (2) A person commits an offence if the person—
- (a) engages in UK-related activities that are likely to assist the stated, or assumed, aims of a designated body, and
 - (b) knows, or having regard to other matters known to them ought to reasonably to know, that their activities are likely to assist the stated, or assumed, aims of a designated body.
- (3) “UK-related activities” means—
- (a) activities taking place in the United Kingdom;
 - (b) activities taking place outside the United Kingdom which are prejudicial to the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.
- (4) Subsections (1) and (2) apply to conduct outside the United Kingdom, but apply to conduct taking place wholly outside the United Kingdom only if the person engaging in the conduct—
- (ab) is a UK person, or
 - (b) acts for or on behalf of, or holds office under, the Crown, or is in Crown employment (whether or not they engage in the conduct in that capacity).
- (5) In proceedings for an offence under this section it is a defence to show that the person engaged in the conduct in question—
- (a) in compliance with a legal obligation under the law of the United Kingdom which is not a legal obligation under private law,
 - (b) in the case of a person having functions of a public nature under the law of the United Kingdom, for the purposes of those functions,
 - (c) as a lawyer carrying on a legal activity, or
 - (d) in accordance with, or in relation to UK-related activities carried out in accordance with, an agreement or arrangement to which—
 - (i) the United Kingdom was a party, or
 - (ii) any person acting for, or on behalf of, or holding office under, the Crown was (in that capacity) a party.
- (6) A person is taken to have shown a matter mentioned in subsection (5) if—
- (a) sufficient evidence is adduced to raise an issue with respect to it, and
 - (b) the contrary is not proved beyond reasonable doubt.
- (7) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years or a fine (or both).
- (8) The following terms have the same meaning as in section 3—
- “Crown employment”;
 - “financial benefit”;
 - The “law of the United Kingdom”;
 - “lawyer”;
 - “legal activity”;
 - “UK person”.

This amendment creates a new offence of undertaking conduct harmful or prejudicial to UK interests that is inspired by a designated body, rather than actively commissioned on behalf of a designated body.

Amendment 14, page 7, line 8, at end insert—

“17D Dissemination of publications relating to a designated body

(1) A person commits an offence if the person engages in conduct falling within subsection (2) and, at the time of doing so—

- (a) intends an effect of the conduct to be a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement to support, or to provide assistance to, a designated body, or
 - (b) is reckless as to whether the conduct has that effect.
- (2) A person engages in conduct falling within this subsection if the person—
- (a) distributes or circulates a publication relating to a designated body;
 - (b) gives, sells or lends such a publication;
 - (c) offers such a publication for sale or loan;
 - (d) provides a service to others that enables them to obtain, read, listen to or look at such a publication, or to acquire it by means of a gift, sale or loan;
 - (e) transmits the contents of such a publication electronically; or
 - (f) has such a publication in the person’s possession with a view to its becoming the subject of conduct falling within any of paragraphs (a) to (e).

(3) For the purposes of this section a publication relates to a designated body if matter contained in it is likely to be understood by a reasonable person as a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement to support, or to provide assistance to, a designated body.

(4) It is a defence for a person charged with an offence under this section to show that—

- (a) the matter by reference to which the publication was treated as relating to a designated body neither expressed the person’s views nor had the person’s endorsement, and
- (b) it was clear, in all the circumstances of the conduct, that the matter did not express the person’s views and did not have the person’s endorsement.

(5) A person guilty of an offence under this section is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years or a fine (or both).”

This amendment would create an offence of disseminating, or possessing with a view to disseminating, a publication that encourages support for or assistance to a designated body.

Clause 2 stand part.

Amendment 2, in clause 3, page 7, line 27, at end insert—

- “(5) Regulations under subsection (3) may not be made unless a draft of the statutory instrument containing them has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.”

This amendment ensures that any regulation under section 33C made by the Secretary of State to remove a designation is subject to the draft affirmative procedure.

Clauses 3 to 8 stand part.

New clause 3—*Designation of the IRGC*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must take reasonable steps to lay before Parliament regulations under the provisions of this Act to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a body involved in foreign power threat activity.

(2) Before laying such regulations, the Secretary of State must be satisfied that the IRGC fulfils the conditions set out in Section 1 of this Act.

(3) The regulations specified in subsection (1) should be laid before Parliament within a month of this Act coming into force.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to take reasonable steps to bring forward regulations designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) within a month of this Act coming into force.

New clause 4—*Assessment of the adequacy of the powers contained in the Act*—

“(1) Within twelve months of passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must commission the Independent Reviewer of State Threats Legislation or another such person performing a similar function to produce a report on the adequacy of the powers contained in this Act.

(2) The report specified in subsection (1) must consider the effectiveness of the Act’s powers in tackling the threat posed by state-backed and state-linked actors to the security of the United Kingdom.

(3) The report specified in subsection (1) must include any proposals for legislative changes to the provisions of the Act as are considered necessary by the Independent Reviewer.

(4) As soon as receiving the report, and no later than three months after receiving it, the Secretary of State must lay the report before both Houses of Parliament.

(5) Within three months of laying the report before Parliament, the Secretary of State must publish a response to the report and to any recommendations made by the Independent Reviewer.”

This new clause would require the Independent Reviewer of State Threats Legislation to assess the adequacy of the powers introduced by this Act twelve months after its passing.

New clause 5—Seizure of Passports etc from Person Suspected of Assisting a Designated Body—

“(1) This section applies in the case of a person at a port in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, or in the border area, if a constable has reasonable grounds to suspect that the person—

- (a) is there with the intention of leaving Great Britain or Northern Ireland for the purpose of assisting a designated body outside the United Kingdom; or
- (b) has arrived in Great Britain or Northern Ireland with the intention of leaving it soon for that purpose.

(2) The constable may—

- (a) exercise any of the powers in sub-paragraph (4) in the case of the person, or
- (b) direct a qualified officer to do so.

(3) A qualified officer must (if able to do so) comply with any direction given by a constable under sub-paragraph (2)(b).

(4) The powers are—

- (a) to require the person to hand over all travel documents in the person’s possession to the constable or (as the case may be) the qualified officer;
- (b) to search for travel documents relating to the person and to take possession of any that the constable or officer finds;
- (c) to inspect any travel document relating to the person; and
- (d) to retain any travel document relating to the person that is lawfully in the possession of the constable or officer.

(5) The power in sub-paragraph (4)(b) is a power to search—

- (a) the person;
- (b) anything that the person has with him or her; and
- (c) any vehicle in which the officer believes the person to have been travelling or to be about to travel.

(6) A constable or qualified officer—

- (a) may stop a person or vehicle for the purpose of exercising a power in sub-paragraph (4)(a) or (b);
- (b) may if necessary use reasonable force for the purpose of exercising a power in sub-paragraph (4)(a) or (b); and
- (c) may authorise a person to carry out on the constable’s or officer’s behalf a search under sub-paragraph (4)(b).

(7) A constable or qualified officer exercising a power in sub-paragraph (4)(a) or (b) must tell the person that—

- (a) the person is suspected of intending to leave Great Britain or (as the case may be) the United Kingdom for the purpose of assisting a designated body, and
- (b) the constable or officer is therefore entitled under this Schedule to exercise the power.

(8) Where a travel document relating to the person is in the possession of an immigration officer or customs official (whether a qualified officer or not), the constable may direct the officer or official—

- (a) to pass the document to a constable as soon as practicable, and
- (b) in the meantime to retain it,

the officer or official must comply with any such direction.”

This new clause would replicate existing powers to seize travel documents from individuals suspected of terrorism, applying those powers in relation to individuals suspected of assisting a designated body

New clause 6—Police powers to apply for serious crime prevention orders in designation cases—

“(1) The Serious Crime Act 2007 is amended as follows.

(2) In Section 8, after subsection (2)(a) insert—

- “(ab) it is an application for an order under section 1 that is related to an offence committed under section 2 of the National Security (State Threats) Act 2026.””

This new clause allows police to apply for serious crime prevention orders in relation to offences committed under this Act.

New clause 7—Sanctions—

“(1) The Secretary of State may make regulations under the provisions of Section 1 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 to subject any—

- (a) body designated under the National Security (State Threats) Act 2026, or
- (b) a person who commits an offence under section (2) of that Act

to any available sanction within that Act.”

This new clause would ensure that any body designated under this Act, or any person who commits an offence under this Act, may be subject to the sanctions regime set out in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018.

The schedule.

Alicia Kearns: We have tabled 13 amendments, not to frustrate the Bill but to give it the necessary teeth. This Bill is soft where it should be hard, silent where it should speak, and blind where it should see. It is soft because, as drafted, it sets a higher bar to prosecute a person who supports the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps than a person who supports the terrorists whom the IRGC funds and commands; it is silent because whole categories of hostile conduct that our terrorism laws have criminalised for 20 years are simply missing; and it is blind because it has been written for one organisation on one timetable, with almost no provision for future designations. Good will is not enough, and we must close the holes that our enemies will exploit.

The Government have lifted much of this legislation from section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000, yet they have added something that does not appear in the terrorism offence: a requirement that support was given for a prohibited purpose that was prejudicial to the safety or interest of the United Kingdom. Let me ask the Minister the simple question that this Bill invites: what level of support for the IRGC do the Government consider beneficial to the United Kingdom? The IRGC is the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism, and if she agrees that there is no level of support for it that is

[Alicia Kearns]

beneficial to the UK, we can simply remove the prohibited purpose. She has just said from the Dispatch Box that she agrees that there is absolutely none, so let us act and amend the Bill.

Under the Bill as drafted, to convict someone who supports the IRGC the prosecution must prove that their support was prejudicial to the safety or interest of the UK—an additional threshold—but that requirement does not exist in terrorism law. To convict someone who supports Hamas, Hezbollah or the Houthis—the proxies that the IRGC arms and funds—there is no such hurdle, so the body that inspires, organises arms and funds the terrorists is handed a protection in law that the terrorist himself is denied. That is the difference between a prosecution that succeeds and one that never gets off the ground, and I know something about prosecutions that fail at the last moment. Our amendment 3 simply removes the extra defence and brings this offence into line with the terrorism law from which it is drawn.

I recognise that the Government may seek to argue that state entities enjoy protections in international law that terrorists do not, that we must set a higher bar than in equivalent terrorism legislation and that acting prejudicially to the UK's interests is a reasonable test. However, state immunity protects the Iranian state from being sued or prosecuted in our courts, and it has nothing to do with the British resident who chooses to fund or promote the IRGC. We are not prosecuting Tehran; we are prosecuting the person here who does its work. The proposition that the Minister is left defending is that supporting the world's biggest sponsor of terrorism should be harder to prosecute than supporting the groups it sponsors. That is not a higher bar; it is international lawyers tying the hands of Ministers who are meant to be keeping us safe.

On amendments 11 and 12, the same instinct to protect where we should prosecute runs through subsection (7) of proposed new section 17C, which makes a reasonable excuse a defence for accepting and keeping a material benefit from a designated body. That is not necessary, because there are already protections in the Bill for, for example, a lawyer or somebody who has no ability to know that funds were being taken. I recognise that such a provision is in the National Security Act 2023, but that is not a reason to repeat a weakness, and we have an opportunity to fix it. There is no excuse for keeping a hostile state's money—not in this Bill and not in the Act it leans on.

The sentencing gets the gravity backwards. As drafted, supporting a designated body and actively assisting one carries the same maximum sentence of 14 years or a fine.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves on to fines, the issue she has raised, and which I raised earlier, seems to be crucial. It is true that Jonathan Hall, as the Minister said on Second Reading, recognised that the approach to a terrorist organisation was different from the approach to a state. Nevertheless, creating this higher bar whereby to secure a successful prosecution it must be established that the individual concerned was acting on behalf of the designated body for a prohibited purpose—connection with the body alone is not sufficient—seems to me to make prosecution less likely rather than more likely. If

international law is at the heart of that—the fear of appeals, and so on and so forth—we need to hear that from the Minister, and the case needs to be a highly persuasive, because it seems to me that the Government are making their lives more difficult, rather than easier.

Alicia Kearns: That is exactly the crux of the point I made in my speech on Second Reading. We should not set a higher threshold, because we will see prosecutions collapse for exactly that reason. We need to be arming prosecutors to go and get the justice that our country needs to better protect us.

Turning to the maximum sentence of 14 years, actively doing a hostile state organ's work—moving its money, carrying its information, committing violence on its behalf—is graver than just supporting it. It is a kind of treason, and I suspect most British people would call it that. We urge the Government to consider having a higher potential sentence for actively working with or receiving material benefit from a designated body. Amendment 7 would therefore raise that maximum sentence from 14 years to 25 years. That figure is not plucked from the air; it matches the Australian regime under which the IRGC was listed last November. As I have said, the Government may argue that the 14 year maximum sentence is taken from the NSA 2023, but let us raise the maximum sentence in both. After all, we are talking about treason.

On amendment 10, I turn from where the Bill is too soft to where it says nothing at all. This is one of the gaps about which the Government have offered no answer, and I have looked hard for one. Section 5 of the Terrorism Act 2006 makes preparing an act of terrorism an offence, but this Bill contains no equivalent. As the Bill is drafted, a person can plan to assist a designated organ—to be straightforward, let us talk about the IRGC—and unless and until they commit the act, they have committed no offence at all under this Bill. However, the entire purpose of national security work is to prevent and disrupt before harm is done, not to see the plot and clear it up afterwards. We would not tolerate that vulnerability in terrorism law and we should not invent it here. Amendment 10 closes that gap, and lets police and prosecutors act while a plot is still on the drawing board. If the Minister believes preparation is already caught elsewhere, I would welcome her showing me where, but I have yet to be shown that in the briefings I have had.

Amendment 13 recognises that the gap left by preparation is widened by a second omission: self-directed and inspired actors. The Bill misses entirely the person who is never directly commissioned or directed, but who absorbs a hostile state's propaganda and acts on it alone. Twenty years of counter-terrorism has taught us this lesson at a terrible cost. The gravest or most likely threat is no longer the directed plot, but the individual radicalised online who acts on their own. Hostile states bring the resources, reach and sophistication of states to that propaganda, arguably with a greater inspiring power than any terrorist group can muster. We saw that with the bots that screamed for independence in Scotland and fell silent the moment Tehran's internet went down, something my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) raised in his speech earlier. That is just a small insight into the ways they are invested in turning us against each other. A Bill that catches only

the commissioned and directed is fighting the last war and leaving us dangerously exposed to the next. Amendment 13 captures those inspired to act by a designated body, but not directed by them.

I turn now to the most dangerous omission of all, which we touched on in the wind-ups on Second Reading, and the omission that would worry our allies and partners, which amendment 8 seeks to address. As drafted, the Bill captures activity in the UK and activity abroad that is “prejudicial” to the UK. It does not catch activity planned here on British soil to be perpetrated abroad where there is no ability to prove that it is prejudicial to the interests of the UK where there is no harm to the UK. Activity by the IRGC in France, Iran or Bosnia, or by the Chinese in Hong Kong, may not be directly prejudicial to the interests of the UK, so again we are adding an unnecessary threshold. But if it is perpetrated here, be it in Manchester, London or anywhere else, we must be able to prosecute those responsible.

In plain terms, the gap was turning the UK into a base for state terrorism: a cell here in Britain planning a campaign of intimidation against a journalist in Dublin on behalf of the IRGC, or a network running sabotage operations in Germany. Arrested and charged, their defence writes itself. If the act was not to take place here in the UK, you cannot argue that it was prejudicial to UK safety. The law does not like ambiguity. We should not leave prosecutors having to argue that an attack on Dublin or Berlin was also somehow an attack on London. Amendment 8 closes that gap directly, so that planning hostile activity from British soil is caught wherever that activity is aimed. If the Government are confident that that scope is already reached, they lose nothing by putting it beyond doubt. Far better to write the law clearly today than to watch a case fall apart on that very point.

The next omission is propaganda itself. Since 2006, it has been an offence to disseminate publications that promote terrorism. The Bill extends no equivalent protection against the propaganda of designated states. We have heard colleagues today talk about publications such as Press TV which, shamefully, former Members of this House appear on and are paid to have shows on. Two of the principal weapons of hostile states are the propaganda that recruits and the disinformation that divides. The Chinese Communist party pushes propaganda and disinformation through the United Front Work Department. I hope these powers will reach it one day, but amendment 14 brings designated bodies within the same standard applied to terrorist publications for 20 years, because I do not in any way think that the Government think that IRGC propaganda should have more latitude than that of a proscribed terrorist group.

Next is an omission that many living in our country, especially our Jewish community, will find the most difficult. Under section 13 of the Terrorism Act 2000, it is an offence to display in public the insignia of a proscribed organisation. It is the power that we rely on to take Hamas flags, Hezbollah banners and the symbols of Hizb ut-Tahrir off our streets. The Bill as drafted contains no equivalent provision whatever, so if the amendment is not accepted by the Government, either now or in the other place, the flag of the IRGC may fly lawfully on a British street, glorifying every stabbing, every attack on our Jewish communities, every kidnap plot and every assassination attempt that the regime has

directed here. How do we look the people who are being hunted in the eye and tell them that the banner of their hunter is welcome on our streets?

The Government may say that criminalising the display of state symbols brings lawful state activity under UK criminal law, contrary to diplomatic convention, and that by reciprocity, hostile states could criminalise the Union Jack and UK uniforms abroad, exposing our personnel and dual nationals. I have taken the time to consider that. Yes, state immunity protects foreign states in our courts, but it should not and does not dictate what a resident of this country may do on British pavements.

5.15 pm

The amendment does not touch the Iranian state, or its embassy or any accredited diplomat protected by the Vienna convention. It touches the person waving the flag or wearing the uniform. The reciprocity argument does not survive five seconds of contact with reality, because Iran already jails its own citizens for waving the Union Jack. We do not keep our flag safe in Tehran by keeping their flag flying in London.

I move from the offences that the Bill omits to the powers it withholds from our police and the officers standing at the border. New clause 5 closes one of the starkest gaps between the Bill and the terrorism law that the Secretary of State clearly said she seeks to mirror: “the same as” was the language she used. If an officer has reasonable grounds to suspect at the border that someone is leaving the United Kingdom to assist a designated terrorist group—which, under the Bill, would be a designated hostile state body—they should be able to seize the passport of the person seeking to travel and stop them.

We grant that exact power in terrorism cases. Parliament created the provision in 2015 so that an officer at the border does not have to watch a suspect board a plane and vanish. On 29 March 2024, two men stabbed Pouria Zeraat, a journalist with Iran International—an incredibly brave man who continues to do everything he can to shine a light on what is taking place in Iran—outside his home in Wimbledon. The Crown told the court that the men had acted as proxies for the Iranian state, and within hours they were at Heathrow and gone. We can close that loophole by accepting new clause 5.

Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of whom we have spoken much, recommended the power last year. He said that it was an immediate recommendation, and the Government rightly accepted it. I welcomed them doing so, but now the Government have left it out of the Bill. The equivalent power against terrorism has worked for 10 years and been used 75 times. If the threat is visible at the border, we must not tie the hands of the officer standing in front of it.

The second power that the Bill withholds is the serious crime prevention order. Again, terrorism law already allows it, but this Bill does not, which is why I tabled new clause 6. A serious crime prevention order lets a court manage risk beyond the conviction, limiting travel, restricting internet access, controlling communications, and compelling disclosure that aids an investigation. Each one of those tools would help us tackle hostile state networks. We grant them against organised crimes and terrorists, but the Bill grants them against neither the IRGC nor any future designated body.

The Minister must explain why a SCPO is right for county-lines gangs and terror cells, but not a hostile state. I suspect that the real answer is that it may have been an omission, or that there may be plans for a future Bill, but we have this Bill in front of us now, so let us give the police the necessary powers.

There is a blind spot at the centre of the Bill—a consequence of writing it for one organisation and forgetting that there will be more state bodies that behave as terrorists. The Bill does not mention sanctions once. For legislation the entire purpose of which is to act against hostile state bodies, there is a remarkable and revealing silence that tells us who the Bill was drafted for. The IRGC is already sanctioned, so the Government did not trouble to build a bridge to the sanctions regime, but the next body we might designate may not be sanctioned at all, and I assure the House that there will be a need for future designations. I have touched on one: the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist party.

New clause 7 enshrines designation as grounds for sanction. It does not impose anything automatic, and neither does it ask for a running commentary on sanctions—Government lawyers can rest easy—but it gives the Bill a bridge to a second or third designation, not just the first. Amendment 15 builds directly on that bridge. Where new clause 7 makes the link possible, amendment 15 makes the Government turn their minds to it. It requires the Secretary of State, within six months of designating any body, to consider whether that body should also be sanctioned, and to lay the reasons for that decision before this House.

Amendment 15 is not a demand that the Government sanction anyone. The amendment deliberately ensures that designations and sanctions do not drift apart due to inattention. If the Government are serious that the power should be used agnostically against bodies not yet sanctioned, they would welcome a discipline that forces them to look every time.

Finally, I come to the threat that the Bill cannot even bring itself to name. Hostile states, and the bodies that serve them, will use any tool they can to silence dissent, subvert democracy, and advance their interests, particularly in those who sought safety in our country—Tibetans, Hongkongers, Ukrainians and British nationals who dared to stand up to autocrats and terrorist technocrats, and who are now under attack on our soil.

Amendment 16 names three of the most common and most sinister forms of attack by hostile states: transnational repression, abusive lawfare and sanctions evasion. It would be the first time that transnational repression was put into British law. That may seem like an amazing, glaring omission to many Members of this House; I myself was not aware of it until I gave the Bill Office my amendment and asked them to provide me with the legal definition of transnational repression, only to be told that there is no such definition because it is not in law. We can correct that through this Bill. Doing so would send a single, unambiguous warning that a foreign power that reaches on to our streets to do these things will be designated for it.

We have heard about the threats from Iran to our country. We know how the Chinese Communist party has put bounties on the heads of pro-democracy Hongkongers—cash for the abduction of people as young as 19, kidnap notes put through the doors of

neighbours saying, “Bring this person to the Chinese embassy so that we can deal with them.” We have talked about Russia murdering people on our soil, and behind all the names we know—Litvinenko, Berezovsky and all the others—there are hundreds and thousands we do not know who are still being attacked.

Section 33 of the NSA already names some hostile acts, including sabotage, the theft of trade secrets and entering a prohibited premises. If the Act can name those examples, it can find the room to name transnational repression. This is the chance to improve the National Security Act, protect the vulnerable and put autocracies on notice.

To conclude, I will draw these threads together. Every one of these 13 amendments is drawn not from theory, but from the body of counter-terrorism law that this country has built, tested and relied upon for two decades. Apart from the transnational repression suggestion, every measure is taken from terrorism legislation to ensure that we do not have omissions or gaps in the Bill. They also come from my experience working directly to counter hostile states and terrorist groups before I came to this place. Even the basics—a propaganda offence, the flags and uniforms, the power to seize a passport at the border; orders we already have—are the bare minimum the Government should be looking to accept. If these amendments are not agreed to, it ceases to become an issue of haste and becomes one of choice—a choice to give the IRGC a gentler regime than the terrorist groups it funds.

We support the Bill. We are not trying to stop it. I hope that I have made the case clearly that we just want to plug the gaps. I do not think it is fair for the Government to suggest that we are trying to use this Bill like a Christmas tree and hang lots of additional items on it. I seek simply to close existing gaps. The only new measure would be the one concerning transnational repression. I commend these amendments to the Committee, and I hope they will be considered.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dame Angela Eagle): I have to commend the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) for doing her homework. I wish to explain why we do not think these amendments are needed at the moment.

There are a couple of themes that run through my response to the hon. Lady’s amendments. The first is that it is not possible to treat a state body the same as a terrorist organisation, because one cannot abolish a state body. One has to think about the differences between the two, which is why we have called the measure closing the loophole in this Bill designation, rather than proscription. It is also the case that we clearly have other international obligations, both under international law, for the sovereignty of individual states, and under diplomatic law, with the Vienna convention, so that we can enable diplomatic relations or other arrangements with states that we might not approve of particularly. Within that difference lie some of the different approaches in the Bill and in the hon. Lady’s amendments.

The other common theme, which perhaps divides us in our approach to the Bill, as well as explaining the differences and why we will not be accepting the hon. Lady’s amendments, is that we are not trying to put all of Jonathan Hall’s recommendations on to the statute book in this Bill. As my right hon. Friend the Home

Secretary said in her opening remarks, we have accepted all the recommendations in Jonathan Hall's report and will be legislating for them subsequently. What we wish to do with this quite narrow Bill is close that loophole with state-sponsored or proxy organisations as quickly as possible so that we can deal with the rising threats present on our streets as we speak. It may help to bear those two things in mind as I lay out the Government's position regarding the amendments that the hon. Lady has just spoken to.

Through amendments 3 to 6, the hon. Lady seeks to remove the prohibited purpose test. The test is there precisely to cover the difference in treatment between terrorist organisations and states, which we cannot proscribe and with which we may have to have some kind of arrangements. While the Bill is modelled on the provisions in the Terrorism Act 2000, it has to reflect the realities of dealing with state entities. That is what the prohibited purpose test is about. There may be some cases where UK persons need to have legitimate dealings with a state entity; it might be a British diplomat or a non-governmental organisation delivering humanitarian aid. The prohibited purpose test is necessary to protect legitimate conduct without creating loopholes that can be exploited by hostile actors.

Sir John Hayes: I am glad that the Minister has addressed that point, because it was raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) and I on Second Reading. Surely the counter-argument is that it will be a sure defence when prosecutions are brought; it will be much harder to secure a conviction, because the necessity to prove a purpose will be tested beyond measure. The association with a state-sponsored organisation such as, for example, the IRGC is ipso facto proof, surely, of guilt.

Dame Angela Eagle: Action that is prejudicial to the safety and interests of the UK is the test that we are talking about. If one were delivering humanitarian aid and had to deal with part of a state that we did not particularly approve of, that would not be prejudicial to the safety or interests of the UK. It would be in line with what the UK wished to do, but if it were prejudicial, because it was hostile activity, the test would be passed.

Alicia Kearns: The Minister gives the example of a diplomat, and she is right that our diplomats in Tehran will need to engage with the IRGC—it is nonsense to suggest that they would not be able to do so—but that is why there is a specific exception for that in the Bill. Proposed new section 17A(5) refers to a person who

“acts for or on behalf of, or holds office under, the Crown, or is in Crown employment (whether or not they engage in the conduct in that capacity).”

As I have mentioned, I am concerned that that means that anyone who is a traitor and works for the civil service would have protections under any circumstances, but it means that we do not need that additional threshold, because diplomats are already specifically protected in the Bill at another point.

Dame Angela Eagle: It is not only diplomats. It may well be NGOs delivering humanitarian aid and people who have to come across states or their designated proxies in particular cases.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): We need to be clear about which provisions relate to which offences. The offence that I think the Minister has heard concern expressed about, and to which amendment 3 relates, is the offence under proposed new section 17A of the National Security Act 2023—in other words, the offence of supporting a designated organisation. The provisions that relate to protections for those who are acting on behalf of the UK state apply to the other two offences, not to the 17A offence, do they not?

The Minister is of course right that there is a difference between the way in which the UK state needs to interact with another state entity and the way in which it needs to interact with a terrorist entity, but these offences relate to individuals not to states or, indeed, the designated body. We are talking about offences that might be charged against individuals who are themselves accused of supporting that designated body.

Is not the point here—the point has been made several times—that we are setting up an additional hurdle in order to prosecute successfully for an offence of supporting a designated body? As the Minister heard me say on Second Reading, what I am concerned to understand is why that is not duplication, in effect, of the designation process itself, which distinguishes an innocent, perfectly rational state body from one that is up to no good for all the ways described in the designation process. Why do we need the prohibited purposes test in addition to the designation process?

5.30 pm

Dame Angela Eagle: I think it is to cover all potential actions that individuals may undertake that are okay; they can assure themselves that an activity is okay, even if it involves a designated state, if it is not prejudicial to the safety or interests of the UK. Many humanitarian organisations are worried about being inadvertently caught in the designation process, and the prohibited purpose test is there to give assurance in those contexts.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Earlier today, I and other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee met the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross's regional delegation to the UK. The ICRC makes the point that while it is not a non-governmental organisation, it needs access to state actors on both sides of a conflict. I am curious about whether the prohibited purpose test is specifically looking to protect NGOs and organisations such as the ICRC, or whether it is also to do with compliance with international law, such as the European convention on human rights.

Dame Angela Eagle: The Bill does accord with the European convention on human rights, international law and all our obligations. The prohibited purpose test is there precisely to give assurance to bodies like the one that the hon. Member mentioned, so that there will not be any dubiety about whether they can engage with the organisations that they must work with as part of their core job.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): May I put on record my thanks to the Home Secretary and the team for the speed with which they have addressed the major issues in the Bill? I also thank the Home Secretary for making it clear on Second Reading that the Bill's provisions will not apply to humanitarian organisations.

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes. This is the test that delivers that assurance.

Sir Jeremy Wright: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way again. I hope she accepts that I am genuinely trying to ensure that I have understood correctly how the test is supposed to work. I would be grateful if she also addressed the other point that I raised. I understand her argument that the intention is to ensure that, for example, those at NGO level who might engage with a designated body are not held criminally accountable for doing so. However, she will recognise that the Bill deals differently with the offences of assisting or obtaining a material benefit from a designated body. In those cases, there is provision for the defence that she has outlined, but that approach is not taken in relation to supporting a designated body. Can she explain why we have that difference?

Dame Angela Eagle: I think it is about consistency. The Bill was drafted to try to mirror—albeit in a slightly different context—the Terrorism Act provisions, while fitting into the National Security Act’s provisions, so that we do not have a complicated range of tests.

Amendment 7 relates to defences and sentencing. Essentially, the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) wishes to increase the prison sentence for actively assisting to 25 years from the current 14 years. The idea is that 14 years would very much fit in with the sentences under the National Security Act, and we would not end up with a complex range of sentences for quite similar offences. One could increase both, if we were minded to do so, but the point about the introduction of designation in the Bill is that it is trying to fit into the National Security Act, which has been working quite well, rather than our having a whole range of different sentences for very similar offences.

Alicia Kearns: I fully recognise the Minister’s point that she is trying to align the provisions with those in the National Security Act, but as per my argument earlier, let us improve the National Security Act while we are at it. The Minister says that the question is whether she is minded to make the change; I say she should be minded to. If someone actively assists or materially benefits from a hostile state while committing treason, it is absolutely right that they should get a tougher sentence than that for just flying a flag or supporting a hostile state. Those acts are still heinous, but a far worse crime has been committed. I ask the Minister to consider making the change when the Bill is in the Lords.

Dame Angela Eagle: I note the hon. Lady’s point.

Amendment 10 would

“create an offence of engaging in conduct in preparation for committing, or assisting another to commit, an offence relating to a designated body.”

It is not necessary, because a person who engages in conduct of any kind, including preparatory conduct, that is intended to assist a designated body in carrying out UK-related activities would be caught by the Bill’s provisions.

The hon. Lady talked about what she called a loophole; she said that the Bill does not cover attacks inspired by a designated body. Her amendment 13 would create a new offence for self-directed acts inspired by a designated

body, but we do not believe it is necessary. The test for the assisting offence in proposed new section 17B of the National Security Act is whether conduct is intended to assist a designated organisation, or whether the person ought to have known that their conduct was likely to assist the organisation. The person does not need to be tasked or directed by the organisation to commit the offence, so those who are inspired to do things, rather than being asked or told to do things by the designated body, are caught.

With amendment 8, the hon. Lady seeks to capture conduct that occurs outside the UK but is planned within the UK. Again, we believe it is unnecessary. If planning takes place in the UK, it is already caught in the Bill, under the offence in proposed new section 17B of assisting a designated body. That offence refers to conduct of any kind, and it will be an offence to plan something in the UK that takes place outside the UK if it materially assists a designated body in carrying out activities that are prejudicial to the safety or interests of the UK—the prohibited purpose test. That could cover someone in the UK who assists a designated body in its work, done overseas, to target an ally of the UK, so the amendment is unnecessary.

Amendment 14 would create an offence relating to the dissemination of publications that encourage support for a designated body. The conduct that the amendment seeks to address is already covered by the new offence of supporting a designated body.

I think the hon. Lady wanted people to be criminalised for wearing clothing or displaying flags or similar symbols linked to a designated body. The Bill does not ban the wearing or carrying of an image, because we cannot ban what might be worn by a foreign diplomat, but if somebody is supporting or promoting the hostile activities of a proscribed body in any way, they will be caught by the new support offence. I hope that assures the hon. Lady that that issue is covered.

New clauses 5 and 6 would give effect to other recommendations made by Jonathan Hall by creating new powers to seize travel documents, and to allow police to apply for serious crime prevention orders in relation to offences committed under this legislation. We are committed to legislating on those recommendations and, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on Second Reading, we will do so as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I want to begin by restating that Liberal Democrats support this Bill. We have long called for action to tackle the threat posed by the IRGC, and we have repeatedly been disappointed by slow progress. The Bill represents a positive step, and a rare moment of agreement on a principle across this House. When it comes to important matters of national security, this is a desirable outcome.

The UK is increasingly targeted by hostile state-backed groups, and the IRGC has been involved in such activity, as we know. Attacks on Britain’s Jewish community in recent months have laid bare the clear and ongoing threat to that community, and also to UK national security. The uptick in antisemitism and the threats against our national security continue, regardless of the

politics in this House, and we must bear that in mind when we act urgently to protect Jewish communities. That is why I urge Members across the House to support new clause 3 on the designation of the IRGC. This will provide, after long delays, much-needed certainty for the Jewish community and others that the Government will act at pace by bringing forward regulations within a month of this legislation passing.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman will know that I have called for the proscription of the IRGC numerous times in this House, and that it is something I absolutely want, but does he not accept that we have to pass this legislation, set the framework up and allow the Home Secretary to make an evidence-based decision before proscription is brought into effect? Should he not withdraw this new clause, and allow due process to take its course?

Max Wilkinson: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. The new clause will not be withdrawn. The sentiment is shared between us, and I think we should appreciate that.

New clause 3 reflects the Government's stated intention to move by the summer recess, and it ensures that this commitment will be honoured in practice; that would give much reassurance to those watching from outside the House. Importantly, the new clause does not force the Home Secretary to designate the IRGC prematurely; it would have to do so only in line with the coming into force of the rest of the Bill. It does not override due process; nor does it lower the evidential threshold required under the legislation. It ensures that the intelligence gathering and preparatory work necessary for designation are treated as an urgent priority, rather than something that can be continually delayed. This urgency is long overdue.

Liberal Democrats will also support new clause 4, which provides for an independent post-legislative review within 12 months of this legislation passing. This is a crucial safeguard. The Bill introduces significant new powers, and it is essential that their effectiveness and proportionality are independently assessed.

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to want this. However, there is already a requirement under law for Jonathan Hall, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, to review all terrorism legislation and related legislation, including the National Security Act 2023—which this would fall under—every single year, and to report back to Parliament. Hopefully the hon. Gentleman will be reassured that this is already covered in law, and that there is a specific requirement.

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Lady knows much more about this than I do, and I bow to her greater knowledge.

The Home Secretary gave a reassurance on Second Reading that humanitarian organisations would not find their work being criminalised, and the Security Minister has just touched on that point as well. We welcome that further reassurance on the official record, but I have no doubt that the point will be further explored elsewhere when the Bill moves on. I am sure that Members from across the House will agree that the accelerated passage of the Bill through Parliament,

which will limit the amount of scrutiny it receives, heightens the imperative for independent post-legislative scrutiny, which may be useful to the Government.

Similarly, we will support amendment 2, which ensures that any decision to remove a designation is subject to the draft affirmative procedure. Again, speed is a factor in this Bill's passage, as the official Opposition have mentioned a number of times today, and it is likely that this will not be needed in the short to medium term. However, parliamentary oversight should apply not just at the point of designation, but at the point of removal. It is vital that there should be adequate parliamentary scrutiny if a future Home Secretary should seek to remove a designation, and this amendment will enshrine that mechanism.

We also support amendment 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone). This amendment closes a critical loophole by making it an offence to use corporate structures to conceal assets belonging to designated individuals or organisations. It would strengthen enforcement against the murky structures which many Members of this House have long opposed. I urge Ministers to consider the merits of the amendment, even if it does not reach a Division today.

The Liberal Democrats will support amendment 8. The Bill refers to "UK-related activities", but fails to account for activities that are conducted overseas but planned from within the UK. It cannot be right that groups planning attacks on our allies and neighbours are sheltered from the law by this oversight. These actors do not respect traditional borders and so our laws must adequately adapt to meet the challenge. The amendment would close that loophole and, in doing so, strengthen the Bill.

5.45 pm

The Bill can be further strengthened to bring the activity of copycat and lone wolf actors into scope, as set out in amendment 13. Experts are warning that access to violent content online is a contributing factor to violent acts being carried out by those who feel they are acting on behalf of a group, even if they hold no direct link or contact. The laissez-faire attitude of social media platforms to content moderation means that attacks of that kind are more likely. Amendment 13 would bring lone wolf and copycat actors into scope by creating a new offence of undertaking conduct that is harmful or prejudicial to UK interests that is inspired by a designated body, rather than actively commissioned on behalf of a designated body.

Finally, while there is merit in many of the amendments thoughtfully and helpfully proposed by the official Opposition, we will not support amendment 3. The amendment would remove the additional defence of supporting a designated body for a non-prohibited purpose. That is an important protection in the Bill to ensure the performance of the functions of the diplomatic mission in accordance with the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations, or to allow humanitarian assistance or other activities that support basic human needs. It would also ensure that the engagement of the UK Government with the designated body would not be for a prohibited purpose.

We support the Bill, which is long overdue. We hope that it will pass today and make quick progress in the other place.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I declare an interest that I chair, and have done for about five years, a group called Solidarity with the Iranian Workers' Movement Committee. We formed officially about five years ago and have been working for about 10 or 15 years. It is a group of Iranian refugees and trade unionists in this country, and we have tried to provide solidarity and campaign on human rights issues, focused on trade unionists in Iran. We started informally around the Tehran bus workers' dispute, if people can remember that taking place, because a lot of the trade unionists we worked with were subsequently arrested and detained, and some were executed. That brought us together in solidarity.

On new clause 3, we have been raising time and again the proscription of the IRGC and have expressed our disappointment at the lack of action by the Government. I understand why the legislation is brought forward, and I hope that it will be brought through effectively and with the impact that we want, particularly on that organisation. Members will remember that we worked with the National Union of Journalists. In this country, the IRGC targeted journalists in particular, and a broadcasting station in Chiswick had to depart and operate from New York for a period.

Although I support the intentions of the legislation, may I also express my reservations about it? I have been in this place long enough to have experience of legislation that has come through not with undue haste, but with haste, and it is in that legislation that we usually make mistakes because we have not taken into account others' views about the impacts. What worried me was that the explanatory notes—the Secretary of State asked us to look at them in some detail—made clear:

“Given the pace at which this legislation was developed, outside groups have not been engaged on the specifics in the Bill.”

A range of organisations are now expressing concern, such as the Red Cross, and that worries me. That is why rushing a Bill through in one day is precipitous. I am worried that as a result of that, we will legislate poorly. When I say “poorly”, I am referring to incursions on people's rights; I do not mean the right to in any way defend the organisations or states that many hon. Members referred to on Second Reading, but people's right to express solidarity with some organisations or even countries in struggle, which we have had in the past.

To cite an example, I am a member of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. Trump is now targeting Cuba and has designated it as a terrorist state. Under the Government's proposals, for an organisation to be designated there are two factors, which were set out on Second Reading. First, a body has to have been

“involved in foreign power threat activity”,

as set out in proposed new section 33A of the National Security Act 2023 and in the Bill's explanatory notes. One of those activities is foreign interference in elections. Secondly, the Secretary of State may designate a body if they believe that

“is necessary to protect the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.”

In the coming months, even until the next general election if necessary, I will be working in solidarity, through the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, with the current Cuban Government. I will be working to influence that election to ensure that a Government are elected

that prevent the hostile attack by the US on Cuba, so that will be seen as foreign interference in an election.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman references Cuba in the context of this legislation. The United States has elections—whether they elect the right president or not, is a matter for the Americans—but the Cuban people do not have that luxury. On direct or indirect threats to the United Kingdom's interests—this is indirect threat—he will know that many Cuban nationals have been sent to Ukraine to fight in Russia's illegal war. They are killing Ukrainian soldiers and aiding and abetting the bombing of civilians. Putin is losing, but if he did win, Cuba would have been aiding a regime that is not in our national security interest.

John McDonnell: Well, QED. There we have it. Under the Bill, as members of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, I and many other hon. Members will be committing an offence—

Dame Angela Eagle: I have a great deal of respect for my right hon. Friend, as he knows, but in order for that to be the case, this Government would have to decide to designate the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. Obviously I cannot talk about what may or may not be designated should the Bill get on the statute book, but I think he is winding himself up into a bit of a tight knot.

John McDonnell: I am grateful for the Minister's consideration of my mental health, et cetera. The designation covers “foreign interference in elections” and we will be campaigning to maintain solidarity with Cuba itself. On the second designation—

“is necessary to protect the safety or interests of the United Kingdom”—

in our current trade negotiations with the United States, we are taking decisions about the “interests” of the UK as interpreted by the US. So I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that when we introduce such legislation, we must discern what could be the worst that could happen and how could it go wrong? We are opening up an opportunity for things to go wrong. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary would not designate the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, but in a certain situation, certain Administrations would. By not including sufficient protections in the legislation we are, unwittingly, opening the door to its being used to designate organisations, and therefore individuals, as breaking the law, with significant penalties imposed. That is why the rush to legislation is my concern. If we are not engaging with outside bodies that could be in the specifics of the legislation, as the explanatory notes say, that is where we will make mistakes.

What consultations or discussions have been had with some of the organisations campaigning on the international implications of what is happening, particularly regarding the role of the US. What discussions have taken place? There could be ramifications well beyond what we all agree on today with regard to the designation of the IRGC and others that, at this moment, could be specifically designated as advancers of terrorism.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I note the definition on activities being “prejudicial to the safety or interests of the United Kingdom”,

but does my right hon. Friend agree that we are getting into some tortuous territory? It could be properly argued that it is in the interests of the United Kingdom to seek to uphold basic human rights and have international humanitarian law observed consistently. That is in our collective and global interests, but we could find ourselves in situations where actors who we currently class as our allies, such as in the example he has given, use organisations to undermine that very principle. Is that not an example of how we need to think this legislation through?

John McDonnell: There is a consideration that needs to be properly debated and given the time to be debated. My specific point is that if the US moves against Cuba and imposes and demands a wider trade ban, for example, the argument could be made that we are undermining our own interests if we do not co-operate with the US. That argument has been used in the trade negotiations so far. Under this legislation, we could have an organisation designated specifically around trying to break that blockade. That is my worry.

That leads me on to a minor point about designation. At the moment, designation is made through the affirmative procedure, which brings a statutory instrument before the House that we can vote for or against; we cannot amend it. What we saw under the proscription process, particularly with Palestine Action, was that the statutory instrument came before us with a bloc of 20 organisations. We had to vote for it or against it; we could not distinguish in voting between any of those organisations.

I ask the Government to consider that when we deal with this matter, it should be dealt with through the super-affirmative procedure, rather than the affirmative procedure. In the super-affirmative procedure, there is a process of consultation in which individual organisations can be dealt with, rather than dealing with organisations en bloc. In that way, we could take a more considered decision about the individual roles and aspects of organisations that the Government are designating.

I hope the Government will consider that process better, because it would reassure us more that this legislation will be effective and will not have the sweeping consequences that bloc proscription has brought so far. We have seen maybe 3,000 people going through our courts simply for holding up a poster with regard to Palestine Action.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I will speak to my amendment 1, which I am very pleased has the most supporters of any amendment before us today.

Amendment 1 would make an offence of the concealment of beneficial ownership relating to a designated organisation and the establishment and maintenance of that concealment of finance and assets. In simpler terms, it would crack down on the professional enablers working to hide the ownership of assets for a designated group by clarifying that that is the same as providing them with a material benefit. These groups rely on hiding their money, and opaque financial systems only help them to do that. By extending liability to those who make that opacity possible, we limit the ability of designated groups to continue to benefit from their assets and finances.

Amendment 1 makes it clear that financial transparency is a national security issue. The opaque systems, all too often in overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and those who enable their use, are assisting nations

and organisations that want to do our country harm. Designating these state-backed groups is vital. We have seen the issues they cause across the country: targeting our institutions, targeting those who speak out against regimes, and directing acts designed to target and strike fear into our Jewish communities.

6 pm

I did not table this amendment for theoretical cases or as a stimulant for debate, however; I tabled it because groups such as the IRGC are benefiting from these structures right now. It is alleged by *The Times*, Bloomberg and Transparency International that Iranian-Cypriot banker Ali Ansari has purchased a huge London property empire for the benefit of the new Ayatollah. His purchases are linked to a company called Birch Ventures Ltd, which is registered on the Isle of Man with Ansari listed as the beneficial owner. Last year, this Government sanctioned Mr Ansari because they believe he is funding the IRGC. The Government believe that Mr Ansari is such a risk of supporting a group which may be designated a state threat that they have frozen his assets, but I fear this Bill does not actually ensure that his role in supporting these groups is properly captured. The usefulness of Mr Ansari to the Iranian regime is his ability to obscure their wealth, hide their assets and ensure that their financial flows carry on unabated by acting as the beneficial owner when it appears this is not actually the case.

It is not only the Iranian regime who can fund their state threats through obscuring ownership. Just this week the Government have sanctioned individuals and companies that existed as fronts to purchase technology that could be used in Ukraine at the behest of the GRU—another candidate to become a designated group under this Bill. Those responsible for disguising the benefits to the GRU of the ownership of these companies or the assets they hold could also become liable for prosecution under my amendment.

Another Russian intelligence arm, the FSB, directs cyber-attacks against our country and the businesses in it. Indeed, the Government identify that FSB Centre 18, known as Star Blizzard, has targeted Members of this House. Sanctioned oligarchs Dmitry Patrushev and Denis Bortnikov were identified as part of the Navalny 35 as acting as wallets for their powerful fathers who have held senior positions in the FSB. Again, these are powerful people who are enabling the continued existence of the wealth of senior figures in dangerous groups, and those roles should not go unpunished.

The malign state actors—the people my amendment is targeting—have a simple role: they are the enablers, the fixers, the money men. They may not write the hacking code or carry out sabotage or violent acts personally, but by enabling and obscuring the finances which make such activity possible, they are culpable and responsible. We cannot allow a loophole in this vital legislation that leaves these individuals who play such a key role without punishment. Making it clear that this role is illegal will remove their usefulness to these groups. It will cut out sources of funding and make it harder for them to continue their activities.

To make sure that this new law has a real effect, the Government urgently need to take two key steps. First, they need to work with overseas territories and Crown

dependencies to ensure they are operating to the highest global standards to prevent the financing of designated groups—just as they would be expected to stop the financing of terror groups. There can be no hiding places for those who do us harm, and now that we are finally giving these groups a proper legal classification, we must root out their financing in the same way we have done with terrorism for decades. I would appreciate the Minister telling us what plans she has to do this, and if she has had these conversations already, and if not, when she will.

Secondly—this is incredibly important if, as I suspect, the Government do not accept this amendment today—we need to get better at enforcing the current laws around beneficial ownership. We must ensure that those who are not correctly reporting beneficial ownership, for whatever reason, are not able to get away with it.

I support this Bill and want it to pass, but I am concerned that some who play a crucial role in propping up designated groups, shielding their finances and contributing to their malign activity could get away unscathed. I urge the Government to support this amendment today.

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

Dame Angela Eagle: New clause 3, tabled by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), would require the Secretary of State to bring forward regulations designating the IRGC within a month of this Act coming into force, but the exercise of these powers under this Bill will have significant implications for national security and foreign policy, and it is right that they should be exercised independently by the Secretary of State on the basis of expert advice, including from the security and intelligence agencies. That is what this Bill allows, and putting these designations on the face of the Bill would be a very difficult way to effect the change, so the way to do this is the way that the Bill sets out.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham's new clause 4, which would

"require the Independent Reviewer of State Threats Legislation to assess the adequacy of the powers introduced by this Act twelve months after its passing",

is already essentially covered by the Bill's provisions, because they would be subject to part 3 of the National Security Act. The independent reviewer of state threats legislation has to carry out an annual review into the operation of its provisions, and is also empowered by part 1 of that Act to review any other such things he or she sees fit. Amendment 2 would require the draft affirmative procedure to be used for regulations removing a designation. He is right that such regulations should receive the proper parliamentary scrutiny, and the Bill already provides that such regulations are subject to the draft affirmative procedure. The use of the negative procedure is limited to very minor technical changes, such as the addition of aliases.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked whether it would be possible to proscribe a particular group, and gave a particular example. The test is whether the body is engaged in "foreign power threat activity"; it is a high bar, and it targets organisations that pose a

real threat to the UK. I cannot imagine for one minute that my right hon. Friend would be involved in any of those.

Amendment 1, tabled by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), would provide further examples of conduct that would be considered a material benefit, and he spoke about what those might be. Obtaining material benefits from a foreign intelligence service is an existing offence under section 17 of the National Security Act, so I do not think the further examples of conduct in amendment 1 are needed, as that conduct is already caught by the provisions in the Bill.

Alicia Kearns: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

OFFENCES RELATING TO DESIGNATED BODIES

Amendment proposed: 3, page 3, line 8, leave out from "body" until end of line 9.—(*Alicia Kearns.*)

This amendment and Amendments 4 to 6 would remove the additional defence of supporting a designated body for a non-prohibited purpose.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 85, Noes 317.

Division No. 29]

[6.7 pm

AYES

Argar, rh Edward	Kearns, Alicia
Bacon, Gareth	Lam, Katie
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Lamont, John
Barclay, rh Steve	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Bedford, Mr Peter	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Bhatti, Saqib	Lopez, Julia
Blackman, Bob	Mak, Alan
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Malthouse, rh Kit
Brandreth, Aphra	McVey, rh Esther
Burghart, Alex	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Chope, Sir Christopher	Morrissey, Joy
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Costa, Alberto	Norman, rh Jesse
Coutinho, rh Claire	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	O'Brien, Neil
Davies, Gareth	Patel, rh Priti
Davis, rh David (<i>Proxy vote</i>	Paul, Rebecca
<i>cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Philp, rh Chris
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Pritchard, rh Mark
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast</i>
Evans, Dr Luke	<i>by Mike Wood</i>)
Freeman, George	Rankin, Jack
French, Mr Louie	Robertson, Joe
Fuller, Richard	Rosindell, Andrew
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Shannon, Jim
Garnier, Mark	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Glen, rh John	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Grant, Helen	Simmonds, David
Griffith, Andrew	Smith, Greg
Griffiths, Alison	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Harris, Rebecca	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Hayes, rh Sir John	Spencer, Dr Ben
Hoare, Simon	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Holden, rh Mr Richard	<i>cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Huddleston, Nigel	Stephenson, Blake
Hudson, Dr Neil	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Thomas, Bradley

Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James

Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Sir Ashley Fox and
 Rebecca Smith

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Aquarone, Steff
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brewer, Alex
 Brickell, Phil
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Buckley, Julia
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carden, Dan
 Carns, Al
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collins, Tom
 Collins, Victoria
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil

Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Daby, Janet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dickson, Jim
 Dillon, Mr Lee (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Franklin, Zöe
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia

Grady, John
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayer, Alex
 Maynard, Charlie
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine

McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Susan
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pitcher, Lee
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Rutland, Tom
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sowards, Mark

Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Slade, Vikki
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Hannah
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Jamie
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Luke
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick

Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
West, Catherine
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Claire Hughes and
Shaun Davies

Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, Clive
Kearns, Alicia
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrisey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew

Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Rankin, Jack
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Voaden, Caroline
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Ashley Fox and
Rebecca Smith

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 2

OFFENCES RELATING TO DESIGNATED BODIES

Amendment proposed: 8, page 4, line 27, after “United Kingdom” insert

“or are conducted outside, but were planned from within, the United Kingdom”.—(*Alicia Kearns.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 143, Noes 249.

Division No. 30]

[6.21 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
Aqarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Cane, Charlotte
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davis, rh David (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
Dillon, Mr Lee (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine

NOES

Bailey, Mr Calvin
Baker, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia

Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Coleman, Ben
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Daby, Janet
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dearden, Kate
 Dickson, Jim
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon

Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Seward, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth

Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 West, Catherine
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:

Shaun Davies and
 Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: 13, page 7, line 8, at end insert—

“17D Self-directing acts in support of a designated body

(1) A person commits an offence if the person engages in conduct of any kind which is—

(a) inspired by the ideology, actions, and self-promotion of a designated body, and

(b) prejudicial to the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.

(2) A person commits an offence if the person—

(a) engages in UK-related activities that are likely to assist the stated, or assumed, aims of a designated body, and

(b) knows, or having regard to other matters known to them ought to reasonably to know, that their activities are likely to assist the stated, or assumed, aims of a designated body.

(3) “UK-related activities” means—

(a) activities taking place in the United Kingdom;

(b) activities taking place outside the United Kingdom which are prejudicial to the safety or interests of the United Kingdom.

(4) Subsections (1) and (2) apply to conduct outside the United Kingdom, but apply to conduct taking place wholly outside the United Kingdom only if the person engaging in the conduct—

(ab) is a UK person, or

(b) acts for or on behalf of, or holds office under, the Crown, or is in Crown employment (whether or not they engage in the conduct in that capacity).

(5) In proceedings for an offence under this section it is a defence to show that the person engaged in the conduct in question—

- (a) in compliance with a legal obligation under the law of the United Kingdom which is not a legal obligation under private law,
- (b) in the case of a person having functions of a public nature under the law of the United Kingdom, for the purposes of those functions,
- (c) as a lawyer carrying on a legal activity, or
- (d) in accordance with, or in relation to UK-related activities carried out in accordance with, an agreement or arrangement to which—
 - (i) the United Kingdom was a party, or
 - (ii) any person acting for, or on behalf of, or holding office under, the Crown was (in that capacity) a party.

(6) A person is taken to have shown a matter mentioned in subsection (5) if—

- (a) sufficient evidence is adduced to raise an issue with respect to it, and
- (b) the contrary is not proved beyond reasonable doubt.

(7) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years or a fine (or both).

(8) The following terms have the same meaning as in section 3—

“Crown employment” ;

“financial benefit” ;

The “law of the United Kingdom” ;

“lawyer” ;

“legal activity” ;

“UK person” .—(*Alicia Kearns.*)

This amendment creates a new offence of undertaking conduct harmful or prejudicial to UK interests that is inspired by a designated body, rather than actively commissioned on behalf of a designated body.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 135, Noes 258.

Division No. 31]

[6.32 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Cane, Charlotte
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Dance, Adam

Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davis, rh David (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
Dillon, Mr Lee (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duffield, Rosie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie

Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, Clive
Kearns, Alicia
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
McVey, rh Esther
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca

Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Rankin, Jack
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Voaden, Caroline
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rebecca Smith and
Sir Ashley Fox

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex

Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carns, Al
Charalambous, Bambos
Chownes, Dr Ellie
Coleman, Ben

Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Daby, Janet
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dickson, Jim
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian

Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee

Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Seward, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will

Strathern, Alistair
 Streeter, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 West, Catherine
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Taiwo Owatemi and
Shaun Davies

Question accordingly negated.

Clauses 2 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 3

DESIGNATION OF THE IRGC

“(1) The Secretary of State must take reasonable steps to lay before Parliament regulations under the provisions of this Act to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a body involved in foreign power threat activity.

(2) Before laying such regulations, the Secretary of State must be satisfied that the IRGC fulfils the conditions set out in Section 1 of this Act.

(3) The regulations specified in subsection (1) should be laid before Parliament within a month of this Act coming into force.”
 —(Max Wilkinson.)

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to take reasonable steps to bring forward regulations designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) within a month of this Act coming into force.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 144, Noes 244.

Division No. 32]

[6.44 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward

Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett

Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davis, rh David (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dillon, Mr Lee (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jones, Clive
 Kearns, Alicia
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James

MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Hannah
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Martin
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Charlotte Cane and
 Tessa Munt

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Coleman, Ben
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Daby, Janet
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dearden, Kate
 Dickson, Jim
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill

Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin

McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt

Rushworth, Sam
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 West, Catherine
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Taiwo Owatemi and
Shaun Davies

Question accordingly negated.

Schedule agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading.

6.55 pm

Dame Angela Eagle: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This Bill will create crucial new powers to allow the Government to keep pace with the evolving threat picture that Members from all parties referred to in the previous debates. The Bill will now move on to the other

place, where I am sure colleagues will give it rigorous scrutiny while ensuring that its passage continues as smoothly as possible.

6.56 pm

Alicia Kearns: The Bill asks how our country confronts the greatest threat it faces: states that behave like terrorists. We support the Bill, and have today set out its weaknesses—the places where, as drafted, it is found wanting. We tabled 13 amendments and new clauses, with not one designed to delay the Bill, not one designed to wreck it and, tonight, not one accepted—not a clause, not a line, not one additional defence for our country. There are two ways for a Government to show their contempt for the House: they may deny it time or deny it influence. They may rush this House or overrule it. This Government have chosen both.

Mark Sowards: Does the hon. Lady not accept that Jonathan Hall, whom Members on all sides of the House respect, backs the Bill as a narrow and focused measure to designate state threats?

Alicia Kearns: I am not sure that anyone has disputed that Jonathan Hall backs the Bill. I had a lengthy call with him to discuss the gaps in the Bill, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman has not had. I will not share a private conversation, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman to have a similar call with Jonathan Hall to discuss those gaps.

We are here in this place to find the gaps while they can still be mended. That is the whole of our purpose, but we were not permitted to fulfil it today because scrutiny was declined. I have to admit that it feels like our suggestions were not even given due consideration. So I must tell the House what in the Bill now leaves this Chamber unaltered. The sponsor remains more gently treated in law than the proxies that it arms. The world's largest sponsor of terrorism keeps a protection denied to its terrorist proxies.

The self-directed actor—the lone individual that our terrorism law learned to tackle, at great and terrible cost, two decades ago—will fall through a gap that we were forbidden to close. Britain may be used as a base from which to plot against our friends in Dublin, Berlin or Brussels, or even those in Hong Kong and Tehran.

The flag of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps may still be flown, lawfully, on a British street, glorifying every threat against our Jewish communities that the regime has directed here. [*Interruption.*] The Minister may say, “Not necessarily,” but she specifically ruled out our amendment on the basis that we should not prevent members of the Iranian diplomatic corps from wearing uniforms here. The Bill does not apply to members of the diplomatic corps; it applies specifically to UK persons. That is therefore still the case and there is no protection against seeing those flags walked past Jewish people's homes. In Committee, I asked the Government how we look the people the regime has hunted in the eye and tell them that the banner of the hunter is still welcome on our streets. Tonight, I have no answer to offer them.

A law passed in good faith but built wrongly fails as surely as one that is passed in bad faith. When a prosecution comes, it will turn not on the speeches

[Alicia Kearns]

given today, the Government's good intentions or our warnings, but on what a defendant did. When that day comes and there is a gap that was identified in this House today that could have been closed in an afternoon, let the record show that it could have been mended.

The Bill now passes to the other place, and I have every confidence that their lordships will give it the scrutiny it deserves. We will not oppose the Bill tonight. We will support it, not because it delivers the full protections it should, but because a flawed shield is still a shield of some form and the men and women that the Bill is designed to protect cannot be left with nothing. We support it, having placed on the record of this House what was refused and whose hand refused it. The threat we face is patient, it is ruthless and it will not be deterred by a law that we were too rushed to finish and that the Government were too proud to mend.

I have supported this Bill at every stage, and it is because of that that I lament what the Bill could have been and that the House was given a single afternoon to try to get it right. I hope this Bill is as watertight as the Government assert, but if they wish to be absolute and to remove risk or ambiguities, we ask those in the other place to shut down any risk that the shield this aims to be might let even one traitor succeed in harming our nation. I hope they will do that on the basis of the way we have put forward our amendments: in the national interest.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

7 pm

Max Wilkinson: This has been an exercise in efficient democracy today, and I have enjoyed all six or so hours of it. Now, the Bill has passed this House and it proceeds

to the other place. When it has completed its journey, I hope that the Government will move forward and designate the IRGC as soon as possible, according to the timetable they have stated they aspire to. That is something that those on all sides of the House have aspired to for some time, and it will make our country a safer place, particularly for our Jewish communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS

That the draft Nuclear Safeguards (EU Exit and Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 23 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(Claire Hughes.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Digital Waste Tracking (England) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 23 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(Claire Hughes.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration (Leave to Enter and Remain) (Amendment) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 14 May, be approved.—(Claire Hughes.)

Question agreed to.

Private Sector Investment: Lancashire

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

7.2 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate Government support for private investment in Lancashire this evening. Lancashire is my home. It is also the home of some of the most powerful innovators that we have in this country. Often, they fly under the radar of both Government and private investors. In many ways, that is because they do not need us. They already have exceptional trade links and supply chains within their own sectors—decades-old business models in multi-generational companies that just work—so they crack on, quietly making money for this country and prosperity for themselves. In some ways, they do not need our help when they have figured it out for themselves for so long, but we need them. We need companies that have drive and that, with Government support and further investment in enabling infrastructure, could do 10 times what they are currently doing for our economy.

As a Labour Government, we are great at helping people who are struggling and who do not have the opportunities they deserve. I am grateful for the millions this Government are investing into Lancashire through Pride in Place projects, which will absolutely improve health and wellbeing—something we have particular need for in our county, where poor health accounts for a significant portion of the productivity gap. But, as a Labour Government, I think we could be more honest with ourselves that while overcoming deprivation is a top priority, growth is a top priority too. We could also be better at recognising where those growth opportunities are.

I think it is fair to say that this Government are pretty convinced by agglomeration economics and by the idea that if we invest in city regions, the wealth will trickle out. But what happens somewhere like Lancashire, where there is already wealth but it has been supported consistently for decades by EU funding and then by the crisis and resilience fund and the shared prosperity fund, all of which have now been removed? It feels shortsighted to pull the rug from under Lancashire's thriving economy in the hope that some wealth might trickle out from surrounding city regions in 20 years or so.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, particularly around growth in cities and towns, which I am particularly interested in. Over the last 10 years, we have seen growth of around 10% in our cities whereas growth has been around 5% in our towns. Does she agree that if we do not invest in our towns, particularly where they are outside of city regions, we will miss a crucial opportunity to uplift everyone?

Maya Ellis: I absolutely agree. As I will come on to, it is about ensuring that we make the most of all areas of our country. Some of those areas already have growth, and we need to ensure that we are expanding the growth that is already there.

Without a proper holistic look at how the Government can support businesses in Lancashire, not only will businesses struggle, but our UK economy will struggle more when we miss out on the huge potential for growth.

I could stand here all night waxing lyrical about how wonderful Lancashire is—our hills, our grand town halls, our coastline, our grit—but I know none of those things speak the language of the Treasury, Government and growth, so I will focus on the numbers and the examples of how the Government have a growth opportunity in Lancashire that they need to not miss.

Lancashire is a £40 billion GVA powerhouse. That makes us the 5th largest economy in the north. As the Minister knows, the current growth narrative for the north is often dominated by our major metropolitan neighbours. While we celebrate their success, any true growth narrative for the north must take non-metropolitan areas into account. At this point, let me be clear: “non-metropolitan” does not mean rural. There is a serious risk of people in Westminster making that mistake.

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for the Ribble Valley in Lancashire. Does she agree that Lancashire has missed out on millions of pounds of investment because the likes of Manchester and Liverpool have been prioritised and because we have not had a fully functioning combined authority?

Maya Ellis: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. As I will come on to, the people and places in counties such as Lancashire deserve that kind of funding. Even if the politicians who have been making the decisions have maybe delayed those opportunities to get devolution, we should not penalise the people there for that.

Lancashire is a prime example of a polycentric economy. We have coastal and rural environments, but also urban environments from city centres to market towns, with many of the same issues and opportunities as our metropolitan neighbours. We are a county of 1.57 million people and over 55,000 businesses, contributing a massive portion of the north's economic output. We face the same challenges—some of the highest levels of deprivation and worklessness in our urban pockets—yet we also have areas that rank in the top five of northern local authorities for productivity. We are not just waiting for growth; we have an economic base that matches any of our neighbours, where strengths in defence, energy and advanced engineering add unique productive potential to the north as a whole.

The private sector in Lancashire is ready to lead. We have a dynamic project pipeline with the potential to attract over £20 billion in additional investment over the next decade. However, we are currently fighting with one hand tied behind our back. The macroeconomic data tells a sobering story: since 1998, Lancashire has experienced the lowest growth in investment spending of any UK region. Despite our high-value production base, we rank in the bottom quarter for average Innovate UK grant size, for example. These grants are increasingly concentrated in areas with strong knowledge-intensive business services, rather than production-oriented economies such as Lancashire's.

We must be honest about what Lancashire is missing out on because we lack mayoral arrangements, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster) highlighted. Currently, we are excluded from 30-year investment funds estimated to be worth £30 million per year for our county. We are also missing out on the collective £200 million per year available to new mayoral

[Maya Ellis]

areas and the city region sustainable transport settlements that our neighbours in Greater Manchester and Liverpool enjoy.

Mr Foster: On transport and infrastructure, we are all aware in Lancashire that if we could have investment in a second bridge across the River Ribble linking the M55 and opening up Blackpool airport, and linking it with the M6 and the M65, we could have huge opportunity, but the Government, the Green Book and the Treasury do not seem to want to recognise or support that. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Maya Ellis: I completely agree. As many of my constituents regularly tell me, the congestion we get when the M6 fails or has a closure is a nightmare when it falls on to the A-roads around the constituency, so a second bridge around Preston to create a ring road is critical.

Staying with the subject of transport, my hon. Friends the Members for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) and for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) are having to fight relentlessly for better connectivity in their constituencies, which is where devolution could really help us. The Government may say that Lancashire did not come to the table when the offer was first there for devolution, but that is not the fault of Lancashire's places and people, so it does not seem fair that they should suffer. Lancashire leaders are at the table now, so let us crack on.

The disparities are reflected in our venture capital and equity investment volumes, which trail significantly behind Greater Manchester. In the first quarter of 2024, Greater Manchester reached approximately £104 million in investment, while Lancashire secured just £7 million. That innovation gap is not due to a lack of ingenuity; it is a lack of investment that acts as a direct drag on our wider commercial performance.

When I speak to private investors—both those investing in small companies and those investing in big infrastructure—they often sheepishly tell me they know they should probably be doing more in Lancashire, but that they are creatures of habit. I am making it one of my missions to coax more of them up to Lancashire to see what is on offer, but I ask the Minister not to let this Government fall into the same bad habit of sticking to what we know, even though there is clearly such growth potential in Lancashire.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving a passionate articulation of the frustration felt by many of us outside non-metropolitan areas. We feel that frustration greatly in Redditch, where we are south of the West Midlands combined authority border. I find that difficult to explain to my students who want extra funding in education or to those who want transport links that do not get funding because we miss out on every partnership and every strategic housing fund. If we are really going to get the economy moving and growing, that has to happen in our towns—towns like Redditch—that led the industrial revolution many years before we had even heard of metro mayors.

Maya Ellis: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. As much as the debate is about Lancashire, one thing that will underpin change for both our counties is a commitment to devolution and to towns, so that the focus is not just on our cities.

We know what works. Our enterprise zones at Samlesbury and Warton have already helped to deliver a cumulative £1.2 billion in private investment. In the wider north-west, private capital already supports 873 businesses. We have world-class assets, from BAE Systems, which supports 20,000 jobs in the north-west and partners with 1,400 UK suppliers, to our nuclear renaissance, anchored by Springfields, Westinghouse and Heysham.

The data is firmly on our side. Lancashire offers a cost-effectiveness ratio of 1:80 for tech talent. That means that a tech professional's take-home pay goes significantly further in Preston or Blackburn than in London or even Manchester. We are a magnet for the next generation of start-ups, already producing 16 academic spin-outs from our universities that have raised £36 million in equity this year.

I will take a moment to highlight a couple of specific initiatives that exemplify our county's proactive approach to investment. Fhunded is a project close to my heart, as I had the privilege of working directly on its development during my time at Lancashire county council, prior to my election to this place. I want to give a huge thanks to my former colleagues at LCC, especially Dan Knowles and Rory Southworth, who have nurtured this initiative into the vital economic engine it is today. Fhunded has become a cornerstone of our early-stage finance community, acting as a curated bridge that brings our brightest founders and most ambitious funders together. Its impact is undeniable. The vast majority of equity raised in Lancashire throughout 2024 was generated through connections made via the Fhunded initiative. It serves as a perfect case study for this debate: a local government-funded catalyst that is successfully mobilising private capital and ensuring our high-potential start-ups can thrive right there in Lancashire.

Another brilliant publicly funded initiative is the RedCAT Catapult run by East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce. It has exceeded targets set by the previous Government on return on investment, supporting businesses in the low carbon technology and advanced manufacturing sectors. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) is meeting the Minister soon to discuss the initiative, and we would welcome some initial thoughts today on potential support for future funding.

Beyond the big names, we must support our foundational economy. In Lancashire, family-owned, mid-tier businesses are the key to the supply chains that drive our most vital sectors. They have the potential to scale, to bring new innovation and to distribute growth across our entire economic base. KeTech, in my constituency, is an established software and data SME that powers 80% of the UK's train data, but has struggled with winning UK contracts over foreign competitors. Our ability to work with such small and medium-sized enterprises is currently heavily constrained by the loss of local economic development funds, but the Lancashire county combined authority has the potential to drive key pilot activity based on our leadership in the mid-tier business council.

When it comes to growth, we know from our city region neighbours that it was the investment in culture and night-time economy that attracted the young talent

needed for innovation to really thrive. The Guild Hall in Preston was a key entertainment venue for the whole of Lancashire but closed in 2019 due to reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and will take over £60 million to rebuild. I hope that the Ministers in the Departments for Business and Trade and for Culture, Media and Sport speak regularly about the impact cultural investment like that can have on attracting talent and growth, and I hope that they will support Blog Preston's campaign to reopen the venue.

The county has quick wins and immediate opportunities in defence, energy and advanced manufacturing that simply do not exist elsewhere in the north. There are pipeline investments from Government that, if pushed through quickly, could provide a win-win-win by stimulating local economic growth, supporting the UK to retain key sovereign capabilities and driving national growth—the most important mission for our Labour Government.

While my primary aim today is to put Lancashire back at the heart of Government thinking in general, I also have, as Members would imagine, some specific asks of the Government. First, will the Government confirm funding for the permanent home of the National Cyber Force at Samlesbury in my constituency via the defence investment plan? This £5 billion commitment by the previous Government needs continued engagement from Ministers.

Secondly, will the Government continue their investment in the National Cyber Force ecosystem, including investment in the Blackburn cyber and skills campus, to ensure that my constituents get the skills to work at the National Cyber Force and that we do not just bring people in from elsewhere in the country?

Thirdly, will the Government confirm funds to Westinghouse for next-generation nuclear fuel capabilities? Westinghouse at Springfields is the supplier of choice to fuel the UK's independent nuclear deterrent platform.

Fourthly, will the Government progress the office relocation requirements of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs as an anchor tenant to bring forward a new office quarter around Preston station?

Fifthly, will the Government fast-track our move toward a mayoral combined authority with a commitment in the spring spending review for an interim settlement, similar to other areas, that allows Lancashire to pull its weight—as it clearly can—alongside its northern neighbours?

I am nearly finished. Sixthly, echoing the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), will the Government scope the return on investment of a second bridge across the River Ribble, west of Preston, to create a ring road around Preston and unlock the increasing gridlock in our rapidly growing county?

Finally, will the Government commit to regular engagement with Lancashire MPs through the all-party parliamentary group on Lancashire, which I chair, to ensure that Ministers fully understand the opportunities for Lancashire to make a significant contribution to the UK economy?

I am a red rose through and through in both party and county. I came back to Lancashire, and I will likely be there forever, because I see not only the potential, but a way of doing growth better—of businesses grounded in community, with care for the environment in which we are lucky to work and live and with a quiet relentlessness

to thrive. Our businesses lead with humility; they understand risk and reward, and that is what makes them stronger. Those are Labour values, and it should be this Labour Government who help those values and those businesses to thrive. I look forward to the Minister's response.

7.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to close this debate on behalf of the Government. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis) for securing this debate on investment in Lancashire's economy; there can be no doubt about her commitment to and passion for Lancashire. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for South Ribble (Mr Foster), for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Redditch (Chris Bloore), who contributed so well to the debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley said in her concluding remarks, she is a red rose, and I think that applies to all those who call the red rose county home.

I want to address as many of the specific issues raised as possible, but I will talk about some of the positive investments in Lancashire that the Government are supporting and that have been enabled by Government policy. I am sure that by this stage, everyone in the House will know that I grew up in the north-east of England, on the other side of the Pennines—I hope that will not be held against me in this debate. We share something very much in common with Lancashire: our recent history, at a time of deindustrialisation in both our regions, which undermined the culture of the proud people of the north.

I saw the effects of successive Governments who stepped back and allowed the slow and supposedly inexorable outsourcing of our industrial base to cheaper overseas markets. My hon. Friend talked about sectors such as advanced manufacturing and defence, and I know she will agree that that decline destroyed the landmarks, identity and culture of many industrial heartlands. What we have seen is that, as important as thriving services are, they work best when they are on top of a powerful industrial base of good, local jobs in manufacturing, engineering and key industries spread across the country.

Mr Foster: Leyland Trucks is now the only heavy goods vehicle manufacturer in the United Kingdom, and it is based in my constituency. Is it Government policy that we should be buying British? Does the Minister agree that the Government should support any orders for trucks through Leyland DAF?

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for raising Leyland Trucks. He will be aware of some of the procurement advice changes this Government have made, because we are keen to support British industry particularly in areas relating to national security. Thanks to Government support, Leyland Trucks has invested in its assembly lines and is now capable of producing 30 electric trucks per shift for sale both here in the UK and on international markets. It is also building a fully integrated zero-emission battery electric road sweeper. That is funded in part by our DRIVE35 programme, which represents the biggest investment in our car industry since the second world war. Leyland Trucks is vital to our automotive sector and the Government's industrial strategy.

[Chris McDonald]

I could highlight some other great investments in Lancashire, including in aerospace, which we heard about from my hon. Friend the Member for Ribbles Valley in opening the debate. There are 6,000 jobs being supported at BAE Warton and Samlesbury, thanks to the Typhoon deal that the Government secured with Turkey last year and our wider Typhoon programme. Production and final assembly of each Turkish Typhoon fighter jet will take place at either Warton or Samlesbury as part of that deal. My hon. Friend the Minister for Trade is in Turkey as we speak, securing more trade opportunities for British industry.

In energy, Lancashire is also playing a critical role in making the UK a clean energy superpower, thanks in no small part to the strength of the nuclear sector in the county. Lancashire is already home to world-leading expertise located at the Springfields and Heysham power stations and we are building on these strengths. This Government are investing in nuclear power, working with the private sector with partners such as LS Electric, to progress an energy storage project at Widow hill. This is helping to balance the grid and keep energy supply stable as more renewable power comes online. I know that there is appetite to do even more in Lancashire, especially with the RedCAT low carbon technology commercialisation accelerator. It has been raised with me by Members previously and I know it is doing good work in bringing cutting-edge low carbon products to market. I am meeting members of the East Lancashire chamber of commerce and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) soon to discuss this initiative further.

Defence has of course been mentioned strongly, and we are all eagerly anticipating the publication of the defence investment plan, but in addition to the BAE sites I have mentioned, my hon. Friend the Member for Ribbles Valley will be aware that Lancashire is part of the north-west cyber cluster. She mentioned that specifically in her requests for further information and I undertake to write back to her in relation to the six or seven points she raised in detail at the start of the debate.

The Ministry of Defence has made Blackpool and the Fylde College one of just five new defence technical colleges to bring employers across the defence sector together with young people from the area to ensure they can secure roles in engineering, in nuclear and in cyber-security. I know my hon. Friend shares my enthusiasm for creating opportunities for young people in defence, in energy and of course in advanced manufacturing.

In addition to this support, the Department is working with the Office for Investment and local partners to deliver the “Lancashire Growth Plan”, which I would certainly recommend Members from the area become familiar with and carry around Parliament and push under the noses of Ministers, because, as we have heard, growth does not just happen in cities, and not all the places that are classed as not urban are also not rural. That is a strong feature not only of Lancashire but many places in the north-east, including the place that I call home.

These are industrial areas centred around towns and it is good to see a strong pipeline of private sector investment coming forward across Lancashire. We have GVS Filter Technology’s recent £14 million low carbon manufacturing headquarters in Lancaster; a £100-million

Eden Project in Morecambe, where Vinci has been appointed as the main contractor; and the Department for Business and Trade has thrown its support behind the recent investment announced by Budweiser, the official sponsor of the FIFA world cup 2026. I do not know whether I am allowed to point that out, but there we are. I believe my hon. Friend joined my ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden), who is responsible for employment rights and consumer protection, in celebrating Budweiser’s £7.8 million investment.

There is another investment that I must mention. Mr Speaker is not here and is of course not able to speak on behalf of his own constituency, but Chorley is also benefiting from TVS Supply Chain Solutions, part of India’s TVS Group and a major UK employer. The group is planning to invest hundreds of millions of pounds in the UK, creating thousands more jobs, including in Chorley. I am aware that senior leaders met my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister during his recent India visit, which will help us secure nearly 7,000 new jobs from Indian investment in the UK.

Leigh Ingham: It was interesting to hear the Minister name a number of towns in relation to manufacturing roles. In our towns, we have on average 9% employment in manufacturing, whereas in cities, that figure is 4%. Does the Minister agree that in towns, if we really push our manufacturing sector, we can massively increase the number of good, unionised jobs available to people in those areas?

Chris McDonald: I do agree with my hon. Friend. More than that, in the towns I have described and, in fact, in the places across the country where there is manufacturing, it is usually the most productive employment—the most productive economic activity. Of course that is good for the economy, but it is also good for jobs, because the most productive employers offer the higher wages, certainly higher than would be available if those factories were not there. My hon. Friend is quite right; aspects of industrial policy that can centre more manufacturing in towns will provide better employment and improve the standard of living of people who live in those areas.

Boosting economies in those areas also needs to be linked to investment in infrastructure, which is why the northern growth strategy is important—it will ensure that the right transport and infrastructure is in place to attract that business investment. We are making upgrades to the west coast main line, equipping Lancashire combined county authority with £215 million of investment via the local transport grant to help councils deliver transport improvements, including bus lanes, cycleways and congestion-reducing measures for motorists. The Pride in Place programme, which has been mentioned, is providing £5.8 billion over 10 years to rejuvenate many places around the country, including six in Lancashire. We are targeting that investment in the places where it is most needed, breathing new life into high streets, parks and the public realm. Pride in Place funding is also supporting youth clubs, libraries, community grocers, cultural venues, health and wellbeing services, and other local initiatives that make a big difference to local areas, making them both better places to live and more attractive for private investment and the creation of jobs.

Significant work is under way to attract greater private sector investment in Lancashire. After years of Governments under-investing in and, frankly, overlooking industrial communities such as those in the north-west, we have acted decisively to drive growth and regeneration across the county. The reforms we have set out in our industrial strategy are making it easier for Lancashire's key industries to invest, grow, and succeed in what is a fiercely competitive global market. Our Office for Investment is working hard to bring in more private domestic and international investors to support our high-export, high-productivity firms and back the places where people live.

We are ensuring that Lancashire is placed at the forefront of the Government's growth mission, while ensuring that growth is seen and felt by local people in

local communities. We are an active, interventionist Government, working to drive growth and investment in Lancashire, in the north-west and throughout the country. I am grateful for my hon Friend's support in that effort, and I am committed to working with her and other Lancashire MPs to ensure we build on that momentum in the weeks and months to come. She said that she could wax lyrical about how wonderful Lancashire is, and indeed it is wonderful. She also said that she wanted to coax more people to Lancashire, and I am sure that with this debate, she has done just that.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 17 June 2026

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

High Street Shops: Illicit Activity

9.30 am

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): We have 10 or 12 people, including the Minister and Opposition spokespersons, wishing to speak. There are lots of people here, and I am sure there will be lots of interventions. I will therefore impose a four-minute limit on speeches, but that will have to be reduced if we have too many interventions. I have fired the starting gun.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling illicit activity in high street shops.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. Before I start, I want to put on the record my thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), who have been leading the dodgy shops campaign in Parliament. I am pleased to see that there are 50 MPs working to support this important issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes could not make it here today, but I will raise some of the issues that she asked me to raise.

High streets are at the centre of our communities. When our constituents look at them, they judge how our towns feel and how they feel about our towns. In Halesowen constituency, people want to see our high streets succeed. We have many independent and successful shops such as Bella's Beautiful Things in Halesowen, Betty Stitchkit in Quarry Bank, and Cradley Heath DIY in Cradley Heath. We also have fantastic community groups that work hard to make our towns beautiful, such as Halesowen in Bloom and Cradley Heath and Old Hill in Bloom, whose volunteers do fantastic work.

But the truth is that, as the challenges to retail have increased, old established shops are closing and new shops are popping up in their place: vape shops, mini-markets and barbers. Although the majority of those shops are perfectly legitimate, there is increasing evidence that what the public suspect is true: many are involved in money laundering, counterfeit goods and other criminality. In fact, the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, whose members are on high streets every day, tells me that in some areas up to half of mini-markets and vape shops have links to organised crime.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): It is shocking that, in some hotspot areas, 50% of convenience stores or vape shops are linked to organised crime. My constituents in Derby South are really fed up with that, and so are legitimate business owners. Does my hon. Friend think it is time to crack down and shut down these dodgy shops once and for all?

Alex Ballinger: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is completely right that we need to tackle those dodgy shops. I am pleased that the Government have made a range of announcements on that, but I will make further suggestions for where we might go even further.

We see dodgy shops in Derby, and we do not just have to take the word of the CTSI. My constituents saw with their own eyes on the BBC in April that there was drug dealing in the open on Cradley Heath High Street.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is right that dodgy shops and mini-marts are often a front for organised crime, particularly drug dealing, but also for the sexual and criminal exploitation of children, which we sadly know all too much about in Rochdale. I am delighted that the Government have listened to experts such as Rochdale trading standards on extending closure orders from three months to a year, and that they are looking closely at doing that. But there is also a big issue in my local shops of drug paraphernalia being sold next to sweets, and of drugs in resealable bags designed to look exactly like sweet wrappers. Does he agree that the Government should look at the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 so that trading standards can intervene on this?

Alex Ballinger: I am glad my hon. Friend raised that issue. He shared with me some photographs of paraphernalia that looks just like a packet of Skittles or a packet of sweets. It is completely unacceptable that we allow businesses to market these things, which only encourage illegality, to children.

In my constituency, an undercover reporter was able to buy cannabis, cocaine and prescription drugs over the counter right in the centre of our towns. Although the police have taken action and there have been a number of arrests, we should not have to wait for the BBC to expose a crime for action to be taken. My constituents ask, "Why is this shop, which has been so publicly exposed as dealing drugs, still open?" I do not yet have a satisfactory answer.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. On 17 July 2025, trading standards closed an illicit vape shop on Honiton High Street and seized a large amount of illicit tobacco. Does he think that this change in the law, which allows the closure of shops for 12 months rather than just three, will mean that these shops might close altogether?

Alex Ballinger: Yes. It is a really positive development, because it allows His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, trading standards and the police to investigate properly in those 12 months and build a case so that they can go after not just the shop but the people behind it.

On Cradley Heath High Street, there is something that sits right in our faces: we have 12 mini-markets and vape shops right opposite the largest Tesco in the area. Although last year the Chartered Trading Standards Institute ranked Birmingham as the country's No. 1 hotspot for dodgy shops, it is undeniable that the problem is going over the border into the Black Country and affecting our area.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Hotspot teams are looking at this issue in certain areas, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is also a problem in rural and coastal areas, such as mine in Falmouth? The problem is spreading across the country—he talks about it moving into the Black Country—so perhaps we should look at extending the hotspot areas much wider.

Alex Ballinger: My hon. Friend makes a really good point about the challenges that seaside towns face. I agree that this blight is affecting the whole country, so we need to look at all the hotspots.

The impacts of this problem are really big. Organised crime costs the UK £47 billion each year. Money from the economy that could be invested in the private sector or public services instead goes into organised crime, funding violence, people smuggling and other criminal activity. The local impacts are really serious, too. Legitimate traders are seeing footfall decrease, as law-abiding people avoid towns. Parents are worried that their children can buy vapes and laughing gas under age, in the open. Local residents fear for their safety when they see knife crime and other criminality spilling out of these businesses. Our high streets are the heart of our towns, and our communities care deeply when crime starts to encroach upon them.

However, there has been real progress. I welcome what the Government have achieved in the last few months. There has been a series of very positive announcements, responding to the calls from our communities to do something about these dodgy shops.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): Since the recent fire on Union Street in my constituency, there has been a lot of focus on illicit vape shops, and there have been calls for further legislation. We will see what the investigation says, and then action may need to be taken. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is about not just legislation but enforcement and having the resources available? I would welcome extra resources to ensure enforcement can take place.

Alex Ballinger: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Local authority trading standards were underfunded and under-resourced by between 30% and 40%, according to some estimates, during the 14 years of Conservative government. Local authorities and the police need resources to tackle this crime.

I will give some good statistics. The National Crime Agency's Operation Machinize has led to 3,000 premises being raided and close to 1,000 arrests. The £30 million that the Government are investing in tougher enforcement with the new high street organised crime unit is also welcome.

There are many issues that enable these shops to operate, so it is important that all agencies work together: the Home Office, trading standards, the NCA, HMRC, immigration enforcement and local police. Immigration enforcement is important because, as has been mentioned before, we see evidence that asylum seekers are being employed and exploited in these shops. They are sometimes being paid only £4 an hour, which is completely unacceptable.

The new unit gives me real hope that we can achieve co-ordination, and that organised crime groups will not fall through the gaps between agencies and will face the full force of the law. We have talked about resources.

Seventy-five new police officers have been recruited, and there are extra resources for customs and trading standards to prioritise the work. The tougher enforcement standards, including the doubling of closure orders to 12 months, are vital for this work.

When tackling serious organised crime, the National Crime Agency employs the 4P approach: pursue, prevent, prepare and protect. The Government have taken positive steps to enable the authorities to pursue offenders, with more co-ordination, resources and tougher enforcement. There is scope to do more to prevent the opportunities for these dodgy businesses to open in the first place. There is a good example in the Netherlands, where the Bibob Act allows public authorities to conduct integrity checks on individuals and businesses before granting licences and permits.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on an important issue. As he will know, the Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026 recently came on to the statute book, which I hugely support as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. There is a licensing scheme under that Act, enabling local authorities to have more control over shops that sell products such as tobacco and vapes. There will be a clear method to facilitate the reduction of those shops on our high streets. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important for the Department of Health and Social Care to get on with the consultation on that licensing scheme as soon as possible?

Alex Ballinger: I agree that it sounds like a very helpful proposal. On the subject of permits and businesses, there is much more the Government can do to restrict the permitting of high street bookmakers, which many Members have spoken about.

In the Netherlands, public authorities are allowed to conduct integrity checks on individuals and businesses before granting licences and permits, and local authorities have the power to refuse applications if they think there is a serious risk that a permit could be used for criminal activities. I can see the benefit of that, as the police or other intelligence agencies could advise whether individuals are linked to organised crime, or whether it is reasonable to assume that 12 mini-markets and vape shops in one small town centre are operating legitimately.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned mini-marts. We had none in Carlisle 12 months ago, and now we have at least 12 or 15. They are all distinguished by having wrapped windows that cannot be seen through. There is a presumption in planning guidance that windows should be active, whereas these are obviously inactive. Does my hon. Friend think that more needs to be done to enforce existing planning laws to ensure that these shops do not open or, if they do, that they are closed down for contravening planning guidelines?

Alex Ballinger: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Why are they wrapping the windows? The first question must be: what are they trying to hide? We want our town centres to be welcoming, warm and open. That practice is completely against that type of approach.

Could the Minister tell me whether the Government are considering similar measures to the Dutch Bibob Act? There are also far too many loopholes in Companies

House, which BBC research reveals is wide open to abuse. Our dodgy shops group is proposing that greater powers be given to Companies House to identify and clamp down on fake company directors, with escalating fines or a “three strikes and you’re out” system.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): In my patch in Thurrock, we unsurprisingly do not have a lot of London tourist tat shops, which are synonymous with dodgy directors changing hands every few weeks. We do, however, have a number of really suspect home goods shops, which sell goods that are often faulty. People have no recourse to a refund if the products go wrong, because the shops change hands every three to six months. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must do more to crack down on such evasion of responsibility by businesses changing hands through Companies House?

Alex Ballinger: I agree, and I hope the Government are looking to close some of the loopholes at Companies House and strengthen oversight of fake directors who are abusing the system.

Finally, I am concerned about whether landlords can be complicit in the organised crime that we see. We propose increasing the transparency and accountability of landlords to deter complicity, but also more support for law-abiding landlords to take action against tenants suspected of breaking the law. Will the Minister say more about whether the Government are considering increasing that accountability and the power of landlords to help to deal with illegality on our high streets?

Cradley Heath High Street used to be the thriving heart of our community. I was appalled but not surprised to see drug dealing in the open in one of the shops in our town. Through under-resourcing and inattention, we have allowed the problem of dodgy shops to become a visible stain on our communities, so I welcome the Government’s really positive steps on that so far. The new taskforce, tougher powers and more resources will make a significant difference, but I call for those resources to be focused on the Black Country, which is becoming more of a hotspot, as people have heard in my speech today. I would like the Government to consider doing even more and at whether we could look abroad for lessons on further tools to use to prevent more dodgy shops from opening. I am referring to licensing, registration and requirements for landlords who knowingly or unknowingly facilitate organised crime. We need to get our high streets back to being the law-abiding, beating heart of our towns that we all want to see.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. Everyone who wishes to speak is bobbing. Because of the number of hon. Members who have indicated that they wish to speak in the debate, and with the authority of the Chairman of Ways and Means, I am imposing a time limit on Back-Bench speeches of four minutes.

9.46 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for bringing this important issue to the Floor of the House and for all of us who are here being able to speak on it as a result.

I rise to highlight a pressing crisis directly impacting local businesses and community safety across my Strangford constituency. At the epicentre of the constituency sits Newtownards, where we have Conway Square, a booming hub of local commerce. Yet Newtownards, my biggest town, currently faces the difficulty faced throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: illicit activity impacting the fabric of the retail sector. Our high streets are the economic and social lifeblood of these distinct communities. Whether we are talking about the local traders in Newtownards, the independent businesses in Comber or the traditional shopkeepers at the Thursday market in Ballynahinch, they are forced to act as an unassisted frontline defence against an escalating wave of retail theft, criminal damage and antisocial behaviour.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to see a clampdown? We welcome the Government moving on this issue, but if there is a systematic clampdown, we have to try to ensure that the Government also recognise that we must not have even more derelict, empty properties on the high street. We need a combination of a crackdown on illegal shops, but also efforts to redevelop the high street for legal shops so that shoppers can enjoy them.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend always brings wise words and wisdom to the debate.

We frequently hear the narrative that Northern Ireland maintains historic lows in overall crime, but sweeping generalities do not always give the true picture. I know that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is not the Minister’s responsibility, but to give a perspective from Northern Ireland, which I always do in these debates—it is really important that we put it on the record—the PSNI has said that the overall crime statistics are down by some 2.3%, but in relation to my constituency of Strangford and to Newtownards in particular, Ards and North Down has bucked the positive trend. It stands out as one of the few policing districts to experience an increase in recorded crime. Unfortunately that is happening, and I am here to reflect that in this debate.

Long-term trend data reveals that, across the region, theft offences have risen substantially, driven heavily by a massive surge in shoplifting. It has reached the point at which shoplifting has hit some of the highest levels ever recorded in Northern Ireland’s recent history. In town centres such as Newtownards, the commercial crime wave is felt acutely. CrimeRate shows that the overall crime rate in Newtownards sits at 44 crimes per 1,000 people, which is 24% higher than the Northern Ireland average. That, again, gives an indication of the issues.

Crucially for our high streets, theft and shoplifting make up more than 20% of all recorded crime in Newtownards. That goes along with high-density antisocial behaviour and criminal damage, which intimidate shoppers and drive down footfall. As National Trading Standards warns, organised crime groups are actively infiltrating high street retail spaces. On our own doorsteps, shopkeepers face organised, brazen shoplifting rings that steal to order, often funding low-level drug networks or residual paramilitary elements that still attempt to exert control over our towns. I have been in touch with PSNI Superintendent Johnston McDowell to ensure that the police have a proactive partnership with the shopkeepers,

[*Jim Shannon*]

the chamber of trade and individuals to reduce that. To expect a small business owner already battling inflation and footfall migration to absorb the financial losses of relentless retail theft is completely unsustainable.

The Minister is always responsive, and I know that she travels to Northern Ireland regularly. I also know that she likes going there—I am very biased, but doesn't everybody? I believe we must work with the Northern Ireland Executive to allocate dedicated and visible town centre foot patrols that cover the full span of the constituency with a heavy permanent presence in Newtownards and stretching down as far as Ballynahinch so as to deter organised theft rings.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to intervene on the hon. Gentleman for a change. I have been raising similar issues with Middlesbrough council about Middlesbrough town centre. I am assured that the council is bringing forward a plan soon. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there needs to be closer collaboration between local government and central Government to address these issues?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is right to add that issue to the debate. I know that when the Minister responds he will encourage us all in that regard.

I am not going to take all the time that has been awarded to me in this debate, but I will say that we must be more aggressive with the legal outcomes for repeat offenders. Shoplifting cannot be dismissed as a victimless, low-level offence; it is not that for those who are trying to make their living.

What discussions has the Minister had with the Justice Minister back home to ensure that we can do better? We need cross-district town centre shared networks with enhanced capital funding to expand localised business crime partnerships—that is the police, chamber of trade and local shopkeepers. We also need to share live digital intelligence and instantly flag active shoplifting groups. After Newtownards earlier this week, will those groups be in Bangor, Comber, Ballynahinch or Saintfield the following week? Our constituents and retailers across Strangford and this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland deserve town centres that feel welcoming, prosperous and secure. Let us deliver the legislative teeth that we need to ensure our shopkeepers and businesses are able to trade.

9.52 am

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing this important debate.

This is an issue that communities such as Leigh and Atherton face every single day. Quite frankly, my constituents have had enough. Illegal and exploitative businesses are undermining public safety, damaging our high streets and eroding community pride. Whether it is vape shops, barber shops or mini-marts, people are fed up with outlets appearing overnight, often acting as fronts for organised crime, and residents having no say. Meanwhile, as we have heard, legitimate businesses that follow the rules and contribute to the local economy are struggling to survive.

I have been working alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) on a campaign to shut these dodgy shops down. That campaign now has support from over 50 Members—many of them are here today—and that shows just how widespread and serious the issue has become. Enforcement action such as Operation Machinize, which took place in Leigh and Atherton back in 2024 and led to numerous arrests, and the recent raids by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in London show what can be achieved. They also highlight a fundamental problem: the system does not stop these businesses opening in the first place, nor does it give the authorities the tools to keep them closed.

I thank the Government because they have taken welcome steps and are listening. Those steps include new funding, a dedicated organised crime unit and stronger closure powers. I particularly welcome the extension of closure orders to up to 12 months, and I thank the Minister for working alongside us on that. However, we must be honest: this will not be enough on its own. Too often when one shop is shut, the same individuals reopen nearby within weeks. Residents see it and I see it. At the same time, the spread of these outlets continues, particularly in more deprived communities. Leigh and Atherton does not need any more of them.

We need to go further. We need stronger enforcement powers and proper resourcing for trading standards and local authorities. Trading standards needs more teeth.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for tackling this issue. I echo the remarks from her and my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) about the need to learn the lessons from our colleagues in Holland. We have all talked about the perverse issue of frankly playing whack-a-mole, whereby shops pop up and bad faith actors hide behind a smokescreen, whether from trading standards, HMRC, the National Crime Agency or local police forces that are responsible for addressing enforcement. Will she echo my calls for the Home Office to work closely with colleagues in HMRC, the Treasury and the Department for Business and Trade to make sure that we are addressing the cumulative impact of the harm caused to local areas?

Jo Platt: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a huge champion of that cause and who did so much work on it before entering this House, and I echo his comments.

We need joined-up action across Government and a commitment to maybe extend the funding beyond the initial three-year period. It cannot be a short-term fix. We need a court system that can deliver swift justice and we need tougher consequences, whether through escalating fines or a clear “three strikes and you're out” approach so that repeat offenders cannot simply carry on.

Finally, as was mentioned earlier, it is really important that landlords and managing agents are held to account. Greater due diligence is needed so that properties are not repeatedly let to those engaged in illicit activity. If we are serious about restoring trust in our high streets and in politics, we must deliver real change. That means backing legitimate businesses but also taking decisive action against those who are undermining our communities. If we want our high streets to thrive, they must be safe, lawful and fair. The Government have made a start, but we must go further and faster.

I want to end by thanking the Government for the work they have done so far on the issue. They have truly listened to our communities' concerns, and I look forward to working alongside them to continue to tackle this problem on our streets.

9.56 am

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing this important debate.

As other Members have noted, town centres are incredibly important to residents, and Huddersfield is no different. The town centre is a part of our identity; it is a reminder of our childhoods, and, for many, it represents whether a place is doing well and whether agencies, councils and Governments care about them. In too many places in the north and the midlands, people have seen the slow decline of their town centre—the place they call home. That has led to resentment and a lack of trust in politicians and agencies to get the basics right.

On top of that, the number of vape shops in England has grown by nearly 1,200% in little over a decade. While cash-intensive businesses are not new, for too many residents the rate at which they are rising is alarming. The National Crime Agency estimates that at least £1 billion of criminal cash is laundered through UK high street stores each year. Not only do those stores often provide hotspots for illicit activity, they also destroy the character that makes towns so special. From my conversations with constituents at coffee mornings, at business round tables and on doorsteps, I have heard loud and clear that closing those stores is vital to injecting the life back into our town centre.

I welcome the creation of the Government's high street organised crime unit, particularly its focus on strengthening partnership working and the intensified enforcement action on businesses that are committing these offences, which includes additional raids, closure orders and cash seizures. In November 2025, the West Yorkshire trading standards team conducted undercover raids to crack down on high street businesses suspected of laundering criminal cash. The operation seized £2.7 million of criminal assets. The feedback from those operations has been positive and they will be continuing. Will the Minister set out when further enforcement activities like those will be increased in local areas? In addition, what further steps are being taken to connect information across agencies and to flag suspicious entities so that such operations can be closed down quickly and, as other Members have said, stopped from popping up again?

A recent report by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, titled "Hidden in Plain Sight", highlighted a corridor of crime across the north of England, from Liverpool to Hull and Grimsby. Unfortunately, Huddersfield has been ranked in the top 10 UK towns and cities with the most dodgy shops on the high street. The report calls on the Government to urgently invest in enforcement capabilities and particularly mentions trading standards.

Over the past decade, trading standards has seen its resources cut by up to 50%. In 2002, more than 4,000 staff were employed by trading standards, but in 2025, there are now 2,300. Since then, crime has become more

visible, so will the Minister confirm the steps being taken to support trading standards on the ground? We must ensure that our town centres can once again become vibrant spaces worth fighting for.

10 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on introducing the debate. There are a lot of ideas and much intent to tackle this problem, because high streets are so evocative. They are a visual symbol of economic challenges and act as an ever-present reminder of what has been lost. That is one reason why people feel so strongly about the brazen illegality we see on high streets the length and breadth of the country. It is no longer a question of isolated bad actors but of a regulatory system that has been repeatedly outpaced by evolving criminal business models.

My constituents are angry that where once there was an active high street with household names, there now stand illegal vape shops, mini-marts and a suspicious number of barbers. They know that something is not right, particularly when legitimate businesses have already vacated the area due to reduced footfall. But the law is fighting back. I have joined local enforcement activity in Ellesmere Port, where all the agencies came together and carried out co-ordinated raids, resulting in the seizure of illicit tobacco and vape products, with shops shut down under court orders. That was most welcome, but what was seized was sadly just the tip of the iceberg, and we see a repeated cycle of enforcement and re-emergence with connected parties.

It is the recurring nature of these rackets that shakes people's confidence in the system, especially when they are so brazen, so I absolutely welcome the Government's intent to tackle the problem. There is much to commend in the blitz on dodgy shops programme, which contains measures that finally go beyond rhetoric. The creation of the high street organised crime unit has long been called for, and the commitment to double the time for which a shop can be closed after breaching the law will also help, but as a number of people have said, we can go further.

A Business and Trade Committee inquiry found that "enforcement agencies do not have the necessary powers to permanently close"

rogue businesses. The director of National Trading Standards said,

"you seize, go back, seize and go back".

It is clear that the tools we have are not fit for purpose. Councils should have the power to close premises permanently without having to go to court, and landlords should not get off the hook if their property is used for illegal purposes. Landlords need help to make wise choices, and they could be encouraged to flag any suspicious or illegal behaviour. Those landlords who are indifferent about who is renting their property should have nowhere to hide if illegal activity is happening on their premises. If landlords are indifferent, they should face criminal sanctions, too.

We also need a tougher approach on the collection of fines. Too often, they go uncollected. According to the Home Office, £18 million of fines were issued against illegal car washes in 2025, but the Department could not say how many had actually been paid. After a

[Justin Madders]

freedom of information request, we know that the figure is around 5%. We need a proper deterrent; these fines must mean something, and there should be tough enforcement action against individuals.

I know that a number of Members wish to speak, so I will end my remarks, but I want finally to say that I welcome the action taken so far. There is no shortage of ideas about how we can go further. It is good to see that the problem is finally receiving the attention it deserves. Regenerating our high streets is critical to national renewal, but to regenerate them, we first of all have to reclaim them. Illicit activity on our high streets is an evocative issue that frustrates law-abiding people and erodes confidence in the state's ability to tackle crime, so I absolutely welcome the blitz on dodgy shops and the action to back up the rhetoric, but we need to go further by addressing the problems at source, to prevent illegal shops from opening in the first place and then leaving no hiding place for those who are found to have broken the law.

10.4 am

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. In March, the excellent work of Dudley trading standards officers was highlighted in a Channel 4 documentary in which officers uncovered links to organised crime and signs of child exploitation, including the illegal sale of vapes to children as young as 11. The trading standards team has been carrying out extensive enforcement activity against illegal shop operations, particularly those involved in illicit vaping sales. That work ultimately led to the closure of 31 illegal shops, including in Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and Netherton. Dudley council has since launched an internal audit, and it is reviewing evidence shared with child protection teams and examining whistleblowing reports from the last 10 years to ensure that nothing has been missed. It is vital that those responsible are held to account and, above all, make certain that strong safeguards are put in place to protect vulnerable children in future.

I was a local councillor before becoming an MP and was always impressed by the proactive work of our trading standards and the local police. I have worked with them to secure closures of several local shops over the years and have even given evidence to strengthen cases. Despite those tireless efforts, they are working with one arm tied behind their backs. Closure orders only last for three to six months and then shops reopen with a different owner. Some shops have more than one location and transfer illicit stock across local authority boundaries to evade enforcement, which I have seen happen between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger). All the while, trust and hope in our communities is eroded.

I am really pleased that this Labour Government are taking action to support the work of local teams and restore pride in our towns and high streets. Recent national enforcement by HMRC strengthens cases against shop owners and adds to the arsenal for tackling this issue. Illegal activity has no place whatsoever on our high streets. It creates an uneven playing field for shops and services that follow the rules. We need to extend closure order periods, tackle phoenixing and hold landlords to account for who they let their units to.

It also needs to be really easy for the public to report their concerns. We all hear from constituents who have suspicions about illegal shops in our towns and high streets, and we know that first-hand reporting always carries the most weight. In the past, concerns could be reported directly to our councils through their websites, but in some cases it has now been directed centrally through Citizens Advice.

Jayne Kirkham: There are also situations where people try to report but are too scared or worried, so there needs to be some sort of process so that people can report without fear of retribution.

Cat Eccles: My hon. Friend is right. I hear a lot from local shopkeepers that they are afraid to raise their concerns with the police for fear of being attacked. It is absolutely right to make it as easy as possible for the public, who are as frustrated as we are, to support this work. We are now seeing reports directed centrally through Citizens Advice, where there is no specific reporting mechanism for trading standards itself, which leaves people uncertain about where to direct their reports.

I am hopeful that we will see an improvement in how we tackle illegal activity on our high streets and make our communities vibrant and welcoming once more.

10.7 am

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing this vital debate. When I speak in this House about illicit activity in high street shops, I do so on behalf of the people of Birmingham Erdington, including those in Kingstanding, Castle Vale and south Oscott. These residents take great pride in their community and deserve to feel safe on their local high street.

Areas such as Erdington High Street and Slade Road are not simply a row of shops but the centre of community life. They are where people go to work, shop, meet neighbours and access essential services. However, for too long, organised criminal activity has been allowed to take hold in my community, undermining legitimate businesses and damaging public confidence. We are not talking about isolated incidents or minor trading offences; we are talking about organised criminal networks using retail premises as fronts for wider illicit activity—selling illegal tobacco, counterfeit goods, untaxed alcohol and unregulated vapes, which normally end up in the hands of young people.

In my constituency, Operation Fearless and Operation Skybridge have resulted in one of the largest seizures of illicit goods in Birmingham's history. I pay tribute to the work of our local police officers, trading standards teams and everyone involved in Operation Fearless and Operation Skybridge. Residents have seen the difference that visible enforcement activity can make.

Since the launch of Operation Fearless, there has been a concerted effort to tackle antisocial behaviour, antisocial crime, shoplifting and wider criminality that has affected confidence in the town centre for many years. Despite those efforts, enforcement agencies are often placed in an impossible position: shops are closed down, only for the same operators to open under a

different name days or weeks later. There is also growing local concern about the wider criminal exploitation linked to some of these premises.

Phil Brickell: My hon. Friend is speaking passionately about enforcement in Birmingham Erdington. Does she agree that key organisations in the private sector have a lot of information? All these shops are banked by someone. The Government can drive down the barriers to information sharing between the private and public sectors to identify suspicious activity so that enforcement agencies—be they the police, trading standards or the National Crime Agency—can have the greatest possible impact when they conduct these sorts of raids.

Paulette Hamilton: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. It needs to be joined up. The one thing I have learned from being an MP and seeing things work in my area is that when we work together, we get things done.

Organised criminal networks are operating across multiple organisations and exploiting vulnerable individuals. That is why we need stronger and faster closure powers, better support for trading standards teams and greater accountability for landlords who repeatedly rent properties to those engaged in illicit activity. I welcome the Government's work to date, but I ask the Minister what further support the Government will provide to build on the success of operations such as Fearless and Skybridge at a hyper-local level. What steps will be taken to ensure that local authorities and police forces have the long-term powers and resources they need to tackle organised criminal activity on our high streets once and for all?

Finally, how will the Minister work with local authorities and other agencies to tighten our planning and licensing rules, to stop unscrupulous landlords doing what they have been doing and getting away with for so many years? Residents tell MPs that it is lawless up there, because there is nothing they can do.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members to be as brief as possible with their interventions. We should just get everyone in with the four-minute time limit.

10.13 am

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing this very important debate. This weekend, Nuneaton celebrated the 800th anniversary of its royal market charter, first awarded by King Henry III. It was an absolutely fantastic day, with live local music and our teenage, independent and normal Saturday markets all coming together to celebrate our rich history and culture and the talent of my town.

I was immensely proud to be part of that, and I was delighted to see such an increase in footfall for our traders. But my town, like so many others, has been battered by years of austerity and under-investment. Transformation plans were delayed again and again, while £1.25 million was cut from our trading standards between 2011 and 2015, creating a culture of looking the other way while dodgy shop after dodgy shop moved in. In the past two years, our Labour council has begun to turn things around. Our long-promised transformation plans are finally coming to fruition with the opening of Saints, the demolition approvals for and

landscaping of long-empty sites, and now new investment in Grayson Place, welcoming the UK's first championship padel courts and the brilliant North Warwickshire and South Leicestershire college to our town.

Our council and its officers have worked tirelessly to diversify our town, bringing in homes, services, hospitality and leisure. An empty Debenhams has become luxury apartments, and an old nightclub has become Saints—thriving community assets. Footfall is rising again, up more than 24,000 in the final quarter, with 2 million visits to my town centre this year. Businesses are returning and confidence is growing. We are on track to restore our once-vibrant town centre.

However, that progress is at risk if we cannot turn the tide on crime and dodgy shops, which threaten the very survival of historical towns such as mine. Dodgy shops undercut honest tax-paying traders by selling counterfeit and illegal goods. Worse still, they undermine public confidence in our country's ability to enforce the law. People see illegal vape shops, drugs and counterfeit products being openly sold, and suspected money laundering and organised crime, and ask how that is allowed to happen. For far too long, that question has gone unanswered.

I welcome the Government's new funding for trading standards, and the National Crime Agency's new powers to strengthen enforcement between the Home Office, HMRC, trading standards and the police, but that funding and those powers must reach into towns such as mine. We cannot simply force problems out of larger cities and into smaller towns without providing the resources to tackle them. We need to prevent them from arising in the first place.

While out door-knocking recently, I was told by residents about cars driving at all hours of the day, including 4 am visits, with whole streets being disturbed. I raised that with our local teams, and raids took place this week. Illegal goods were seized, and we now await closure orders. However, that is all too often not the outcome. As we have heard, the endless whack-a-mole situation prevents people from closing such places down permanently. If our towns are to make progress and we are to protect what we have, we must be able to close them down permanently and never allow them to open again.

10.16 am

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing this important debate and on his excellent speech.

Our high streets are more than just places to shop. They are at the heart of our communities; they are places where people meet, local businesses grow and neighbourhoods come to life. That is why illicit activity on our high streets not only undermines the honest businesses that work hard to serve the community but makes people feel unsafe in their communities. They see illicit activity go unchecked and feel powerless.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Crowds and antisocial behaviour outside shops are often a red flag for the activity inside them. That is an issue not just for the Home Office and HMRC, but for the police. To make

[Carla Lockhart]

our towns safe, the individuals engaging in that type of activity outside shops also need to be dealt with. Does the hon. Member agree?

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. People sometimes feel intimidated by those who congregate around shops, and that makes them feel unsafe.

Southgate and Wood Green constituents have told me that, aside from the sale of counterfeit vapes and tobacco, they have witnessed drug dealing openly taking place outside cafés and other premises. They have witnessed phoenix shops—which open for a few weeks, close and then reopen under a different name—dodging tax and business rates and contributing nothing to the local area. It is clear that organised crime is behind that, as many hon. Members have said.

Serious and organised crime is estimated to cost the UK Government at least £47 billion annually. Investing in the protection of our high streets should be at the top of our priorities. The recent Home Office and Treasury announcements are a good start, but we need a co-ordinated approach, with one Department taking the lead in solving this problem, which cuts across Departments. If we are to crack the problem, co-ordination and information-sharing at local government and national Government levels will be key.

That is why I welcome the Government's new national high street organised crime unit, which has been established to co-ordinate across Government, policing and enforcement agencies. That is, alongside the £30 million for combating high street criminality, a welcome step forward. However, to act as fast as possible, we must also give authorities more power to tackle crime head-on.

As is the case in my constituency, trading standards teams are already stretched. We desperately need more investment in trading standards, including more trading standards officers. Specialist financial investigators are also urgently needed to address money laundering, and I am pleased that the Treasury has promised to invest in them. We must do more at the pace that this challenge demands.

However, although the Government's efforts to tackle illicit activity are welcome, enforcement alone cannot close an already widening gap. Criminal networks are often hidden behind front operators with no obvious criminal record, making it difficult for local authorities to identify risks before damage is done. Colleagues have already referred to the Bibob Act in the Netherlands, which focuses on prevention and tackling the issue before it can come to life on high streets. I would very much welcome powers like those in that Act.

As we work to tackle the criminality on some of our high streets, we must ask how we can prevent it from taking root in the first place. Can the Minister tell me whether the Government are considering giving greater powers to local authorities and trading standards officers to tackle illicit activity on our streets? What steps she is taking to ensure that there is greater co-ordination in Government and at local level?

I welcome all the changes that the Government are making to protect our high streets from illicit activity, including the extension of closure order powers. However,

more needs to be done to tackle this challenging issue. We must restore public confidence and more vibrant and thriving high streets. To do so, we need to use all the weapons at our disposal to cut out once and for all the cancer of illicit and criminal activity.

10.21 am

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing the debate. The Home Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, is currently investigating organised crime on our high streets—that is welcome.

Across Worksop, Retford and Harworth, there has been a surge in vape shops, barber shops and mini-marts. They are clustered close together and often have barely any customers. Local people are asking a very simple question: how do such businesses survive?

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I certainly hear the same thing in Mansfield. Residents raise concerns with me when they see businesses that seem to operate without customers but somehow remain open and trade. Does my hon. Friend agree that, where there is evidence of that type of activity, the public are right to expect rapid enforcement of the law?

Jo White: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. I strongly believe that such businesses are money-laundering fronts. There needs to be close police scrutiny of them, and greater partnership with other authorities to monitor those shops and shut them down as quickly as possible.

Local traders and residents are rightly concerned. Earlier this year, I decided to take a closer look. I held a local inquiry, alongside Julie Leigh, the leader of Bassetlaw district council; Sally Gillborn, the chief executive of our business improvement district; and Michael Bullen, a local businessman. They deal with this issue day in, day out. The message that we received was clear: the system is not working. Planning rules are too weak, licensing is underpowered and enforcement is stretched.

We set out some practical recommendations. First, the Government must give councils real control over their high streets. At the moment, the clustering of such shops just happens and local communities are left to deal with the consequences. Secondly, we need proper regulation of vape and tobacco retailers—a licensing scheme is long overdue. Thirdly, we cannot ignore the harder question. Where we see cash-heavy businesses with little visible trade, it is right to ask whether they have links to wider criminal activity. Such links must be properly investigated, and enforcement needs backing. Licensing fees have not kept pace with other developments, trading standards officers are under pressure and the relevant data is not being used as it should be.

This is not just about Whitehall; it is also about what happens locally. We need visible neighbourhood policing back in our town centres, with named officers, a consistent presence and real relationships with businesses. The Nottinghamshire police and crime commissioner listened to my call for a police station in Worksop, and I welcome the announcement that it will be opening shortly, but we need simple ways to report concerns, and confidence that those concerns will be acted on. We need co-ordination; at the moment, too much intelligence is siloed. At its heart, this is about fairness—fairness for the businesses doing the right thing—and confidence for the public

that their high street is safe and properly regulated. What we are seeing is not tolerated or isolated; it is serious, and we need action right now.

10.25 am

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing this important debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) and for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) on their work to combat dodgy shops.

As is evident from the number of Members here—particularly Labour Members—this issue concerns many of our constituencies. Sadly, my Thurrock constituency is not immune to dodgy shops and illegality and criminality on the high street. Like others, we have seen a massive proliferation of vape shops and barber shops, as well as—if not mini-marts—very odd home goods shops springing up out of nowhere, with two or three competitors directly opposite, and selling goods that probably explode the minute they are turned on and are no good for anyone. Those phoenix shops close down or change hands after five to six months, evading tax, evading business rates and providing no good and no use to the town at all.

Indeed, one such shop, on Grays High Street in my local town, now does not even bother to remove the merchandise or move it around; it just sticks a Sharpie-written sign up on the door every six months saying that it is under new management, which is absolutely appalling. We know where the issues lie: spending on trading standards has been reduced by around 50% over the last decade.

Jodie Gosling: Considering the strength of feeling and the level of criminality that we have heard about, does my hon. Friend not find it shocking that, on top of long-term cuts of £100,000 in its medium-term forecasts, Warwickshire county council has just frozen £55,000 that was allocated to tackling rogue traders?

Jen Craft: That is indeed shocking and very short-sighted.

The real issue in my area is that our council is under intervention, so its ability to plan and take enforcement action, and to put planning conditions on town centres to better reflect what people are after—rather than the best way for businesses to turn a profit—is somewhat hampered.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) got there first in mentioning the disgraceful cuts by Reform-led Warwickshire county council. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) agree that it is also rather disgraceful that no Reform UK Members of Parliament are here for this debate? They often talk about the importance of our high streets, so where are they?

Jen Craft: I agree with my hon. Friend. The lack not only of Reform UK Members but—other than the shadow Minister—of Conservative Members is disgraceful and a real shame. Labour Members are trying to make positive change to bring communities together and tackle this issue, which, as we hear time and again, is a

root cause of people's disaffection and disillusionment with the state of their town centres and, indeed, of our country.

When I walk down Grays High Street, Derwent Parade or Civic Square in Tilbury, I find it an incredibly depressing experience—I know that Members will be familiar with that. There are big gaps where shops used to be. Those shops were the pride—the crown jewels—of the town, and they are being replaced with shops that bring no real benefit, including dodgy vape shops and other phoenix shops that change hands every few months. It leads to a sense that high streets are not for decent people or for the community; they are for those who seek to turn a quick buck, who do not play fair or by the rules, and who are often the very sharp end of a criminal network that makes hundreds of millions of pounds and exploits vulnerable people. We all know this.

I am delighted that the Government have announced the high street organised crime unit and that Thurrock will be one of the areas targeted for attention. Bringing together a co-ordinated response using the National Crime Agency, trading standards and the local police force will start to turn the tide on some of the illegal and illicit activity that we are seeing on our high street.

But I would like to pose a question about what comes next. If dodgy shops are closed down and closure periods are extended, we can manage to stamp them out for good, but we need to think about what they will be replaced with; an empty, dead high street is no good for anyone. I have been trying to encourage my local council to use some Pride in Place impact funding, particularly around Grays High Street, to open up shops closed down for illicit activity to the community as welcoming spaces. We could do something that the community can be proud of and create a place where people might actually want to go and spend time in.

We must have a co-ordinated effort across Government and at the local level about what to do. If we end criminality and illegality, what do we want our high streets to look like? They cannot go back to being the high streets of the 1950s—we are not going back there—but what does the high street of the future look like? What is a space that we can all be proud of, that is welcoming and encouraging for our communities and that is not under the purview of criminality? Let us reclaim our high streets and regenerate them once and for all.

10.31 am

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing this important debate and the constructive manner in which he introduced the subject, which is important for many Members across the House.

I thank many hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) highlighted the securing of action against illegal trading in Honiton High Street. I took note of the comments made by the hon. Members for Thurrock (Jen Craft) and for Carlisle (Ms Minns) about planning controls, screening windows and changes of use in planning conditions; I am supportive of those approaches. The hon. Members for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) and for Halesowen also pointed out that landlords need to be tackled; I will return to that later,

[Gideon Amos]

as I will to the point made by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders) about the burdensome need to go to court to follow through with these orders.

High streets are the heart of our communities, and we cannot allow them to become sites of decline. Both Taunton and Wellington have a fabulous range of independent traders, shopkeepers and publicans, who are making ends meet in a financial climate made much harder by recent tax increases. Footfall in Taunton, however, is up by 4.6% in large part due to their efforts. The Government must be on their side, and we must be clear that criminality on our high streets will not be tolerated. The hollowing-out of our police force by the previous Government has allowed organised crime gangs to gain far too much of a foothold in our communities, with local communities paying the price.

Let us make no mistake: organised crime sits behind and at the top of all this, either employing or—quite often—exploiting migrants as suits their purposes and to do their dirty work. A recent BBC investigation found someone trying to sell a shop to its undercover reporter for £18,000; a Facebook group listing dozens of mini-marts, barbers, car washes and takeaways for sale; ghost directors charging illegal workers up to £300 a month to register mini-marts in their names; and people working 14-hour shifts in mini-marts for only £4 an hour.

Thanks to a local publican in my constituency, who came forward with vital information back in 2024, I raised illegal trading in Taunton and Wellington with Somerset trading standards and local police. I pay tribute to police officers such as Andy, the trading standards officers and my Lib Dem Somerset councillor colleagues, who oversaw the work that led to a number of high-profile closures in Taunton. Taunton Market, Mr Taunton and Top Market have rightly been closed down, as has the Danya Store in Wellington only last week, following just the kind of crackdown that was needed and that I have supported.

It cannot be said too often to anyone flouting these laws in Taunton and Wellington or anywhere across the country: illegal trading is not welcome—you will be closed down and you will be prosecuted. But we need to go further. Polling commissioned by the Liberal Democrats found that three in five Brits want to see more power to control the number of vape shops on their high streets. The Chartered Trading Standards Institute has pointed out that we need properly resourced trading standards services, which means tackling the local government funding crisis—particularly the social care funding crisis, which is a burden under which councils such as Somerset are struggling.

Through the Crime and Policing Act 2026, the Government increased the duration of temporary closure notices from 48 hours to 72 hours by amending the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, and they have recently said that they will extend closure orders from six months to 12 months to give investigators more time to pursue prosecutions. The Liberal Democrats welcome those changes, but we want the Government to go further. Under Liberal Democrat plans, councils would be given the power to issue closure orders to more swiftly shut down any shops engaging in criminality. Those powers would be expanded to ensure that repeat

offenders' premises are closed down permanently, and those whose ownership is under question would remain shut until the owner comes forward and faces up to the law.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for a return to proper community policing, which must mean giving the bobby on the ground more powers to deal with this menace more easily and, crucially, with less paperwork. Officers currently spend almost half their shift on paperwork, but we all want them out and about in our communities. The Liberal Democrats propose giving officers the power to close down premises using closure notices for seven days, not just 72 hours. More importantly, they would not have to apply to the courts for an order, as is currently required under section 80 of the 2014 Act, safeguarded by the requirement that the superintendent must have evidence of more than one instance of illegal activity and by right of appeal to the courts. Police officers would then not have the onerous task of preparing an application to the court every time they encounter illegal trading and want to halt it, as they are currently required to do under section 80.

Our changes would mean that officers are able to close premises quickly and easily, reducing the criminal scope for phoenixing—setting up premises quickly under a different company—and constraining the ability to set up nearby alternative premises. The current law allowing closure notices—section 76 of the 2014 Act—restricts the grounds to nuisance and disorder. Criminal activity is not mentioned, so a new law would correct that omission.

Measures need to be taken against landlords who repeatedly rent their units to dodgy companies carrying out illegal activity. My Somerset councillor colleagues, supported by trading standards, have called for civil penalties against landlords who knowingly let their premises be used for illegal trading. The Chartered Trading Standards Institute has also made that point. Landlords who repeatedly offend should lose their premises for at least two years; the premises should be handed over to the local council to be let out at reduced rents to genuine local businesses that play by the rules.

The changes that the Home Secretary recently announced cannot come soon enough, but the Government should be much bolder. The Liberal Democrats want to see more police on our streets to restore proper community policing; swifter closure orders and notices, lasting up to seven days, with an end to the burden of paperwork that they currently generate, which slows our police officers down; and penalties for landlords who repeatedly turn a blind eye to whom they are renting their properties. These criminal gangs must be given no quarter in Taunton and Wellington or any other town centre in the country.

10.38 am

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) on securing this important debate.

For far too many people and in far too many places, the high street has become a visible sign of where the British state has lost control. People suspect that the cash-only takeaways, barber's shops and vape shops that they see springing up on their high streets are symptomatic of a deeper rot. As the hon. Gentleman and many others set out, in many cases they are right.

All too often, such high street shops are linked to organised crime, including through the sale of illicit or counterfeit goods, money laundering, immigration crime and people smuggling.

Last month, the BBC uncovered that people smugglers are directing migrants to pay for illegal channel crossings using a network of high street businesses, including mobile phone shops. In 2024 alone, trading standards seized more than 1 million illegal vapes and 19 million illegal cigarettes. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) mentioned, the National Crime Agency estimates that £1 billion of crime-linked cash is laundered through high street businesses every year. It is clearly difficult to produce reliable estimates of things such as money laundering, so the real figure may be even higher. The money laundered by such businesses often fuels human trafficking or the drug trade.

The problem is only getting worse. According to one survey, 99% of trading standards professionals have seen an increase in the number of cash-intensive businesses opening on their local high streets in recent years. Cash-intensive businesses often provide the best fronts for money laundering and the trade in illicit and counterfeit goods.

While businesses that do the right thing are struggling with ever more regulation and ever higher taxes, businesses with links to organised crime are thriving. To combat the rise in illicit activity on our high streets, we must understand the criminal networks that sustain that activity and the link in many cases between those networks and immigration.

Let us imagine, for example, an organised crime gang involved in the drugs trade. When that gang sells drugs to people, payment will most often be made in cash, because cash is harder to trace. However, if that business wants to bring its cash into the normal financial system, it will need to launder the money so as not to provoke suspicion. If a person suddenly deposits tens of thousands of pounds with no clear income source, a bank will register that as suspicious, but not so if the money is deposited by a high street business.

The gang might therefore set up a high street shop—something cash-intensive and with low overhead costs, such as a vape shop. The shop records its transactions but adds to those real purchases a series of phantom cash sales used to disguise the illicit cash raised by the sale of drugs. The deposit appears legitimate and can be backed up with paperwork. Once that cash is deposited, it can be paid out as profit to those involved in running the organisation, for example as a fake invoice to an overseas supplier that is paid out to a shell company registered abroad.

The criminal gangs involved in the drug trade operate across borders both financially and physically. They will have overseas suppliers who provide them with the drugs that they sell. These supply networks are often sustained by links between people of the same nationality, ethnicity or even extended family. Often, these drug gangs are also involved in other kinds of cross-border smuggling—of counterfeit goods, illegal tobacco and, indeed, people.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this to the attention of the Chamber today. One of the issues, which I know the Minister is well across, is

the cross-border trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that has a land border. A better working relationship with the Garda Síochána is critical. Can the Minister confirm that the Garda Síochána, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the police forces here on the mainland can work together to better defeat paramilitary and organised crime groups?

Katie Lam: The hon. Member is right that the common travel area presents particular challenges. It is crucial to maintain the sorts of relationships he is talking about in a way that keeps the public safe in Northern Ireland and the whole country.

If high street shops are already laundering money on behalf of these gangs, they might also sell the things that the gang illegally imports. They might serve as points of contact for people who are looking to smuggle people into Britain illegally, as was highlighted by the BBC's most recent investigation.

Those shops might also help criminal gangs to bring people into this country by sponsoring their visas. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) has previously highlighted, many cash-intensive high street businesses sponsor an absurd number of visas. On paper, these people work for a legitimate high street business, but in practice many of them will be using that apparently legitimate employment as cover for their work as part of a criminal gang. Others may be working, or forced to work, for dramatically less than the minimum wage, which both exploits them and distorts the labour market. That happens everywhere in the country. In the stunning town of Tenterden in my constituency, Indian restaurant Badsha was recently found to have been employing illegal migrants for a fourth time, racking up £120,000 in fines and not paying a single penny.

I would appreciate it if the Minister set out how the Home Office thinks about and plans to tackle the links between illicit activity on the high street, organised crime, immigration and people smuggling, and how the Department's plans for tackling illicit activity on the high street take account of those links. Does it keep a record of how many businesses raided under high street organised crime operations were also registered visa sponsors? Does it keep a record of the visa status and visa type of those employed by these businesses?

What proportion of high street businesses employing people illegally are repeat offenders like the one in my constituency? Will the Minister share what proportion of Operation Machine targets in cases related to counterfeit goods, illegal tobacco or vapes, money laundering or the sale of drugs were also involved in illegal working, visa fraud or organised immigration crime and people smuggling?

10.43 am

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Dowd.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) for securing this excellent debate. The message I take away from it is, "You've done some stuff that we think is good, but we need to do a lot more." This issue is undoubtedly one that we will all be judged on when we next stand before the electorate.

[Sarah Jones]

As I have in Croydon, every Member in this place will have experience of a high street that they grew up going to that they know will never again be as they remember it. We also know that we need to tell a new story for our high streets. As shops have closed for all the reasons that Members have outlined, illicit activity has stepped in. It is important to start with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft): we have not only to tackle the criminality, but to establish what we want to do with our town centres. As has been mentioned, there is some innovation across the country where town centres are growing, which is great.

The Government are very aware that we have to understand and appreciate the fact that the town centre of the future will be different, and we need to change laws and do what we can to encourage a new high street. A wider high street strategy is being pulled together at the moment; every Government Department that could possibly be relevant is coming together and asking, "What more can we do to ensure that our high streets can thrive for the businesses we want to see on them, rather than this illicit activity?"

The activity itself has been very well described, and my hon. Friends the Members for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) and for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) showed leadership in painting us a very good picture of the problems we see nationally. We know there is this increase in shops—I see it on my high street, as everybody does—but people are not in them, so how are they making money? What is going on in that space?

As other Members will have done, I recently joined the raid of a shop in London, which was a big joint operation between trading standards, local authorities and the police, and some of the things I learned were very uncomfortable to hear. For example, an increasing number of builders are being employed by these shop owners to build hidden cupboards so that people can hide their illegal activities. Also, there were lots of cameras in the back of the shop, but they were not there to protect the shop itself; they were to keep an eye on the people working there—these are nasty criminal gangs that want to ensure that the people they employ are not stealing from them. The young lad who was in the shop when we did the raid had nothing to do with the ownership; apparently, the owner was away. As has been mentioned, understanding who owns some of these properties is a complicated and difficult challenge. I am very well aware of the problem that we are trying to fix.

I am very grateful to the many Members who pointed to the important work that the Government have introduced—I do not want to diminish it by saying that we of course need to go further. We have the new high street organised crime unit in the Home Office, as well as the £30 million that has been allocated, in part, to fund the National Crime Agency, and £6 million of which is going to trading standards. Many Members have talked about how the ability of trading standards to respond to today's challenges has been completely wiped out, so that money will help them. Some £1.5 million has been allocated to immigration enforcement, just to add to all the other work that is happening in immigration—my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen asked about the connections, which of course exist; just

today, there was an immigration raid in my constituency—and £1.5 million is going from that pot to HMRC so that it can do some work on this issue. Members talked about Companies House; there is more work to be done there, for sure.

The closure powers—the closure notice extension to 72 hours and, looking ahead, the longer, 12-month closure—are important, and I am glad that Members have welcomed them. I was very interested in what Members had to say about the Netherlands. As Policing Minister, I do not really get to go on trips, but maybe there should be a Netherlands trip with the campaign group to see what is being done there. In the absence of such a trip, I will certainly read more about how that regime is working. That is a really important point: we should look to other countries and understand what they are doing.

We are open to all of the many good suggestions that Members have made. There is a ministerial group chaired by the new Security Minister; she would have been here, but she could not be, as she is introducing legislation today. I am also on the committee, along with all the Departments that Members would expect to be there. There was a push for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to do work in this space; I know that it is looking at that, and I will certainly talk to it more about that. I will say that all the suggestions that have been made today were mentioned in that first ministerial meeting; we talked about all the same issues. I know we need to go further and faster and we need to push forward, but there was nothing surprising in the suggestions that hon. Members made; these are very sensible things that we are looking at and want to take forward.

There will be big national pushes under Operation Machinize. For obvious reasons, I cannot say when they will be, but Operation Machinize has worked effectively; when all the agencies work together, there is a much more effective outcome. All Members made useful suggestions: more support for trading standards; looking at licensing and more powers for local authorities; data sharing—that is an important suggestion, which I certainly agree with—a place for direct reporting into trading standards, which is an interesting one; and more powers to tackle landlords as well as the organised crime.

The Home Office's policing reform programme will, I hope, help us tackle these kinds of issues much more effectively. Setting up a national police service could tackle this co-ordinated, serious organised crime in a much better way. At the moment, every time there is a new issue, we have to set up a structure to tackle it at national level. The national police service will be there to do that. It will bring together the National Crime Agency, counter-terrorism and all the other national organisations. We know that some of this money laundering is driving terrorism, for example, and at the moment two different bodies are tackling that. Bringing it all together and having co-ordination at the centre will help.

At the bedrock of our policing policy, we have the commitment to 13,000 more neighbourhood officers on our streets. That will make a significant difference in how people feel about their high streets and in the criminal activity that we are able to tackle. When people mention, for example, kids hanging about outside the

illegal shops and doing things that we think they should not be doing, the police will be there to tackle those problems.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen again for securing this debate, and I thank all Members—

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Jones: Oh, yes—I forgot to talk about Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: I hope the Minister does not mind my asking, but would she take the time, as she often does on her visits to Northern Ireland, to engage with the Northern Ireland Justice Minister, Naomi Long? There are lots of things we can do better together, and we can share ideas, so will the Minister take that opportunity on one of her many visits to Northern Ireland?

Sarah Jones: Yes, of course. Forgive me; I should have responded to that earlier. The hon. Member also made the point about illicit trade across all our nations, and we need to work together to tackle that as well.

I will end just as I began, by saying that we will be judged on this when we next stand before—

Gideon Amos: Will the Minister accept another intervention?

Sarah Jones: I will take one more.

Gideon Amos: I am very grateful. I just want to clarify one point about planning controls. Key points were made about whether shops are actually shops if their windows are completely covered. If planning guidance

was changed, that might open the way for enforcement under the existing system. Will the Minister get that message through to MHCLG?

Sarah Jones: Yes, of course. There are several areas for MHCLG to look at, and I know that it is already looking at what more powers we can have to close down the shops and stop them opening in the first place, as well as over the clustering of shops. We need to look at all those issues.

I thank everybody again. I very much get the message that we have started a good piece of work, but there is a lot more to do.

10.54 am

Alex Ballinger: We can see the scale of the problem across the country from how many people have come to the debate today from different nations, cities, towns, seaside resorts and rural areas. It is great to see such interest. I am pleased about the steps the Government have taken so far. I thank the Minister in particular for taking away what the taskforce has been doing, which is really important work. We all know that a lot of this is down to cuts to trading standards and big cuts to police in the past, so the steps we are taking to resource those are welcome. I encourage the Minister to work with this group of MPs, as I am sure she will, as we go through changes and we can have some real results.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling illicit activity in high street shops.

10.55 am

Sitting suspended.

Transport: Marston Vale

10.59 am

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport requirements in the Marston Vale.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I hope this can be a constructive debate. I am not here to bash the Government or to stand in the way of progress; I am here to open a dialogue with the Minister on behalf of the people I serve in Mid Bedfordshire.

The Marston Vale in Mid Bedfordshire contains historical villages such as Cranfield, Marston Moretaine, Lidlington, Stewartby and Brogborough, as well as the new town of Wixams. It also sits at the heart of the Government's growth agenda. The Universal UK resort will be a £50 billion boost to the UK's economy, bringing millions of visitors every year to Kempston Hardwick. East West Rail, connecting the intellectual powerhouses of Oxford and Cambridge, will run along the Marston Vale line, stopping at Ridgmont, Lidlington and Stewartby. The merger of Cranfield University with King's College London will bring further world-class research to the Marston Vale.

The Marston Valley development will see 5,000 houses delivered across new villages between Marston Moretaine and Brogborough, and the Stewartby brickworks development will see 1,000 houses delivered on a brownfield site in Stewartby. The new town of Wixams will continue to be built out over the coming years, with thousands more houses and a new train station. The Government's proposed new town at Milton Keynes and potential developments at Keepers Place and the Aspley Guise triangle could see tens of thousands more houses built in and around the Marston Vale.

All in, the roughly 7.5 miles between junction 13 of the M1 and the town of Kempston will soon see two nationally significant infrastructure projects, thousands of new homes and one of the UK's leading universities, all at the centre of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. That is on top of existing significant sites including the Millbrook proving ground, the community forest of Marston Vale and the Woburn Forest Center Parks.

As I said, I am not here to stand in the way of the growth that our area is set to contribute to the UK. If it is done right, there are immense opportunities for the Marston Vale, with thousands of new jobs, brilliant new transport links and new communities in our area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I very well understand the absolute devastation caused by bad management. As I said to him beforehand, I have similar problems in my constituency in relation to the Ballynahinch bypass. We must have robust Government involvement in prioritising infrastructure, and it must be managed, wherever it may be. We cannot have a piecemeal system; we must have central Government pushing it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that is the clear way forward?

Blake Stephenson: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. With the scale of the change that we are discussing, particularly in my constituency and also in

his, it is vital that the proposals are done with, not done to, the residents of the Marston Vale and Strangford, in order to retain public support.

That means proper planning on transport infrastructure that considers the cumulative impact of these nationally significant projects on the local communities they will sit within. At the moment, I am afraid that is not happening, and public support is slipping away. Transport modelling for the various projects has been siloed and has failed to properly take into account the cumulative impact of proposals. For example, outline planning permission for the 5,000 houses at Marston Valley was granted on the basis of transport modelling that does not consider the impact of Universal UK, and Universal UK's transport modelling does not consider the impact of the 5,000 houses at Marston Valley.

East West Rail's proposals will increase capacity to serve Universal, but they fail to properly plan for the impact that they will have on the local road infrastructure by severing local communities. For example, to increase the number of trains on the line in response to Universal UK, East West Rail plans to close a number of level crossings in the Marston Vale and leave others with significant downtime throughout the day. That will have an enormous impact on local communities, effectively bisecting the Marston Vale along the rail line.

One of the level crossings that East West Rail has proposed to close, at Station Lane in Millbrook, is a key local route for the Marston Valley development. It is also a vital link for the Millbrook proving ground, including for the transport of military vehicles. The alternative route would direct enormous volumes of traffic down country lanes even with today's level of demand, but we are adding thousands more houses and Europe's biggest theme park. Roads such as Bury Ware in Lidlington are simply not equipped to cope with the volumes of traffic they are expecting.

Previous East West Rail proposals have broad local support, but the new proposals, which fail to plan for the cumulative impact of transport pressures in the Marston Vale, now risk eroding that. I urge the Minister to work with East West Rail to reconsider the impacts of its proposals on level crossings in the Marston Vale, in the light of the cumulative development impacts. We cannot allow it to irreparably damage our communities and turn our country lanes into gridlocked rat runs.

Plans to deliver a new multi-storey car park in Lidlington have also caused concern that the village could end up as a park and ride for Universal UK, just one stop up the line on East West Rail. That is not nimbyism; it reflects a real local concern that good intentions alone are not plans. We cannot prevent people from parking in Lidlington and hopping on the train to Universal, but we can alleviate residents' concerns and reduce the risk of it happening by properly planning for and delivering a park and ride elsewhere.

The new Ridgmont station just off the M1 is a prime candidate for such a park and ride, but that station's delivery has been predicated on house building that does not yet have planning permission and is not yet included in any local plans. Disjointed planning and concerns about delivery timetables at Ridgmont leave residents in Lidlington and elsewhere fearing the worst.

Another impact of the changing demand for transport in our area is that East West Rail's plans for Stewartby station are now out of touch with the needs of local

residents. Stewartby station is relatively busy. Despite a limited rail service, the station sees around 90,000 passengers a year, almost all of them local and many of them students at Kimberley college, which is located a short walk from the current station. East West Rail's plans for the station involve removing it from the village entirely and turning it into a gateway station for Universal UK.

To be clear, we absolutely need an East West Rail station to serve Universal UK, but very little work seems to have been done on the implications of the new station location for Stewartby residents and students of Kimberley college. If the plan remains to build a new Universal station and axe the Stewartby station entirely, Ministers need to ensure that East West Rail urgently works to produce a detailed plan for transport links between the station, Stewartby village and Kimberley college.

That plan should include details on how residents with mobility challenges will be able to get to the station, and it should set out the safeguards that Ministers will put in place to ensure that hundreds of students at Kimberley college will be kept safe when using an extremely busy station and making a much longer journey, likely on foot, from the station to the college. The alternative that I have been calling for would be to keep the current Stewartby station operational in addition to a new station serving Universal UK, with a limited stopping service operating only at peak morning and evening times.

More generally, despite a much-publicised announcement on the Government's infrastructure investment to enable Universal UK earlier this month, neither the Chancellor nor the Transport Secretary has written to me to outline specifically what that investment will deliver in my constituency. Residents in the Marston Vale want and deserve clarity from the Government on what infrastructure, particularly transport infrastructure, will be delivered to facilitate the arrival of millions of visitors to Europe's biggest tourist attraction in their backyard. I hope the Minister will be able to offer some further detail in her response.

Another good example of transport pressure in our area is junction 13 of the M1, which the Minister knows I am going to mention. The Government have indicated that junction 13 will be upgraded in the early 2030s, for which my constituents are grateful, but the timeframe for upgrades needs to be urgently reviewed. Junction 13 is unsuitable now; it is already acknowledged that it is regularly severely congested. While the Marston Valley development will provide some upgrades to cope with the demand brought by those new houses, it will not consider the volume of additional traffic brought by Universal UK. Junction 13 is a key route for local traffic as well as traffic passing through our community. Given the significant increase in traffic volume, we need that upgrade now.

Junction 13 is not the only significant road infrastructure impacted by local development plans. Vehicle traffic will also use the A421 to get to the Universal UK resort from the M1. The Government have acknowledged this with their investment in slip roads from the A421 to Universal UK, but we have recently seen the significant congestion caused, even with the current levels of demand, when the A421 is closed. In September 2024, there was

severe flooding on the road, which saw a dip fill with 72 million litres of water after a pumping station was overwhelmed.

Work has been done to solve that particular vulnerability, but the traffic chaos that occurred in 2024 demonstrates what happens in the Marston Vale when the A421 is out of commission. That congestion would be many times more significant if the A421 had to be shut for any reason after Universal UK is built. Any respectable transport plan for the Marston Vale must address one key question: what is our contingency plan if the A421 is out of action? We have seen no answer to that question.

Junction 13 is not the only project for which timing will be crucial. From the day that the Universal UK resort opens in 2031, millions of visitors will pour through its doors, whether we have built sufficient transport infrastructure or not. But if we have not, they will pour through its doors via gridlocked local roads designed for local traffic, not for the largest theme park in Europe. It is imperative, therefore, that the Marston Vale is home to a national effort to deliver new infrastructure as swiftly as possible. That includes having the new station at Wixams on the midland main line open from day one, it means ensuring that East West Rail between Oxford and Bedford has services running to completed modern stations with step-free access, and it means having a road network, especially junction 13, that can cope with the volume of traffic we are expecting.

As I said, I did not come here to play party politics, to bash Ministers or to rail against the march of progress. I came with a specific request. What we see in the Marston Vale is not unique, but it is unusual: several projects of national significance contained within roughly 7.5 miles of Bedfordshire, split across Central Bedfordshire council and Bedford borough council. The myriad challenges are difficult to address because there is no centralised master planning and, as a result, there is no way to mitigate the cumulative impact of the various individual proposals. That is leading to contradictory solutions.

Because there is no centralised masterplan and no single body overseeing these projects, it is also much more difficult to leverage funding to ensure that it is spent in the right places. I would like Ministers to commit to working with me, local councillors, local residents and key stakeholders, such as Universal and local developer O&H, to develop a master plan for transport in the Marston Vale. That should set out exactly what communities in the Marston Vale need to manage the various pressures on our area. It should include detail about how to manage transport pressures strategically during construction periods, and it should open a conversation about how we secure the right funding to deliver those projects.

The rewards of success are clear: enabling the Marston Vale and its residents to play the fullest part in delivering the Government's growth agenda, right at the heart of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor. But the costs of failure are stark: residents in the Marston Vale waking up in the 2030s to discover that they have suffered all of the downsides of growth in their communities, and that some of the benefits for the country as a whole have been squandered.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this timely debate, and I thank him for the way in which he made the case on behalf of his constituents. I also acknowledge his efforts to support the expansion of forest land in the Marston Vale.

There is significant opportunity in the Marston Vale, but it is held back by pressing transport challenges. Many communities rely on cars because public transport options do not yet provide the connectivity that people need. The Marston Vale line has historically suffered from low frequency and reliability issues, while congestion on key routes such as the A421 continues to impact daily journeys. I know that bus services can be limited or fragmented and active travel routes are not yet sufficient for many residents.

Those deficiencies affect access to work, education, healthcare and wider opportunities. They undermine growth in an area that sits at the heart of the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, which is a priority for the Government. How we respond to the transport requirements of the Marston Vale is central to the success of the corridor as a whole, and to allow the constituents of Mid Bedfordshire to take full advantage of its growth potential.

East West Rail is fundamental to our response to the Marston Vale's transport needs. The project was designed to tackle many of the issues that the hon. Member raised while driving national growth. The Government's support for East West Rail represents a major investment in public transport in his constituency, as he acknowledged. It will mean going up from one passenger service per hour to five services per hour in the Marston Vale, delivering net zero passenger services using battery electric hybrid trains and significantly cutting journey times.

By upgrading and electrifying the Marston Vale line, introducing more frequent and reliable services, and delivering modern, accessible stations at Ridgmont, Lidlington and Stewartby, East West Rail will transform the experience of rail travel for local communities. It will make rail a more attractive, dependable and sustainable option, reducing reliance on the car and helping to ease pressure on already congested roads. Crucially, it will also better connect the Marston Vale to the wider region, opening up access to jobs, education, amenities and services across the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor.

However, I recognise that this transformation brings concerns, particularly around the impact of works and level crossings, including at Millbrook. The move to a faster, more frequent railway requires changes to ensure safety and reliability, including the closure of certain crossings. I also understand the impact that will have on local communities.

That is why East West Rail has committed to providing alternative routes where closures are proposed, and why feedback from its most recent consultation will be carefully taken into account ahead of the application for a development consent order next year. The company will consider how best to manage traffic and housing

impacts, taking on board local views set out in the response to the public consultation, and set out again today by the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire.

As the hon. Member rightly argued, the transport requirements of the Marston Vale cannot be considered in isolation from the significant growth opportunities now emerging across the corridor. Those include opportunities for new homes along the East West Rail route, potential new towns in Milton Keynes and Tempsford, and the new Universal resort at Stewartby. The £5 billion investment by Comcast NBCUniversal is a landmark development that is expected to generate nearly £50 billion in economic benefit for the UK and create tens of thousands of jobs. It will also place new and substantial demands on the transport network, with millions of visitors each year and a large workforce drawn predominantly from the surrounding area.

Our response has been to ensure that transport infrastructure both supports this development and, importantly, delivers wider benefits for local communities. As has already been said, the Government have committed £1.3 billion to support the project and its surrounding local and regional infrastructure, including investment in transport improvements. These include the development of Wixams station in collaboration with Network Rail and targeted upgrades to the highway network, including along the A421 corridor. Wixams station, which is on the Midland main line, is anticipated to open before the Universal park opens its doors to visitors.

Blake Stephenson: I thank the Minister for briefly outlining what the £1.3 billion of taxpayers' money will be spent on. My residents will be relieved to hear that Wixams station is expected to open in time for Universal.

The Minister also talked about targeted investment in the local road network. When the detail becomes available, will she commit to writing to me with more information about what public money will be spent and where, and what impact the Government expect it to have?

Lilian Greenwood: I will ensure that my colleague, the roads Minister, writes to the hon. Gentleman with further information on those plans.

Importantly, we are also working to ensure that the resort is fully integrated into the wider transport system, particularly through East West Rail and its new station at Stewartby. This will allow visitors and employees to access the site by rail from across the region and beyond, reducing pressure on roads and promoting more sustainable travel patterns. We are clear that a development of this scale, alongside other development opportunities and potential new towns at Tempsford and Milton Keynes, must act as a catalyst for a high-quality, integrated transport network for the Marston Vale that benefits residents as well as visitors.

Although strategic investment is essential, meeting the transport requirements of the Marston Vale also depends on improving everyday local journeys, and I recognise the concerns that the hon. Member raised on behalf of local residents. That is why the Department is working closely with Bedford borough council, neighbouring authorities and England's Economic Heartland to develop a transport opportunity plan for the area. This work is focused on delivering a more coherent and connected local network, enhancing local bus services, improving walking and cycling routes, and

ensuring better links between communities, stations and key destinations. We recognise that the current provision is not sufficient, particularly for those without access to a car, and this work will bring together local authorities, transport operators and other partners to address the gaps in a co-ordinated way.

I am sure the hon. Member welcomes that an integration taskforce has also been established, bringing national expertise to bear on this challenge. Its role is to ensure that all modes—rail, road, bus and active travel—are planned and delivered as part of a single integrated vision that is aligned with the Department’s “Better Connected” strategy.

The hon. Member referred to the importance of M1 junction 13, and that importance is why it is part of a pipeline scheme set out in the third roads investment strategy. I have already committed to ensuring that the roads Minister writes in response to his concerns relating to resilience and the A421.

The Government have committed to supporting England’s Economic Heartland as the subnational transport body to promote integrated transport, helping to ensure that as many communities as possible can benefit from these transformational connections.

In closing, I again thank the hon. Member for securing this debate and for the constructive approach that he has taken to addressing this issue.

Blake Stephenson: The Minister talked about bringing together local councils—Central Bedfordshire council and Bedford borough council—and England’s Economic Heartland. One of my asks was that we also bring together Universal UK, O&H, which is a significant developer of 5,000 houses in the area, and East West Rail, to ensure that local infrastructure is integrated. Would she consider my proposal—if she cannot answer directly now, she can take it away—that those stakeholders also get around the table? They are developers of significant infrastructure in the area and I think they also need to be around the table.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Member makes a really good point about the importance of making sure that stakeholders are involved in these conversations, and I will certainly take his proposal away and talk to colleagues in the Department.

The transport requirements of the Marston Vale are clear: better connectivity, greater reliability and a system that supports sustainable growth. Through East West Rail, targeted investment linked to the Universal development and a renewed focus on local transport integration, this Government are committed to meeting those needs. My departmental colleagues and I will be happy to continue engaging with the hon. Member, his constituents and nearby colleagues as we take these important investments forward.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.

Rural Pubs: Fiscal Support

[WERA HOBHOUSE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of fiscal support for rural pubs.

It is a pleasure to lead this debate on fiscal support for our country’s great rural pubs. Although this debate is about fiscal support, it is really about our heritage. To demonstrate that, I would like to take hon. Members on a pub crawl around my constituency. Meriden and Solihull East has the historical, grade II-listed Malt Shovel in Barston, which dates back to the late 15th or early 16th century and is widely regarded as one of the oldest pubs in the borough of Solihull. There is also the Queen’s Head in Meriden, a 17th-century coaching inn. We would then move on to Hampton in Arden, where there is the White Lion, another 17th-century pub with traditional architecture. I should say at this stage that I do not drink, so I am happy to drive Members if they come.

From Hampton in Arden, we would travel to Catherine-de-Barnes, where the excellent Boat has a tremendous beer garden for sunny afternoons. In Dorridge, the Railway Inn, right next to the station, often serves hard-working commuters after a long day’s work. Dorridge also has the Forest, a 19th-century coach house just by the train station, serving tremendous food and drink, with great rooms for weary guests. There is also the Drum and Monkey, my local, which is a famous country pub with a history dating back to the 1860s.

After all that, we would end up in the historical village of Knowle, where I want everyone with me. In the village, there are a number of pubs that we could choose from, but I have selected a couple. The Wilson Arms, now a Toby Carvery, is a 16th-century pub with timber frames and excellent Sunday lunches. The Red Lion, right on the high street, has great food and drinks.

I pick Knowle to end, because this weekend we are celebrating the 750th anniversary of the village. I pay tribute to all those who make the village the special place that it is: Visit Knowle, the Knowle Society, the various publicans and, of course, our residents. To them, I say thank you. Community, character and identity, that is what our rural pubs represent. That is why they are worth fighting for, and why I am here today, concerned about the impact of the Government’s policies on our rural pubs.

I will start by talking about the economic importance of pubs and their contribution to the economy, especially in rural areas. There is no doubt that the UK’s pub and brewing sector plays an enormous role in rural constituencies across the UK. Rural pubs provide jobs and huge economic value. According to the British Beer and Pub Association, the pub and brewing sector supports more than 300,000 jobs in rural constituencies in the UK. Combined, rural pubs and breweries contribute almost £11 billion to the economy and generate £7 billion in tax.

In addition, as I have outlined, rural pubs are steeped in history and heritage. They attract tourism from across the country and the world. Tourism is estimated to be

[Saqib Bhatti]

responsible for about a third of employment in rural pubs. People come from all over the world to spend time in the great British countryside and enjoy the excellent food and drink that we put out in our great pubs. In all our constituencies, but particularly for Members from rural seats, the influence of pubs in our constituencies is enormous. I am immensely proud of the pubs in Meriden and Solihull East. We have almost 40 local pubs, which support 1,740 jobs. Of that cohort, there are 500 16 to 24-year-olds working in the sector, which makes an overall contribution of £61 million to the local economy. In the wider west midlands, there are more than 4,000 rural pubs, which employ 88,000 people and contribute £2.9 billion to the economy.

Aside from the huge economic impact of these pubs, they are also a vital part of the fabric of our rural communities. They provide food, drink and places to stay, and some historical pubs date back centuries, truly making them part of our great and unique British history.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. As everybody knows, I represent the most beautiful constituency in the United Kingdom. As he says, pubs are not just about food and drink; they are also somewhere for people to go to socialise. They are great for people who are lonely. The Butchers Arms in Carhampton reopened in January, and it now has a library and a shop. I am sure he would agree that is a very good situation to be in.

Saqib Bhatti: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, but I think we should have a rule in this House that when a Member says they have the best constituency, they owe everyone a pint. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I could get used to this popularity. The hon. Member is absolutely correct, and I will come to the social value of pubs as a meeting place.

When people think of Britain, they of course think of our iconic landmarks such as Buckingham Palace or Big Ben, but they also think of our red post boxes, our black cabs and our rural pubs. Our truly unique rural pubs are the pillars of our local communities, serving as meeting points for old friends, destinations for wedding receptions and hubs for our community.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recognise that, for many rural locations, the rural pub is the last-standing business in the village? It is the post office, the village store, the job club, the parent and child club and the club for the elderly and lonely. I have even seen, through Pub is the Hub, a barber in the lounge of a pub. It cuts people's hair during the day and serves them drinks in the evening. Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Government impose extra fiscal pressures on pubs, what they lose is probably worth far, far more than the revenue they think they are gaining?

Saqib Bhatti: I could not agree more. That is exactly why we are here today. I am really concerned about the core of our communities being hollowed out by Government interventions. For elderly people in particular, a good pub lunch with great drinks and warm food can be a staple of the weekly routine. It is therefore no wonder that two thirds of adults believe that their local

pub is vital to combating loneliness and social isolation. On the back of my hon. Friend's intervention, I gently ask the Minister whether he recognises that losing a rural pub has a huge impact on our rural communities. Where are those people meant to go?

Dr Thomas Thurnell-Read from Loughborough University has conducted some fascinating research into the social value of pubs in local communities. The project looked at the impact of pub closures on communities and made it very clear that the loss of a pub, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) said, is so much more than just the loss of a business. Dr Thurnell-Read made it clear that the closure of a pub echoes throughout the entire community, impacting friendships, identities and vital local support networks in ways that cannot be captured by data alone.

As traditional community infrastructure such as banks, village halls and post offices also come under pressure, pubs are more important than ever as anchors in our rural communities. For rural areas, some pubs now act as more than just a place to meet and socialise. They have essential services such as micro post offices, prescription drop-offs, wi-fi hubs and barbers, as my hon. Friend mentioned. They even house part-time library shelves.

Research by the Rural Services Network has found that for every £1 invested in the provision of services and activities in the pub, an average of £8.28 of social value is created. It found that the diverse new services offered by pubs in local communities have lasting positive impacts on the overall wellbeing of individuals and their families, as well as on reducing loneliness, improving mental health and giving people greater independence.

Having spoken at great length about the value and importance of rural pubs, I am really concerned about the Government's intervention and the lack of support for this vital industry. Some of our best pubs are in the Chancellor's crosshairs. Labour has hit rural pubs with increased taxes and a litany of new burdensome legislation that is killing them off. The pub and brewing sector is among the most highly taxed of any business sector, with around £1 in every £3 spent in the pub going back to HMRC.

One of the most egregious taxes is the Government's national insurance raid on our businesses. Having spoken with representatives of the UK's beer and pub sector, there is no doubt that Labour's rise in national insurance has had a huge impact on rural pubs. Just last week, Simon Emeny, the chairman of Fuller's, said that pubs are facing "unprecedented" pressure from Labour's tax rises. Given the nature of pub work, the lowering of the national insurance threshold has had a deep impact on publicans. Pubs are one of the major employers of young people. The sector employs 58% of its people on a part-time basis, which means that lowering the threshold has forced pubs to reconsider their hiring practices.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): The concerns about taxes that the hon. Member is raising have really affected Jack, the owner of the Ye Olde Poppe Inn in Tatworth, and Buddy, the owner of the Flying Fish. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to lower VAT for pubs?

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Member makes an interesting point. When publicans speak to me about taxes, they talk about their turnover either increasing or staying

stable but the costs going up. The Government have to set out what they will do to improve the fiscal landscape for pubs, and for the hospitality industry more broadly.

A lot has been made of Lord Milburn's report on NEETs—those not in education, employment or training—and the rise in the number of 16 to 24-year-olds in that category. Has the Minister considered the impact of these tax rises on pub-specific jobs? Some 51% of people working in pubs are under the age of 24, meaning that many are likely to be balancing working in the pub with other part-time commitments such as school or university. These new employment costs mean that publicans will think again about hiring staff on a part-time basis, driving many people into worklessness. The national insurance rise has had the single most damaging effect on the Saturday job.

In addition to the crippling jobs tax, pubs are also suffering because of stifling increases in business rates. These policies threaten to be a huge—maybe even the final—nail in the coffin of many pubs that are really struggling. Analysis from UKHospitality has found that, by 2027-28, the average pub's business rates will be £4,500 higher than they are today, rising to an astonishing £12,900 within three years, even with the reduced multiplier and transitional relief. I asked one of my staff members how much they paid for a pint of beer in one of the pubs in my constituency, and they said a pint of lager came to £7.50. That pub would have to sell an extra 1,720 pints just to offset the cost of those shocking tax increases.

The Conservatives recognise the value of our pubs. We have pledged to scrap business rates for 250,000 retail, hospitality and leisure businesses because we recognise the importance of ensuring that businesses keep more of what they earn, allowing them to invest in the community rather than sending it back to central Government. I say to the Minister that Governments do not create growth or jobs; our businesses do. This announcement formed part of our larger campaign to get Britain working again, freeing up money for businesses to hire new people, often younger and always local. It would drive new jobs and economic growth across rural areas of the UK.

Building on that, *The Telegraph* revealed last month that landlords will be hit with a “nice pub tax” under new guidelines. It found that HMRC has ordered officials to levy higher business rates on pubs that are in attractive locations or based in character properties. That is a complete disaster, and could mean that many pubs are forced—

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

It is important to note that the article in *The Telegraph* on the changes for rural pubs was about the fact that we published, with full transparency, the guidance used to value pubs that was signed off under the previous Government. This Government are cutting pubs' business rates by 15% this year, freezing them for the next two years and reviewing that very guidance. We respect the press, but that article was fake news, and I do not think it should be repeated in this place.

Saqib Bhatti: I love the Minister's passion, but I have not finished yet, and I encourage him—[*Interruption.*]

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. Can I make sure that we all understand that lots of Members want to speak? If you start debating with the Minister now, we will lose time. Please respect that, and I encourage you to come to the end of your speech.

Saqib Bhatti: I will speed up, Mrs Hobhouse, but I encourage the Minister to wait until I have finished. The litany of regulation, such as in the Employment Rights Act 2025, and the taxes that the Government have raised have had a huge impact. Labour is waging war on our rural pubs. Those publicans can feel it, and we can all see it.

I know that we are all looking forward to England's first world cup game against Croatia this evening, and along with all Members, I wish them the very best. We have some of the highest alcohol duties on a pint of beer. I do not want to broach the subject of the EU but, while I am not a natural fan of closer alignment, it seems that Europe is in a better place on this, so I ask the Minister to comment on that.

In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, Mrs Hobhouse; hopefully you will be Madam Deputy Speaker one day. In conclusion, I say to the Minister that the litany of measures taken by the Government have affected Saturday jobs and had a huge impact on young people. He has shown a lot of passion, but I encourage him to show bravery—and perhaps England fans will chant his name tonight.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I encourage everybody who wants to speak to bob. I intend to call the Front Benchers at about 3.28 pm, which gives everybody else an informal time limit of four minutes. If Members do not stick to that, I will have to put on a formal, and shorter, limit, so please respect each other. I thank Saqib Bhatti for sticking very nicely to his time limit.

2.46 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) on securing the debate. As someone who used to represent the industry, I understand the challenges that our pubs have faced not just over the past two years, but over a decade of changing attitudes and behaviours that mean many of us do not go to the pub as often as we used to. I am sure that, were it not for our service in this place, many of us would be enjoying a pint or two while watching England this evening, benefiting from the extra licensing hours that the Government have allowed to celebrate the world cup.

I will not be as cynical as others—or maybe I will be—by mentioning a variety of pubs in my constituency that residents should visit tonight. Whatever happens tonight, and whether they go to the Golden Cross or the Coach and Horses in Harvington, or the Old Bull or the Bulls Head in Inkberrow, I hope that they spend their money in the local pubs in our villages. In Inkberrow, Feckenham and Hanbury, the local is often the last community asset standing. It is the place where people gather, older residents find connection and the social fabric of our villages is woven. In my constituency, many of them have become temporary post offices.

[Chris Bloore]

I thank the Minister for his engagement during the business rates process. I was one of the Labour Members who darkened his door with concerns and recommendations for change. It is not lost on me that those changes represented £400 million extra for pubs. I thank him for his honest engagement throughout the process, which all Back Benchers should welcome. I also welcome the 15% business rates discount and the frozen multiplier, which are worth nearly £1,650 for the average pub. However, the sector warns that deeper structural reliefs are needed, and that, without further change, 15,000 jobs could be lost over the next couple of years. That is the reality I hear from licensees across my constituency.

I gently suggest some things that the Minister might want to consider for the future. First, the business rates methodology review must reflect the unique trading model of rural wet-led pubs, which is not the same as that of urban pubs. Secondly, we must expand draught relief—and go further where possible. Thirdly, we must strengthen protections for assets of community value, and make it easier for communities to take over vulnerable pubs through co-operative models. For anyone who is not aware, Pub is the Hub does incredible work and deserves more support.

Our pubs are not just peripheral amenities; they are institutions. If we allow them to disappear, we lose not just businesses but the hearts of our communities. It is so hard to start a new business right now for a variety of reasons, including, as has been mentioned, changes in people's behaviours and attitudes towards spending money or enjoying a drink. I fear that, if we lose some of the rural pubs in our communities, we will lose many other businesses that rely on them. I thank the Minister for his co-operation, support and engagement throughout the process, but there is a lot more work to do to keep those businesses in our constituencies safe.

2.49 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) on securing this important debate.

I will begin by mentioning two people I represent. Becky runs the Red Lion in Eynsham. She met the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden), at my invitation earlier this year. That followed a question in the House, so some Members present, including the Minister, who is smiling, may already know Becky's story. Her turnover is up, but her profits have vanished. She said that there is

"no living to be made any more"

from her rural pub. Think about what that means: the customers are still spending, yet she is squeezed to the point of asking herself whether to carry on at all.

Donna runs the Oxfordshire Yeoman in Freeland. She has faced the uncontrollable in the last few months: a washout summer, when summer trade is the very thing that a rural pub banks on to survive the winter. Stacked on top of that, she has faced the entirely controllable: a 50p minimum wage rise, soaring energy bills and rising water bills, all landing at once.

When landlords are counting every penny and customers are counting every penny on the same evening, that is not a market finding its level but a trade being hollowed out from underneath. Consider the scale of the loss: 161 pubs closed across England, Scotland and Wales in the first quarter of this year alone, which is more than two a day. Those closures took roughly 2,400 jobs with them. There is a huge difference between losing a pub in a city and losing one in a village. When an urban pub closes, a community loses an option, but when a rural pub closes, a community loses its social space, which almost never comes back. The rural pub sits alongside the church and the village hall as part of the fabric of some of our smaller communities. Such closures represent a loss of identity and cohesion in communities such as mine. We should ask, "Why is the rural pub more exposed?" They tend to have lower footfall, they tend to face higher energy and supply costs, and it is far harder for them to diversify their income. Running costs across hospitality are up around 43% since 2019, and one third of those businesses are operating at a loss.

I would like to turn to what might actually help. First, there is VAT and energy. Becky's case is one of simple fairness. Why should British hospitality pay roughly double the VAT of comparable European countries? The Liberal Democrats would cut VAT on hospitality by 5% until April 2027 now—not after yet another review—and remove the main renewable levy from energy bills, taking more than £90 a year off the typical bill, funded by a windfall tax on the banks. Taken together, that is £270 back in the pockets of the average household over 18 months, allowing them more opportunity to buy a pint or a meal in their local pub.

Secondly, there is the issue of business rates. In January, the Government discounted 15% of the planned rate hikes for pubs, but Becky's rateable value was hiked phenomenally before the freeze arrived, locking the damage in. The relief does nothing for shops, restaurants, cafés and the wider high street. Our ask is straightforward: the Government must deliver the full 20p discount promised to all retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. In the interim, they should keep the 75% relief and freeze the small business multiplier.

Before I end my remarks, I wish to refer briefly to the role of small breweries in our communities, such as Tap Social Movement in Kidlington, Little Ox in Freeland or Twisted Tree in Tusmore. Those small and medium-sized enterprises in the community combine a passion for independent brewing with a commitment to creating local jobs. However, in addition to the impact of pub company ties on landlords, the large brewers are locking small breweries out of our village pubs. Fewer than 40% of local pubs are open to small, independent breweries. Will the Minister encourage Ministers in the Department for Business and Trade to consider that barrier to market access? As part of the current pubs code review, will they consider a guest beer arrangement in England and Wales similar to that in Scotland?

2.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I give big thanks to the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for raising this issue. As always, I will give a Northern Ireland perspective on the issues.

I speak for the small villages, the crossroads and the tight-knit rural communities where the pub is not merely a commercial business but a vital community hub. It is the village town hall, the local meeting place and the frontline defence against rural isolation; it is a cornerstone of our £2 billion tourism economy. However, those historical institutions are hanging by a thread, suffocating under a mountain of unsustainable operational costs.

We have heard the warnings loud and clear from the industry's frontline. I pay special tribute to Colin Neill MBE, the chief executive of Hospitality Ulster, who I have met on numerous occasions. All Members in the Chamber have probably met him—I know that the Minister has. Colin has been a tireless champion for our publicans, masterfully making the case both at Stormont and here in Westminster. He has warned the Government in no uncertain terms—forgive me for being graphic, Minister, but we must be factual in presenting this case—that our local hospitality sector is in deep distress as a result of the cumulative impact of soaring energy bills, skyrocketing national insurance contributions and upcoming business rates revaluations. Colin has rightly pointed out that the current tax burden is squeezing the very life out of local employment. Hospitality Ulster data shows that nearly half our operators have been forced to reduce staff numbers. We are looking for economic growth and job creation, but we have lost them—this is a full-blown crisis.

Our rural pubs face a unique structural disadvantage compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. In Great Britain, pubs have benefited from various configurations of business rates relief, but publicans in Northern Ireland face the terrifying prospect of massive hikes in their rates bill—a move that Colin Neill has warned would be the “ruination” of our hospitality industry and, by extension, a severe blow to the Northern Ireland economy. Furthermore, our traders are forced to compete on an uneven playing field with the Irish Republic right across the border, where the Government have previously used targeted VAT reductions to protect their hospitality trade, to our disadvantage in Northern Ireland.

We cannot stand idly by and watch our rural heritage be wiped out by fiscal inertia. The sector accounts for four of every five tourism jobs in Northern Ireland, so we cannot deny or ignore that it is critical. If the Department for the Economy is to meet its growth targets—the Minister will want to encourage Northern Ireland to grow and meet them—it needs a thriving hospitality sector to anchor it, so, alongside my DUP colleagues and the Minister back home, I call on the Chancellor and the UK Government to co-ordinate directly with the Stormont Executive on delivering a targeted and ringfenced package of fiscal interventions.

We need three things: a reduction in the hospitality VAT rate to lower the structural burden on food and drink operators, energy cost reform to protect rural businesses that do not have the footfall of Belfast establishments, and a reformed, reality-based rates system that treats hospitality as an economic driver to be supported, not as a cash cow to be milked until it is dead, which is what I see happening.

The hospitality sector is asking for the chance to survive and grow, and I echo that sentiment. I ask the Government to give our publicans the breathing room that they deserve—especially for rural pubs that cannot

work on economies of scale—and to deliver the fiscal support that rural economies desperately need, before the lights go out for good in rural pubs. I thank the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East for bringing this issue to the Chamber. I hope that the Minister can give us the answers that we desperately need.

2.57 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) on securing such an important debate. I also thank Rajan Sehmi from my office for his support in preparing my notes.

We all know how much pressure rural pubs are facing, but I will highlight some of the many positive stories that my constituents have told me about their impact on our community. I recently met Bob from Kings Langley, whose young daughter Abbie is living with stage 4 cancer and is in a wheelchair and on 24-hour oxygen following a double lung transplant. Bob told me about Debbie and Ady, the landlords of the Unicorn in Abbots Langley, who have gone above and beyond to support Abbie and her family and ensure that the Unicorn remains a safe and welcoming place for her.

The Unicorn has organised events specifically for Abbie, including a “sip and paint” party at which 12 of her friends painted a portrait that now hangs proudly in their family home. Knowing that Abbie is a Robbie Williams fan, the Unicorn arranged a tribute act to perform. Unfortunately, Abbie had to go into hospital that day, but Debbie was able to stream it for Abbie on a video call. When Bob later organised a skydive in support of the Hospice of St Francis, which cares for Abbie and of which I am proud to be a patron, the Unicorn hosted a fundraising event that raised more than £1,400 for the hospice. Debbie has shown us that rural pubs are so often a source of friendship, support and hope for families facing the most difficult circumstances.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point about the wonderful charitable work that many of our rural pubs do. I would like to place on record my gratitude to the Black Lion in my constituency and also the Crossings Inn. The Black Lion does wonderful charity work, and the Crossings is the hub whenever there is a power cut in that particular area of Cumbria, which is sadly quite prone to them. On that point, I congratulate the Countryside Alliance on its “Rural Oscars”—both the Crossings and the Black Lion were northern finalists, and I am delighted to say that the Black Lion, as the winning pub for the north, is through to the finals. Will the hon. Gentleman share my congratulations to the Black Lion and all the other finalists on the excellent work that they do, and wish them the best of luck in the “Rural Oscars”?

Mr Mohindra: It is my absolute pleasure to do so—to be a bit cheeky, I think some of the blackouts might come a bit more frequently with this Government's policy on energy prices.

More widely across South West Hertfordshire, another constituent from South Oxhey told me about the Dick Whittington, which hosts free sandwiches on Wednesdays, a weekly OAP afternoon and a family

[Mr Mohindra]

Easter egg hunt. Other constituents in Kings Langley praised Pete, the landlord of the Saracen's Head, and his staff for always being community-focused and creating a welcoming atmosphere. Michelle told me about the Coach & Horses in Rickmansworth: for decades, the pub has put on a complimentary lunch for the Watford Mencap pancake race that she organises and that I have had the honour to open for several years now, raising vital funds for those with learning disabilities.

I have had the privilege of visiting those pubs in my pubs tour last year and hearing directly from publicans across South West Hertfordshire, but it was moving to hear from constituents about their favourite pubs. Some of the top key words mentioned were, "staff", "atmosphere", "community", "welcoming", "local" and "family", but specifically "community."

It is probably worth mentioning what is sold in the pubs. Although we speak about beer a lot, a third of drinks sold in hospitality are spirits. Many people prefer gin and tonic to a pint. Pubs and the distilleries that supply them are suffering from excise duty increases of 17% in the last three years.

I recently met Kate Nicholls from UKHospitality, whom many in this Chamber will know. She said that pubs are choosing to close on quieter days and operate shorter hours, making it more difficult to maintain exactly that community that we have been speaking about in this debate, where the pubs operate as the beating heart of our villages.

In conclusion, the Conservatives would introduce a permanent 100% business rates relief for hospitality, retail and leisure, capped at £110,000 per business, funded through £47 billion of savings by cutting the ever-increasing welfare bill and the civil service. Publicans in South West Hertfordshire have been telling me that this Government are wringing pubs for cash instead of treating them as places we need to protect. That is especially true in our rural communities, in which the word "community" so often depends on the pub.

3.2 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for securing this important and timely debate. I want to put on record that I am an officer of the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism.

In my constituency, pubs are a central part of our local economy and job creation. The rural pub is the beating heart of village life. Domestic and international tourists alike flock to our array of historical pubs and alehouses to drink a crisp pint in a picturesque setting, and it goes without saying that we locals like them very much too. I have many such pubs in my constituency—too many to name—all fantastic places to eat, drink and socialise.

That reality is threatened, however, by the monumental challenges faced by all hospitality businesses in recent years. The local pub, once a staple of every town and village, is now an endangered species. In Stratford-on-Avon treasured, long-standing pubs are on the brink of closing. In rural, often isolated areas, the village pub is the only

community infrastructure still standing after the school, the post office and the local shop have all closed. It is where quiz nights and coffee mornings are held, and where social life happens. Despite their social and economic value to the community, our rural pubs are firefighting on all fronts.

One such pub is the Golden Cross in Ardens Grafton, a cherished 18th-century, family-run pub situated in the heart of the pretty south Warwickshire countryside, within easy reach of the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, and with views of the Vale of Evesham and the Cotswolds. A more perfect setting for a profitable pub could not be imagined but, almost with the feeling of inevitability, it closed its doors for the very last time earlier this month. That has been a heartbreaking decision for the owners, who did everything they could to avoid closure; but with rising operating costs, increased wage bills, higher national insurance contributions, escalating energy costs and supplier price increases, they simply had no other choice but to say goodbye to the business that supported the livelihoods of their families and community life.

Elsewhere in my constituency it was only through the intervention of local residents and of the charity Plunkett UK that the Fox at Loxley was saved from the same fate and became a community-owned pub. When will the Government intervene to save our pubs and our wider hospitality industry? The Government's policies should be providing the platform for our pubs and hospitality businesses to thrive. The emergency pub relief has been eaten up by cuts in relief and steep increases in rateable values from April 2026. Business rates must be reviewed and made fairer.

For a Government who claim that their main objective is economic growth, it boggles the mind that they thought the way to achieve that was to increase employer national insurance contributions—a measure that disproportionately impacts hospitality, raising costs for part-time staff and hitting small and medium-sized businesses the hardest. That is why I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues have been calling on the Government to exempt hospitality small and medium-sized enterprises from the employer national insurance contributions increase, and to cut the VAT on hospitality businesses by 5%.

In other countries of Europe, the hospitality sector has 10% VAT, which means that it can grow and employ more people. Rural pubs are among the providers of first jobs for our young generations, forming the foundation of a working life where they learn so many skills each day.

I do not know what evidence the Government need to see before they believe that our pubs are at crisis point and that another U-turn is necessary. I hope that the Minister will take the Golden Cross in my constituency as firm evidence that the current situation is entirely unsustainable for our pubs and that Government intervention is needed now to save our pubs from extinction.

3.6 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) on securing this timely and important debate.

Pubs are not just places to grab a drink, as anyone who has grown up in a rural town or village knows. They are where we meet our neighbours, where people check in on us when we are having a rough time, and where a young person gets their first job and learns how to show up for work. They are woven into the fabric of this country, so when I say that the pressure on rural pubs is serious, I do not mean it lightly.

A constituent whose family runs a rural pub recently got in touch to tell me that they are on the precipice when it comes to staying afloat as a business. They are not complaining about thin margins or a bad few months; they are talking about whether they have a future at all. Rising costs, business rates, national insurance and wages—it is coming from every direction at once.

Viv has run the Lansdown Arms on Station Street in Lewes for 23 years. A few months back I invited her to Parliament to meet the Hospitality Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden). Viv told us straight out that she does not know how much longer she can keep her business going. Her rateable value has gone up by £22,250, meaning roughly an additional £1,600 that she has to find every month. So many pubs in my constituency of Lewes are in similar positions. Those crippling policies are the difference between keeping staff on or cutting their hours, and between fixing the kitchen or leaving it and hoping for the best.

We all know that, once a rural pub closes, it almost never comes back. In 2020 there were 75 pubs in my constituency; that number was down from 95 in 2011, or a 21% decrease in under 10 years. At that rate, 50 years from now there will be no pubs at all left in Lewes constituency. We are seeing that situation play out in the village of Plumpton right now. Local people are trying to buy the Fountain Inn themselves. Stuart Wallis and the Fountain Inn Community Benefit Society have pulled together nearly £300,000 in pledges. Her Majesty the Queen, who grew up nearby, has thrown her support behind the campaign—but, honestly, should people have to crowdfund to save one of the last pubs in their area? That should not be where we are.

There are bright spots; the Steamworks at Glynde station is a great example. It is in an old station building, which I was proud to play a very small part in turning into a proper local hub as well as a pub, and it shows what is possible when people are given a bit of support and a bit of breathing room. Today I will meet with the famous Harvey's Brewery, which is based in the heart of my constituency, in the town of Lewes. It is a family brewery that has been part of our county of Sussex for generations, quietly underpinning pubs, jobs and local identity in a way that is rarely talked about. From the Long Man Inn in Wilmington just down the road to the Eight Bells in Jevington, which won best pub in Sussex in the 2026 BRAVO—Brighton Restaurant Awards Vote Online—awards, the overall picture is worrying, and the Government need to take it seriously.

The Liberal Democrats are calling for an emergency VAT cut for hospitality—pubs, restaurants and venues—until April 2027. On business rates, the promised reform has not worked for a lot of pubs. In some cases it has made things worse. We need proper relief to be maintained for retail and hospitality while a genuinely fair system is designed, not a rushed patch that leaves pubs worse off than before. On national insurance, we cannot automate

a pub. We cannot replace the person behind the bar, the chef out the back, or the young person doing their first shift on a Friday night with an app or a machine. Hospitality is people-powered, and the rise in employer national insurance has landed hardest on exactly the kind of small local businesses that deserve support, not another squeeze. Pubs are also often stuck in an expensive tie that does not give them the flexibility to be competitive in the modern market.

I am not asking for anything complicated. I am asking the Government to listen—to Viv at the Lansdown Arms and to the locals, and indeed Her Majesty the Queen, trying to save the Fountain Inn in Plumpton. These places have served their communities for generations. It is time the Government returned the favour.

3.10 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to contribute to this debate under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse? I am reminded of my youth in Bath, where I first attended pubs such as the Assembly Inn—but, since the subject of today's debate is rural pubs, I shall move quickly to discussing my constituency. I want to refer in my contribution to Chickpea Group, which was founded just seven years ago by a brother and sister team, local people, with one of their school friends. They have gone from selling a few pizzas in the back of a pub in Wilton in my constituency to having now more than a dozen establishments across Hampshire, Dorset and south Wiltshire. I spoke to Jordan Davids this morning to get to the heart of what she feels about the challenges that exist in that thriving business, and she said to me that essentially it has grown and prospered because of the support of locals and despite some of the changes made in recent times.

As a former Treasury Minister, I empathise with the significant challenges involved in balancing the books. I sat in that position in years past, when lots of easy solutions were offered, with sincerity, but I recognise that sometimes there is a gap relating to the complexity in delivering and the reality on the ground. Chickpea Group has grown two to three new venues every year, and it has told me that the issue is the combination of a number of factors.

In my experience, it is very difficult for Treasury officials to evaluate the combined impact of increases in the national living wage made in one domain and one set of decision making, the threshold changes and rate increases for national insurance, then the behavioural effects of employment rights and then the ongoing challenges of energy costs, before we get into the incredibly complicated issue of business rates. However, that is the reality for the person on the ground, running one of the establishments in my constituency—the Grosvenor Arms, the Pembroke Arms, the Queen's Head, the Silver Plough and the establishments in the market square in Salisbury; they have to deal with all those things together.

The Minister will, no doubt very professionally and skilfully, explain the end of the reliefs and what the Government have put in, with a new lower multiplier, but he must also come to terms with the fact that it is in the fusion of all those factors that the individual business owner is finding great difficulty at the moment. I stand here to applaud the success of Ethan and Jordan Davids and their original business partner Tommy Tullis in

[John Glen]

moving forward through difficult times. I acknowledge that it was not all great under the previous Government, either; but we have got to the point at which we need a rational analysis of all the factors that are making life difficult for rural businesses. Colleagues have mentioned all the other factors particular to a rural location. It needs a thoughtful intervention from the Government to look at the behavioural effects and honestly deal with a problem that is not going away and is, my constituents tell me, very severe for the future prospects of their business and others like it.

3.15 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) on securing this debate. Ely and East Cambridgeshire is a very rural area, and in many of my villages the pub is the only place left for local people to gather, meet and socialise. According to the Campaign for Real Ale, we have lost or are at risk of losing 609 pubs since January this year, and 60 of those are definitely lost forever because they have been demolished or converted.

My village of Reach nearly lost its pub back in 1999. The villagers bought it, and it is now run as a fully commercial business on a long lease, with the freehold belonging to the parish council. It sits at one end of Devil's Dyke, so it has been renamed the Dyke's End. It remains a very successful and popular pub.

I regularly meet my publican network and the local CAMRA group, and they tell me about what pubs do to support community events and social interaction, combat loneliness and help with mental health, as well as providing young people with their first job and training them in communication and hospitality skills. But they are really struggling financially. National insurance, business rates and energy costs come up over and over again, which is why the Lib Dems are calling for a 5% cut on VAT for pubs, action to reduce their energy costs and the replacement of business rates.

All of our communities and publicans deserve better support, but I would like to highlight two in my constituency. The Carpenters Arms in Soham was voted CAMRA's rural pub of the year in 2024. It has an amazing array of real ales, a beautiful garden out the back and community events. It is a real part of that market town in my constituency. More recently, the Black Horse in Rampton has been voted CAMRA's East Anglia cider pub of the year 2026. It has a whole wall full of different ciders. Hon. Members would have to visit regularly to try them all. One of them is Foxhay cider, which is made in Rampton using local apples, so the pub supports small local businesses as well.

As we have heard, these small, rural pubs are also supporting the wonderful micro and small breweries, which need people who can take small amounts and get through it quickly before it goes off, as it has a shorter life than commercial beers.

Our pubs really are the hubs of our communities, but if we continue to over-tax them, we will continue to lose them, with all the impact that will have on our local

communities. Will the Minister commit to asking the Government to reduce those taxes and allow our pubs to thrive?

3.18 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for securing this debate.

The Lamb Inn in Iron Acton was built in 1690. It is believed that Mary and William of Orange stayed there. It is a real community pub that has been run by Tracey and Brendan Byrne for the last 20 years, but the Byrnes tell me they have a long list of burdens bearing down on them, including employer national insurance contributions, business rates, VAT and alcohol duty, all of which are under the direct control of this Government.

That is the reality facing rural pubs across Thornbury and Yate, and indeed the country. These are not simply places to drink; they are community anchors, spaces for the lonely, meeting points for neighbours and outlets for local breweries and farmers. Pubs in villages and hamlets without the footfall that town centre pubs enjoy, which often have higher energy costs, cannot absorb pressure the way larger operators might. When they close, nothing replaces them—the loss is permanent.

Greg and James at the Swan at Nibley have also been hit by National Highways closing a road for three years. They are looking forward to trade improving from this weekend, when the closure ends, but they say that a cut in VAT for hospitality would make a big difference to them and all pubs in our area.

The employer national insurance rises have forced publicans to make brutal choices about staffing. Those hit hardest are young people looking for their first job—the kind of formative, confidence-building experience that hospitality provides. Previously, pubs were able to employ 10 to 15 young people, working a few hours a week; now they struggle to employ three. That is a dozen NEETs for every pub lost, in more than one way.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She is right to highlight the number of NEETs in this country. We probably should not call them NEETs, because so many of them are trying to find employment, education or training. They want to cut their teeth on the opportunities that hospitality venues such as rural pubs provide. Does she agree that, if we can take some pressure off those rural pubs, they will be more than willing, ready and able to bring young people into their businesses, to give them the skills to go on and do other things? Right now, with the pressure that they face from all angles, the owners end up doing all the work themselves.

Claire Young: I agree. The Swan has been taking on apprentices, but many pubs are unable to do so because of the challenges. There is often a lack of opportunities in our villages and, with transport issues, it can be difficult to travel to places where they can be found.

On business rates, Liberal Democrats have consistently called for a fair and more proportionate system. The Government's partial climbdown—a 15% reduction on a planned hike, after sustained pressure from the House—was welcome but it went nowhere near far enough.

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): Like my hon. Friend's constituency, mine has beautiful countryside pubs but they are struggling. Pub owners have told me that this year is worse than the covid years. They face closure, despite being the only place for communities to meet in rural areas, as in many others. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must overhaul the entire business rate system to give pubs the support they need to thrive, not just barely survive?

Claire Young: I absolutely agree. I could also highlight many other anomalies that affect the wider hospitality and attraction industry.

At the Horseshoe in Chipping Sodbury, I met Matthew Lewis of the Independent Pub Alliance. The ask from the pub trade is not complicated: stability, fairness and a Government who understand that these businesses are part of the community infrastructure. I urge the Minister to meet the alliance to better understand its ask, and I would be delighted to bring Matthew to meet him. My constituents value their rural pubs, as do I and my party. Will the Government show that they do, too?

3.22 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for securing this valuable debate.

Rural pubs and breweries across the country are suffering under an excessive tax burden that is stifling investment and employment opportunities. Melksham and Devizes is home to Wadworth, a fantastic local company, which has been brewing beer in Devizes since 1875. In a recent meeting with Toby, Wadworth's managing director, the severity of the financial situation facing the hospitality industry was made clear. The reduction of the threshold for employer national insurance contributions will cost £750,000 a year across the business, which includes 129 tenanted pubs.

Yesterday, my team spoke to the landlady of one such pub, Sarah of the Three Magpies in Seend, who said that, because of the increase in the minimum wage, rising national insurance contributions and higher training costs, she had to cut back on the number of local youngsters that the pub employs during the busy summer season. To put that in perspective, last year there were 20 members of staff at the Three Magpies over the summer; this year there will be just nine. That is 11 young people missing out on an invaluable opportunity to gain the skills, knowledge and experience to set them up for future careers.

We all saw the Milburn review's stark warning that one in six young people could be classed as NEET within five years if no action is taken. We urgently need to review the impact of the burden on the hospitality industry on youth employment and ensure that we are not taxing future generations out of employment opportunities.

In addition to the national insurance challenges, UK alcohol duties are the second highest in Europe, pushing up prices for consumers and reducing profit margins for landlords. The Treasury's current trajectory will suffocate Britain's proud pub culture, with more choosing to purchase alcohol from the supermarket and drink it at home. That poses increased health risks, because at-home consumption lacks the natural boundaries of a pub setting.

At a time when the cost of utilities has skyrocketed, the Government should surely be doing far more to support the UK hospitality industry, not adding to its woes. Both Toby and Sarah told us that one of the simplest ways to support our pubs would be a VAT reduction for the industry. It would free up capital to invest in either new staff or the business itself. Similarly, duty on alcohol should be reviewed, with the duty paid on a UK pint amounting to 10 times the amount paid in Germany.

We have to recognise the important role that rural pubs play. Socially, they are the beating heart of villages and help to regulate consumption, keeping evenings merry. Economically, they can be engines of growth for rural communities, providing a springboard into employment for many young people and investing in the local area. It is time the Treasury recognised that fact and significantly increased its offering of support to ensure that we can all continue to enjoy a pint down the local.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): How about that for timekeeping? I thank every Member for staying so disciplined within the time limit.

3.26 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse.

I thank the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for securing this important debate and I thank all my colleagues who gave such excellent speeches, which set out not only how much they love their pubs, but the struggles that they face. That is the important thing. I do not want to talk about how much those pubs matter to our communities or how much fun I have had in pubs over the years, because the thing that we must focus on is the big screaming problem. We need to take it seriously. Warm words go only so far right now. We have a huge problem that is hitting pubs every day, and we have to do something about it.

I will set out how big the problem is. In the first half of last year, more than 200 pubs closed in six months. That is eight a week. A year on, things are even worse. The British Beer and Pub Association said that 161 pubs closed in the first three months of this year alone in England, Scotland and Wales. That is about 2,400 jobs. Those in rural and coastal constituencies have been among the hardest hit, and according to UKHospitality, running costs for pubs have risen by an estimated 43% since 2019. One third of hospitality businesses are operating at a loss, six in 10 have cut jobs and 63% have reduced staff hours. That is bad.

Anyone knows that pubs are much more expensive than they used to be. That is hurting customers, as fewer people can afford an evening out. When a plate of fish and chips costs 15 quid, that is hardly surprising. It is obviously not because pubs are raking it in. Sadly, quite the opposite is true. Pubs are facing many of the same pressures that are hammering small local businesses across the board: spiralling food prices, high rents, sharp business rate increases, soaring energy bills, increased employer national insurance contributions and rising wages. As an entrepreneur who spent 24 years building a business, the overall situation scares the daylights out of me. I am not envious of them in that position.

[*Charlie Maynard*]

I am grateful to Nick at the Old Crown in Faringdon and Tommy and Mike at the Three Horseshoes in Witney, who sat me down and talked through just how tough it is to run these businesses. The Minister is smiling at me because he is a Witney boy, so he understands.

Dan Tomlinson: I have spent some time in the Three Horseshoes!

Charlie Maynard: Well, there you are. It is a wonderful pub, and we need to keep it open.

This is all doubly tough for rural pubs. City pubs have a much larger catchment of potential customers who are within walking distance and not car-dependent, which matters with drink driving. Rural pubs are likely to rely on oil, liquefied petroleum gas or electric heating rather than the gas grid, and they have a small labour pool from which to hire. On top of all those hurdles, pubs in the countryside are much more significant to their communities, as they are typically the only pub in the village and a key hub in village life, as so many Members have pointed out.

In west Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, we have fought really hard to enforce making pubs assets of community value, so that everyone understands that they cannot make a quick buck from buying a pub, turning it into a house and selling it—the cost to the community is far too great. But being a community asset alone does not pay the bills. We have to make those pubs into survivable businesses.

The changes announced in last year's autumn Budget—the business rates revaluation and the removal of reductions that dated from the covid pandemic—led to extreme distress for publicans. While I recognise that the Government have subsequently acknowledged the crisis facing Britain's pubs, the package of support that they announced at the start of the year, including the 15% cut to pubs' business rates bills from April and a two-year real-terms freeze, was only a partial U-turn, and it will still leave many pubs facing a business rates increase on top of the other cost pressures that I have listed.

Jess Brown-Fuller: From April 2026, the Horse and Groom in East Ashling in my constituency saw its business rates rise from £11,000 a year to £32,000 a year. That is an additional £22,000 that it has to find out of nowhere. It is a rural business and it is busy—when someone visits the pub, it is full, thriving and buzzing—but ironically, it does not matter if more people come through the door, because the money is leaving just as quickly due to all the additional costs. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is why those businesses need the Government to step in and support them? It is not about being busy. These are not failing businesses; they are thriving businesses that cannot make the books add up at the moment.

Charlie Maynard: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. Business rates feel so unjust—so arbitrary and out of control, and appeals are virtually impossible. We all beg the Minister to put doing something about that at the top of his list, because they are so grossly unfair and really rip the heart out of running a business.

We need to pick those problems apart and work out what can be done. As announced just an hour ago by our mighty Lib Dem leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), getting back inside the EU's single market would help in a number of ways. Food costs would go down if we were back inside the single market, both in pubs and on supermarket shelves. That matters: it would allow food to be sold for less, making pubs more affordable and getting more people through the door. It would also help with recruitment, as we would not need to spend thousands and waste months on visas for key staff, many of whom are from outside the UK.

Being back inside the European single market for electricity would reduce energy bills, because we would be able to buy and sell electricity when the UK or the EU had surplus energy. I am not pretending that the move would solve everything, but those outcomes would materially help. However, there are plenty more problems that we would still need to deal with.

Mike Wood: Does the hon. Gentlemen recognise that if the level of alcohol duty is one of the big obstacles facing rural pubs, what we need to be able to do is widen the differential in the duty rates paid on beer sold on draught in pubs or licensed premises compared with bottles and cans drunk at home alone? That would be impossible if we rejoined the European Union. [*Interruption.*]

Charlie Maynard: As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) points out from a sedentary position, I am not suggesting that we rejoin the European Union.

Employer national insurance contributions are the single biggest nightmare. It is a tax before getting out of bed, before generating any revenue and before making any profit. It is a huge mistake by Labour, and a direct result of Labour Members straitjacketing themselves into foolish promises about not touching any of the big three taxes. It needs to be unwound.

Equally, we have strongly opposed the Government's changes to employer NICs at every opportunity, and we have called on them to reverse the tax rise in full. We are also calling for a consultation on a new NICs band of £5,000 to £9,100, with a lower rate to better support part-time workers, on whom the hospitality industry heavily relies. I have already covered business rates, so I will not go into them further.

On energy costs, the crisis in Iran has obviously made many costs, not least fuel prices, worse rather than better in the last few months. That is causing enormous pain. We would remove the main renewables levy from household energy bills, putting £270 back into people's pockets over 18 months. That would be funded by a new windfall tax on big commercial banks, targeting the windfall interest payments they receive from the quantitative easing-related reserves they hold at the Bank of England.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): At the weekend, I visited an excellent rural pub in my constituency—the Olive Tree in Sutton Green—and met the owner, Nigel, and his staff. They are doing a great job running a pub in very difficult times. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the Government want to reset their relationship with rural pubs and help them, they should consider cutting beer duty or increasing the draught discount?

Charlie Maynard: Absolutely.

I will finish by saying that we need to look in the round at the massive cost pressures and changing consumer habits, from lower footfall to falling discretionary spending power, which combine to put pressure on pubs. A one-off package of business rates support is one thing, but we need to get back into the single market, fix NICs, reform business rates properly, fix energy costs and give pubs and hospitality a 5% VAT break. If we do not do those things, pubs in my constituency—the land of your birth, Minister—will keep going bust. We want to avoid that.

3.36 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for securing this timely and important debate. I will certainly take him up on that pub crawl offer in the recess. It is fitting that this debate takes place on the day of the British Beer and Pub Association's annual reception, when we will have the opportunity to speak directly to people in the sector and, of course, about the small matter of the England game later.

The BBPA has set out the challenges. For every £3 spent in a pub, £1 goes straight to the Exchequer. As hon. Members have said, rural pubs are at the heart of our villages as community hubs and gathering places. They play an important role in charity, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) set out. That is certainly the case in my constituency, where more than 5,000 jobs are supported by the pubs and hospitality sector. Sadly, thanks to the Chancellor's choices, rural pubs face ever-growing pressures. When there are economic headwinds, although some are obviously beyond the Government's control, the Government should act where they can to support our pubs.

That is what the previous Government did when we introduced a new strength-based duty system, including two new reliefs: draught beer duty relief, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) campaigned avidly, and small producer relief. Our support went further. We froze alcohol duty rates in 2023, which we extended in 2024. We also provided a 75% business rates relief scheme for pubs and hospitality businesses, which was a lifeline for thousands of rural pubs that would otherwise have faced higher bills they could not meet.

That record stands in stark contrast to this Government's. Since the Chancellor's first Budget in 2024, the Government have added layer upon layer of costs to a sector that operates on tight margins, where a single bad month can put a rural pub out of business. One of the Chancellor's first decisions on business rates was to halve that 75% relief, increasing the average pub's business rates bill from £4,000 to £9,500.

Next came the removal of the 40% relief, and then the revaluation. Some pubs are now seeing their rateable value double or triple, with the BBPA warning that 5,000 of the smallest pubs are now facing business rates for the first time. What was the Government's response? A partial U-turn of a 15% relief after a significant backlash. However, only 6% of hospitality and leisure businesses will benefit, and even then, the average pub will see its rates increase by £5,300 under Labour.

Our commitment is different. The Conservatives would scrap business rates entirely for pubs up to the £110,000 cap, benefiting 250,000 businesses overall. Our cheap energy plan would reduce costs, particularly for rural pubs, and we would not proceed with the regulatory costs in the unemployment Bill, which the Government seem so keen on. Does the Minister really believe that a 15% reduction on a hike is sufficient to help these rural pubs?

Sadly, business rates are only the start. The Government also cut the employer national insurance threshold to £5,000 and hiked the rate to 15%. I know from conversations with landlords in small rural pubs employing four or five people that the extra cost is not a rounding error; it means fewer people employed in those pubs. In February, alcohol duty was increased by the retail prices index—a £400 million cost to the sector, passed on to consumers—which the chief executive of UKHospitality said would be the final straw for some pubs.

Then there is extended producer responsibility. The BBPA has warned that the pub sector will face a hit of about £50 million because glass bottles sold in venues will be considered household waste, even though pubs already pay to have their waste commercially recycled. What is the Minister's response to that double charging and to the rules that do not reflect how glass bottles in pubs are collected by the vast majority of premises? Taken together, those additional costs create the cumulative impact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) referred to, which is what matters.

Rural communities feel pub closures differently. A pub closing in a city can be replaced by one around the corner, but when a pub closes in a Norfolk village, it can be lost forever. I am grateful that the Rose and Crown in Harpley, which closed, has been reopened, but that is one positive story. There are other, less positive ones: in the first quarter of this year, 161 pubs closed—a 26% increase on the year before—and we are now on track for 500 pubs to close in the rest of this year.

A survey of 20,000 hospitality businesses—the people taking the risks; the people employing other people—tells a story: 64% plan to cut jobs and 42% will reduce their trading hours. UKHospitality and the BBPA said it together:

“Hospitality's tax burden....is suffocating the sector...more lost jobs, less investment and business closures.”

Who is paying the heaviest price? It is young people. Youth unemployment is now at 16%. For generations, a job at the local was their first job—the first foot on the ladder.

As Conservatives, we want to see those opportunities given to young people who are out of work, instead of us rejoining the single market and importing people to come and take those jobs. The Government are kicking that ladder away. National insurance hikes, business rates hikes, duty rises, EPR fees, above inflation wage rises and a potential lowering of the drink drive limit, which particularly affects rural pubs—I could go on. With this Buckaroo effect, the Government are presiding over the accelerated loss of a British institution, which is felt particularly acutely in our rural communities.

As a first step, I urge the Minister to join the all-party parliamentary beer group—he will get the same fine tie that I am wearing if he does—where he will hear about these concerns. He will hear how rising costs mean that

[James Wild]

a third of venues are running at a loss and how the Government need to change course. When we were in government, we proved that targeted support works. Rather than load on more costs, the Government should support pubs with the decisive fiscal relief that the Conservatives have committed to.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the Member in charge to wind up.

3.43 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. It is some of the most impressive I have seen in Westminster Hall, as you managed to keep this unruly lot to time. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) for securing this debate and for his contribution on the importance of rural pubs.

I represent an urban seat here in London—it is at about midday on the clock from central London—but it has a plentiful supply of green belt, and I have 12 farms in my constituency, even though it is within Greater London. So I have some understanding of the situation for rural communities. I also grew up in the constituency of the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), as was mentioned earlier. I spend every Christmas eve doing carols at the Three Horseshoes, so the owners have to look out for me this year. It is a fantastic pub. We want to make sure that pubs like that, and pubs in all the constituencies mentioned today, have the support they need.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for mentioning the pubs in his constituency, including the Golden Cross—I hope that England can get a golden cross in this evening and that we can score some goals. [Interruption.] Thank you, one and all. I thank all Members for their contributions and for sharing the stories of the businesses in their constituencies. Pubs are so important to so many communities, particularly rural communities. The Government have rural rates relief for pubs that are the only pub in villages with populations of 3,000 or less. There are a couple of thousand businesses across the country that make use of the rural rate relief scheme, which covers shops as well. I encourage all Members to make sure that local businesses are aware of that scheme, which was also in place under the previous Government. I know that it is welcomed by those businesses that use it.

I will deal with the topics that were raised in turn. We are reforming the business rates system and have implemented permanently lower multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties, such as pubs. That is funded by a high-value multiplier on the 1% of the most expensive properties, which includes large distribution warehouses used by online giants. That change will mean that the tax rate paid by the smallest businesses on the high street will have a wedge of a third compared with the tax rate paid by the online giants. That is a permanent change, not a temporary relief that will jump up and down. Those changes are worth nearly £1 billion a year for the 750,000 retail, hospitality and leisure businesses that are the lifeblood of our high streets.

Members, particularly Liberal Democrats, talked about the need for a significant change to the way that pubs are valued. As I mentioned, this Government are the first in a very long time to commission an independent review of how pubs and hotels are valued for business rates purposes. In the weeks after the Budget, we heard very clearly from businesses that they had concerns about the opaqueness of the methodology. Some who spoke about business rates for pubs mentioned the feeling of running to stand still, which Members mentioned: their turnover goes up, but then their business rates bill goes up, too. We have been clear that, as was set out in law in the 1980s, it is right for business rates to reflect rents, and we will not separate out pubs entirely. The question is: how can we best value pubs and communicate their value through the Valuation Office Agency to individual ratepayers?

Mike Wood: I am sure that one of the messages the Minister will have heard from pub owners is that the unique way that pubs are valued for business rates—through an assessment of their fair maintainable trade—means that if they invest in their own business, one of the first things that happens is they face a higher bill, long before they have started to repay the money that they invested. Will the Minister consider addressing that with a business rates holiday to provide space for businesses to recoup some of their investment before it is taken off them in business rates?

Dan Tomlinson: I love an intervention like that one. We are looking at exactly that. Last year, in a call for evidence on how we can improve the business rate system to support investment, we set out that we would look at improvement relief. At the moment, it does give a relief if a business invests, but only for a short time. That is under active review as a result of the call for evidence, where we heard that businesses were interested in the extent to which changes to improvement relief could support them and their investment decisions. I would happily receive further representations on that from Members.

Calum Miller: Further to the comments from the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), the Minister will be aware of the way in which the pub industry is dominated by major pub companies, which often own tied pubs. That has a major bearing on the leasable value of many of these properties. Many publicans in my area tell me that that drives up their rates, even though they do not have full control over that, just as they do not have full control over their purchasing. Is the Minister working with the Department for Business and Trade to review that, and is he talking to the Competition and Markets Authority to review whether the pubco structure in our country is fit for purpose?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for raising that issue; it is one that publicans in my constituency have raised with me as their MP. Of course, there are benefits to having a link with a major supplier, and I understand why many publicans choose that route, but it is clear that there are significant challenges, too. DBT has looked at this, and I am sure that conversations are ongoing with the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Kate Dearden), about what reforms could be made.

This is not my policy brief, so I do not want to speak too far out of turn, but I totally understand the issue. I will raise it personally with my hon. Friend. I have done so in the past, after being asked to by my constituents.

On a related point, guest beers and access to the bar for guest beers in tied pubs was mentioned. DBT has met the parties involved in the beer market access review to hear their evidence directly, and it is giving due consideration to all the evidence, along with input from competition policy experts. This is under active review by the Government, and we are committed to making sure that we can have a diverse and competitive beer market. On a personal level, I hope that the Government can look really closely at this so that we can improve competition and choice, but it is being led by my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax.

As has been mentioned, in January this year we went further to support pubs, with a further 15% off their business rates bills and a real-terms freeze in business rates for pubs in the next two years of this revaluation period. That support is worth £1,650 for the average pub this year. It means that three quarters of pubs are seeing their bills either fall or stay flat this year and, as a sector, pubs will pay 8% less in business rates in 2029 than before the revaluation took effect.

Moving on from business rates, the Government recognise that pubs often serve as crucial community assets, particularly in rural communities, as the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East and many others have mentioned. They support local economies and communities, provide spaces for gatherings, support those in need and foster a great sense of local pride.

Jim Shannon: The circumstances around VAT in Northern Ireland, and reduced VAT across the border, are peculiar and particular to us compared with other parts of the United Kingdom. Has the Minister had chance to speak to Colin Neill, the chief executive of Hospitality Ulster, to ascertain some of the things that he feels might be a way forward? If so, have there been discussions not only with him but with the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive?

Dan Tomlinson: I have not managed to have that conversation, but the hon. Member is very welcome to write to me, and I am happy to consider those representations. Of course, I have heard calls from Members to cut VAT for hospitality, and I am aware that there is a campaign on that matter. I just say that cutting VAT for hospitality from 20% to 10% would cost £11 billion. A range of policy ideas have been raised, all of which involve cutting tax. The right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) was right to acknowledge that there are important fiscal considerations for the Government. It is important that we manage the public finances and bring down Government borrowing, and we are forecast to have the fastest reduction in Government borrowing of any G7 economy, with our deficit falling below the G7 average for the first time in a very long time. Of course, I will listen to the representations made and the asks from campaigners, but I caution that we have to ensure that we have sufficient revenue to fund our public services in a sustainable way.

John Glen: The Minister will acknowledge the distinct combined effect of a whole range of Government decisions on the rural pubs sector. While I acknowledge the need

for fiscal responsibility, what work has he done to look at the net effect of all Government decisions, and at why a distinct solution is needed for this particular sector?

Dan Tomlinson: We consider our policies in the round, on a sector-by-sector basis, as well as looking at measures tax by tax. The right hon. Gentleman is right that, as politicians in the Treasury, it is important for us to push the civil servants to make sure that we look not just at individual measures in silos, but at them in the round.

There are some cross-cutting measures that particularly help hospitality. For example, if a hospitality business wishes to employ a young person, aged 21 or younger, as long as their wage is less than around £50,000, the business is relieved from NI. That is up to 25 years if it hires a young apprentice. Of course, the Government are always considering the impacts of their policies on sectors as a whole.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Building on what the Minister said about employment costs, we have heard about the pressures that many hospitality businesses, particularly pubs, are feeling following the reduction to the threshold on the increase of the rates. As part of the work that the Minister is undertaking to review things in the round, could he focus on the possibility of increasing the employment allowance for smaller businesses in the sector? That could be a very welcome relief for them.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Minister, please watch the time.

Dan Tomlinson: Thank you, Mrs Hobhouse. We continue to look at the impact of tax policies across sectors. The Chancellor and I will keep tax policy under review in the run-up to the Budget later this year. Let me make a couple more points before wrapping up in sufficient time for the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East to conclude.

We want to make sure that we cut the stifling red tape that is holding our pubs back across the country. At the Budget, we announced the first iteration of the national licensing policy framework. That does not sound very exciting, but it is very interesting. I have been pushing colleagues across Government on it, so that we can provide more clarity in our licensing framework to give pubs that want to open in certain ways or do certain things the flexibility to do so, to support their growth and wider economic growth.

There is the world cup game tonight, and pubs across England and Wales can soon benefit from extensions to licensing hours, as we are letting pubs stay open later for home nation games in the knockout stages. It is encouraging that Scotland did well the other day; hopefully, both teams will make it through to the knockout stages.

We are also backing pavement pints, with a commitment to make it easier for pubs to serve food and drink outside by cutting unnecessary bureaucracy. At present, many businesses are forced to reapply repeatedly for pavement licences to continue serving customers outdoors. That process can cost up to £350 each time, creating an avoidable and costly burden for businesses. I hope that the reforms we have announced will bring that to an end. Finally, in January, the Chancellor announced a

[Dan Tomlinson]

£10 million package of funding for hospitality support over three years, up from £1.5 million for one year announced last April.

We understand the need to make sure that we do all we can to support pubs and our hospitality sector, particularly in vital rural communities. I thank Members for their contributions, which I will take back with me to the Treasury in the weeks and, I should hope, months to come.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): After this debate, we all feel very thirsty for an ice-cold lemonade.

3.58 pm

Saqib Bhatti: I thank Members across the House for their moving stories of charity in their local pubs, the exciting growth stories and the stories of community. The Minister has heard very loudly the deafening calls for change. Hospitality is crying out for more breathing space. He gave a bit of hope on investment relief, but the Government need to go a lot faster and further. Not doing anything is also a decision, and it will have a huge impact, because more and more pubs will go under and unemployment will continue to rise, especially youth unemployment.

We want the Minister to be successful on economic growth. That endeavour is good for us all, but we cannot tax our way to growth. I encourage him to reflect on what has been said, and to be bold and brave. Although I will not be chanting his name tonight, I hope that he will recognise how deafening the calls for change are.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of fiscal support for rural pubs.

Mental Health: Parity of Esteem

4.1 pm

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I will call Liz Twist to move the motion and then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered parity of esteem between physical and mental health.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. In my constituency surgeries I see the devastating consequences of our failure to treat mental illness with the urgency it requires. In my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention, I hear from young people about their experiences and the impact of waiting for treatment from mental health services. Bad mental health is routinely cited as a reason for economic stagnation, low school attendance rates and an increase in benefit claimants. Long waits for mental health support are directly linked to worsening symptoms and, tragically, to spikes in self-harm and suicide attempts.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Tragically, my constituent's husband, John, took his own life in 2021 after a mental health crisis while in the care of NHS mental health services. Does the hon. Member agree that we need more Government support and funding for access to quality mental health services in rural areas? If we were losing people in this way to physical conditions, it would be a national scandal.

Liz Twist: The hon. Member might be reading my mind, because I will come on to that issue. I am sorry to hear of the death of his constituent—it is tragic.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate, and she is absolutely right to address this issue. In Northern Ireland, we have extreme mental health issues; indeed, the figure is 25% higher than it is here on the mainland. The Government have made a commitment to address the nation's physical health. Does the hon. Lady agree that they must now treat the nation's mental health equally? In doing so, they will address the emotional issues among the people we represent here.

Liz Twist: I do agree, and I will expand more on that theme.

Parity of esteem means tackling mental health with exactly the same respect, funding and clinical focus as physical conditions.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate, and I know that she is a strong advocate for mental health in her role on the APPG. In the NHS, it is vital that funding for mental health keeps pace with funding for physical health care, and the mental health investment standard has been a crucial policy in driving parity of investment. Does she agree that it is vital that the mental health investment standard is retained in the NHS?

Liz Twist: I agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of the mental health investment standard as one of the measures for securing good mental health support and for making mental health equal with physical health.

As I was saying, parity of esteem means tackling mental health with the same respect, funding and clinical focus as physical conditions. We are here today to debate that principle, which has been discussed in this place for over a decade, yet it remains unfulfilled. We have made great strides in mental health: the Mental Health Act 2025, investment in mental health support teams for schools, which were rolled out this week, and additional mental health workers. Now it is time to deliver on our manifesto commitment to

“give mental health the same attention and focus as physical health.”

We need to look at the current waiting lists for mental health support, but before I look at the figures, I remind Members that every patient waiting to access mental health support is in urgent need of support, just as those on physical health waiting lists are. Sadly, and all too often, people see their condition worsen as they wait, which can lead to extreme consequences. Furthermore, physical illnesses frequently cause profound psychological distress, yet our services treat the physical and the mental in isolation. From my experiences of working with people who have rare conditions, I know the impact that that can have.

The most recent figures show that almost 1.87 million adults and over 576,000 children and young people currently hold open referrals for mental health services. If these were patients waiting for hip replacements or cardiac care, that would dominate the national discourse. NHS England has developed waiting list targets for mental health patients after referral—the longest being four weeks after referral for access to community-based services for non-urgent mental health care—but those developed standards have never been adopted. Research shows that 12 times more patients with mental health conditions are waiting longer than 18 months for treatment, compared to those with physical conditions. The Government have rightly instructed the NHS to drive down waiting times for elective physical health care, but so far mental health services have been excluded from that ambition.

The situation for our children and young people is particularly concerning. Barnardo's says that one in five children now has a probable mental health disorder, which is double the rate in 2017. Demand has increased hugely, yet around 28% of referred children are still waiting for help, with nearly 40,000 facing unthinkable waits of over two years for treatment. We see the human cost of those delays in the lives of people like Amy, a young woman diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder. She has spent over a decade isolated at home, yet she has seen a psychiatrist only once in those 10 years. We also see it in the harrowing accounts collected by Rethink Mental Illness. One patient told Rethink that their psychosis was full-on and that an attempted suicide was the only thing that got them help. That is an unacceptable threshold for care.

I have heard of more experiences from the suicide prevention charity Body and Soul, with which I have worked. One young person it supported spent almost a year on an NHS waiting list for cognitive behavioural therapy. Just as they neared the top of the list, their health

deteriorated into a severe crisis, and they attended A&E, battling suicidal thoughts. Instead of receiving urgent intervention, they were informed that their crisis made them “too severe” for the therapy they had waited so long to access. They were removed from the waiting list entirely and, with nowhere else to turn, they attempted to end their own life. As Body and Soul rightly highlights, no patient with a life-threatening physical condition would be told they are too ill to qualify for treatment, unlike in this case.

Mental health charity Mind is calling for the development of open-access mental health support pathways, ensuring that people can seek help early and directly, without facing unnecessary referral barriers or rigid clinical thresholds. When we fail to provide accessible care, the results can be fatal. People living with severe mental illness face a premature mortality gap of 15 to 20 years, compared to the rest of the population. Closing that gap by treating mental health with the same urgency as physical health must be the baseline of our approach. Rethink Mental Illness recently found that 83% of people said their mental health deteriorated while waiting for support, and nearly a third of those whose health worsened attempted suicide. Families are making impossible choices, with some parents reporting that they are skipping meals to pay for private therapy for their children because they cannot get the help they need.

This crisis in mental health impacts on our Government's core mission to kick-start economic growth. We are seeing a rise in economic inactivity driven by long-term sickness, and poor mental health is a primary factor. The Mental Health Foundation estimates that the economic and social costs of mental health problems reach £118 billion a year. Those figures have not arisen overnight; the previous Conservative Government have much to answer for in this crisis.

We need to make sure that we maintain the emphasis on mental health. Last year, the Department of Health and Social Care reported that the proportion of NHS funding spent on mental health is expected to decline over the next two years. We need to look at that again.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): My hon. Friend was a champion for mental health long before I came to this House, and I congratulate her on securing the debate. She makes a point about spending, and I read this morning that despite 28% of cases in the NHS being related to mental health, it receives only 13% of the funding. That is at the same time that parity of esteem has been a legal requirement for over a decade. If we are serious about parity of esteem between physical and mental health, the spending must follow the rhetoric.

Liz Twist: My hon. Friend is quite right to point to those figures and to say that we need much more input into tackling that difference in funding.

As I said, the proportion of NHS funding spent on mental health is expected to decline, and we need to look again at that. That is exactly why the mental health investment standard was introduced, and why we need the planned 10-year mental health strategy, when it is published, to set out the actions we need to take to ensure that mental health has parity of esteem with physical health. It is vital that the MHIS continues to protect mental health spending until a suitable long-term funding measure is firmly in place to ensure that funding matches need.

[Liz Twist]

Three weeks ago, the interim Milburn review highlighted the unique combination of pressures faced by young people entering adulthood today, including a mental health system that cannot respond to the current level and severity of demand, a pandemic that affected their social development and an ongoing loneliness crisis.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. I know that this is a topic she understands deeply and has campaigned on for many years. She is right to highlight the Milburn review. Does she agree that part of the response has to be developing a mental health support system that is preventive, not just reactive? We see that in child and adolescent mental health, particularly in Scotland, where there are enormous waitlists. We have to tackle those, but we also have to have a system—in education, for example—where we prevent people from reaching crisis, whether in childhood or when they become adults.

Liz Twist: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, which is why I am so pleased that we set up mental health teams in schools.

We need to look at preventive measures so that we do not keep getting into this position. When people are left to languish on waiting lists, their ability to participate in the workforce collapses. We must stop waiting for people to hit rock bottom before we step in: we have to deploy preventive measures. It is simply not good enough that one in three young people must wait more than 18 months for treatment after referral.

I welcome the changes the Government have implemented, the extra investment for mental health support in schools, and the expansion of that support to 100% of schools by 2030, but I have some specific asks of the Minister, supported by mental health charities. First, will she ensure that reducing waiting times for non-urgent community mental health care is included as a specific priority in NHS planning guidance? That would send a clear message to local systems that this must be tackled alongside elective physical care.

Secondly, Mind, the mental health charity, says that reducing mental health care waiting times must be treated as a core test of parity of esteem; Rethink makes the same point. Will the Minister commit to fully rolling out the access and waiting time standards consulted on by NHS England in 2021 to ensure that emergency mental health care is provided within one hour, urgent care within four hours and community care within four weeks?

Thirdly, to help us to meet our shared ambitions for parity of esteem, will the Minister outline how we will work together to reverse the projected decline over the next two years in the proportion of NHS funding spent on mental health? Will the Government also commit to protecting the mental health investment standard until a long-term alternative funding plan is firmly in place?

Finally, the Government have outlined an ambitious shift toward neighbourhood health services. How will the Department ensure that community mental health is a central component of this roll-out, so that patients can access multidisciplinary support before they reach crisis point? We have a historic opportunity to build a

national health service that treats the mind and the body with equal respect. I look forward to the Minister's response on how we will finally deliver true parity of esteem between physical and mental health services.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate, for her long-standing commitment to improving mental health services, and for her phenomenal work in her role as chair of the APPG on suicide and self-harm prevention. I am also grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate and shared experiences from their constituencies. I am sorry to hear of John's death. Men's suicide is a huge concern; many of us, myself included, can share personal stories. We need to do much more in that space.

This debate speaks to the heart of what a modern health and care system should be. For too long, mental health has not been given the same attention, priority or esteem as physical health. That has had profound consequences for individuals, families and communities across the country. It also has significant economic impacts, as we heard from my hon. Friend, with an estimated 1.26 million 16 to 64-year-olds economically inactive due to mental health issues in 2024-25. The National Health Service Act 2006 states that health includes mental health. This Government are committed to giving mental health the same attention and focus as physical health, and ensuring that people can access timely, high-quality support, regardless of whether they are experiencing a mental or a physical health condition.

As my hon. Friend said, parity of esteem means recognising that mental and physical health are inseparable. Far too often, services have treated them as distinct issues, when in reality they are connected. Of course, many people experience mental and physical health conditions at the same time, with a cause and effect relationship that goes both ways. We know that poor mental health can increase the risk of developing physical health problems, while living with a long-term physical condition can have a significant impact on a person's mental wellbeing. People living with severe mental illness experience some of the poorest physical health outcomes in our society, and on average die 15 to 20 years earlier than the general population. That is why we are committed to improving the ways that services respond to people with co-occurring mental and physical health needs.

Care must be co-ordinated around the individual rather than around organisational boundaries, ensuring that people receive holistic support that addresses all aspects of their health and wellbeing. NHS England has developed the mental health personalised care framework, which sets out how services should assess and manage people's care in partnership with them and in collaboration with all relevant teams. That framework places particular emphasis on joined-up care, safety and risk management. It has been tested in local systems and will be published shortly. I know that will answer some of the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett, but not all of them, so I shall try to address those points in my speech.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): On wraparound care, we have a fantastic initiative in Winchester where Citizens Advice spends time with patients at Melbury Lodge, the in-patient unit, to help them deal with all their life admin, such as debt issues and money issues. It has been shown that those who receive that service have a shorter stay in hospital, are significantly less likely to be readmitted and are more likely to engage with social services once they have been discharged. Is the Minister willing to meet me and the team to discuss that initiative? For every £1 spent on it, £14.08 is saved in cost avoidance for the NHS.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the wraparound care in Winchester citizens advice bureau. We need the local health ecosystem to partner with initiatives in the voluntary or charity sector such as that one, and acknowledge their impact, fund and support them. Some may think that things such as debt are basic, but their impact on mental health cannot be overestimated. I am sure that officials will want to meet the hon. Gentleman and others to look at the landscape across the country, because there are some fantastic initiatives that we need to recognise, partner with and support.

The Government are taking action to elevate the status of mental health. For 2026-27, NHS mental health spending is forecast to increase to a record £16.1 billion, representing a real-terms increase of around £140 million compared with the previous year. Alongside that, the mental health investment standard remains in place. Integrated care boards are required to protect mental health spending in real terms over the next three years, ensuring that mental health continues to receive the investment needed to improve services and outcomes.

Investment alone is not enough. We must transform how care is delivered. That is why the 10-year health plan sets out our vision for a neighbourhood health service, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett mentioned. That is about bringing care closer to people's homes, communities creating genuinely patient-centred services, and moving away from a fragmented system that often leaves people navigating multiple services without the support they need. I hope the ICBs are engaging hon. Members in all parts of the House to feed into the design of the neighbourhood health centre model and asking about the unmet needs and service gaps in their constituencies and regions.

Danny Beales: The Minister is being kind with her time, as always. As part of our inquiry into mental health services, the Health and Social Care Committee visited the 24/7 neighbourhood mental health centre pilots and Trieste, where the model originated. They have clearly been hugely successful already. The Minister mentioned the broader neighbourhood healthcare changes; can she assure us that the learnings from those hubs will be spread across the country? Will there be a clear road map for rolling out these services to every area?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; this is a great pilot, and there are some real, huge successes. The Government must learn from the impact that the hubs will have, and of course we want to roll them out. That is why we are piloting six community-based health centres across England in Tower Hamlets, Lewisham,

Whitehaven, York, Sheffield and Birmingham. Those centres provide round-the-clock open access treatment and support for adults with severe mental health needs and work closely with primary care and community services to provide joined-up care.

All hon. Members across the House will recognise that it is not appropriate for someone who is facing crisis or poor mental health to be sat in A&E; that just exacerbates their condition and situation. The community-based health centre pilots show that a different model can work. In May, my noble Friend Baroness Merron visited the community-based mental health centre in east Birmingham, where she met staff and service users to hear directly about the service's impact. The visit demonstrated the important role that community-based mental health support has in providing earlier intervention, improving experiences of care and helping people to access support before reaching crisis point.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett is particularly interested in how the reforms will benefit her constituents. Although her constituency is not home to one of the six core or the 16 associated community-based mental health pilot sites, a range of community-based support is already available locally. Gateshead Connects hubs provide accessible community drop-in spaces that offer mental health and wellbeing support alongside practical advice on issues such as housing and finances. Residents can access NHS talking therapies through services based at Blaydon primary care centre, and community mental health support networks operating across County Durham provide peer-led groups and safe spaces for people living in and around Consett. Those local services reflect the wider direction of travel in our 10-year health plan, which will bring support closer to people's homes, strengthen community-based provision and ensure that people can access help earlier, before their needs escalate into crisis.

Significant progress has also been made in building a stronger crisis care pathway. That pathway includes the NHS 111 mental health option; the expansion of crisis cafés, about which we hear from so many hon. Members, as well as sanctuaries and crisis houses; and the roll-out of crisis tech services across England. We have completed delivery of the mental health response vehicle programme, with 88 vehicles now operating across local systems. There is now full national coverage of 24/7 mental health liaison teams in acute hospitals, and we are investing up to £120 million to increase the number of sites with mental health emergency departments to 85.

The Government have also delivered on our commitment to modernise the legal framework that underpins mental health care. The Mental Health Act 2025 brings mental health legislation into the 21st century and ensures that people receiving treatment have greater choice, autonomy and involvement in decisions about their care.

My hon. Friend says that parity of esteem must extend to children and young people, and she and many other hon. Members spoke about cases of children facing crisis. The children and young people's modern service framework is being developed and remains on track for publication in autumn 2026. The framework will support a more integrated approach to physical and mental health.

Hon. Members rightly spoke about access to services and waiting times. It is unacceptable that some people are waiting far too long to receive the mental health

[Preet Kaur Gill]

care that they need, particularly children and young people and those experiencing a mental health crisis. ICBs must do more. No child should be left waiting. The Government have delivered three years ahead of schedule our commitment to recruit an additional 8,500 mental health workers across the NHS, in the hope of easing pressures on services and improving access to care. We are also expanding NHS talking therapies and continuing the roll-out of mental health support teams in schools and colleges to achieve full national coverage by 2029. We know that we need to go further.

Adam Dance: Some residents in rural Somerset have said to me that they are waiting 18 months to receive talking therapies. That is just not good enough.

Preet Kaur Gill: I absolutely agree. That is the responsibility of the ICBs, which have been informed that they must make sure that waiting lists come down.

We know that we need to go further. We are developing a new cross-Government mental health strategy for England covering all ages, which will be published later this year. The Department is keen to hear the views of hon. Members from across the House and I am happy to share with any hon. Member details of how they can feed into that work. The strategy seeks to transform mental health support by setting out a plan to respond earlier, reducing waiting times and helping people to remain active. Importantly, it will look beyond the NHS and recognise the critical role of schools, employers, local government and the voluntary and community sector, because achieving parity of esteem is not solely the responsibility of the NHS.

This debate has highlighted both the progress made and the challenges that remain. We are under no illusion about the scale of the task, but this Government are committed to building a health and care system where mental health is treated with the same seriousness, urgency and ambition as physical health. Parity of esteem is not an aspiration; it is a necessity. Through sustained investment, service reform and a renewed focus on prevention, particularly early prevention, we are determined to make it a reality. I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett; I have a huge amount of respect and regard for her, not only because she secured this debate but because of all the work she continues to do. I know that she will continue to hold us to account. I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Abuse of Customer-facing Workers

4.30 pm

Chris Evans (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling abuse against people in customer-facing roles.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on customer service. I am proud to speak on this issue as a Co-operative party Member of Parliament. For many years, the Co-operative party has been at the forefront of tackling abuse against retail workers. It has worked closely on the issue with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. I had hoped to see a member of the union in the Public Gallery, but they have not yet made it.

The sector is encumbered by appalling levels of aggression, harassment and violence. The British Retail Consortium estimates that 1,600 such incidents take place across the UK every day; 118 of those involve physical violence, and 36 involve a weapon. Sadly, many employees have had an experience—ranging from being followed home at night to being knocked unconscious by a shopping basket—that made them fear for their life. Those facing such violence are ordinary hard-working people, often with families they are supporting at home. They deserve kindness, respect and the guarantee that they will return home safely from work.

In the light of the overwhelming pressure, the Government have begun to take steps to address the issue. The response has been fronted by the introduction of a stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker, established by the Crime and Policing Act 2026. Those found guilty of the new offence can be sent to prison for up to six months, receive an unlimited fine and be barred from entering certain shops. Alongside that measure, the Government are rolling out facial recognition technology in public spaces and using tags to carefully track the movements of serial offenders.

Those policies have been warmly welcomed by campaigners, who believe they will curb the rising violence and bring attention to retail crime. The voices of our 3 million retail workers are finally being heard, after too many years of being ignored. We cannot, however, expect those voices to fall silent any time soon. They now call on the Government to ensure that the measures introduced by the Crime and Policing Act are successful. Therefore, I ask the Minister to explain how success will be measured. What criteria will her Department use to evaluate the policy and determine whether it adequately protects retail workers?

I am also keen to hear how the Minister interprets the BRC's latest findings, which record a 20% decline in incidents of retail violence and abuse in the past year. To what extent does she believe that Government policy has contributed to that decline? Or does she believe it has come about due to heavy investment by retailers, improved staff training and closer collaboration with enforcement officials?

In addition, the police must make effective use of the stand-alone offence in order to reprimand criminals and deter would-be perpetrators. That will require a stronger police presence on high streets and at retail parks and shopping centres, as well as the continuing prioritisation of retail crime. I would be grateful if the Minister could

explain how the Government are supporting police forces across the country to achieve that. What challenges may be posed as the policing framework evolves in the next two years?

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): This is a really important debate. In Falmouth and Truro, we have a lot of abuse of shop workers in connection with shoplifting. An issue in the past has been that people think they are immune if they shoplift something worth less than £200. That is changing and the police will now arrest those people. Will my hon. Friend deal with that different way of tackling shoplifting, which often comes with a level of abuse and violence these days?

Chris Evans: I agree with my hon. Friend. One of my first jobs was working on a fruit and veg concession in Kwik Save. Kwik Save is no longer on the high street, but I still remember the scourge of shoplifting there, and the fear of approaching would-be shoplifters owing to the threat of violence. Very often these are low-level crimes. We write them off as nothing, but they can lead to larger problems in society. We need to crack down on that, and I hope the Government will give some indication on that today. I will try to develop that point as my speech goes on.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): The staff at St Michael's Co-operative in Yeovil have reported to the police more than 100 incidents of shoplifting a week, but the police presence still is not forthcoming. Do you agree that rural police forces need a lot more funding?

Chris Evans: Absolutely. We need more funding and we need more police on the beat. It is vital that we treat these cases seriously. There is a serious underlying threat of violence if would-be shoplifters are approached. Shop and retail workers need the assurance that when they call the police, they will come out and take the incident—including any threat that came with it—seriously. I particularly understand that threat in rural areas. A shop owner might decide to close down, leading to the end of what might be the last shop for miles around. It is imperative that we do something about this, particularly in rural areas.

Will the Minister meet representatives of USDAW to discuss how the Government can empower workers to speak out and report incidents of abuse? I want the measures introduced by the Government to successfully tackle retail crime. They have the potential to transform the lives not only of shop workers, but of every person in a customer-facing role. I say that because, should the Government's legislation be successful, it must be implemented across all sectors.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on customer service, I work closely with the Institute of Customer Service. The team there have campaigned tirelessly against the abuse of all frontline workers through their "Service with Respect" campaign.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. He is touching on broader sectors, and he is exactly right that this is an epidemic across public-facing and customer-facing roles. I recently went to a GP surgery where receptionists told me they deal with sometimes weekly incidents of racial abuse. They showed me windows

that had been smashed by patients who were unhappy about the service they were receiving. It feels as though there has been a cultural shift in what people deem to be acceptable behaviour towards, for example, ticket guards at stations and receptionists. Recently, a member of staff at our hospital was seriously attacked. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to send a clear message that these behaviours are not acceptable and properly resource the police to crack down on these incidents?

Chris Evans: I will develop that argument further, but there is nothing more depressing than seeing a sign saying, "Abuse of staff will not be tolerated," and we seem to see them everywhere now. That was not a sign we saw before. I think things have changed since lockdown. People seem angrier and more aggressive, but by shouting at people in these types of roles, particularly at GP surgeries, they are just stopping vital medical care getting to people who are ill and may need to be transferred to hospital. It has to stop.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being extremely generous with his time, and he is making an important speech. At a supermarket in Muirend in my constituency, there is a strong connection between other criminal actions—particularly shoplifting—and abuse of staff and sometimes physical violence towards staff. Do you agree that the UK Government must work with the Scottish Government and the police to ensure that we take a co-ordinated approach to resolving all retail-related crime, because that often leads to abuse of shop workers?

Chris Evans: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we need a co-ordinated response, including across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. At the end of the day, this abuse does not stop at the border. It does not happen because someone is Scottish or English; it happens everywhere, and we should have a co-ordinated response from the four Governments of the United Kingdom to address it. He is absolutely right to bring that up.

The "Service with Respect" campaign's proposals would encompass 60% of the UK workforce, or around 18 million people. Of those, 42% say they experienced abuse from customers in 2025, up from 36% the previous year. Although these figures are alarming, they do not come as a shock to me. My first job was in a bookmaker's. As a result, my first experience in a customer-facing role was marred by violence and constant abuse. I distinctly remember the undercurrent of aggression that ran through every shop that I worked in. That only intensified when I worked alone, and low-level verbal and physical harassment soon became the norm.

That is not isolated to betting shops in south Wales. Across the UK, 90% of staff have witnessed violence or threats of violence by at least one customer, and 75% have been told that they or their colleagues will be assaulted after leaving work—abuse is not confined to the workplace.

Before becoming an MP, I worked in a bank—for my sins—and banking is another sector in which employees routinely face abuse. They work directly with customers' finances, often assisting them in times of stress and vulnerability. That can heighten tensions, increasing the likelihood that meetings will escalate into harassment,

[Chris Evans]

intimidation and threats of violence. Indeed, data collected from UK Finance members suggested that 10,503 incidents of abuse were directed at bank and building society staff in 2024. That is nearly double the figure in the previous year.

Risks encountered by customer-facing banking staff are often overlooked in debates such as this. Given the sector's important role at the heart of our communities, I would welcome an explanation from the Minister as to why the amendment sought by UK Finance to the Crime and Policing Bill was not taken forward by the Government. That amendment would have extended the offence of assaulting a retail worker to the banking sector—a timely development amid the growing number of protests organised against banking staff.

Finally, I cannot ignore the scourge of harassment faced by public transport workers. In a survey of more than 600 RMT members, nearly two thirds had experienced customer violence in the past year. Of those, 70% agreed that abuse on public transport had increased on the year prior. For me, this is personal: both my mother and my stepfather worked on the valleys line and, sadly, abuse was part of their daily lives. In the light of the Crime and Policing Act, the RMT is campaigning with renewed vigour for the introduction of stronger legal protections for its members. At a station, a transport worker and a retail worker can be working in close proximity; nevertheless, if both are assaulted, they will be eligible for different levels of legal protection. That disparity is unacceptable.

In addition, the Scottish Government have pledged to create a stand-alone offence of assaulting a public transport worker. When that comes into force, those working on a service in Scotland will be afforded significantly stronger protections than those assaulted south of the border—even on the same train service. I hope the Minister will meet representatives of the RMT to discuss how that problem can be alleviated. If the Department requires more evidence before doing so, I urge it to create a cross-industry working group composed of transport professionals, the unions and officials from the civil service.

So far, I have highlighted the abuse faced by employees in just three sectors, but I could go on—to the call centre staff, the hospitality workers, the utility engineers or simply the caseworkers in our constituency offices—and we have yet to touch on the impacts of such abuse. The Institute of Customer Service reports that workplace abuse causes one third of employees to consider leaving their jobs and one quarter to take sick leave. When workers begin to disengage in that way, the services they provide suffer, the businesses they work for suffer and, ultimately, the communities they serve suffer. Incidents of abuse can have a debilitating effect on a workplace long after the perpetrators have fled and the immediate dangers have passed. In the most severe cases, staff are left with physical injuries, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression.

Neither the human nor the economic costs can be fully explained, let alone calculated. Although sick leave has been priced at £1 billion a year, the costs of replacing those who leave their roles, training new staff and undertaking legal proceedings push that figure far higher.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I apologise for the intervention and congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He has touched on a point that I was talking about with my colleagues from USDAW in Redditch, which is the number of members they have lost from the workforce who are now on benefits or receiving support. They were chased out of the workforce due to their experiences, because we are not protecting people in their places of work, which are often their places of home and community as well.

Chris Evans: My hon. Friend should not apologise for making an intervention like that. He is absolutely on the point there. We forget about the economic and the human costs of this. It is costing the economy billions of pounds, which could be saved if we nipped it in the bud right now. I hope the Minister will address that when she winds up the debate. If the Department deems the stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker successful, will it extend that provision to encompass all other customer-facing roles? If an answer cannot be given currently, will she set out a timetable for a review process?

We are on the brink of real, tangible change. Vital protections for people in customer-facing roles are within reach, thanks to the efforts of the Co-operative party, USDAW, the British Retail Consortium, the RMT and the Institute of Customer Service, among others. Extending the stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker to all sectors would be transformative, vastly improving the lives of millions across the country, but that will be achieved only if this Labour Government continue to stick by the side of the workers and trade unions. These groups are the backbone of our economy and the heart of our communities. They must be protected with the full force of the law. I look forward to the Minister's response. I know that she is level-headed and will come up with some good ideas. I thank her for listening.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. I also remind Members that they must always talk through the Chair. I know it is a little strange, but you have to address each other as “he” and “she”. I think I heard “you” three times.

4.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) for telling us the stories of this issue with passion, belief and conviction, as he so often does. He brought them to our attention capably today. It is always a pleasure to come along and support him. Indeed, I always do because he brings issues to the Chamber that are pertinent to me, which I will explain in relation to my constituency. It is a pleasure to see the Minister in her place—she is back as well. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), is also here again. It is almost like “Groundhog Day”, only with a different subject. We wake up at 6 o'clock when the alarm goes off, but I digress.

I always give a Northern Ireland perspective, as that is my duty here on behalf of my constituents in Strangford. When we talk about the rise of retail crime and abuse against customer-facing workers in Northern Ireland,

we are talking not about isolated incidents but about a systematic, daily onslaught against our high streets. I am sad to say it is at that level in my constituency.

The latest figures from Retailers Against Crime expose the terrifying scale of the problem. Shoplifting in Northern Ireland has surged by a staggering 33% year on year. Let us be clear: this is not petty theft, but highly organised, aggressive criminal behaviour that has caused retail financial losses to skyrocket by some 45%. Far worse, it is not just a financial toll; there is a devastating human cost, as the hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) said. That cost is the people who never thought that they would ever be threatened at their place of work, who probably know everybody in the community and who suddenly find themselves being threatened, traumatised and unable to cope. They never envisaged that as part of their job.

The retail union USDAW has revealed the deeply alarming statistic that 18% of shop workers in Northern Ireland suffered a direct physical attack over a single 12-month period. That means that nearly one in five workers went to do their job and ended up being physically assaulted. That is why this debate is incredibly helpful for our constituents and for those who want change and protection for shop workers.

My son Jamie, my eldest boy, was the manager of Shop 4 U on Newtownards High Street. He left that job some five years ago, but at that time he was the manager. It is a very big shop with an off-licence at the end of it. One night, as so often happened at that time, a guy came in, probably high on drugs. He had a knife in his hand and threatened Jamie. Jamie was right to step back and say, "Look, you go ahead." Why would someone throw themselves in front of somebody with a knife who is perhaps unable to understand their pleas, or who is aggressive enough to ignore those pleas, whatever they may be? Why would someone do that if it is only for a bottle of whisky or gin or a dozen beers? A life is worth more than that. On that occasion they had CCTV in the shop, so they were able to chase up the individual and see where they came from.

My point is that the traumatic effect that that has on people will differ from person to person, character to character and personality to personality. Jamie was probably able to get over it because he is a strong young man. Somebody else who is threatened by a person with a knife may not be able to get over it. What about the ladies in the shop, for instance? What if Jamie had not been there as the manager of the store? I often think of how they would have responded. We look back at those things.

Furthermore, some 60% of all violent incidents, threats and verbal tirades directed at local shop staff are triggered by confronting shoplifters. Physical abuse is one thing, but verbal abuse can be almost as terrifying because of the aggression behind it. Our retail staff have been forced on to the frontline. It used to be a case of, "Let's go and do me six hours, four hours, eight hours in the shop and fill the shelves, speak to the people, look after the customers." But now they get threatened and, all of a sudden, their job is not the job they signed up for. They face everything from physical intimidation to the terrifying threat of ammonia and acid attacks. Bleach is used against them as well.

Our official Police Service of Northern Ireland data shows an overall decrease of 2.3% in standard police logs, which tells us a dangerous truth. It is one that the

hon. Member for Caerphilly mentioned and he is right. That is also my perception in my constituency. It proves there is a massive under-reporting gap: every verbal or physical attack on a shop worker might not be reported to the police. If it is reported to the police, is there a reaction? That is what the hon. Gentleman referred to. Shop workers endure verbal abuse and threats every single day, but they do not report it because they feel the system has abandoned them. If they feel the system has abandoned them, the system has to change.

We cannot look at the numbers and do nothing. Our independent shops have been forced to absorb a massive crime tax just to pay for security. I am the oldest person in this Chamber—I suspect by far—and I can remember going to the shops down the road and there was not a security man in the shop. There was never any need to have a security person in the shop. There was no need for CCTV cameras. A police van was always available, by the way. It was never too far away. It was always on the beat, but things have changed.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will join me in commending the work that organisations such as the Harrogate business improvement district do to support the town centre in Harrogate. It has recently hired a business crime officer who has 30 years' experience in policing. Having organisations that connect the shops, the town centre, the police and the council, keeping everyone looped together, adds real value to our communities. It helps keep them safe and reduces crime and threats to shop workers.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman always brings something pertinent to the debate, so I thank him for that. That is a positive step forward and probably one of the things that the Minister will respond to when she concludes.

We are talking about absorbing a crime tax just to pay for security when staff live in fear. They need to know that abuse is not acceptable, whether they are paid a minimum wage or £1 million a year. A job should never determine the abuse that someone has. We need to make that point very clear today.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly for securing the debate. I look forward to the Minister's contribution and to the contributions of the two shadow spokespersons and the speakers who follow me.

4.52 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) on securing this debate and on the passionate way in which he laid out the case. The Crime and Policing Act was a key moment in our journey to a society in which the job that we do does not determine how we are treated at work, and retail workers across my constituency are now safer, thanks to the actions of this Government and the campaigning by the Co-operative party and USDAW in particular.

Before I was elected, I went to visit Central Co-op workers in my constituency in Stretton, Horninglow and Winshill, and I was shocked by what I heard. Pretty much every worker that I spoke to had faced verbal or

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physical abuse of some kind simply for doing their job. They were proud, hard-working people simply going out to do a job and provide for their family.

Sexism and racism makes women workers and workers of colour even more vulnerable. Probably the most horrific story I heard when I spoke to those workers was about a female colleague doused in liquid and threatened with a lighter. I cannot imagine what that would have been like for her in the moment and then reflecting on it afterwards. But in true brave spirit, she was back at work within days. Often, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly said, the trauma of that abuse goes home with people. It does not just affect them and their mood; their wider family are impacted, too. That abuse is an assault on their pride in who they are.

Often, retail workers, particularly those who work in shops, will live local to where they work. I heard one case of a female shop worker who was verbally assaulted and then saw the person who had committed that abuse as she was walking home in her uniform. Due to this Labour Government making assault against retail workers a specific offence, I can say to those people I met, “We have heard you. We have acted.”

It must be noted that the law change did not include verbal abuse or wider customer-facing roles, so that is why I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly on securing this debate and on the points that he has made. I cannot pretend that things will change just because the law has changed—sadly, they will not. The fact that we have to put up signs in shops and hospitals and on our buses asking people to be kind shows that, as a society, the basic respect that we had for each other has broken down. I hope that we can restore that.

The change in the law was, however, a clear statement that assault of retail workers will not be tolerated. We have repealed the appalling Tory law that meant that those stealing items under £200 were effectively decriminalised.

Danny Beales: A frustration I have heard about local enforcement is that even if the issues are reported—they are often not, unfortunately, because people give up—and the police come out, and an arrest is made for theft, abuse or the other things we are discussing today, the perpetrator can be back on the street that day, often committing the same sorts of offences, because they are not held in custody. They will wait a long time to go to court, and prisons are in a dire state after 14 years of Tory government left us with no places.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to think about alternative forms of punishment and deterrence? That could be banning orders from town centres, banning orders from the transport system of people who persistently dodge fares and assault and abuse staff, and other forms of deterrent to stop these behaviours blighting our town centres and public services.

Jacob Collier: My hon. Friend makes a great point. I have often heard about repeat offenders and the same sort of people coming into the shop. Workers often have to protect themselves from individuals who they know are going to commit a criminal act.

Unfortunately, abuse against customer-facing workers happens everywhere in society. I have heard that from workers across different sectors of our economy. I should probably declare my membership of Unison and the GMB union. I recently met GMB Swissport members at East Midlands airport about their “Airport Workers Against Abuse” campaign. I heard their shocking stories about the physical attacks and verbal abuse they suffer in terminals. There is a difference between how people can be policed landside versus airside. As there are fewer protections airside, workers are more vulnerable. Travelling abroad is often a very stressful time, but there is no excuse to take it out on the hard-working men and women who get us to where we want to be. The Government and the airports should listen to the GMB’s campaign and introduce stricter penalties to protect the dignity of our airport workers.

Those working in customer-facing roles in my constituency, whether in a pub or a nursery or driving a bus, deserve to have dignity at work and the right to do their job without facing abuse. It is on us to put in place the conditions to make sure that happens.

4.59 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) on securing this debate and on his excellent opening remarks.

Abuse against people in customer-facing roles is always unacceptable. No one should ever have to face abuse in their place of work. The Liberal Democrats were supportive of the measures included in the recent Crime and Policing Act 2026, which introduced the specific recording of offences of assault against retail workers. After years of increasing violence and abuse experienced by those working in retail and other frontline work, the introduction of this offence should act as a strong deterrent against abuse and allow data on such abuse to be more reliably recorded.

Although there has been an improvement on the legal deterrence front and in the collection of data, we need greater enforcement to ensure that offenders are reprimanded for committing acts of abuse. After a decade of cuts to police numbers and resources, people want a return to having a visible police presence in their communities, focusing on preventing and solving crime. Restoring a permanent police presence on our local high streets is the most effective way to deter rogue operators and give people confidence to report illicit behaviour.

This Labour Government promised the public 13,000 more police officers. Instead, officer numbers have fallen. By March this year, there were 4,000 fewer frontline officers than the year before. Over the past 18 months, we have seen not only a reduction of force numbers, but a decline in policing resources. In my Richmond Park constituency, there is now no 24/7 police front counter in the whole of Richmond borough, and the Royal Parks police force has been disbanded, increasing pressure on neighbourhood teams. Just this week, police in Richmond Park had to make an operational decision about whether to provide a presence by Teddington Lock to deter children from jumping off the lock, which puts them at risk of drowning, or to police bonfires,

drug use and antisocial behaviour on Richmond Green. I do not envy the officers who have to make those operational decisions, but the lack of funding has put our local force in that position.

What has been most noticeable in our community is the rise of retail crime. The Liberal Democrats have called on the Government to do more to address this.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Domestic abuse survivors who work in retail roles are at particular risk in that their perpetrators often know exactly where they are, which till they might be working at and what their shift patterns are. The perpetrators can continue to perpetrate abuse even while their victim or survivor is at work. Does my hon. Friend believe that the Government need to go even further to provide protections to specifically protect domestic abuse survivors in retail roles?

Sarah Olney: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention and for all his work. He speaks so powerfully for the victims of domestic abuse, and I thank him for taking this opportunity to raise the issue. I hope that the Minister has heard what he said, because it is an extremely serious point. We should have the victims of domestic abuse at the front of our minds when we think about this issue and the particular risk that it creates for them.

Shoplifting not only causes shops to lose out on sales, with the costs then passed on to paying customers, but means that staff members, often young people, are met with the possible threat of violence. Shoplifting has risen by a staggering 48% in England and Wales over the past five years. Every time I meet the owner of a local store, I am told that shoplifting has effectively become decriminalised. Thieves do not feel the threat of reprisal, and staff do not feel protected by law enforcement. It is incredibly frustrating that the Government have not connected the dots between increased fear and crime and the stripping back of our police forces' ability to do their jobs.

That is why the Liberal Democrats have been calling for more money for CCTV through loans of up to £6,500 to small independent convenience stores so that they can install modern CCTV to deter shoplifting and make our high streets safer. The installation of CCTV would act as a deterrent against shoplifting and abuse against staff, save money for police forces by preventing such crimes in the first place, and allow them to conclude investigations more quickly because of a stronger evidence base.

Shop owners and staff members are often told by the police that it is not a cost-effective use of resources to follow up on relatively minor thefts, but to every local business and paying customer it is. I urge the Government to recognise the detrimental impact that shoplifting is having on our society and to take this issue seriously.

Tom Gordon: Does my hon. Friend agree that police powers could be beefed up through the use of public spaces protection orders? People in customer-facing roles often end up with abuse from people who might have been drinking. Does she agree that we should look at how those powers could be better used, given that communities, organisations, councils and businesses want them to be enforced?

Sarah Olney: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. We could be doing so much more, not just through the police but across society in different ways, to increase safety on our high streets. People need to know that they are backed up by the police, and that they have a strong and effective police presence to turn to when they have an issue.

The vast majority of abuse that customer-facing staff receive on a day-to-day basis may not come under the authority of the police. That is especially relevant for female members of staff, who will experience crude comments, unsolicited flirting and, at times, explicit harassment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) raised. Having to work under such conditions can cause anxiety in staff members and make them feel extremely uncomfortable at work. A study by Unite found that 56% of women in the workplace have been subject to sexually offensive jokes, 43% have been inappropriately touched and 25% have experienced sexual harassment. In addition, a TUC survey found that 30% of women who experience harassment do not report it to their employer. This goes so much further than just abuse for customer-facing staff; it speaks to a culture across some workplaces in the UK, which we need a much more fundamental approach to root out and change.

5.5 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) on securing the debate.

As others have noted, the abuse faced by many people working in customer-facing roles is deeply distressing. We should all be concerned by the rise in abuse, threats and physical assault against people just trying to do their jobs. The trend cannot be divorced from the rise in so-called petty crime, including shoplifting, as several hon. Members have highlighted. According to a survey conducted by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, in cases where retail staff faced abuse, 70% of incidents had been triggered by shoplifting. Of those incidents, two thirds were related to drug addiction or suspected drug addiction.

Failing to clamp down on crimes such as shoplifting is not cost-free. It does not just make life terrible for the businesses that are the direct victims of the theft; it puts retail workers and the public at risk. The kind of people who are engaged in habitual shoplifting are often involved in other types of crime, and they represent a very real danger to us all. Unfortunately, under this Government's Sentencing Act 2026, up to 12,000 of this country's most prolific shoplifters will avoid jail altogether, leaving them free to not just continue stealing but abuse and harass retail workers.

While prolific offenders walk free, law-abiding people face ever more rules and restrictions, and ever greater suspicion from the authorities. Instead of going after the hyper-prolific offenders who drive such a disproportionate amount of crime in this country, the state responds by making life harder for ordinary people. Is it any wonder that so many people now feel that they are living under something called anarcho-tyranny? In such circumstances, the state is either unable or unwilling to control violent crime, theft and genuine disorder. While failing to enforce

[Katie Lam]

the law against genuine criminals, the state vigorously and inflexibly enforces a mountain of complex, often seemingly arbitrary rules on ordinary people who work hard, pay their taxes and do the right thing.

That can produce infuriating and ludicrous outcomes. Shop Around the Clock, a fabulous store in St Michaels in my constituency, is plagued by shoplifting. Suki, who manages the business, very kindly had me in for a morning shift last Friday. He told me that, despite years of reporting regular shoplifting to the police, the only time they had visited was to let him know that the pictures he had put up of regular thieves violated GDPR. He also walked me through his report to the police of the latest shoplifting incident he had suffered that Tuesday. The process was slow and repetitive—easily 10 times as long as it needed to be. For small business owners like Suki, who are already doing a million things at once, it is often hard to justify that wasted time. Especially given advances in technology, this seems a crazy way to insist that people record crimes.

This is the experience of far too many people in Britain today. They feel their own behaviour is restricted, and they meet with resistance and hassle when they engage with the authorities, yet they see crime and disorder go unpunished. If they try to do something to stop the crime themselves, they are crushed. The rise in attacks against retail workers is one terrible manifestation of this, but there are many.

This is clearly completely unfair but, fortunately, there is a solution. Speak to any member of the British public and they will be able to tell you exactly what to do: spend less time on policing speech and filling out paperwork and more time on catching thieves; give police forces the tools they need to tackle these crimes; and, when we catch a career criminal, make sure that they serve a proper prison sentence. Put simply, we can fix this problem by pursuing criminals, enforcing the law and letting law-abiding people get on with their lives. Given that so much of this abuse is triggered by shoplifting, and given how onerous the process of reporting it is, my main, specific question to the Minister is this: what kind of conversations has she had about changing the online reporting system, particularly in the light of technology innovations that could make it so much simpler and faster?

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I call the Minister. You have until about 5.30 pm; please leave a little time for the Member in charge to wind up.

5.9 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): Thank you, Mrs Hobhouse. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. Members might be pleased to know that I probably will not take all the time available to me—perhaps I will give them a few minutes of their life back to do something else.

I want to start by saying what an important debate this is. My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) is absolutely right to bring the issue of the abuse of shop workers to this place. It is enormously important, and many Members of Parliament have campaigned for many years for the legislation that we

have just passed, alongside the incredible work of the Co-op, USDAW and others. When I was shadow Policing Minister, I remember introducing a similar amendment to Government legislation and debating it with the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who was the Policing Minister at the time. He argued that there was no need for these measures, because abuse of a shop worker is an aggravating factor, and that the evidence did not support their introduction. That argument was wrong, and I am really pleased that we have passed this law.

It was the right thing to do for a number of reasons. First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly said throughout his speech, we need to make sure we are implementing the legislation and seeing results, and that we use it now that we have it. It sends a powerful message that we in this place see and understand this behaviour, and that we will not tolerate it any more. It is important that we say that loud and clear.

The speeches made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) were really important and spoke to the nub of the problem. The hon. Member for Strangford said that people feel that the system has abandoned them, and that is right. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), also spoke about the way in which people who live by the rules feel that everybody else seems to be getting away with not living by the rules. That has wider consequences for our society than just the problem of retail crime and the abuse of shop workers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter spoke of a very serious case in which somebody was doused with liquid and then threatened with being set on fire. That is horrific. The abuse that shop workers receive, which was mentioned by the spokesperson for the Lib Dems, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), ranges from those very extreme cases to the abuse that people get every day. I remember talking to shop workers at my local Co-op about the abuse they faced. Someone said, “Well, it’s just part of the job.” No, it is not. It needs to stop and we need to make sure we are doing all the right things.

Tom Gordon: The Minister does fantastic work in her area. Will she join me in commending the work that organisations and charities such as Victim Support do to help people who find themselves in the horrendous situation that she outlined and that we have heard about from Members across the Chamber? Will she elaborate on the support she and her colleagues in other Departments give to people who work in shops and other customer-facing roles?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Member is right that Victim Support and other organisations give really important support to people in such situations. Across different Departments, we all have a role to play in trying to stop this abuse and the retail crime that goes alongside so much of it. I will go into that in more detail.

First, I will set out the statistics on shop theft, which drives a lot of the abuse that we see and is often perpetrated by prolific offenders. In the year before we came to power, there was a 30% rise in shop theft, and in the past year there has been a 1% fall. A 1% fall does not sound great, but when we compare it with a 30% rise,

it shows that we are completely turning the tide. I know that members of the public will say, “Well, that’s just statistics; that’s not my experience,” and it will take us a while to make people feel safer and tackle the huge problem that we still have. I want to reassure Members that—my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly asked about this—because of the policing interventions that we have done and because of what a lot of shops have done, we are beginning to turn the tide on shop theft. That is important.

A lot of the larger retailers admittedly have more funds to do this, but the Co-operative Group, for example, has done incredible things to design out crime in its shops, and it has seen the biggest fall compared with other retailers. Lots of others are doing interesting things, whether that is having live facial recognition; designing out the ability for people to get behind the shop counter and steal some of the alcohol that might be there; having cameras on shop workers; or having security people. All those things are undoubtedly making a difference, and so is the ability of our police to respond.

We have been clear with our wonderful police that we want them in our neighbourhoods tackling this type of crime. We have already seen over 3,000 more police in our neighbourhoods, and we have committed to having 13,000. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson talked about police numbers. The previous Government cut 20,000 police and then recruited 20,000 police, but they put 12,000 of them behind desks. Our measure is not about exact numbers—we want 13,000 more police in our communities, and we want outcomes. That is what we are driving towards. There are other things that we can do and that we are doing in this space that will also make a difference, and we will keep striving to do more.

The hon. Member for Weald of Kent talked about technology, databases and wanting to cut bureaucracy for our police. I 100% agree with that. Last week, we launched PoliceAI with £75 million of funding to use AI to take away some of the nonsense bureaucracy that our police have to do. I have given it two first tasks in relation to outward-facing technology: one is to tackle tool theft and the other is to tackle retail crime. There are lots of quite good systems that different parts of the country are using to more easily record shop theft and upload imagery and CCTV. We want to design AI that can read across all of those so that the police can easily see and bring together who the prolific offenders are.

There was talk of prolific offenders in this debate, and it is true that a small cohort of people are responsible for a large amount of retail crime and abuse against shop workers. They are often people with very complex needs—they will have an addiction; they will be drug addicts or alcoholics—and we in the Home Office are designing a programme to target those prolific offenders.

Some areas do that already, and people have been doing it increasingly, but there are things that we can put in place to help us really target that prolific cohort, whether that is providing the support they need to get into treatment or more interventions to make sure they cannot do what they want to. My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) said that we should be doing more to use things like orders to stop people coming into a community, or tagging. I think we need to be using all of those more, and we are designing a programme of work to do exactly that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly asked if I would meet USDAW, and I am always very happy to do that. I have done so many times, but it is probably timely that I meet it again now that the Crime and Policing Act has been passed. He also asked how we would measure progress. We will measure what happens with the absolute numbers and the reporting of these issues, and whether people are reporting—whether that is through USDAW or our links in the retail sector. We will measure it through the crime statistics and what is happening as a result.

My hon. Friend also asked, importantly, why the provision is defined as being just about shop workers and why we did not make it wider to include transport workers or people who work in banks, for example. We deliberately kept it narrow to avoid any ambiguity in the courts. I know people disagree with that, but we just have to agree to disagree; that is what we have done in the legislation. However, if the legislation makes a marked difference, which we hope it will, of course we will need to look at whether the provision should apply elsewhere.

I have met representatives from banks, and I have had conversations about the particular challenges they have. They face the problem of abuse—I do not want to deny that—but the frequent protests they are increasingly experiencing are a slightly different issue, and one that we are talking to them about to try to support them through.

With the number of police in our communities going up; with the new rule that all thefts under £200 have to be investigated; with the new tech, IT and AI that can help us read across all these different systems; with the law in place; with the police giving a strong message that we want to see people punished for abusing shop workers; and with the work that we are beginning to do on prolific offenders, hopefully we will increasingly see results. The fundamental point that my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly and everybody here has made is that we cannot accept this as normal behaviour—it is not. We will not tolerate it, and we will keep working until we tackle it.

Tom Gordon: I thank the Minister for being generous with her time. Will she comment on something that I have witnessed on social media: the filming of shop workers in customer-facing roles to generate content and clicks? That is pervasive and nasty in nature. Does the Minister have any thoughts on what the Government could do to tackle that issue?

Sarah Jones: There is a wider question about social media and how it sometimes drives these kinds of behaviours. People are almost goading each other to do more extreme activities—I have heard about that in a number of areas. This week, I was told about a new trend that I find utterly extraordinary: people are breaking into houses, filming someone asleep, and then leaving and putting that on social media. That is horrific. They do not take anything or do anything, but they are basically competing with each other to do that. Clearly, we are having a national debate, and the Government have taken action, about the issue of under-16s, but there is a much bigger debate still to have about social media and how it is driving these kinds of behaviours.

Having said that I would be brief, I seem not to have been as brief as I expected. I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly on his powerful

[Sarah Jones]

speech and on securing this really good debate. He should be assured that the Government are on the side of people who just want to do their job, and who should not be abused while they are doing that job. That is not acceptable, and we will keep doing what we can.

5.22 pm

Chris Evans: Again, I pay tribute to the Co-operative party, USDAW, the British Retail Consortium, the Institute of Customer Service and all the others who have worked so tirelessly and diligently to keep this issue on the political radar. The work they are doing is really important.

I also pay tribute to everybody who spoke in this debate, including the Front-Bench spokespeople for the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam). It has been proved again that even though we may disagree about our methods, we all ultimately want the same thing: for people to go about their work in a safe manner and enjoy their jobs like they used to.

I also pay tribute to the Minister. I knew I would end up saying this, but the Minister really gets this issue, and I was encouraged by her comments. In particular, I am pleased that she has agreed to meet USDAW—I know

she has already met it and the RMT. I know that the Crime and Policing Act is relatively new, as it passed only this year, and we have to see how it works out. I genuinely hope that it is successful, and I think it will be, but for legislation to be successful, it has to be properly enforced. I hope that will continue to happen across the country with various police forces. I obviously understand that the Minister has to see how the law pans out, but I am pleased that she has committed to looking again, at some point in the future, at bank staff and transport workers, who are also being abused on a daily basis.

I thank everybody who took part in this worthwhile debate. It has been harrowing in parts to listen to some of the examples. We have quoted an awful lot of statistics in this debate—we do in this place generally—but behind those statistics are families sending somebody out to work who will unfortunately be in the line of danger. I am hopeful that, with this legislation, we can bring about the change that is desperately needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling abuse against people in customer-facing roles.

5.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 17 June 2026

CABINET OFFICE

Insourcing

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): A priority for this Government is reforming procurement and how we deliver our public services. For too long, successive Governments have been, at best, ambivalent about whether services are delivered in-house and, at worst, have maintained a policy that is essentially “outsourcing by default”.

We are drawing a line under that approach. A core principle of our reforms is that the way we deliver public services should help to build a fairer economy and to rebuild the capacity of the state.

As part of this, I am proud to introduce the public interest test. Under this new approach, all Government Departments will formally assess whether their services can be delivered more effectively in-house. If not, a clear explanation should be published to ensure transparency and justify any decision to outsource.

We also recognise that decades of outsourcing have eroded the state’s capability to deliver a wave of insourcing. So this Government are taking steps to rebuild these required competencies. That is why Departments will, for the first time, develop and publish robust insourcing strategies.

These medium-term road maps will set out exactly how they plan to develop the skills and capacity needed to make insourcing a reality. We will first embed this approach across Government Departments, but our ambition spans the entire public sector. It is our intention that, over time, all public services—no matter where they are delivered—are evaluated with the same rigour, accountability, and commitment to public value.

To lead by example and put the principles into practice, the Cabinet Office will look to bring its building management services, including cleaning and security staff, back in-house as soon as possible, subject to completing a public interest test. This will begin when current contracts end in 2028.

Applying the test to these services will cover contracts across 83 Government buildings—including Downing Street and the Cabinet Office—and would mean the Government opting to take control of frontline workplace services to strengthen our capability and operational security while securing value for money.

I am proud of the steps this Government are taking to rebuild our public services and return them to public hands.

[HCWS120]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Market: Consumer Protection

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): We are acting today to restore consumer confidence in the

energy sector and ensure that failures in Government insulation schemes can never happen again.

The 2025 National Audit Office report into the failures of the ECO4 and GBIS schemes that we inherited from the previous Government: thousands of faulty installations, terrible damage to peoples’ properties, and blameless families who had signed up to a Government scheme and were forced to live in damp and sometimes unsafe conditions as a consequence.

I promised, when I first updated the House on our response, that it would never happen again.

As we embark on the Government’s warm homes plan—the biggest programme of home upgrades in British history—we must ensure that people have confidence when retrofitting and upgrading their homes.

Homeowners and landlords need to trust that upgrading their buildings will deliver the right results and not leave them facing further issues down the line. Those faulty installations did not just damage people’s properties, they eroded trust and confidence in the entire market. In October, we set out three principles for reform of consumer protection that have guided our proposals:

Work should be right first time. Despite the unacceptable failures uncovered in ECO4 and GBIS, in most cases work on Government schemes is safe and carried out to a high standard. Consumers must be able to trust that work will be done right the first time in all but the rarest circumstances.

Simplicity. People should not be expected to navigate a variety of organisations when they want to make changes to improve their homes. The installation process for low-carbon heating and energy-efficient home upgrades will be clear and straightforward.

Swift remediation and a straightforward process for redress. In those rare cases where things do go wrong, there must be clear lines of accountability, so that consumers are guaranteed to get any problems fixed quickly.

We are taking this chance to completely overhaul the consumer protection landscape and fundamentally reset a system that simply has not worked for people across the country.

Today we are launching a consultation on consumer protection, seeking views on how we can simplify the current fragmented landscape and establish a single, accessible, end-to-end consumer protection service for home upgrades, that means stronger central oversight, shifting the system towards prevention, and clearer lines of accountability across Government and industry.

This will have powers to enforce better service through contracts that hold installers and delivery partners to account, including bans from working on Government schemes if they do not meet high standards.

This will protect people in the future, but we must also support people who had faulty solid wall insulation fitted during ECO4 and GBIS. We are doing that in three ways.

First, at the end of last year we launched our “Find and Fix” programme to identify and offer a full house audit to the families who had external wall insulation installed under ECO4 and GBIS.

We have now contacted over 10,000 properties and arranged over 5,000 audits.

And we want to help all affected households to access an audit as quickly as possible. TrustMark will continue to contact households, and I would encourage everyone who hears from them to take up the offer of a free audit.

I have been clear that the families who have suffered from these poor installations should not be the ones to pick up the bill. It is the industry's responsibility to put this right and help affected families.

Secondly, in cases where the installer that fitted the faulty installation is no longer trading and the guarantee is missing, fraudulent or cancelled, the National Energy Foundation will be contacting homeowners and arranging remediation of both internal and external wall insulation fitted under ECO4 and GBIS.

Eligible homes will be identified through audits, with remediation action in recipient homes taking place as quickly as they can make that happen.

Thirdly, in the rare instances where the cost of damage from faulty ECO4 and GBIS solid wall insulations exceeds the £20,000 limit covered by a valid guarantee, we are working with delivery partners on the right solutions.

I can announce today that the Installation Assurance Authority will now cover the cost of repairs up to £25,000 where these are within the terms of the original, still-valid IAA guarantee. We will continue to work on solutions for the remaining cases, and I hope that other guarantee providers will follow the IAA's lead.

Families who were affected should first contact the installer who carried out the installation, and where the installer is no longer trading or unable to remedy damages, they can contact their guarantee provider to initiate a claim.

ECO4 and GBIS has some of the highest levels of non-compliance that Government have seen, but other issues have been brought to the Department's attention. In particular, many households who had spray foam installed have found they have encountered problems when selling their home. I have held extensive talks with the spray foam industry to support homeowners that have struggled to sell or been targeted by rogue removal companies. Independent advice has been published online by the Property Care Association, and we will keep working with mortgage lenders to ensure they can be flexible when lending to those affected.

A range of major lenders are already on side and have confirmed that they will not take a blanket approach to houses with spray foam, including Nationwide, Lloyds, Santander and Barclays, and I am planning a follow-up roundtable with the sector later this summer.

Finally, ensuring a fair deal for consumers in the energy market remains a priority for the Government. Today we are also responding to our consultation on strengthening protections in the energy supply market, enhancing the powers of the Energy Ombudsman and making it easier for consumers to access support when they have a complaint about their retail supplier. We want to give the ombudsman stronger powers, including the ability to issue a penalty fee that will end up as compensation for consumers, to enforce decisions and hold suppliers to account.

Families will have clearer routes to pursue justice through the courts, and we are shortening the complaints process and making automatic referral to the ombudsman easier so that people are no longer stuck in limbo waiting for their case to be escalated.

If we want to change this country, restore faith in Government's ability to improve lives and disrupt a status quo that is simply not good enough for so many people, then we need to learn from the mistakes of the past.

We need to rebuild confidence and take people with us, and we need to ensure that failures like those we saw on the ECO4 and GBIS schemes can never happen again.

This is our chance to build an energy sector that truly works for working people, and that is the message behind the measures I have set out today.

[HCWS121]

TRANSPORT

Automated Vehicles: Consultation on Draft Statement of Safety Principles

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I would like to provide the House with a further update on the progress the Government have made in implementing the Automated Vehicles Act 2024.

Today the Government are publishing their analysis of responses to last year's call for evidence on the statement of safety principles. The call for evidence sought views on how the statement of safety principles could be used, described and measured.

Alongside this publication, the Government are launching a statutory consultation on the draft statement of safety principles. This public consultation will seek views from organisations representing road users, road safety groups, and self-driving vehicle businesses, in line with the requirements set out in section 2(3) of the AV Act 2024. The consultation will be open until September 2026. Subject to the outcome of the consultation, the statutory statement of safety principles for AVs will be laid before Parliament next year for approval.

Safety sits at the heart of the AV regulatory framework, ensuring that AVs are safe to use on Great Britain's roads and remain safe throughout their deployment. A cornerstone of this framework is the statutory statement of safety principles, which will guide the Secretary of State in decisions on whether an AV can be deployed on Great Britain's roads, and in the ongoing monitoring of authorised AVs.

There are also principles relating to behaviours specific to an AV, such as operating only within their authorised domain. In addition, the Secretary of State may have regard to the statement of safety principles when deciding whether the in-use regulator should investigate an incident, and when considering whether to impose sanctions and the appropriate extent of any such sanctions.

The statement of safety principles will provide guidance on the behaviours that the Secretary of State expects to see from vehicles in meeting the self-driving test of travelling safely and autonomously. Consistent with the AV Act 2024 and international United Nations Economic Commission for Europe regulations, the safety standard underpinning the statement of safety principles is that AVs should achieve a level of safety equivalent to at least that of careful and competent human drivers.

To achieve this, the draft principles are based on several behaviours considered to be consistent with careful and competent human drivers. These cover five broad themes:

Vehicle control

Hazard anticipation, perception and reaction

Obedying traffic rules

Interaction with other road users

Adaptability to road conditions

This is a reserved matter, as the statement of safety principles is made under the Automated Vehicles Act 2024, which confers these functions on the Secretary of State. The statement of safety principles extends to England and Wales, and Scotland, and applies to England, Scotland and Wales.

The statement of safety principles consultation has been laid as a Command Paper in both Houses. The summary of responses to the statement of safety principles call for evidence and a research report into public perceptions of AV safety that supports the development of the statement of safety principles will be placed in the Library of each House. All papers are published on gov.uk.

[HCWS119]

Petitions

Wednesday 17 June 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

East Hagbourne Post Office

The petition of residents of East Hagbourne in the constituency of Didcot and Wantage,

Declares that the loss of the community post office branch in the East Hagbourne Community Shop would be damaging to the village and wider community, and that the volunteer-run community shop is not in a position to take on the Post Office's new 'local' model.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage the Post Office to ensure that the community model is restored to the East Hagbourne Post Office.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Olly Glover, *Official Report*, 18 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 372.]

[P003198]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall):

Thank you to the petitioners for raising concerns regarding the future of the community post office branch in the East Hagbourne community shop, as set out in petition P003198, presented on 18 May 2026.

The Government recognise the important role that post office branches play in supporting local communities, particularly in rural areas such as East Hagbourne, and fully appreciate the impact that the loss of a branch can have on residents and local businesses.

While Post Office Ltd is publicly owned, it operates at arm's length from Government and has the commercial freedom to manage the network within parameters set by Government. Decisions regarding individual branches, including on closures and formats, are therefore operational matters for the company. As such, it would not be appropriate for Government to intervene directly in these decisions; however, we have raised the concerns of the East Hagbourne community with the Post Office.

The Government protect the post office network by setting minimum access criteria, which, for example, require 99% of the UK population to live within three miles of a post office outlet.

While Post Office Ltd continues to consider options for a replacement service in East Hagbourne, alternative branches remain available nearby, including Didcot post office, approximately 1.2 miles away, and Georgetown post office, approximately 1.6 miles away. This is consistent with the Government-set access criteria, which ensure that, however the network changes, services remain within local reach of communities.

The Government expect Post Office Ltd to continue to engage with the local community and stakeholders as it explores options for maintaining services in the area.

EDUCATION

Corpusty Primary School

The petition of residents of Corpusty, Saxthorpe and the surrounding communities of North Norfolk,

Declares that Corpusty Primary School is a vital part of the community and provides essential education for local children and families.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Synergy Multi Academy Trust and Norfolk County Council to pause the proposed closure of Corpusty Primary School until alternative arrangements to secure the future of the school have been fully explored and the forthcoming local elections have taken place.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Steff Aquarone, *Official Report*, 17 March 2026; Vol. 782, c. 832.]

[P003171]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould):

Following a request from Synergy Multi-Academy Trust, we have approved the proposed amalgamation of Corpusty primary school with Reepham primary school on 1 September 2026. This will result in the closure of the Corpusty school site. While there is a presumption against closing small, rural primary schools, this does not mean that rural schools will never close, but it does ensure that the case for closure is strong and clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. We recognise that schools sometimes become unviable due to very low pupil numbers, especially where forecasts show that pupil numbers will continue to fall.

Having considered the evidence carefully, and the options available, we believe that this amalgamation is necessary and that pupils will benefit from being taught in the amalgamated school in Reepham.

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